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Language, Thought, and bpNichol's *The Martyrology*: Whorfian, Feminist, and
Marxist Readings

By

Sam Whittaker

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2017

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Language, Thought, and bpNichol's *The Martyrology*: Whorfian, Feminist, and Marxist Readings

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Declaration of Originality

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Abstract

This thesis examines the ways in which *The Martyrology*, the magnum opus of Canadian poet bpNichol, examines the influence that language has on thought. The early twentieth century linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf propagated the idea that the language that one speaks affects how he or she thinks about the physical and conceptual world in which he or she lives. This idea, often called Whorfianism, has been highly influential in Marxist and feminist theory, and is often used to help describe the ways in which capitalist and patriarchal power structures are perpetuated. *The Martyrology* also examines such power structures, and it frequently does so by playing with the language used to describe those power structures and the language of those who benefit from such power structures. Through play with language, *The Martyrology* plays with how the reader understands his or her physical and conceptual world, becoming more aware of the problematic ways in which English encodes gender and class. This study explores how *The Martyrology* alters and changes the structures and conventions of English to empower the reader to be more aware of the ways that English influences how he or she thinks.

Table of Contents

Declaration of Originality	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction to Theory.....	1
Who's in Control: The Person or the Language?	2
<i>The Martyrology</i> and Whorfianism	8
<i>The Martyrology</i> and Marxism	18
<i>The Martyrology</i> and Feminism	23
Chapter 2: Marxism and <i>The Martyrology</i>	27
Barthesian Myth and Marxism	45
Chapter 3: Space, Place, and <i>The Martyrology</i>	55
Chapter 4: Feminism and <i>The Martyrology</i>	69
Chapter 5: Time, History, and <i>The Martyrology</i>	88
Barthesian Myth and History.....	88
Feminism and History	90
Marxism and History	95
Conclusion.....	109
Works Cited	113
Appendix.....	116
Vita Auctoris	135

Chapter 1: Introduction to Theory

Nichol's *The Martyrology* spans a total of nine books and six volumes (in its most recent edition). In its massive breadth, it covers a variety of politically important topics, including sexism, historiography, and social and economic inequality. Roy Miki argues that the variety of important and complex topics that *The Martyrology* covers is the greatest of its achievements, praising "the urgent vitality with which it raises and probes the central problems of our time: Where, if anywhere, does meaning reside? Does history matter? Is there a way out of the closures of the self? Is a sense of community still viable? Of what value is the craft of poetry?" (13). These are complex questions, but the most important and most ubiquitous (both intratextually and extratextually) topic that *The Martyrology* addresses is language itself. Language must be used to talk about or think about any of these other complex topics, and Nichol's play with language foregrounds the importance of that fact. Language is the system of structures, conventions and rules that allow for humans to communicate with each other. But in our poststructuralist world, we know that it is more than just this. It is now generally accepted that the language that a person speaks, to at least some degree, has an influence on how that person thinks. *The Martyrology* addresses the mechanisms of human thought whenever it addresses language.

Language is, of course, intimately connected with politics. The way or ways that a person or a group of people speak(s) often influences what subject position(s) he/she/they may occupy in society. The structures and signs of a given language, though, can perpetuate the deprivileged position of abjected groups and persons. Marxist and feminist theories can be usefully employed to examine the political effects of language's influence over thought.

The idea that the language that one speaks has an effect on the way that he or she thinks can be traced in the twentieth century to the linguist Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf. In the early conception of this idea, described by Whorf in *Language, Thought, and Reality*, speakers of different languages understand the world in fundamentally different ways, and they do so primarily because of the different structures of the different languages that they speak. Various called Whorfianism, linguistic relativity, or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, this idea has undergone much variation and revision in the more than eighty years since its conception. While Whorf believed that the language one speaks determines what one is able to think, other theorists believe that it only nudges one's thought process along. Most contemporary theorists fall closer to the latter end of that spectrum.

Regardless of which variant of Whorfianism one ascribes to, so called "hard" or "soft" Whorfianism, it is a useful tool for examining *The Martyrology* because *The Martyrology* plays with the linguistic structures of English, linguistic structures that Whorfian theory claims affect how English speakers think. By subverting, altering, undermining, and recontextualizing language conventions and rules, Nichol unpacks layer after layer of meaning within language. In doing so, he allows the reader of *The Martyrology* to become aware of several of the ways in which language can affect his or her ability to think. In this way, his poetry both makes a compelling argument for the veracity of Whorfianism, and demonstrates some of its ramifications.

Who's in Control: The Person or the Language?

Nichol himself asks questions about the issue of control over language in his article "Who's in Control: The Poet or the Language?" In this article, Nichol states: "It seems to me that what the question [from the title] raises is the fundamental issue of consciousness, the nature of consciousness. Are we, indeed, always in control?"

(473). This issue of consciousness with relation to language is not unique to poets. This is a useful question to ask whenever language is used. Nichol here is speaking of a sense of poetic inspiration, referencing the concept of “ekstasis,” or poetic trance (473), but all acts of communication in which one uses language can similarly be investigated in an attempt to locate consciousness. Although the analogy of ekstasis does not effectively describe the way that language influences speakers of language in most contexts, the sense of a loss of control that it suggests is true of both readers and writers of language in all contexts.

Nichol’s questions about authorial control inform how he demonstrates that language has some measure of control over all of its users. He continually engages with the issue of authorial control throughout his poetry. One of the ways that Nichol does this is by consistently using a lowercase “i” for the first person singular. As Miki explains, “[e]ven in the inaugural moment of writing, Nichol tries to navigate around [the power of writing’s] promptings by distancing himself from the tangled web of subjectivity it appears to embody. In the act of writing, where does the ‘i’ end and where does ‘it’ begin?” (16). Nichol subverts his own influence as an author over the meaning of his own work, both allowing and requiring the reader to have significant control over the meaning of the text. When he does this, though, he simultaneously allows the reader to better understand the effects that the conventions of language have on his or her thought. One cannot see the lowercase “i” and recognize that this is an attempt by the author to distance himself from the empowered and valorized subject-position of author without also coming to realize that by normalizing the capitalization of the first person singular, English normalizes the valorization of first-person subject positions. This subversion of convention is also a subversion of language. It requires the reader to reflect on how language functions extratextually.

The uppercase “I” is not the only convention that Nichol subverts in *The Martyrology*. Language conventions, from syntax and grammar to word formation, are subverted throughout the text. Like the lowercase “i,” these other subverted conventions also allow for more options on the reader’s part. Pauline Butling, speaking of Nichol’s collaborative theoretical work with Steve McCaffery, states that “they do not simply deconstruct conventions. The whole process must be generative. Indeed the whole point is to multiply the possibilities, to open out the form” (238-239). Butling is speaking here of Nichol and McCaffery’s use of the utterance ”Pataphysics, which utilizes a “disruption in the reading pattern produced by the presence of only one quotation mark before ”Pataphysics. The reader looks ahead for a second quotation mark (probably not even noticing that the first one is a closing mark), then reverses direction and reads backwards still looking for the missing half” (Butling 238). In *Book 5*, the interweaving chapters, or “Chains,” invite the reader to read backwards and forwards to create meaning, rather than finding the meaning dictated by conventional literary techniques for reading, such as linear decoding. In ways such as these, Nichol continually provides the reader with agency regarding how to decode language.

McCaffery, Nichol’s friend and frequent collaborator and commentator, explains that *The Martyrology*’s meanings “declare writing to be an infinite resource that constantly threatens closed, intentional meaning” (“*The Martyrology* as Paragram” 60-61). In doing so, it also demonstrates that conventional language, conversely, does in fact close off meaning. The ways that language affects thought are rarely intentional, rarely is there some agent dictating how the syntax, for example, of a language should be used to alter how people think, but it does indeed suggest to its users to think in a certain way in order to be understood. By displacing authority from

the author to the reader, Nichol normalizes the active engagement with decoding language.

One such strategy that requires the reader to actively work to understand language that Nichol frequently uses is the paragram, which the OED defines as “a play on words in which a letter or group of letters in a word is altered so as to produce or suggest another word” (“Paragram”). Nichol frequently uses paragrams throughout *The Martyrology* to uncover the hidden suggestive meaning of words and phrases. One of the most frequent ways that Nichol uses paragrammatic play is to break apart words and phrases, thereby creating barriers between them. Discussing the breaking apart of words via paragram, McCaffery explains that when “an invisible partition appears between the word and its components, [they] suddenly declare themselves as independent and different. Moreover, the purpose of this declaration is not to gain mastery over the partition but simply to institute linguistic play and a perverse path of production [of meaning]” (“*The Martyrology as Paragram*” 62). In this way, McCaffery shows how this form of paragram also demonstrates Nichol’s strategy of displacing authority in the meaning-making process of the poem away from the poet and towards the reader. Again, this strategy also allows the reader to better understand the mechanics of the rules of language; in this case, how the English language delineates semantic units. The reader, upon seeing a word or phrase delineated in an unusual way due to paragrammatic play, is able to see how that word or phrase may always be delineated in ways that do not conform to conventional English rules.

An example of paragrammatization that Nichol uses throughout *The Martyrology* is the way that he names “saints” by bifurcating words that begin with “st,” such as “saint rive,” derived from “strive.” Nichol uses this strategy most extensively in *Books 1 & 2*, but he continues to speak of the saints throughout all of

The Martyrology. In this way, Nichol creates characters that come pre-encoded with meaning because of their connections to English words. More than imbuing these characters with meaning, this strategy complicates the meaning of these words themselves. “Stand,” when it becomes “st. and,” is revealed to contain a conjunction, and therefore is revealed to be a more connotatively expansive and communal word than it may initially appear to be, not just as a word in a poem, but as an English word. Nichol invites the reader to ask how the sign “and” figures into the sign “stand.” The reader could, for example, be reminded of the idiom “to stand together,” thereby recognizing that this idiom, through its connection to “and,” always informs his or her reading of the sign “stand.”

The bits of language that Nichol plays with, such as using the paragram on “stand,” sets the precedent in the reader’s mind for recognizing how linguistic play can apply to any word. There is no saint raight, but in Book Two, “Sons and Divinations,” when the reader reads “the line to flow together straight & true,” he or she cannot help but see the specter of a hypothetical paragram: “st raight & true.” This is true not just of words that begin with “st.” David Aylward, speaking of the first two books of *The Martyrology*, states that “every word in the language is a saint who continually intervenes between [Nichol] and the world of sense, making it senseless with their hallowed p’s and whining q’s, their doting i’s and literary t’s” (qtd. in Miki 18). Each word and each letter invites the reader to ask how words and letters intervene between himself or herself and his or her own world of sense.

Nichol accomplishes this plurality of meaning via the use of the paragram, which connects meanings of disparate semantic units together. As McCaffery explains, in *The Martyrology*, “each phrase is *itself* only insofar as it is also *another*” (“*The Martyrology as Paragram*” 63). *The Martyrology* foregrounds the

interconnectedness of signs, making the reader aware of the ways in which a letter, word, or phrase can have its meaning altered by other semantic units with which the signifier is connected. McCaffery, contrasting the Saussurean arbitrary sign with the idea of a motivated sign to explore how Nichol conceives of language, explains that “[w]hat Nichol insists upon (and in this insistence significantly parts company with the canons of Saussurean linguistics) is not simply a motivated relation of the sign to its meaning, but a necessary, complex trans-phenomenality in *all* writing. An inevitable condition of words existing within words” (“*The Martyrology as Paragram*” 65). Here, McCaffery is intersecting with Whorfianism. Although Whorfian theory does not examine words in the same way that McCaffery does here, the two ideas are similar: signs have more meaning than just their referents, the sign itself also has meaning.

Nichol’s poetry continually examines how language produces meaning through a variety of techniques. McCaffery lists some tools that Nichol uses for examining language, “pun, homophony, palindrome, anagram,” and states that they “relate writing to the limits of intentionality and the Subject’s own relation to meaning” (58). *The Martyrology* shows that one’s intentions with language, as well as one’s awareness of the meaning of language, are always limited. There are always ways that language influences thought that language users cannot control. In my discussion of the first six books of *The Martyrology*,¹ all of the books which were published during Nichol’s life, I wish to show how Nichol foregrounds some of these elusive effects that language has on the thought of its users. I intend to do so by using Whorfian theory as a tool to describe some ways in which language has the potential to influence how its users think.

¹ The “books” of *The Martyrology* are distinct from the volumes in which it is published. The first six books are published in a total of four volumes.

The Martyrology and Whorfianism

Nichol's ability to affect political and social change through his poetry is directly connected with the degree to which language controls how and about what its speakers think. Whorf argues that language directly influences thought. He states that a "change in language can transform our appreciation of the Cosmos" (336). Nichol mostly works only within one language, English, but he alters the characteristics and rules of that language to allow his readers to have a new appreciation of the Cosmos, or, at least, to understand how language constricts their view of the Cosmos. Whorf provides several examples of ways in which language affects thought by contrasting ways in which the English language differs from the Hopi language. For example, he states that a typical Hopi has "no general notion or intuition of time as a smooth flowing continuum [because] the Hopi language is seen to contain no words, grammatical forms, constructions, or expressions that refer directly to what we call 'time,' or to past, present, or future" (73).² He contrasts this conception with English, which he argues "imposes upon the universe two grand cosmic forms, space and time" (75). In this conception of language, English and Hopi speakers understand the world in fundamentally different ways, and this is primarily because of the difference between their respective languages. Nichol engages with both of these cosmic forms, both space and time. In chapters three and five of this thesis, I demonstrate how Nichol examines the language used to describe time and space to foreground how such language influences English speakers' thought. Nichol's engagement with the language of these two cosmic forms positions *The Martyrology* well to examine language's effect on thought as Whorf describes it, while still allowing for language

² Whorf's understanding of the Hopi language was deeply flawed, but Whorf's thoughts can still serve as useful comparisons of English to any language that differs significantly from English.

examination according to the less extreme forms of Whorfianism that have become more popular in contemporary academic discourse.

Whorf argues that language does significantly influence thought by describing how language alters how people perceive the natural universe. He states that “Newtonian space, time, and matter are no intuitions. They are receipts from culture and language” (196). Whorf sees language as controlling the very foundations of perception. For Whorf, it is impossible to conceive of anything without one’s conception of that thing being shaped by language. Referring to the agreement by speakers of a language about how to organize nature, he states that the terms of that agreement are “obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees” (272). This agreement is “codified through the patterns of language” (272), so by altering the language, Nichol alters the code of the agreement. For example, as we will see in chapter three, Nichol divides utterances that refer to streets in ways not typical of the codes of English in order to alter how readers view those streets. If language constrains thought in the way that Whorf argues, Nichol’s modified language allows English speakers to see the physical world in new ways because they have new ways to speak about and classify that world.

Emile Benveniste elaborates upon the discussion about language’s effect on thought, stating that “[i]t is what one can *say* which delimits and organizes what one can think” (61). He, however, differs from Whorf in his appraisal of the power of language over thought, arguing that “[n]o type of language can by itself alone foster or hamper the activity of the mind” (64). Benveniste, writing several decades after Whorf, exemplifies the trend since Whorf’s work to downplay, in relation to Whorf’s arguments, exactly how much control language has over one’s thoughts. Even in his

critical appraisal of Whorfianism, though, one can recognize that language still plays for Benveniste an important role in one's ability to think. The word "alone" in the Benveniste quotation above is telling. If Benveniste's appraisal of Whorfianism is apt, language still plays a critical role in one's thought patterns because language will very rarely act alone in its operation to foster or hamper one's thought processes. Nichol's poetry examines language in such a way that the reader can better understand language's influence on thought so that he or she can compare how other factors influence thought, such as those described by Marxist and feminist theory. Again, the degree to which language is able to control the thought processes of language users is debatable, especially in terms of cultural factors, and has no definite answer. However, Guy Deutscher provides a useful explanation of a possible way in which language affects thought.

Deutscher's book, *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages*, contextualizes Whorfianism with relation to contemporary academic discourse, and argues that "a growing body of reliable scientific research provides solid evidence that our mother tongue can affect how we think and how we perceive the world" (7). Deutscher, like Whorf, discusses how language affects people's understanding of the natural universe, yet, rather than arguing that language completely determines people's conception of the natural universe, he uses more equivocal language, stating that "nature's guidelines [for its own interpretation] can be supplemented or perhaps even overridden by cultural choices" (91). Deutscher describes this as a "framework of freedom within constraints [which] provides the best way to grasp culture's role in shaping the concepts of language" (95). This less extreme consideration of language's effect on people's conception of the natural universe is currently more generally accepted than Whorf's.

Unlike Whorf's theory, it recognizes that any person is capable of thinking about any thing, natural or otherwise, regardless of his or her language. This, however, does not lessen the power of Nichol's poetry to undermine certain problematic thought patterns by undermining language's control over people's thought. Nichol's poetry foregrounds the fact that language, as a part of culture, affects the "natural" way of thinking about any part of the natural universe. Whether these parts of the natural universe include physical space, units of time, or societal constructs that have become naturalized within a given society, Nichol's poetry gives the reader the tools to better recognize how language shapes his or her thought.

Whorf does not completely confine his consideration of the effects of language's control over thought to its relation to the natural universe. He extends language's effect on the natural universe to include language's effect on the social world. He draws a direct connection between how people perceive the physical world and how people create a society, stating that "[w]hether such a civilization as ours would be possible with widely different linguistic handling of time is a large question" (197). This is a useful question because Nichol's poetry is concerned not only with how language affects people's understanding of the physical world, but also with how language affects the social world.

Pierre Bourdieu addresses language and its effects on society, indirectly answering the spirit of Whorf's question. In *Language & Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu discusses how language and meaning are interrelated in a social context. One of the ways in which language affects people's perception of reality is through its ability to suggest to its speakers particular ways of delineating the world. Bourdieu explains that

the social order owes some measure of its permanence to the fact that it imposes schemes of classification which, being adjusted to objective classifications, produce a form of recognition of this order, the kind implied by the misrecognition of the arbitrariness of its foundations: the correspondence between objective divisions and classificatory schemes, between objective structures and mental structures, underlies a kind of original adherence to the established order. (127)

In this way, Bourdieu describes the social world similarly to how Whorf describes the physical world. Whorf states that “[e]ach language produces [an] artificial chopping up of the continuous spread and flow of existence in a different way” (324). Both the social order and language itself control how people draw borders between social and physical referents, creating artificial and arbitrary differences rather than natural ones. Bourdieu goes on to explain that the social order can be changed by changing representations of the world in language, saying that “heretical subversion [of the established order] exploits the possibility of changing the social world by changing the representation of this world which contributes to its reality” (128). In this conception of language, the act of changing the rules and structures of language has tremendous power over society because doing so can change that society.

Nichol changes the rules and structures of language in a medium that encourages attention to the operation of language: poetry. His motivated and precise alterations of language allow readers to examine how language functions and allow them to act subversively. An example of Nichol’s subversive categorization is, as explained above and in chapter three, his alternative delineation of utterances and words which linguistically recreate a subversive alternate delineation of the social

order. By doing so within language, Nichol allows the reader to recognize the fact that he or she may choose to delineate the world in ways different from the ways prescribed by the conventions of his or her language. As Bourdieu explains, “the language of authority never governs without the collaboration of those it governs” (113). Nichol’s poetry allows the governed to choose not to collaborate.

Bourdieu elaborates on the ability to rebel against one’s social structures within language. He explains that one’s perception of the social world is partly determined because of subjective social structuring that is caused by “the schemes of perception and evaluation ... including all those which are laid down by language” (234). He continues: “[t]he categories of perception[, including those laid down by language,] of the social world are essentially the product of the incorporation of the objective structures of the social space. Consequently, they incline agents to accept the social world as it is, to take it for granted, rather than to rebel against it” (235). By examining the language that delineates these categories, Nichol allows readers to avoid taking the social world for granted and to recognize that he or she can change his or her perception of it.

Bourdieu’s book is a useful tool for elaborating Whorfian thought into social space, and his conception of the relationship between language and the social world of speakers is in line with the more contemporary “freedom within constraints” brand of Whorfianism, as described by Deutscher. *The Martyrology*, indeed, need only give the reader more freedom over these constraints to succeed at equipping him or her with the tools to think about his or her society in a more Marxist and feminist manner. However, even the moderate form of Whorfianism described by Deutscher is not without its critics. Linguist John H. McWhorter is one such critic. In his book, *The Language Hoax: Why the World Looks the Same in Any Language*, McWhorter

directly responds to Deutscher's book, as well as to the more extreme forms of Whorfianism for which Deutscher does not advocate.

McWhorter summarizes his appraisal of Whorfianism: "the whole notion that how someone's language works determines, in any significant way, how they see the world is utterly incoherent, and even dangerous" (xviii). McWhorter accepts the existence of some relationship between language and thought, but not one that is "significant." He uses several examples to illustrate this point, one of which is an experiment which compared English and Russian speakers' relative competency in recognizing shades of blue by having groups of speakers of those respective languages attempt to match up squares of various shades of blue (7). Because Russian has different words for light and dark blue, *goluboj* and *sinij*, respectively, the hypothesis was that Russians would be able to match these squares together more quickly than English speakers, which, in fact, they did. Deutscher uses this same experiment to illustrate the influence of language over thought, but McWhorter is unimpressed with the results. He states:

It's not that this experiment ... doesn't show that language affects thought. Rather, we hit a snag when we try to go beyond the experiment and embrace the notion that it is telling us something about worldviews, being human and the like. ... [I]t must be clear what the mean difference in reaction time was. ... It was – wait for it – 124 milliseconds. (9)

Both McWhorter and Deutscher accept that this experiment shows that Russian speakers are able to recognize different shades of blue more adeptly than English speakers. However, McWhorter believes that such a small decrease in the time it took for Russian speakers to distinguish shades of blue indicates that this decrease is

negligible. Interpretation of experiments such as this one is an important part of contemporary Whorfianism. It is important to know whether or not this 124 millisecond delay is significant in order to know whether or not language's effect on thought is significant.

Nichol demonstrates how some of these near-instantaneous appraisals of the world, as determined by language, can be significant. For example, consider the following passage from *Book 6 Books Book III*, in which Nichol comes across a storefront with a dilapidated sign:

in Hornpayne
 the sign on the building i could see from the road read 'OTHING'
 i reconstructed it as 'NOTHING'
 because it looked like it was falling down
 as Ellie & i drew closer
 i read, suddenly, as 'CLOTHING'
 windows boarded up & broken (*Book 6 Books Book III*)

Because of the rules of English word construction that require a consonant to begin this fragmented word, Nichol reconstructs the sign as “nothing,” when the sign, in fact, says “clothing.” In this way, *The Martyrology* engages with the effect that language has on thought at even the most subtle level. Nichol reads the sign as “nothing,” thereby reading the store itself as “nothing.” The time that it takes to read a word is less than a second, so the 124 millisecond delay about which McWhorter is concerned is relevant to Nichol's reading of the sign.

Another criticism that McWhorter has of Whorfianism is that “language dances only ever so lightly on thought. One proof of this is how terminology's meanings quickly bend according to thought patterns” (159). He gives examples such

as male chauvinist, women's liberation, and special education, saying that these terms' connotative meanings have overwritten their literal ones (159-160). He asks his readers to "[c]onsider terms such as *affirmative action*, now so conventional we rarely stop to parse what the actual words composing it mean: 'affirming' what? What kind of 'action'?" (159). Again, the equivocal language here is telling. How "rarely" one does this is relevant to how much these terms affect one's thinking about their referents. It is impossible to quantify exactly how frequently a given person might think about the literal meaning of such terms, but to do so at all affects that person's understanding of those terms. Nichol's poetry often explicates the literal meaning of words and idioms, whether they were intentionally constructed to signify literally, like affirmative action, or whether the literal meaning has no agential creator. Nichol foregrounds these literal meanings by explicitly breaking down words and phrases into their component parts via paragrammatization. Nichol tells the reader that "all knowledge / is to know the ledge you stand on" (Book Four), letting the reader parse the component words within that word.

Although experiments such as the one described by McWhorter above prove that language does influence thought at least slightly, the extent to which that influence is significant is still debated, and that debate is often dependent on the interpretation of data by participants in that debate. This thesis assumes that such data do in fact indicate that language influences thought in a significant way. This means that Nichol's work, by examining the function of language, is able to enable social change against the status quo of culture, as represented within language. Nichol's poetry allows readers to have alternative ways of understanding language, and therefore to have different ways of understanding their social world. Whorf explains how varied understandings of language allow for better understandings of language:

If a rule has absolutely no exceptions, it is not recognized as a rule or as anything else; it is then part of the background of experience of which we tend to remain unconscious. Never having experienced anything in contrast to it, we cannot isolate it and formulate it as a rule until we so enlarge our experience and expand our base of reference that we encounter as an interruption of its regularity. (267)

Nichol's poetry makes language irregular; it brings the rules of language to the forefront of consciousness so that readers can be aware that they are rules of language, not natural and intrinsic ways in which all humans understand the physical and social world. Nichol will often take one word or phrase and allow the reader to understand it in a variety of different ways, such as with his paragram of words that begin with "st." They are understood differently not only in the subject matter to which these pieces of language refer, but also differently in the reading techniques the reader must use to find meaning in language. Nichol's poetry provides a variety of different linguistic systems through which one can read English.

Whorf explains that "[n]o individual is free to describe nature with absolute impartiality but is constrained to certain modes of interpretation even while he thinks himself most free. The person most nearly free in such respects would be a linguist familiar with very many widely different linguistic systems" (274). By introducing a variety of ways to read English, Nichol allows the reader to approximate the knowledge of this hypothetical, transcendently literate linguist. Nichol provides (and suggests) an enormous variety of modes of interpretation of reality by allowing the reader to interpret English according to "very many" different rules, thereby mimicking the effect of knowing many different linguistic systems that belong to different languages. Nichol's readers are still not completely free to understand the

physical and social worlds as they “really are,” but they are given the tools to recognize that the ways of understanding these worlds codified by conventional and standardized English are not the only ones. A useful way of understanding how these ways of understanding can become standardized in English is through Marxist descriptions of ideology. The way that Nichol examines how language functions allows the reader to recognize how language is affected by the ideology of one’s social group and of his or her society. Ideology is manifested in and reduplicated by language.

The Martyrology and Marxism

Ideology, as Terry Eagleton explains, is difficult to define because it “has a whole range of useful meanings, not all of which are compatible with each other” (*Ideology: An Introduction* 1). Eagleton provides six possible definitions of ideology, the second and sixth of which are the most useful for this discussion of *The Martyrology*. In the second definition that Eagleton provides,

ideology turns on ideas and beliefs (whether true or false) which symbolize the conditions and life-experiences of a specific, socially significant group or class. ... ‘Ideology’ is here very close to the idea of a ‘world view’, though it can be claimed that world views are usually preoccupied with fundamental matters such as the meaning of death or humanity’s place in the universe, whereas ideology might extend to such issues as which colour to paint the mail-boxes.

(*Ideology* 29)

This definition is important to understanding Nichol’s ability to alter world views through language because *The Martyrology* examines the language of various specific social classes. For example, as I describe in the conclusion to chapter five, it examines

the language of the proletarian class' use of puns in relation to the literary class' more academic language. Furthermore, Nichol examines worldview both at the level of grandiose or "fundamental matters," such as one's relationship to his or her society in terms of class and gender, as well as less grandiose matters, such as the tenor of the blueness of the sky: "it is all blue / (bluer than blue) / it was all blue / bluer / BLUE" (Book Three Section One).

In Eagleton's sixth definition of ideology, ideology "retains an emphasis on false or deceptive beliefs but regards such beliefs as arising not from the interests of a dominant class but from the material structure of society as a whole" (*Ideology* 30). This definition is also useful because Nichol often does not address one specific social class's language, but rather, addresses the English language, which is used by many classes and is a part of the material structure of society. It is useful to keep both of these definitions in mind, remaining aware both of how society as a whole structures language to influence people to think in a certain way, and to recognize that the term "worldview" can describe both grandiose and quotidian topics.

Eagleton also summarizes how the French Marxist Louis Althusser considers ideology: "Ideology for Althusser is a particular organization of signifying practices which goes to constitute human beings as social subjects, and which produces the lived relations by which such subjects are connected to the dominant relations of production in a society" (*Ideology* 18). Again, this is useful to keep in mind when reading *The Martyrology* because humans are constituted as social subjects partially through the language that they use. Most importantly, though, this definition is useful to keep in mind when considering how language interacts with what Althusser calls Ideological State Apparatuses.

Althusser provides a useful description of one type of institution by which the dominant power of the state controls the people within that state. He calls these institutions Ideological State Apparatuses, or ISAs. “I shall call Ideological State Apparatuses a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions” (Althusser 136). He goes on to say that ISAs function “by ideology” (138). These ISAs are an extension of state power because the ideology by which all ISAs function “is always in fact unified ... beneath the ruling ideology, which is the ideology of the ruling class” (139). The way in which these institutions get their power is similar to how Bourdieu describes the state operating within language. The way that ISAs operate to control language can be usefully contextualized via the power of dominant cultural forces over language.

Furthermore, the ideologies that appear in language and that Nichol addresses, anti-working class and anti-female ideologies, are those that benefit dominant classes and subjectify subjects according to their class and gender. The effect of ideology, according to Althusser, is that “the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection” (169). When Nichol examines language, he is examining the mechanisms that allow the dominant ideology to reproduce itself through ISAs and which allow the Subject to convince its subjects to submit.

Althusser provides a list of ISAs, which includes the religious ISA, the educational ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the political ISA, the trade-union ISA, the communications ISA, and the cultural ISA (136-137). Nichol complicates the power of many of these ISAs by examining the language used by them and the language used to describe them. Nichol’s poetry is particularly concerned with the educational and religious ISAs, which Althusser describes as being two of the most

powerful. He says that “in the pre-capitalist historical period... there was one dominant Ideological State Apparatus, the Church” (143-144), and that the “ideological State apparatus which has been installed in the *dominant* position in mature capitalist social formations ... is the *educational ideological apparatus*” (144-145). The church ISA is a theme throughout *The Martyrology*, being a continual bugbear that threatens to replace capitalist modes of ideological thought with equally repressive pre-capitalist ones. Nichol, however, ties the church ISA to the education ISA, via their connection through language, to allow the reader to recognize both of them.

The education ISA is the one which Nichol engages with most directly throughout *The Martyrology*. Instruction in language-use is one of the main features of the education ISA. All ISAs inform and control language, but none do so as directly, efficiently, and tenaciously as education. While Nichol’s play with language addresses the power of all ISAs in turn, it addresses the power of the dominant ISA, education, continuously. All of Nichol’s play with language is an attack on the education ISA. Nichol foregrounds language and in doing so foregrounds a mechanism of ideology. This provides the reader with a useful tool for subverting that mechanism’s power because, according to Althusser, “ideology = misrecognition/ignorance” (170). When Nichol focuses the reader’s attention on a single sign or utterance, the reader is able to better recognize how that sign or utterance works, and to be less ignorant of its effect. Bourdieu examines how the way that signifiers refer to their referents is complicated by ideology. He explains that “elastic concepts such as ‘the working classes’, ‘the people’ or ‘the workers’, ... owe their political virtue to the fact that one can extend the referent at will to include” a variety of politically exigent referents (90-91). He explains that “everyone can

unconsciously manipulate [the signifier's] extension in order to adjust it to their interests, prejudices, or social fantasies" (91).

Examination of unconscious signifier-manipulation is what makes Nichol's poetry uniquely suited to examining the functions and effects of ideology. Because of the inherent rules and structures of the language that they interpret, readers will always unconsciously manipulate signifiers based both on how their society's ideology affects them, and how that ideology affects the language that they use and read. Nichol's poetry allows his readers to better recognize the ways in which signs are altered depending on the political exegesis, whether that alteration is intentional or not. For example, Nichol discusses the connotative meaning of the word "American": "we use the word american derogatorily / meaning 'that bastard from the united states' / we lack any sense of real community / define ourselves in terms of what we don't want to be" (Book Three Section Five).³ In this way, "American" is unconsciously altered by Canadians to formulate their own identity. Nichol finds and explores tremendously varied meanings within particular words and phrases such as this, thereby allowing the reader to see other meanings that could exist in a word due to a reader's or speaker's unconscious alteration of that word.

Nichol's attempt to give the reader choice and variety within English acts against the interests of dominant Western power structures. Bourdieu notices that there exists an "extreme diversity of speech forms which are universally relegated to the negative category of 'popular speech'" (93). This category of popular speech is one of the tools which the dominant ideology uses for delegitimizing variety in language. Forms of language that do not conform to the dominant one are attacked by a variety of ISAs, especially the educational ISA. Nichol's varied language, though

³ There are no page numbers in *The Martyrology*.

not typically consisting of forms of popular speech, undermines the power of these ISAs by undermining their influence over language. As Bourdieu explains, “[w]hat creates the power of words and slogans, a power capable of maintaining or subverting the social order, is the belief in the legitimacy of words and those who utter them” (170). By introducing variety into language, Nichol undermines the legitimacy of words that do not belong to the category of popular speech. For example, Nichol spells “thought” as “thot” in order “to rid [himself] of / the ugh in / thought,” rebelling against the normalized spelling that invites such an exclamation of displeasure: “ugh.” Such standardized and unvaried words create a structure that constricts their speaker’s ability to perceive the world, and therefore play a very large role in the creation or subversion of that belief.

Ideology is represented in language, and ISAs reduplicate ideologies that are harmful to oppressed groups in language. Nichol allows the reader to recognize where and how these ideologies function in language and to be able to think critically about these ideologies, and possibly to subvert them. These ideologies are often harmful to women, and promote anti-feminist belief systems, favouring both the dominant class as well as men. Nichol’s Marxist examinations of language are therefore also feminist ones.

The Martyrology and Feminism

By examining language in the way that he does, Nichol foregrounds a lot of the sexist language of the English language that feminist linguists criticize, and which often goes unnoticed in casual speech. For example, feminists often decry the use of “he” as a generic pronoun, which normalizes men and makes women invisible. In the lines “he/i/she / (why is the s the /feminizer?” (Book Four), Nichol foregrounds that the “he” is typically considered to be the default, that

“she” is thought of as an alteration of the natural “he,” and she questions that supposed naturalness.

Much of contemporary feminist linguistics is heavily influenced by Whorfianism, and considers issues related to how the use of “he” as a generic pronoun in English renders women invisible in societies that speak English. There is a similar divide in feminist thought as in Whorfian thought about the significance of language’s ability to control thought and society. The entry on language and gender in the *Linguistics Encyclopedia* states:

For those in favour of altering the *status quo*, the question then arises as to the degree to which a change in language use can assist in this endeavor. The answer one gives will depend on how one views the relationship between language and culture in general, but it is unlikely that either of two possible extremist answers are correct. One such answer is that altering language will achieve nothing, because any alternative terms will simply be infiltrated with the prejudices inherent to the old terms. At the other extreme, the answer would be that a change in language use alone would result in a change in the culture’s beliefs about men and women respectively. (350)

Much like with the issue of the two possible interpretations of Whorfianism, this thesis argues that the latter possibility, that language has a large effect on culture and society, is the more correct. Similar to Whorfianism, feminism examines how both linguistic structure as a whole, and more specific parts of language, such as signs, influence language users’ thought. At the structural level, feminists examine issues like collocation, syntax, and grammar. Feminists, along with Nichol, also examine how signs influence thought.

By examining parts of language such as signs, Nichol foregrounds how these signs can contribute to sexist thought patterns. This kind of consideration of the variable, contextual, and potentially sexist meaning of words is something with which feminist linguists often concern themselves. A useful example of the importance that feminists place on words is Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler's *A Feminist Dictionary*, which provides new definitions of words, on the premise that their conventional definitions make a society's sexist ideology hard to recognize. For example, the entry for "Kingdom" reads "Masculine dominance. When the Queen reigns we are not allowed a Queendom" (219). Kramarae and Treichler say that their book has "several purposes," one of which is "to identify issues of language theory, research, usage, and institutionalized practice that bear on the relationship between women and language" (1). These alternate definitions, much like Nichol's altered signs, allow the reader to better understand the inherent sexism of some words. In the lines "i do not like (as in *bad* grammar) / i.e. i don't do it like (for purpose of / comparison (comparidaughter))" (*Book 6 Books* The Book of Hours "Hour 1"), Nichol's abutment of comparison with comparidaughter functions like the feminist dictionary entry for kingdom does. When comparing women, even daughters, we cannot have a comparidaughter.

In a specifically Whorfian context, Deutscher also explores how words can affect thought in an anti-feminist way. He describes a series of experiments which suggest that native speakers of Spanish and German, languages in which inanimate objects have grammatical gender, associate stereotypical concepts regarding those genders with those objects (210-211). For example, one such experiment suggested that Germans find chairs to be inherently stronger than their Spanish counterparts because the word for "chair" is masculine in German and feminine in Spanish.

Deutscher infers from such experiments that “the idiosyncrasies of a gender system exert a significant influence on speakers’ thoughts[, and that w]hen a language treats inanimate objects in the same way as it treats women and men, with the same grammatical forms or with the same ‘he’ and ‘she’ pronouns, the habits of grammar can spill over to habits of mind beyond grammar” (214). Deutscher is arguing both that the gender of words affects how people see those words’ referents, and that this information can be extrapolated to apply to other features of grammar. Nichol engages with both of these concepts. He addresses the gendering of words in English to explore how English speakers apply gender to words and what the effects of that are. He also addresses how grammar affects thought in general.

Nichol’s feminist language exploration allows the reader to see the anti-feminist ideology that plagues the English language. As Nichol explores the English language, he foregrounds how that language works, and how that language can problematically impact the ways that English speakers think about gender. Not only that, but language can problematically impact the way that English speakers think about class, the physical world, the social world, and all facets of life that are affected by the ideologies of one’s society.

Chapter 2: Marxism and *The Martyrology*

The lines from Steve McCaffery's poem, "Lyric's Larynx," "Capitalism begins when you / open the Dictionary" (178), nicely contextualize the way that *The Martyrology* differs from conventional language usage in its approach to words. Nichol keeps his words perpetually overdetermined with meaning, never able to be enclosed within a dictionary. In doing so, he foregrounds the overbearing capitalist ideology with which they must normally be interpreted. He allows the reader to recognize how the ideology of a capitalist society informs his or her reading of language, thereby allowing him or her to recognize that language influences how he or she thinks about capitalist society.

Language influences thought in a variety of ways, both through the signified, and through the form of the signifier. Nichol, in his emphasis on the importance of the signifier itself to meaning, departs from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, but it is important to read Nichol's work through the lens of Saussurean linguistics. Saussure's description of the separation between the signifier and the signified is the theoretical basis which allows Nichol to examine each component part of the sign independently. Furthermore, Nichol's poetry frequently engages with the terminology and expressions of Saussurean linguistics. For example, Nichol uses Saussurean terminology to explain how he creates indeterminacy in language, stating that there is "no signifier when we cannot grasp the signified" (Book Three Section Eight); Nichol's polysemous language-play complicates both signifiers and signifieds, which, in turn, further complicate each other, making it impossible to fully grasp either signifier or signified as understandable or distinct entities.

Saussure explains how words can evoke other words that are similar to them. He states that

[o]ur memory holds in reserve all the more or less complex types of syntagms, regardless of their class or length, and we bring in the associative groups to fix our choice when the time for using them arrives. ... It is not enough to say ... that the speaker chooses [a word] because it signifies what he wishes to express. In reality the idea evokes not a form but a whole latent system that makes possible the oppositions necessary for the formation of the sign. (130)

Users of language must navigate words that are morphologically, semantically, grammatically, or syntactically similar to a word that they wish to select. In Book Five Chain One, Nichol explores how this affects a reading of the word “ideals,” stating “ideals arrayed against the actual i deals.” Nichol foregrounds the similarity between the word “ideals” and the words “i deals” to demonstrate how users of a language are affected by the words “i deals” when they read “ideals.” Although one’s ideals are usually thought to be a set of moral or ethical guidelines, the fact that the signifier for these guidelines is so similar to “i deals” demonstrates that one’s ideals are often sacrificed for the sake of making a capitalist deal for personal gain.

Even lines that are not explicitly evocative of capitalist language, such as “onto logically thinking thru” (Book Five Chain One), subvert the power of the institutions and apparatuses that benefit from ideology's representation and function in language because they show how a word, here “ontologically,” is evocative of other words. Michael Ryan explains that when words are used in a context in which their meaning is improper, they displace the proper meaning of those words, undermining words’ ability to have definite meaning (5). He goes on to say that “[w]here metaphoric displacement begins, there also the power of sovereign law as the absolutely proper name of a universal meaning is shown its limit” (5). Nichol’s

displacement of meaning functions similarly to metaphoric displacement in that it allows for a single sign or utterance to have multiple explicit meanings. In this way, all of Nichol's paragrams that evoke other words undermine the sovereign law of universal meaning. They allow the reader to see that though he or she may interpret a sign or utterance one way, according to a particular ideology, the sign or utterance is actually polysemous, and may be interpreted in a variety of ways, whether or not those ways are typically considered to be appropriate. Through paragrams, Nichol demonstrates the same function of language that Saussure explicitly describes, namely that the use of a word evokes other words. Politically charged paragrams such as "i deals" demonstrate that these connections between words can significantly change (not only displace) the meaning of a word.

The paragram is one way Nichol explicates letters' meaning. Nichol imbues letters with explicit meaning to demonstrate that they always have meaning, whether or not it is explicit, even if that meaning can only function in the presence of other letters. Jacques Derrida contrasts pictographic and linguistic signification in order to discuss letters. He states that "[d]irect or hieroglyphic pictography represents the thing or the signified. The ideo-phonogram already represents a mixture of signifier and signified" (299). He continues this discussion in order to examine letters specifically, stating that "[l]etters, which have no meaning by themselves, signify only the elementary phonic signifiers that make sense only when they are put together according to certain rules" (299). In contrast to Derrida, Nichol considers letters to have meaning, examining them in a way that is more similar to pictography than traditional linguistic play. By separating letters from words, he demonstrates that even letters require interpretation by language users, and can contribute to the way that

language users interpret an entire word or phrase. In this way, letters can function similarly to hieroglyphs.

One technique that Nichol uses to foreground the meaning of letters is to have letters signify homophones, such as: “i m // u r // n g i c so clearly” (Book Five Chain One). In doing so, Nichol equates letters with words. These letters and their respective words both refer to the same phonic signifiers. In this way, Nichol demonstrates that letters can have as much signifying potential as words. Nichol continues: “looking out across the surface of the words today / the letters are not my n m e / no thing is my n m e” (Book Five Chain One). Nichol again imbues letters with meaning, but here, they do not only do so on their own. As above, they can be put together according to the rules of syntax in a way that allows each letter to operate as a word, but here, they can also be contracted together into words: “name” and “enemy.”

The rules that allow these letters to be sensibly combined to create words differ from the rules that allow letters to be combined into an utterance because they are not the rules laid out by dominant power structures. The reader may choose which rules to use when reading these lines, selecting between normative syntax or word creation. If the letters are combined syntactically and phonetically, the lines read “the letters are not my enemy / no thing is my enemy.” If the letters are read as an alternately spelled word, the lines read “the letters are not my name / no thing is my name.” Therefore, according to the rules with which these lines are read, they mean both that letters are not the enemy, they are not inherently pernicious despite their capacity for being so when the reader is unaware of their effects, and they are not one’s name, they are not the agent of naming that imbues the named with meaning. Rather, that agent is part of a system of dominant power articulated through capitalism or sexism. These agents include ISAs that imbue people with new names,

such as academic or professional ISAs that confer titles and ranks, as well as familial ISAs that give children names according to gender.

Letters provide the sign of these names, but it is ideology that provides them with their potentially deleterious meaning. For example, the feminist linguist Dale Spender explains that “[f]or males to engage in extensive sexual activities there are names of commendation – *virile* and *potent* enhance the male image; but for women to engage in extensive sexual activity there is only repudiation: she is a *nymphomaniac*, a *baller*, a *bitch*” (175). Such names for women need not be “enemies,” they need not repudiate. It is only because of the sexist ideologies of Western society that names that apply to women act as repudiation. In a society that is not constrained by the sexist ideology through which we read these signifiers, they could potentially signify non-sexist signifieds. It is not the letters that perpetuate sexism, but the ideology through which we read these letters.

Nichol describes naming as a capitalist ideology. He does so by separating “no” and “thing”: “no thing is my n m e.” In this way, Nichol makes the reader aware of the ideology pervasive in capitalist society that associates commodity use and ownership with one’s identity or “name.” Furthermore, everything that is named in a capitalist society is named through the lens of capitalist ideology. Spender, commenting on statements by Whorf and Sapir, states that “[n]ew names ... have their origins in the perspective of those doing the naming rather than in the object or event that is being named, and that perspective is the product of the prefigured patterns of language and thought” (164). Because Nichol expresses the conventions of naming by toying with the rules of how letters make meaning, he foregrounds how these rules affect how English speakers’ thinking about identity, commodities, and enemies, are affected by the rules involved in how letters are put together in their

language to create names. By providing alternative readings that require unpacking these lines either according to the rules of normative syntax or according to the reader's ability to fill in missing letters, Nichol demonstrates how the ability to select between multiple readings can be applied both to Nichol's poetry, where normative syntax is often elided, and to everyday language.

Nichol further shows the connection between language and capitalist ideology by showing that language and currency act similarly. They are both objects that achieve their significance through their reference to something else: currency references the economic system that supports it, and language references referents. Nichol announces the connection he finds between currency and language and the problems of passively using the two objects:

the problem is it is all blood money
 won by our sweat in some way
 the currency takes over as language did
 becomes not a symbol used in barter but the end product of bartering
 relates to nothing real
 we never see the gold it's based on (Book Three Section Five)

Much as we never see the metaphorical gold that currency is based on, we never see the referents that signs are based on. Nichol solves this problem throughout *The Martyrology* by making language itself a referent. The letters and words to which Nichol refers throughout the text are within the text, they are distinctly something "real." In this way, Nichol's work is a facsimile of a pre-capitalist barter economy, not relying on a system that refers to something else.

Nichol's use of language foregrounds how language functions in a way similar to Connerton's description of commodities, a description which synthesizes Karl

Marx's explanation of how commodities function in a capitalist economy. We misperceive language much as "we misperceive ... objects, to the extent that we treat them as if they had a merely 'objective' existence" (42). Words, like objects, do not have only an objective existence, but rather, require interpretation by human faculties of thought, which means that interpretation passes through the medium of ideology, in order to use and understand them. As such, they come laden with a network of connections between humans and other words that can be difficult to perceive because of their apparent objectivity. Nichol demonstrates that words and letters become invisible, and more apparently objective, when they are hidden within larger systems of meaning: "the 1 imposition of the earth / the singular / word + one = world" (Book Four). Users of English typically do not recognize the connection between "world" and "word" because both words have apparently objective existence; they seem not to interact with each other via the medium of human thought. People do not typically examine signifiers closely enough to see the similarity between "world" and "word," and they therefore do not typically recognize the influence of a word on one's perception of the world.

Nichol, by connecting "word" to "world" in this manner, evokes a relationship between word and world similar to the relationship that Connerton describes between object and world. Connerton states that "when an infinity of objects are packed into the expanding space of a giant city our misperception [of them] is likely to grow exponentially" (42). By this he means that consumers lose sight of the connections that commodities have to their various buyers, sellers, and producers within a city because of the multiplicity of these connections. Similarly, readers of a language lose sight of the various connotative meanings that letters and words create with each other when they are packed into the expanding space of a text. Nichol shrinks the scope of

language and allows the reader to examine the process of arranging letters into a word to make meaning, showing the connection between only two words in order to make the reader able to perceive this connection. The reader can then see that the letter “l” is slotted into “word” to make a new word, “world,” much as how altering any word will impose a new epistemological world on its user.

Nichol demonstrates that letters do not have “objective” existence independent of each other. For example, the graphic object “l” can be both the letter “L” and the number “one.” When, because of human interpretation and context, it becomes either a letter or a number, it loses its objective existence, as a mere graphic mark on the page and not a letter of the alphabet or a number, in favour of gaining signifying ability. What the signifier “l” signifies is dependent on the context in which it is read, on whether context calls for it to be read as a letter or a number. It is only when Nichol narrows the reader’s focus, when he or she can read “l” independent of context, that he or she realizes that a reading of “l” is dependent on context. In this way, Nichol allows the reader to see connections within the word “world” that are invisible when packed into a larger space.

Larger textual or semantic units are mutually incompatible with recognizing letters, a fact which Nichol describes: “w forms / at the word’s end / word’s beginning / is the book’s end” (Book Four). When the reader begins to look at the letter “w,” the word ends; it is no longer visible because the letter comes to the forefront. Similarly, when the reader begins to look at the word, the book ends. Only through narrowing scope in this way, by examining letters and words as objects, can the reader recognize that signs do not have objective existence irrespective of human interpretation. The reader becomes aware of the fact that his/her own faculties of interpretation both

affect language and are affected by language. How someone interprets a sign is affected by how he or she interprets the signs that surround it.

Nichol demonstrates that linguistic signs both depend on and contribute to the ideological context through which they are interpreted. Nichol does so by examining both letters as signifiers, and the word “letter” as a signifier: “let t err/ as it does in this time” (Book Three Section Eight). Both the word “letter” and the letter “t” err. Nichol demonstrates that “letter” can err by allowing the reader to read “letter” erroneously, one section of the word at a time. He also demonstrates that “t” can err by explicitly stating that it may do so. In this way, Nichol demonstrates that the ideological predilections of signs are intransigently difficult to unpack: one can understand how a sign functions at one level but still not recognize how the parts of that sign also affect understanding. Nichol explicates that “t” can err, but the effect of this error on the sign to which “t” contributes, “letter,” remains ambiguous. Because language affects how its speakers can think, even examining the way that a letter affects thought necessitates using language and letters to formulate that examination.

Nichol helps guide the reader through the process of examining language by stating his purpose directly. By speaking directly, Nichol gives the reader the power to make his or her own choices about how to read. On the first page of Book Five Chain One, Nichol gives alternate ways of interpreting his writing strategy, stating “only puns someone says,” but also stating “i says glimpses of another truth.” In this way, Nichol directs his reader to allow for the possibility that his poetry is not mere puns, but rather a medium for finding truth in language. By describing both views, he allows the reader to make the decision about how to read both his poetry and the strategies for finding meaning that he uses in it. Nichol says that “these words are simply signs / signs i read as other words” (Book Five Chain One), explaining that his

poetry helps readers to read words as signs, in the Saussurean sense, and not as direct representations of reality. He further explains that “the signs / [have] hazardous connections to their signifieds” (Book Five Chain One), a feature of signs that is important to know in order to be able to recognize that this is a fact that Nichol attempts to explicate throughout his poetry. Furthermore, the ability to read signs “as other words” is another feature of language with which Nichol frequently engages throughout *The Martyrology*. By explicitly describing what he is trying to do with language, Nichol gives the reader the power to choose whether or not he or she wishes to approach language in the way that Nichol does in his poetry.

This agency that Nichol gives to the reader directly works against the influence that ISAs have over the reader’s reading process. Nichol’s meaning making strategies foreground how ISAs create and constrict meaning in language. Nichol does this most explicitly with these lines: “(alternate spellings / suggested by / George Pal in / Dr Ormic’s St Andard Dictionary))” (Book Five Chain One). These lines criticize the fact that ISAs, such as education and dictionaries, allow for different forms of language only in ways that do not challenge the power of dominant ideologies to prescribe words’ meaning. The alternate spellings in a “standard” dictionary, a dictionary that conforms to definitions amicable to dominant ideologies, do not attempt to alter the meaning of a word; unlike Nichol’s alternate spellings, they are simply other ways of spelling words that these ISAs recognize. Here, the standard dictionary entry is written simultaneously by George Pal and George Palindromic. This simultaneity is possible because of the use of the paragram. The paragram is not a standard poetic technique taught in all educational institutions, whereas the palindrome is. Palindromes, like institutionally supported alternate spellings, are ways

of examining language that fit within institutional norms. The paragram subverts that norm even while describing it.

The standard dictionary is shown via the paragram to be a part of the ISA that controls language to the greatest degree: education. This is because the possessive apostrophe in Nichol's quotation (above) means that this dictionary is either edited or owned by Dr Ormic, a character who must be a part of the education ISA due to his or her doctorate. This character, by writing a "standard dictionary" perpetuates the ideology that benefits that ISA. Standard dictionaries can often re-enforce the dominant ideology. As feminist linguist Sara Mills argues, "the words which are assembled in dictionaries are likely to reflect the prejudices and preferences of lexicographers who compose them" (124). In his examination of Dr. Ormic's standard dictionary, Nichol replaces standard dictionaries with a description of words which demonstrates that they need not have a defined referent or signified. He avoids directing the reader to pick his new definition as the only one. In doing so, Nichol puts the authority to create meaning in the hands of the reader, which is a more efficient way of highlighting for the reader the ways that the ideologies of the societies in which they live alter the language that they use, and thereby of altering the way that they think about the world. Ryan explains the need for a plurality of voices for revolution against capitalist power, saying that "[m]ore than authority, the left needs diverse unity. ...It is easier now to threaten capital without authority than with" (217). Nichol's meaning making is antiauthoritarian, and Ryan argues that "[a]ntiauthoritarian socialist organizing takes the capitalist weapons of democracy and freedom one step further, radicalizing them as demands against capital" (217). Much like *A Feminist Dictionary*, *The Martyrology* subverts the authority of standard dictionaries by altering the words. Kramarae and Treichler alter them by providing

their own, feminist definitions, whereas Nichol, in the Dr. Ormic lines, alters them by providing alternative spellings. Nichol differs from Kramarae and Treichler by not replacing standard dictionaries with his own dictionary, he allows readers to create their own meaning once they have realized that the meaning that they typically bring to a word is a meaning defined by dominant institutions.

Nichol demonstrates that when people use and read words, they must contend with the ideology that informs the definitions of those words, ideology that commodifies all things, even words. Consider the following lines from the poem “Hour 1,” from *Book 6 Books*:

wordrobe

wandering thru the clothes closet of
the (brain?
no!) memory

‘this fits me
‘this doesn’t’

throwing out the pants that
you bought

age 23

The neologism “wordrobe” uses near-homophony to reveal the connection between words and commodities. A language user’s selection of words is equated to his or her selection of clothes via this connection to the word “wardrobe.” One’s wardrobe is a place filled with objects that are strongly influenced by the ideology of the society of their owner. The clothing that one wears is often determined by that person’s subject position: his or her class, occupation, gender, etc. all factor into what clothing that person will wear. Because what it means to be a part of any of these types of subject

positions is determined by the ideology of a society, ideology acts as a tool that allows people to determine what clothing is appropriate for them to wear. This is similar to how ideology allows a subject to determine what types of language (register, diction, inflection, etc.) is appropriate for him or her to use. Nichol demonstrates that ideology affects how people select both language and clothing in a similar way. He addresses the idea that the process of selecting an article of clothing or of selecting a piece of language is a creative one, but then corrects himself, stating that the process is in fact one of memory. Indeed, both selecting words and selecting clothing involve the perusal of items to which one has access, and only those items. The selection of words is a process of memory because it involves remembering the words which one knows. In this way, Nichol demonstrates how language use is restricted by the language that is available to the user.

Art is dependent on the same economic base and historical circumstances as a wardrobe. Nichol demonstrates this via the explicit comparison of the two, which is foregrounded at the locus of the sign “wordrobe.” Nichol’s comparison of a discarded word to discarded pants, bought at the age of 23, contextualizes the comparison of language to clothing with his own personal history, as this “you” functions as both a first person and second person pronoun. This personal history is threaded throughout *The Martyrology*, and especially throughout the Book of Hours. Because Nichol’s personal history, and by extension *The Martyrology* itself, is here connected with language and commodities, Nichol demonstrates that he and his text operate within capitalist ideologies, while simultaneously drawing this comparison between words and commodities. The use of “you,” functioning as both a first person and second person pronoun, demonstrates that both the writer and the reader are equally affected by the domination of the dominant social group over expression of thought, meaning

that the artist does not occupy a special position with relation to ideology for the purpose of examining that ideology, but rather, has the same faculties for evaluating language as the reader.

Both Nichol and the reader have equal freedom to examine language, but they are both equally constrained by ideology. However, Nichol's art allows the reader to better understand the mechanics of ideology despite the fact that his art is written within ideology. Eagleton provides a description of Althusser's thoughts on the ability of art to inform the reader about ideology despite working within ideology, stating that

art does not enable us to *know* the truth which ideology conceals Science gives us conceptual knowledge of a situation; art gives us the experience of that situation, which is equivalent to ideology. But by doing this, it allows us to 'see' the nature of that ideology, and thus begins to move us towards that full understanding of ideology which is scientific knowledge. (*Marxism and Literary Criticism* 17)

The "wordrobe" poem allows the reader to see that by selecting a word a speaker is seeing what word "fits" him or her, choosing a word because of a combination of his or her personal taste and the taste of the dominant culture, the same process that he or she undergoes when selecting an article of clothing.

Nichol's "wordrobe" section not only allows the reader to better understand the ideology through which art functions, but it also allows the reader to better understand the difficulty with which art addresses that ideology under Postmodernism. Postmodernism complicates art's ability to comment on capitalist ideology. Fredric Jameson explains the problems with which contemporary leftist theorists and writers must contend:

No theory of cultural politics current on the Left today has been able to do without one notion or another of a certain minimal aesthetic distance, of the possibility of the positioning outside of the massive Being of capital, from which to assault this last... [H]owever, ... distance in general (including 'critical distance' in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of Postmodernism. (48)

Nichol's text, like all texts written in the period of Postmodernism, cannot maintain critical distance for the purpose of examining capitalism in art because it itself is a piece of art that belongs to capitalist systems of ideology and production. Jameson elaborates on this problem, explaining that the typical effect of the connection between art and capitalism is that works of both art and critical theory "are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it" (49). *The Martyrology*, like all art, is indeed reabsorbed into capitalism, but it is not disarmed.

Much as Nichol uses language to examine the power of language, he uses the ideology of capitalism to examine those power structures. When Nichol connects his own vocabulary to a wardrobe, he explicates the closeness between his art and the capitalist ideology that he examines. He selects words from his vocabulary as one selects clothing from a wardrobe, both of which involve engagement with ideology. In order to examine capitalist ideology, he must use words that must be and can only be interpreted through that ideology. He demonstrates that his art, a tool for understanding the dominant ideology, is also still a tool of that ideology. In doing so, he demonstrates that although it is not possible to escape ideology to view the world in an unmediated way, it is possible to at least be aware of some of the effects that ideology has on one's world view.

Any use of a word is an ideological act. Althusser explains the importance of words to class struggle:

The realities of the class struggle are ‘represented’ by ‘ideas’ which are ‘represented’ by words... [I]n political, ideological, and philosophical struggle, the words are ... weapons, explosives or tranquilizers and poisons. Occasionally, the whole class struggle may be summed up in the struggle for one word against another word. Certain words struggle against themselves as enemies. (24)

The use of words, then, is the class struggle itself, acting through several steps of mediation, the first of which being thought. In the eighth poem of the third section of “Inchoate Road,” the fourth book in *Book 6 Books*, the line “i think in ink” is an explicit statement of words’ connection to thought. Nichol describes “ink,” or language, as a vehicle for his thought. His ability to think is mediated and constrained by the ideology contained within his word choices. Anti-capitalist thoughts must be expressed via words conducive to those thoughts. The words of this line are conducive to that type of thought because they demonstrate the ideology of their own operation. Nichol demonstrates that in the form of this line, rhyme foregrounds the fact that the word “ink” is contained within the word “think,” thereby demonstrating the importance of recognizing the connection between the two words.

Idioms, like words rely on a pre-existing knowledge-base that can affect how one understands that idiom. Summarizing work by George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Max Black, Mills explains that

when you use a metaphor, you are drawing on a body of thought or background knowledge which might in fact skew your analysis or thinking of that particular object. Particularly if the metaphors which

are being used are so-called ‘dead’ metaphors, i.e. those metaphors which are preconstructed, then the thought-processes which are involved in the use of those metaphors may not be as open to analysis as if a less preconstructed phrase were used. (136)

Idioms are such dead metaphors, and Nichol examines them using similar techniques to other forms of language that he addresses, allowing the reader to recognize the thought-processes involved when using such idioms. One idiom that he addresses is “household name”: “who wants to be a household word? / OLD DUTCH CLEANER / the absurdity” (Book Five Chain Three). He demonstrates the idiom’s capitalist overtones and suggests that the typical dictate of capitalism, to be a household name, is actually undesirable.

Nichol argues for an alternative to becoming a household name by examining, on the same page, another idiom: “to’ make a name for one’s self’ / as tho what one were born with / granted / were not enough.” Here, Nichol addresses the word “make” hidden within this idiom, contrasting it with “granted,” which is foregrounded as being important because it is set off in a line by itself. “Granted” is a word that implies the exchange of something that does not involve commerce. To “grant” something to someone is not to sell or trade it. This contrast situates the verb “make” as a verb that necessarily involves exchange. In a capitalist society, one must typically sell what one makes, or at least invest capital in its advertisement, in order for it to achieve the renown implied by the idiom “to make a name for one’s self.” This demonstrates that this idiom advocates for capitalist action, of “making” things to be put on the marketplace, to be exchanged. By addressing these idioms, Nichol undermines their implicit valorization of capitalist actions. By examining idioms in this way, Nichol foregrounds the pro-capitalist thought-process inherent to them. The

thought processes involved in the use of an idiom usually go unnoticed by users of these idioms because of their function as dead metaphors, but Nichol alienates these idioms, thereby allowing the reader to better understand how their language functions.

Nichol also uses metaphors that are not “dead,” metaphors that are unique and not idiomatic. Ryan explains that philosophical deconstruction considers metaphor to be the

‘illegitimate’ and unsanctioned transfer of meaning, improper analogy.

A metaphor says one thing is something quite different; it implies the possibility of transformation and change, a questioning of the absoluteness of proper meaning and, consequently of law. Metaphors lead astray; in metaphor, a thing becomes other than itself. The law of identity, which is the law of all sovereignty, be it of meaning or of the state, is broken. (3-4)

Ryan contrasts this function of metaphor with meaning that is not metaphorical, stating that, for Hobbes, “[t]he authority of the sovereign’s law depends on the establishing of unambiguous proper meaning for words” (3). According to this description of metaphor, Nichol’s use of metaphor is an act of subversion against the power of the state, that is, the entity with sovereign power over law in a given society. As polysemy proliferates in Nichol’s language via metaphor, the reader must pay closer attention to the function of language, and therefore becomes more aware of the function that language has on his or her worldview. The following lines are rife with metaphor:

i name me anew

claim my signs

m a r t

in the word mart

the word m art

yr ology

the ology

word ology (Book Five Chain One)

The semiological sign indicating Nichol's name becomes a metaphor for the letters on a sign on a storefront of a store that uses the word "mart" in its name. This, in turn, is a metaphor for *The Martyrology*, as well as a metaphor for theology and "wordology," the study of words, presumably. The proliferation of metaphor in these lines completely removes any definite meaning, no interpretation of the meaning of these metaphors is more valid than any other interpretation. Because these lines have no definite meaning, they deny any possibility of definite law. The metaphors involve a mart as both the target and source of metaphors, which explicitly undermines the sovereign power of the state to normalize capitalism. Here, a mart is as much a place for capitalist exchange as it is a study of words or God. In this way, Nichol allows the reader to re-examine the word "mart" as a signifier for a marketplace. The metaphors connecting a marketplace to non-capitalist signifieds, such as wordology or theology, complicates the way that these capitalist signs create meaning, and therefore complicates the way that the reader interprets the language of capitalism, removing the possibility of passive absorption and acquiescence of capitalist values.

Barthesian Myth and Marxism

Nichol also addresses a very difficult-to-notice way that language affects thought: what Roland Barthes calls myth. Myth is an important aspect of language for

being able to understand how language affects thought because myth is often extremely difficult for a typical language user to identify. Barthes explains myth:

In myth, we find again ... the signifier, the signified, and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it *is a second-order semiological system*. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. (114)

Barthes gives an example of myth that is useful for understanding how the dominant ideology of a given society can benefit from myth:

I am at the barber's, and a copy of *Paris-Match* is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the *meaning* of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed with a previous system (*a black soldier is giving the French salute*); there is a signified (it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); finally, there is a presence of the signified through the signifier. (116)

The image of the French soldier is affected not only by the relationship of that sign, the representation of a soldier on a magazine cover, to its referent, the soldier himself,

but also by the myth of the greatness of the French state. Myth, therefore, plays an important role in how readers of that sign understand it. By examining how myth functions, Nichol opens up another avenue for examining how language affects thought.

Paragrammaticisation is an especially useful tool for undermining the power of pernicious myths in society because it robs myth of the ability to cause an initial impression. As Barthes explains, “myth essentially aims at causing an immediate impression – it does not matter if one is later allowed to see through the myth, its action is assumed to be stronger than the rational explanations which may later belie it” (130). Through the paragram, Nichol disallows myths’ signifiers from signifying myths before they signify their constituent words. Therefore, the myths cannot have an immediate impression on the reader.

Myth, though tenacious, is not immune to the kind of critical examination that allows for a better understanding of its influence on thinking. Barthes explains how myth is resistant to attempts to vanquish it, and that the best way to see through myth is to create another myth:

it is extremely difficult to vanquish myth from the inside: for the effort one makes in order to escape its stranglehold becomes in turn the prey of myth: myth can always, as a last resort, signify the resistance that is brought to bear against it. Truth to tell, the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth*: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology. Since myth robs language of something, why not rob myth? All that is needed is to use it as the departure point for a third semiological chain, to take its signification as the first term of a second myth. (135)

Nichol, too, attacks the myth of literature by turning it into a departure point for a new myth. Barthes describes “writing as the signifier of the literary myth” (134). Nichol takes the literary myth and uses it as a signifier for the myth of the labour process involved in writing; he uses literature to direct the reader to awareness of the labour process involved in making that literature: “picture a man (31) narrating this poem / picture a man (36) typing this final draft” (Book Five Chain Two). The reader’s attention is diverted away from the literariness of *The Martyrology* and towards its artifice. Nichol diverts the power of bourgeois modes of thought in favour of Marxist ones. Rather than thinking about the merit that bourgeois ideology assigns to literature, the reader must think about the process of labour. The bourgeois literary myth, that is, the myth of a genius author creating a text instantaneously and in one draft, is supplanted from the forefront of the reader’s consciousness in favour of a more Marxist myth. As Eagleton explains, art is “part of a society’s ideology – an element in that complex structure of social perception which ensures that the situation in which one social class has power over others is either seen by most members of the society as ‘natural’ or not at all” (*Marxism* 5). Nichol’s new myth, by providing an alternative to a bourgeois myth, is another way that Nichol undermines the supposed naturalness of bourgeois myth.

Nichol’s undermining of the literary genius myth is an undermining of the bourgeois class’s power to obfuscate the construction and operation of the myths that benefit it, not just an undermining of how people in a bourgeois culture think about that particular myth. As Barthes explains, “in a bourgeois culture ... there is no proletarian art; ideologically, all that is not bourgeois is obliged to borrow from the bourgeoisie” (139). Even art that foregrounds the labour process and which creates

remain open to salvage. First, because they come from a small section of the bourgeoisie itself, from a minority group of artists and intellectuals, without public other than the class which they contest, and who remain dependent on its money in order to express themselves. Then, these revolts always get their inspiration from a very strongly made distinction between the ethically and the politically bourgeois: what the avant-garde contests is the bourgeois in art or morals – the shop-keeper, the Philistine, as in the heyday of Romanticism; but as for political contestation, there is none. What the avant-garde does not tolerate about the bourgeoisie is its language, not its status. (139)

Nichol's lines quoted above attempt to undermine bourgeois power in literature while simultaneously demonstrating the limited capacity of such an attempt. They subvert strategies for decoding as well as for word interpretation, while allowing for the fact that these subversions are still "penned in." Avant-garde poetic strategies such as those used by Nichol in these lines of poetry can appear to be free from the constraints of bourgeois ideology, but Nichol shows that that ideology still influences the avant-garde. He shows that even an analysis of ideology is not free from the influences of ideology.

The dominance of bourgeois ideology is partially because, as Barthes explains, "practiced on a national scale, bourgeois norms are experienced as the evident laws of a natural order" (140). Nichol addresses this fact, stating that "whatever the political belief / the ordinary man or woman is forgotten / because they are not known" (Book Five Chain Eight). It is considered natural that ordinary people are not considered in politics because bourgeois ideology normalizes their elision. This occurs no matter the

political belief because the valorization of bourgeois culture is beneficial to the ruling class, which enforces that belief through ISAs. The fact that Nichol even must use the word “ordinary” indicates a lack of power on the part of these ordinary people. Barthes explains that the name “bourgeois” is unnecessary because bourgeois ideology is so ubiquitous: “Bourgeois ideology can ... spread over everything and in doing so lose its name without risk” (138). The use of the adjective to describe these ordinary men and women is an extension of how they are not known. Nichol, however, makes clear that he is constrained by the values of the society in which he lives. He states: “i write s i c.” This statement simultaneously demonstrates Nichol’s constraints on how he writes about his social environment as well as the constraints on how he describes that environment. “s i c” can be read phonetically, as “as I see,” demonstrating that Nichol can only write about what he sees; he is constrained by how he interprets or “sees” the world, and, therefore, by the ideology through which he must interpret that world. It can also be compacted into the word “sic,” a word most typically used in Canadian society within brackets, appearing as “[sic],” and is used by bourgeois academics and professionals to denote language which differs from accepted bourgeois norms about language, such as spelling or grammar, thereby denoting such language use as anomalous. In this reading of the line, Nichol demonstrates that he conforms to these ideological writing practices. Nichol explains to the reader that, although he is attempting to undermine bourgeois ideology, as a member of that bourgeoisie, the reader should be on guard against taking his advice at face value.

Nichol emphasizes the myth of the everyday man and woman, that is, the myth of a group of people with no agency yet upon whom there is placed a certain sense of romanticized or idealized importance, by exploding a signifier for that myth,

that “no one takes the time to talk to them,” allowing the reader more surface area with which to examine the myth. Barthes explains that in myth, “a minute form (a word, a gesture, even incidental, so long as it is noticed) can serve as signifier to a concept with a very rich history” (120). The fact that “no one takes the time to talk to them,” that is, the ordinary man or woman, is one such signifier; eight short and unassuming words that signify a very complex myth about the proletariat. This is the signifier that Nichol explodes in order to examine its myth:

no one takes the time to talk to them

no one t t t t t t

seven crosses for our lack of humanity

(akes)

seven crosses for our arrogance & pride

(he ime)

seven crosses for our lack of humility

(o alk o)

seven crosses for the people swept aside

(hem

‘d in then (Book Five Chain Eight)

Nichol allows the reader to see one of the concepts contained within this signifier: that of the effect of the religious ISA on the everyday man or woman. Nichol takes a signifier that occupies one line of space and spreads it over five lines, reducing the disparity between the relative sizes of the signifier and the myth. Simultaneously, he inserts meaning contained by the myth but not by the signifier of that myth in between the lines that the signifier now occupies. Spreading the signifier out across several

lines reveals the metaphorical crosses within the signifier, which then allows Nichol to examine the meaning within those crosses. The meanings that Nichol finds in these seven crosses are all traits characteristic of religious ISAs that emphasize the power and social positioning that comes with being a part of that apparatus at the expense of the ordinary man or woman. The “our” refers to the group of people who can situate “ordinary” people as other and as “them.” That is, it refers to unordinary people, as distinct from ordinary people, the people with the power to sweep ordinary people aside and the social positioning to be inclined towards arrogance and pride. Ordinary men and women are typically a part of a religion, but not a part of the power structure of that religion. The examination of the signifier “noone takes the time to talk to them” then ends by demonstrating that these ordinary people are still “(hem / ‘d in” by their ordinariness even when the signifier is not explicitly stated. The reader has become better equipped to examine one aspect of the myth of the ordinary man or woman, namely, that the ordinary man or woman has no agency but is protected by a more powerful group of people.

In a final example of how Nichol foregrounds the influence of capitalist ideology on language, he advocates a less romanticized view of rural landscapes, and therefore one that is less constrained by the dominant ideology, which encodes rural landscape as signifying the myth of a retreat from city life. He does so by examining prepositions used in idioms used to describe landscape: “so what if he lived *in* the county / he lived *on* the land / which is to say separate from it” (Book Three Section Five). His premise is that the idiom “to live on the land” describes the state of being separate from the land rather than, as is the typical way of understanding the idiom, describing one’s symbiosis with it. He uses this premise to formulate the question: “how do you live *in* the land” (Book Three Section Five). In this way, Nichol avoids

following the language of the outsiders to rural areas, such as “estate owners, improvers, industrialists [and] artists ... who customarily talk the language of landscape” (Connerton 47). By refusing to use such language, Nichol advocates for a new way of thinking about rural landscape and its inhabitants. Connerton explains how outsiders’ viewpoints restrict their understanding of land:

the idea of landscape is not simply a privileged but a restrictive way of seeing which promotes the ‘outsider’s’ point of view, while sustaining in existence a radical split between ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’ on the land: between those who relate ‘directly’ to the land, and those who relate ‘indirectly’ to the land as a form of exchange value. (47)

By foregrounding the idiom, “to live on the land,” Nichol allows the reader to conceive of a relationship between land and its inhabitants in a way that is not affected by an outsider’s reading of that land. He subverts the myth, used by those outsiders, that to live in a rural setting is inherently “outside” the norm of everyday work life, and is merely a space for vacation. Where one lives and how one engages with the space and place in which one lives is an important part of how one engages with language.

Chapter 3: Space, Place, and *The Martyrology*

For Nichol, one's engagement with his or her physical space is closely associated with one's subject position, and therefore with the way that one engages with his or her culture. As Leif Einarson explains, "the cultural territory of the subject, from Nichol's (self-)perspective, is a woven ground of both the infrastructure and architecture of the textual as well as civil and physical spaces we inhabit" (39). Whenever Nichol examines the language of space, he also is examining the language of self and of culture. Nichol addresses the structures and rules of the language regarding space to allow the reader to recognize the effects of language's conceptual framework on one's subject position.

The Martyrology is an extremely physical text, frequently referring to space and place. The language that Nichol uses to make the text physical is an important avenue for foregrounding how language affects people's view of the physical world. Jameson argues for space as being the most important category of perception in postmodernism:

I think it is at least empirically arguable that in our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism. (15)

Nichol's engagement with space is important for adequately examining the psychic experience of the effect of language. Both language and space pose similar problems of understanding. Jameson explains the problems of spatial perception under postmodernism:

I am proposing the notion that we are here in the presence of something like a mutation in built space itself. My implication is that

we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new space, have not kept pace with that evolution; there has been a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject. We do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace, as I will call it, in part because our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism. The new architecture ... stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions. (37-38)

Nichol, by providing new ways of understanding the language of space, provides the reader with an opportunity to grow these new sensory tools. He immerses the reader in the space of his book, demanding that he or she read the book as a spatial object rather than just a textual one. Through this process of reading, the reader navigates a mutated textual space, exploring poetry that is as spatially differentiated from traditional poetry as the space of a postmodern city is differentiated from that of a traditional city. Nichol does this by using landmarks, the tools of navigation through a traditional city, to enable navigation of his postmodern text. Jameson describes the mechanisms of a “disalienated” city:

Disalienation in the traditional city ... involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories. (51)

The ability to map and remap the page is crucial to understanding it as one would understand a traditional city, and Nichol provides the reader with the tools to do so. The reader, then, becomes better equipped to navigate the postmodern world.

The poem on the second page of I, Part 3, in *Book 6 Books* (see Excerpt One in my Appendix), disalienates the space of the page from the reader's spatial perception, allowing him or her to spatially navigate this postmodern text. The poem does so by allowing the reader to become aware of the page and the relationship between words and the page. It does so by demanding that the reader unpack the meaning of the poem by examining the physical space of the page. The reader must read this poem more as a diagram than as words, noticing that the signs "shadow" next to the signs "stone" are positioned as though they were actual shadows projected by real stones jutting forth from the page. To understand the poem, the reader must situate a light source, unsigned, at the right side of the page. This is because this is the positioning of a light source that follows physical spatial rules consistent with the placement of the word shadow around the word stone. This placement must be found via the deductive process of tracking one's reading trajectory of the different stones. The physical space of the page enters the reader's memory via the landmark of the light source, creating a page that is disalienated in the way that Jameson describes pre-modern ("traditional") cities to be. Language becomes used as a graphic object to create a map, allowing the reader to understand space in the poem as one would understand the space of a traditional city. In this poem, the ability of language to construct people's understanding of the physical world is foregrounded by the use of language to construct a physical facsimile of a world that the reader can easily navigate.

Nichol uses similar strategies of orienting the reader within space to engage with the reader's perception of the world as a whole, using the page as metaphor for not just the city, but for the space of the entire Earth. Jameson argues that the

alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment ... can itself stand as the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects. (43)

Nichol uses the relationship between the reader's body and the built environment of the pages of his word-diagrams to stand for the relationship between the reader and the multinational space of his or her environment. The poem entitled "(geography)" (see my Appendix, Excerpt Two) is one such word-diagram. This poem describes the origin of the multinational space that characterizes postmodernity by describing the creation of colonialist space, a precursor to the current multinational space. The poem functions similarly to the untitled poem about shadows and stones, demanding that the reader navigate the physical space of the page. The arrows pointing at either side of the page serve an externally referential and not intratextually spatial function: to indicate the old and new worlds, they belong to the semantic field of naval travel and colonialism, much like other signs on this page: east and west, Britain and places unknown. Simultaneously, the arrows refer to the text itself, to the subsequent and previous pages, a function made apparent via comparison to other arrows on the page that explicitly point to the page itself, such as the arrow that points at the line "the sun sets." This function of the arrows foregrounds the fact that the reader is reading a physical book, not passively decoding art through the apparently transparent medium of the text. As with all signs, the arrows cannot signify the world itself, only the

signified of the world, a fact that is foregrounded because the words associated with each arrow, “this” and “that,” are farther away from the pages to which they respectively refer than the other word. This symbolically represents the disconnect between signifier and signified. The arrows that refer to both the externally referential world and the internally referential book foreground the conceptual difference between the two, allowing the reader to recognize that concepts such as “east” and “west” must be understood in a much more mediated way than concepts such as the page of a book that he or she is currently reading.

Nichol’s diagrams make the reader aware of the conceptual difference between the space of the world and of the page, but some of them also unify these two different types of spaces by obscuring the difference between sign and referent. In part I of Book I in *Book 6 Books* (Appendix, Excerpt Three), the series of diagrams depicting a boat in mist exemplify this process. These diagrams join the referents of the signs that comprise them with the graphic signs themselves. Even more so than in “(geography),” the signs are pictures as much as they are words; the sign “boat” floats on a sea of the signs “wave.” These words signify the pictures into which they are arranged. Because the three stanzas here change only in their positioning of the sign “boat” they become slideshows rather than just pictures, introducing a temporal requirement for reading them. These diagrams demonstrate a sense of movement both referentially and within the page itself; the boat moves across the waves as the sign “boat” moves across stanzas. The signifier situates the reader within space and within time without requiring the reader to decode its signification. The text becomes more spatially navigable because it evokes time, a quality that is necessary for real-world spatial navigation.

Nichol demonstrates how people form their conceptions about space. In *How Modernity Forgets*, Connerton provides some useful analyses of the relationship between capitalism and space. These analyses support Jameson's theories about space in postmodernity, as Connerton's definition of modernity partially overlaps with conventional chronological definitions of postmodernity, and is characterized by the advent of capitalism:

by modernity I mean the objective transformation of the social fabric unleashed by the advent of the capitalist world market which tears down feudal and ancestral limitations on a global scale, and psychologically the enlargement of life chances through the gradual freeing from fixed status hierarchies. Chronologically, this covers the period from the mid nineteenth century accelerating to the present. (4)

When Connerton makes statements about space, they can be read through Jameson's argument that space is an important metric for postmodern understanding, and can also be read as being connected to how capitalist ideology influences the perception of space. One such statement about space is that "in automatically thinking of places as represented on maps, we are ... entangled in a process of forgetting, because in the historical process the labour of producing places is followed by the labour of producing spatial mappings of places" (Connerton 50). Maps are complicit in the effacement of labour because they reduce place to the representation of place. In this way, maps are similar to language as language reduces a referent to a representation of that referent. Book Five opens with a map of a segment of Toronto (Appendix, Excerpt Four), but throughout Book Five Chain One, Nichol explores place using language that allows the reader more options for conceiving of space than simply conceiving it as it appears on a map.

Nichol describes a trip within the section of Toronto on the map: “How Land over the bridge / (du pont) to Daven’s Port / & in between a sea (mer) / Wal” (Book Five Chain One). This description follows Connerton’s model of an itinerary, which “represents a particular route or routes, with starting points and destinations; it indicates how to get from one to the other” (50). Because Nichol describes how to get around this neighbourhood of Toronto, the “signs of memory” that Connerton argues have become effaced by maps (51) reappear. Furthermore, by breaking apart the words, Nichol directs the reader to examine these places and their histories more closely. Howland Avenue becoming How Land in this arrangement: Nichol asks the reader to think about the land itself, using the signifier for a piece of land to invite analysis of the signified. Davenport Road becomes Daven’s Port, directing the reader to think of the road’s eponym. This paragram enables the reader to think about the road’s history, and about the labour involved in the construction and use of such a road. As Connerton explains, “[t]he identity of place is always embedded in the histories which people tell of them, and, most fundamentally, in the way in which those histories were originally constituted in processes of labour” (50). When Davenport becomes Daven’s Port, the reader thinks about who Daven could have been, what stories have been told about him or her, whether or not he or she built a port, and other questions related to that street’s history. In this way, Nichol foregrounds questions about the space of Davenport Road that capitalist ideology typically does not foreground in the mind of day-to-day users of that road.

Nichol also creates paragrams out of street names to foreground the fact that streets perpetuate capitalist modes of communication and exchange. Ryan, summarizing Marx, discusses the operation of capitalist commodity exchange, and explains how commodities are homogenized through the medium of money:

[t]he law of value imposes ‘continuity, uniformity, regularity, order’ upon the labor process. In its very structure, value unifies by homogenizing difference. In order for commodities to be exchangeable, their differences from all others must be effaced, and their inequalities must be mediated by a general equivalent (money) which abstracts from all their distinct forms and is identical with each.

(89)

When Nichol removes difference between words by using paragrams, such as the words Walmer, Spadina, and Madison in the line “Wal Mer’s pa Dina Madi’[s] son” (Book Five Chain One; Appendix, Excerpt Nine), he removes the need or ability to “exchange” such words, to compare, evaluate, and select one word over another when one uses language. More than homogenizing the difference between them, Nichol syncretizes separate words. He removes the need for a general equivalent because there are no distinct forms that need to be abstracted. Nichol undermines, at the level of language, capitalist ideology that allows for existential homogenization only through specific rectification of, and therefore systemic perpetuation of, disparate values of various things. Although language cannot remove the need for money as a general equivalent in commodity exchange, Nichol attacks the use of money at a conceptual level by removing the differences between words for these streets when he places them within a single utterance. That utterance retains other forms of difference, such as those at the levels of syntax, but these forms of difference are not as useful as vectors for examining capitalist ideology as street names. Streets are important things for the economic base of society, and they often have denotative significance to the members of that society and signify a certain class position.

Nichol examines pictorial signification to foreground how language perpetuates the power dynamics associated with streets. Nichol does this by examining the language of space in terms of how it interacts with myth. He takes advantage of the way that pictures signify in comparison to how words signify. Barthes explains that both these forms of signs function identically to each other when they signify myth: “the materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.), however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth” (114). The road map depicting the intersection of Walmer and Spadina on the first page of Book Five Chain Three (Appendix, Excerpt Five) is one such material of speech that is caught by myth. It is a visual representation of its referent, like a photograph or a painting, and it signifies the myth of the state’s power to exercise order over society by exercising order over city planning and streets. Nichol uses linguistic signification to describe that myth:

the glyph

(outline of a y or

scepter that some sea god might be holding)

symbol of what power

The picture signifies a city street. The sign, comprised of the signifying pictorial and the signified street, signifies the myth of the power of municipalities over their citizens as well as the power of geography to constrain where people may go. Nichol foregrounds this myth via the use of linguistic signification. The description of the streets, the symbol of power, as being a scepter that a sea god holds ironically encodes the power of the dominant classes as divine and monarchic. Nichol questions this power by asking “symbol of *what* power [?]” By doing so, he demonstrates that

people have the ability to question the power of the dominant classes to perpetuate myths like this. Nichol discusses the same topic using two forms of signification so that, although the one form of signification, pictorial signification, is caught by myth, the other form works against that same myth.

Nichol's repeated and varied ways of examining streets – through paragram, through mapping, through pictures, etc. – do not just work against bourgeois myths of bourgeois power, they give the streets new myths, they disallow the streets' respective bourgeois myths from determining and restricting the streets' ability to signify. Streets are prime targets for myth because their shape is so simple, allowing for simplistic representation of a map as simply a line. Streets are a category of images that, according to Barthes, "myth prefers to work with[:] poor, incomplete images, where the meaning is already relieved of its fat, and ready for a signification" (127). Toronto's Queen Street West, which appears in the map that opens Book Five, signifies not just the street to contemporary Torontonians, but the gentrified shopping and dining areas that line parts of the street. These areas then come to signify the myth of bourgeois commerce, exacerbating the ubiquity of such subject matter in language. This myth is evoked every time the sign "Queen Street West" is used, thereby normalizing the conception of place via recognition of commercial value. Nichol undermines the ability of such bourgeois myths to influence how people perceive streets by creating his own myths. Davenport becomes Daven's Port, signifying the myth of the character "Daven" and his or her influence on history. Brunswick Avenue becomes "Brun's Wick" (Book Five Chain One), signifying the myth of that character's sexuality.

Nichol also examines the relationship between space and ideology by examining the influence of space on ideology when that space is not specifically

described. For example, on the two pages before the beginning of the Book of Hours, in *Book 6 Books* (Appendix, Excerpt Six) Nichol examines the importance of space to religion by examining the signifier “religion.” His statement that religion is “a combination of / the real ... & the region” is indicative of the influence that space has on religion. Religion is affected by one’s space, by how religion functions within a particular geographic region, and by the “real” circumstances of that space, the parts of that space that objectively exist outside of human perception.

It is difficult to understand and perceive what is actually real because reality is always mediated by ideology. Indeed, although religion is comprised of both the real and a region, it is also a “region of the real,” a small part of the real that humans perceive through the ISA of religion and is therefore “open to / misconception & / fanaticism / which does not yield to / science or / history” (Appendix, Excerpt Six). In this sense, traditional means of finding knowledge, such as science or history, are useless for deciphering the ISA of religion. Nichol alludes to the techniques of science and history here, math and etymology, to track the meaning of religion. But it is only the consideration of the physicality of the sign “religion” that provides useful analysis of that sign for the sake of understanding how it is influenced by space. Religion is described as “uncharted,” which indicates that religion cannot be understood because it cannot be located within place. Unlike other signs such as “east” or “Britain,” “religion” is not placed within a diagram because there is no diagram that can accurately communicate the dense ideological function of this ISA. One must be able to locate this sign in space, to chart it, in order to be able to understand it, to understand which ideological continent it occupies, which geographic region is beholden to which religion. The sign “religion,” is a reminder of the difficulty of seeing ideology through ideology, of seeing the ideology of religion while being

beholden to a society that understands the universe through science and history. Only through an ability to understand and chart space through a disalienated a pre-capitalist space can one properly understand the sign “religion.”

A person’s understanding of the physical space of the natural world plays an important role in the relationship between a subject and his or her interpretation of reality, the region to the real. Jameson explains that one’s cognitive map, like ideology, acts “to enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole” (50). It is important for one to understand how one engages with his or her cognitive map to better understand the way that the process of cognitive mapping mediates one’s perception of reality from the actuality of reality. The immediate spatial “region” that one occupies determines what is his or her perception of “real.” Nichol creates cognitive maps throughout all of his word-diagrams, but he gives more detail about the relationship between signs on a map and ideology in the poem “(details)” (*Book 6 Books Book One Part Four*, see Excerpt Seven). This poem consists of descriptions of geographical features of a map that are openly ideological along the left column, and more factual, less explicitly ideological, corrections along the right column. In this poem, Nichol demonstrates how the language of maps can affect one’s understanding of the world they describe, causing the reader to see monsters rather than whales. The ideological column then terminates with “wind & sea,” the same words that appear in the parenthetical column, suggesting that ideological language is not always obvious.

Ideological language can be made more obvious when it is decontextualized from the society of the people that use it. A person’s understanding of a word is determined by the context of the society in which that person lives. Although a word’s

denotative meaning means the same thing to all speakers of a language, connotation is determined by individuals' experiences within their respective societies. Bourdieu argues that

If ... connotation refers to the singularity of individual experiences, this is because it is constituted in a socially characterized relation to which the recipients bring the diversity of their instruments of symbolic appropriation. The paradox of communication is that it presupposes a common medium, but one which works ... only by eliciting and reviving singular, and therefore socially marked, experiences. The all-purpose word in the dictionary, a product of the neutralization of the practical relations within which it functions, has no social existence: in practice, it is always immersed in situations, to such an extent that the core meaning which remains relatively invariant through the diversity of markets may pass unnoticed. ... The different meanings of a word are defined in the relation between the invariant core and the specific logic of the different markets, themselves objectively situated with respect to the market in which the most common meaning is defined. They exist simultaneously only for the academic mind which elucidates them by breaking down the organic solidarity between competence and market. (39)

Nichol foregrounds the way that different groups of people read the connotative meaning of the word for the star called Polaris:

'known as the Celestial W when below the pole
and the Celestial M when above it'

M

polaris

W (Book Five Chain One)

Here, Nichol demonstrates that different circumstances, such as geography, can affect how people name the world around them. The language of these lines is decontextualized from the real geographical situations which give the word “Polaris” its connotative meaning: connotatively evoking either a “W” or an “M” depending on the location from which it is viewed. The reader is able to compare the two connotative meanings against each other.

Similarly, Nichol states that “in England every county forms a country / stress their r / we stress the newness of our be” (Book Five Chain One). The connotative meaning of “county” is changed from a young and growing community to an established community with a strong identity when the accent of the group of people using that signifier is English rather than Canadian. Nichol makes the reader aware that readers from a different region may interpret the world differently than he or she does because of how they interpret the language used to describe the world. The ability for different groups of people to interpret words differently, to read different connotative meanings in the words in addition to their shared denotative meanings, is important to understanding how people exist in a capitalist society because, as Bourdieu explains, certain words can “receive different, sometimes opposite, meanings from one social class to another” (40). Nichol demonstrates “opposite meaning” with his Polaris diagram, creating a mirror image of the “M” and “W.” Inhabitants of a certain region often belong to a singular social class, people in an economically depressed neighbourhood belonging to the working class, for example. Both space and social class influence how people interpret language and how they perceive the world.

Chapter 4: Feminism and *The Martyrology*

Clint Burnham explains that feminist readings have been one of the “doxa” of *The Martyrology* criticism (19). It is easy to see why this has been the case; themes of gender and of patriarchy are threaded throughout the text. Such themes occasionally manifest in problematic ways. The first two books contain some narrative points that are referentially problematic in that women are often discussed in an anti-feminist way. In the narrative of *Books 1 & 2*, the sole female saint, saint agnes, is often described as either having value or not having value according to the nature of her sexual relationship with men. This causes the first two books to have a complex relationship with gender. The language use of these books, as with the other books of *The Martyrology*, is anti-patriarchal in its language play, yet these first books can be said to advance patriarchal norms in their narrative. As *The Martyrology* progresses, Nichol works against this kind of sexist referentiality; the later books become much less narratively problematic.

Because the importance of language play remains consistent across all books of *The Martyrology*, the first two books are still useful for examining the sexism inherent to language despite having problems with sexism themselves. This is both because of the language’s ability to foreground the ideology of patriarchy, and because of its ability to foreground the sexism inherent to the English language. One effect of Nichol’s reframing of language is that the reader’s preconceptions about gender, exacerbated by the English language itself, cannot take hold in the language of *The Martyrology*. Nichol is able to use language as a tool for anti-misogynistic introspection by examining the structure and conventions of language.

The characters of *Books 1 & 2* are almost all saints, and the speaker almost always refers to them with the honorific “saint.” The use of “saint” as an honorific

obfuscates the character's gender because, unlike other honorifics in English such as "Mr." or "Mrs.," "saint" is grammatically gender neutral. Before Book One begins, *Books 1 & 2* opens with a genealogy of saints (Appendix, Excerpt Eight) that, because of the ambiguity of the "saint" honorific, parodies sexist gendered familial hierarchies. The format of this section alludes to Genesis, which delineates the succession of generations. Here, however, emphasis is not placed on fatherhood, nor on the act of taking wives, as is the case in Genesis. Rather, this genealogy lacks emphasis on any gender, and in fact never even marks gender. Some of these saints give birth, a fact which might give the reader an opportunity to determine gender. However, the line arrangement and syntax make it unclear which particular saints are the ones that give birth. For example: "saint orm married saint rain / gave birth to saint iff and saint ave." These lines could be read as "saint orm married saint rain *and* gave birth," or as "saint orm married saint rain, *who* gave birth." *The Martyrology* therefore opens with an introduction to its characters that establishes them as heroic and respectable without connecting those traits to masculinity. They are heroic because of the connection to Genesis, and they are respectable because the "saint" honorific confers respect. The reader must accept these character qualities without having his or her perception of the characters unconsciously altered by obvious gender markers that might encode these characters with the value system of patriarchal ideology.

This gender neutral genealogy has the added effect of denying a gendered power dynamic inherent to the English language. More than evoking societal preconceptions about gender, gender markers in English follow sexist grammatical rules. Mills explains that

[t]he order in which paired terms appear is another dimension of the unequal status of masculine and feminine terms. The fact that many binary terms are conventionally fronted by the male term prioritizes the male, since the elements which come first in English are generally seen to be the most important in terms of information-processing. (112-113)

Mills identifies some binary terms within the semantic field of marriage, a semantic field pertinent to a genealogy, such as “Mr and Mrs,” “man and wife,” and “husband and wife” (113). Mills notes that a binary term that breaks this rule is “bride and groom,” but she explains that this is caused by its use in a context that is “still influenced by notions of chivalry, where a feminine ideal holds an elevated position” (113). A marriage is a situation influenced by chivalry, but the act of taking a wife and having children is not. The ambiguously gendered characters allow for binary terms that do not privilege the male gender, and do not create a set of terms that “sounds odd to the native speaker” (Mills 113) by having a female term that comes first. Nichol frees these characters from the effect that syntax has on readers’ understanding of character via their understanding of gender.

Although these saints remain gender ambiguous, the English rules for gendering risk causing them to acquire gendered connotations. Dennis Baron explains that

[t]here are two principal ways of marking the referential gender of English nouns: visibly, by means of compounding or suffixation, and invisibly, by the very meaning of the word, for example, *mother/father*, *boy/girl*, and *stallion/mare*, words with unrelated roots that belong to one gender or the other not because of their form, but because of their inherent though morphologically invisible meaning. (112-113)

He goes on to describe how words that are not morphologically gendered, and also not a part of a binary pair, still can have gender, even if that gender is not immediately obvious or explicit: “The absence of *female nurse* and *man doctor* indicates that the apparently common-gender *nurse* and *doctor* are taken to be sex-specific by speakers of English” (113). That is, because *male nurse* and *lady doctor* are terms that do exist, “nurse” and “doctor” must be female and male, respectively. Conversely, in English, “saint” does not require a gendered adjective to be attached to it no matter the gender of the saint. However, this kind of invisible gendering of words is tied to usage, and the overwhelming number of male saints in *The Martyrology* threatens to encode the word “saint” as male within the text. The text resists this encoding because the lone female saint, Agnes, is never described as a “lady saint” or “female saint” or anything of that sort, the word “saint” can remain neuter and the default gender of a named saint can remain ambiguous. Nichol demonstrates that it is possible to read a word that separates people into a class as neuter even if the people in that class are overwhelmingly one gender, such as nurses. By not referring to Agnes as a “female saint,” Nichol subverts the conventions of invisible gendering of nouns in English, denying the effect that noun gender has on thought. The reader is free to consider each saint character without his or her preconceptions about gender affecting his or her reading.

Nichol also examines how words can come to denote femininity through morphology. Baron describes the work of an anonymous 19th century philologist who believes that the word she “is formed [from he] by adding ‘a line symbolic of grace and beauty,’ the letter s” (19). Baron explains how “[i]n this writer’s genesis of language, the pronouns are created in an order and a fashion that mirror human creation – first the male, then the female, the male used to form the female” (19).

Nichol explicitly engages with the philologist's belief, asking "he/i/she / (why is s the feminizer?" (Book Four). Nichol, however, demonstrates that the feminine "s" can be used to do more than just subordinate to male stems. He states that the 's' "makes the i is" (Book Four), the neuter pronoun becomes not a feminine pronoun but a copular verb. When the "I" becomes feminized, rather than becoming subordinate, it becomes more self-actualized: it attains the power "to be." Further denying the philologist's supposition that "pronouns are created in an order and a fashion that mirror [biblical] human creation," Nichol goes on to describe "the men inside women, the me in both of them" (Book Four). Here, Nichol reverses the Biblical creation of Eve out of Adam's rib by describing the sign "men" being created out of a part of the sign "women." Through his examination of words and letters, Nichol reverses the subordination of the female to the male in language. He equips readers with the tools to conceive of morphologically female gendered signs in a feminist way.

Nichol further foregrounds the importance of connotative meaning with regards to morphology when he examines the feminine "s" to explore the ways that Westerners have historically reacted to women in religion. Spender describes this reaction: "male activities were named as religion while comparable female activities were named as cult" (169). Nichol engages with this naming process by examining the word "shallowness," asking "shallowness (hallowness feminized?)" (Book Four). The word "hallow" becomes unhallowed when the feminizing "s" is added, the meaning of the word shifts from the divine to the quotidian. By abutting "shallowness" and "hallowness" here, Nichol demonstrates that nearly identical words can be seen as either laudable or deplorable, religious or cultish, depending on the gender of the word.

The Martyrology is a text that continually engages with Christianity, and, as such, it must contend with the meaning-making strategies of that religion, one of which is sexism. Most of *The Martyrology's* saints, gods in their own right, are male, and God himself is, of course, male. Spender argues that “[t]he effect of making the Deity masculine should not be underestimated because it establishes one of the primary categories of our world as a male category” (167). Although Books Three and Four continue the convention of a male deity, they do not do so passively. Nichol uses a paragram to define theism: “the is M.” Throughout Books Three and Four, “M” and “W,” man and woman, are conflated with each other. Each initial takes up the meaning of the rest of the word. Therefore, the “M” in “the is M” is masculine. The “M” then modifies the meaning of the Christian God because the definite article in the context of Christianity is evocative of the Christian God because of his epithet, “the lord.” “the is M” demonstrates that Western theism is a process of masculinizing God. “Theism,” as both a signifier and a signified, contains male-centred meaning.

Similarly, the signs associated with Christianity are often at risk of perpetuating sexist meaning. Although “saint” remains gender-ambiguous throughout *Books 1 & 2*, it does come to mean different things when applied to different genders. Mills explains how words can mean different things depending on the gender of the person to whom they refer. She uses “tramp” as an example: “for the male, tramp refers to someone who sleeps rough, whereas for the woman it can also mean that she is promiscuous” (112). Terms that can apply to men or women, then, have the potential to be derogatory only towards women. In *Books 1 & 2*, “saint” initially means the same thing for both men and women, but as the title is given to or rescinded from Saint Agnes, the lone female character, what it means to be a female

saint diverges from what it means to be a male saint. Nichol delineates these terms in a sexist way, but abstains from encoding “saint” as derogatory towards women.

For the male, “saint” refers to an individualistically and occasionally tragically heroic figure, whereas for the female, it refers to someone who is sexually reserved and is helpful to men. When described in a sexual context, Agnes is not described with the “saint” honorific. When the narrator is haranguing Saint Reat for not listening to him, he says “you’ve taken up with some chick called agnes” (Book One Scenes From the Lives of the Saints). Here, Agnes is not a useful figure for her male partner; she prevents Reat from listening to the narrator because Reat has “taken up” with her. Later, their relationship is described as being more proper and Agnes is once again described as a saint. Rather than taking up with some chick, Reat “took saint agnes for a wife” (Book One Saint Reat and the Four Winds of the World). Now, Agnes’s sexual relationship with Reat is circumscribed within the institution of marriage, an institution that in patriarchal societies provides an opportunity for women to have sex without being labelled promiscuous. Agnes, here, is also grammatically subordinate to Reat; the tense of the verb “to take” is more direct. Because Agnes is now functioning within patriarchally accepted forms of sexual existence, she is described with the “saint” honorific. Inclusion or exclusion of the “saint” honorific depending on behaviour of the character means that a saint must act a certain way to receive this honorific, and this way of acting is different for the male and female characters. In this way, Nichol foregrounds how words can mean different things when applied to different genders. When “saint” describes men, it means someone powerful and individualistic, whereas, when applied to women, it means someone that is subservient to patriarchal norms and ideologies. However, the fact that this term is not derogatory when applied to women demonstrates that that is not

an intrinsic part of the English language, and that terms which are derogatory when only applied to women are so because of sexist ideology's influence on language.

Many parts of language contain double-standards, connotatively signifying different things when applied to different genders. Nichol uses syntactic ambiguity and unusual collocation to foreground double standards with regards to the male gaze in the lines "it is a freak show / of improbable changes // the bearded ladies & men / parade themselves in purple bathingsuits / offering smiles to the crowds below" (Book One The Martyrology of Saint And). Bearded ladies become more masculine because of their beards, and the men become more feminine because they are "paraded" around in their swim suits. The men are feminized by becoming subject to the audience's gaze; part of the "freak show" is the spectacle of males being subject to the male gaze. Mills explains how words like "bearded" or "paraded" can mean different things when applied to different genders; she states that "adjectives ... do not collocate equally with female and male referents" (68). She uses the example of "pretty boy" and "pretty girl" to demonstrate that "in some way, the adjective 'pretty' contains part of the meaning of the nouns it modifies" (68). Here, "bearded" contains part of the meaning of the noun it modifies; it either does or does not contain "freak" as part of its meaning. Similarly, because "parade themselves in purple bathingsuits" is not a typical collocation for male referents, "purple bathingsuits" contains "freak" as part of its meaning when applied to the male reflexive pronoun. These lines demonstrate how readers will find different meaning in the same language depending on whether the referent is male or female because of their biases, and that part of these biases are that it is "normal" to apply the male gaze to women.

In the same way that words that refer to a gendered person, such as "saint" or "bearded" accumulate new meaning based on their use, words without an explicitly

gendered referent also come to be associated with gender. One word that becomes gendered in *Books 1 & 2* is “fall.” At the start of the “Clouds” section, the saints are described: “when they fell to earth as strangers.” This bit of the narrative is evocative of the Fall of Man because it describes the fall from a heavenly state to an Earthly one. This use of “fall” is loaded with hostility towards the female gender because of its associations with Eve. The connotative meaning of fall is then shifted by the lines “surely when they fell / it was into grace.” Falling is now less a change in location and more a change in state. The sentence’s meaning is further exploded by the fact that Grace is a female name. Proper names are rarely capitalized in *The Martyrology*, so “grace,” here, can refer to both the state of grace and a woman named Grace. One of the fallen saints, And, is told that he “must wander that earth you’ve come to until you meet this woman.” The entrance into a state of grace, of becoming less Earthly and closer to God, is thereby causally connected with finding a woman; to find this woman is to achieve grace and return to the heavenly clouds. The connection of grace to Grace is elaborated when the meaning of “fall” is shifted again: “did you i mean fall there like that into her arms.” The meaning of “fall” is shifted back to a change in location. However, the significance of this physical fall is its idiomatic meaning, that of romance. The signifier “to fall,” therefore, begins as being connotatively an invective towards women and ends as being connotatively praising of women, though it only praises women as being romantically and/or sexually useful to men.

In either case, “fall” has accumulated gendered connotation. Whether it is used to describe women in a positive or negative manner, the reader’s ability to watch that signifier’s transformation allows him or her to be aware of the mechanics of gendering language, as well as allowing him or her to be more cognizant of the ways in which English speakers praise or decry the morality of women. Similarly, the

reader is made aware of how the signifier “grace” is gendered, and how that contrasts with how “fall” can be gendered. In this way, the reader is made aware of the ideologically embedded assumptions of the English language.

The narrator becomes annoyed with Reat because he “hooked up with a chick the village fool could see thru” (Book Two Clouds). Much like Agnes, the “chick” with whom Saint And “hooked up,” this woman loses her title. “she was no cloud lady / only cloudy” (Book Two Clouds). She does not act like a lady should, that is, sexually reserved, and becomes “only cloudy.” The speaker further admonishes Reat, saying that “your lack of vision / ties you to the earth // all these women / these cloudy cloudy women” (Book Two Clouds). These women tie men to the earth; there is no falling . Unlike the saints that fell into grace, Saint And associates with a woman who is sexually promiscuous, and therefore comes to be referred to as “cloudy.” When the cloud lady becomes a cloudy woman, we see the process that Deborah Cameron describes, that “a perfectly innocent term designating a girl or woman may begin with totally neutral or even positive connotations, but that gradually it acquires negative implications, at first perhaps only slightly disparaging, but after a period of time becoming abusive and ending as a sexual slur” (*The Feminist Critique of Language* 135). The word “cloudy” becomes an invective against women, rather than a descriptor for the heavenly. Reat is “tie[d] to the earth” because of his “lack of vision.” His vision has presumably been obfuscated by “all these women / these cloudy cloudy women,” lines which immediately follow the description of Reat’s lack of vision. “Cloudy” has become an insult denoting women who tie men to the Earth. It acquires the opposite implications of the cloud lady who would save men from that fate.

This is one way in which *Books 1 & 2* is narratively problematic. The narrator insults these women because of sexist ideas about how women should behave. However, the play with the words “cloud” and “cloudy” allows the reader to recognize how female-focused insults are created. The juxtaposition of “cloud” and “cloudy,” forms of the same word that acquire opposite meanings, allows the reader to become aware of the fact that this process of acquisition also happens extratextually, with words that he or she may not have noticed need not necessarily be insulting towards women. He or she is made to recognize the fact that language can make it more difficult to think of women who act outside of patriarchally prescribed norms positively because the words which one would use to describe such women have accumulated negative connotations.

Language can also make all women in general appear invisible. Nichol examines how the apparently gender-neutral pronoun “we” can be read as masculine in a way that excludes women from visibility in society. Ann Bodine explains that “[b]ecause of the social significance of personal reference, personal pronouns are particularly susceptible to modification in response to social and ideological change” (130). “We,” like all English personal pronouns, is attached to the social and ideological concerns of contemporary English speakers. Importantly, these social and ideological concerns include those that normalize the use of the male third person as a generic pronoun. Bodine explains that many feminists have stated “that ‘he’ should not be used when the referent includes women, and that speakers of English should find some substitute” (130), the substitute typically being “he or she” or “they.” Nichol examines the word “we” to explore how women must be relegated to a “they.” Nichol explores how women are normally kept outside the category of “we,” saying: “or what comes forth from my mouth / born from the woman in me / handed down

thru my grandma ma and lea / is what marks me most a man / that i am finally this we” (Book Three Section Seven). “We,” here, refers to a group that includes both men and women, and especially women as symbols for the power of speech. Nichol even seems to attribute his creative ability to feminine influence. However, this attunement with feminine creative ability is what most marks Nichol as a man.

When he becomes part of the category “we,” he becomes someone who is able to speak in the first person, to tell his own story. “We,” though not morphologically marked as male, is in fact marked as male through usage. Much as how “he” may refer to a woman when used in the general sense but usually has a male antecedent, “we” also has a male antecedent because women have historically been disallowed a voice. The use of “they” as a singular pronoun to refer to women is indicative of the fact that women are not part of the “we.” By using “we” in these lines to indicate a male and female group that emphasizes the importance of the female, while simultaneously explicating that this “we” marks Nichol not as a member of a male and female group but rather as a man, Nichol demonstrates the effect that that the pronoun has on thought. To use “we” in a context involving speech, “what comes forth from [an author’s] mouth,” is to evoke the male-dominated literary tradition, and therefore to perpetuate that tradition. Through these lines, Nichol allows the reader to recognize the social consequences of using “we” in this context.

Simultaneously, Nichol works to recontextualize the meaning of “we.” Natalya Androsova, in her PhD dissertation, argues that Nichol creates cohesion between the language of both women and men in the passage above:

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 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 feminine* that Nichol is giving to both genders. (58)

Androsova is arguing that Nichol’s writing is self-consciously feminine, that it homogenizes the way that both men and women use language via facilitating both genders to write according to *écriture feminine*, which *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women* explains “refers to a mode of writing that refuses appropriation and destruction and consequently challenges the premises of patriarchal rule” (469). The “we” can adequately describe both genders if both genders have equal access to language. However, the degree of agency that women have over language is not the only factor that can contribute to the invisibility of women in language.

The bifurcation of “st” words allows Nichol’s saint characters to come pre-encoded with meaning, as their names are derived from English words. However, a problematic avenue for misogynist thought appears because of this strategy. Saint Agnes is both the only female saint and the only saint whose name is not a paragram; Stagnes is not a word, unlike words like “stand” or “stranglehold,” from which saint and and saint rangelhold get their names. The other saints have embedded meaning in their character due to their name, but Agnes’s character is not fleshed out in this way. She is not a storm, or a stranglehold, or even someone who stands. She therefore is a flat character, which exacerbates the problem of the infrequency of female saints, contributing to the invisibility of women throughout *Books 1 & 2*. She has no stories

that focus on her, and appears only as a character focalized through the male characters. Her name has no inherent meaning, so she has no agency as a character. Even male saints that are mentioned only in passing, such as saint rive, allow the reader greater insight into their function as characters and as literary devices, because of their names. Agnes's name signifies only her gender because it is not a paragram of a common noun. This is one of the ways in which *Books 1 & 2* has a problematic relationship with its female characters, even at the level of language. However, Nichol later explores the mechanisms which allow him to create names, such as in the line "i (n) am e" (Book Three Section Eight).

The power to name and to have a name is an important determiner of who gets to have power in and over language. Spender argues that men's "monopoly over language is one of the means by which males have ensured their own primacy" (12) and that one of the "features of English language practices which is inherently sexist is the use of names. In our society, 'only men have real names' in that their names are permanent" (24). This is because "[f]athers pass their names on to their sons and the existence of daughters can be denied when in the absence of a male heir it is said that a family 'dies out'" (24). Nichol explicates men's control over language and naming by stating "i (n)am e." Names are not an inherent part of reality; they are created by language speakers generally, and by Nichol in this text specifically. The framing of "I name" further elaborates upon this process. "I name" is also "I, N[ichol] am e," following the text's pattern of using initials to represent a word. "E" is the first letter that is kept out of patriarchal history, so by explicating the fact that he names, Nichol places himself outside of patriarchal history, in the CE rather than the AD. By stating that he names, Nichol foregrounds the process of naming, making his role in the creation of names apparent, and making it obvious that the invisibility of women in

parts of *The Martyrology* is his doing. Saint Agnes does not have a “real name” because *stagnes* is not a real word. However, her name is not bereft of meaning because of a shallowness inherent to women, but because of Nichol’s agency in naming, a fact which “i (n)am e” makes clear. Nichol shows that those who have the power to create names have the power to control how people view what is named.

Nichol explicates how the physicality of a name’s appearance in a text affects its meaning: “names mentioned are here the / length that they appear important as their reappearance makes them / clear unclear that they are what they are no more than what occurs in / the poem that is their shape & tone their reality” (Book Three Section Seven). In these lines, Nichol demonstrates how the appearance of a name is connected with how important people find the named thing to be. If a name does not appear in the text or if a character is only referenced indirectly, the reader cannot find importance or significance in that name. This effect is noteworthy when considering female characters because, as Spender explains, the lack of names for women is “one more device for making women invisible” (24). Agnes is only mentioned twice throughout Books Three and Four, and only once is she referred to by her real name, Saint Agnes, the other time she is simply referred to as “agnes.” When her name is used though, it is amongst a variety of other saints and Nichol refers to them for the first time as “St” rather than “saint”: “St Orm St Reat / St Agnes & St And / St Utter.” Nichol makes it obvious that Agnes does not have a real name in the same way that the male saints do. Her name is less visible than theirs. This imitates the way that women’s names in society are often invisible because “women’s family names do not count” (Spender 24), it is only the male family name that determines continued lineage. Although women in *The Martyrology* and in society are often invisible due to their lack of names that count, the description of this

invisibility makes the reader aware of it, which makes the operation of that invisibility on the reader's unconscious less insidious. The reader is empowered to recognize the fact that the lack of real names for women in English contributes to English speaker's proclivity not to recognize the importance of women in society.

Nichol reduces the difference between male and female categories to its most linguistic form to examine how that difference functions. Dennis Baron describes how this difference, in grammar, may be traceable to early humans' animism. He hypothesizes that "[s]ince everything in the universe was anthropomorphized, all the nouns in the first human language were assigned both gender and divinity" (90). Nichol examines grammatical gender via the use of animism. The streets of Toronto in Book Five become people, specifically, gendered people. St. George Street and St. Clair Avenue are two streets that become people, and because those names are gendered, they become male and female people, respectively. Brunswick Avenue also becomes male, but it does so because of Nichol's repeated reference to "Brun's wick," the penis of Nichol's character Brun. Street names like "George" and "Clair" are obviously gendered due to the fact that they share names with gendered people names, while Brunswick is implicitly gendered because it contains the word "wick." By turning these streets into gendered characters, Nichol directs the reader to think about what rules determine language gendering.

As we saw in chapter one, Deutscher explains that languages with grammatical gender cause their users to apply their biases about gendered humans to gendered signs with non-human referents. English has no grammatical gender, but something similar still happens in English. Cameron explains that, in English, "the [linguistic] concepts 'masculine' and 'feminine' are infinitely detachable from anything having to do with 'real' sexual difference," and that the concepts can be

applied to even inanimate objects such as a knife and fork (82). Streets, therefore, can be read as masculine and feminine despite lacking “real” sexual difference, and despite English not gendering inanimate objects. When St. George Street and St. Clair Avenue are placed together as a pairing, English speakers will intuitively read St. George Street as more masculine and St. Clair Avenue as more feminine because of their names; as Cameron explains, “the attribution of gender is *relational*: it depends on the contrast between two terms” (*Feminism and Linguistic Theory* 83). When the two roads become anthropomorphized characters, they gain ‘real’ sexual differences. They gain male and female pronouns rather than the neuter pronouns that would usually be used in English for roads, and they acquire the subject/object positions that are normalized in a heterosexual romantic relationship in mainstream Canadian society: “the ford where St George laid his bed / hoping to woo St. Clair there” (Book Five Chain One).

The fact that Brunswick Avenue is also gendered as a male road demonstrates that, as Cameron explains “the classification [of gendered objects] does not seem to obey any single, logical principle” (*Feminsim* 83). The two “male” roads discussed here, George and Brunswick, are gendered as male because of two distinct principles: conventional male English personal pronouns, and homophony with slang for male anatomy. Although either reasoning for male gendering may be said to be logical, Brunswick should remain gender neutral if following the logic of St. George's gendering; although “Brunswick,” like George, functions as a name independent of its function as a street name, this name refers to a place (several famous places share this name), and places have no gender. Nichol foregrounds the fact that even inanimate objects, such as roads, which are of neuter gender according to pronoun usage, can in fact acquire gender when placed in a binary pair.

He has the male and female parts of a pair achieve 'real' sexual difference to demonstrate that language causes them to have metaphorical sexual difference. By gendering Brunswick, Nichol demonstrates that the process by which gender neutral words acquire gender is completely arbitrary. In doing so, he also demonstrates that societal preconceptions about sexual difference are arbitrary.

In addition to foregrounding the ways in which English perpetuates perceived differences between genders, Nichol also demonstrates that these perceived differences do not necessarily need to be present in all usages of language. Nichol arranges street names into utterances in order to blur the conceptual borders between those streets, and, by extension, to blur the borders between genders or between words. Saussure explains that “[w]hether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system. The idea or phonic substance that a sign contains is of less importance than the other signs that surround it” (120). By use of paragram and portmanteau, Nichol removes difference between signs at the level of the word, thereby removing their ability to signify independently of each other or to affect each other’s meaning at that word level. One such use of paragram and portmanteau is “Wal Mer’s pa Dina Madi’[s] son” (Book Five Chain One; Appendix, Excerpt Nine). This line takes three Toronto streets, Walmer, Spadina, and Madison, and breaks their signifiers apart in order to combine them into a single utterance. In doing so, Nichol removes the distinction between the three streets. Because of this, any one of these street names cannot affect the meaning of the other street names.

The meaning created within the street names (e.g., “Wal Mer’s pa,” above) also removes the distinction between hierarchies of gender that have pervaded parts of

The Martyrology that deal with genealogy. Cameron explains that “[w]hatever is thought masculine is also valued more highly than whatever is considered feminine. In other words, ... we are dealing not just with a (constructed) *difference*, but with a *hierarchy*” (*Feminism* 85). Indeed, Nichol disallows the “hierarchies suggested in a reading” (Appendix, Excerpt Nine) of the characters in the above lines, especially those regarding gender. Nichol’s lines above refer to St Orm, a saint, and therefore a character that is imbricated with a problematic depiction of women because of the problematic circumstances surrounding their names and the description of these male saints in relation to female characters. However, he is here defined in relation to both a man and a woman. Unlike the genealogy of Book One, which avoided misogyny by maintaining gender ambiguity, St Orm’s genealogy is here, in Book Five, explicitly feminist because he is defined partially in relation to the importance of his mother (“Dina Madi”). Nichol removes the difference between words for streets to remove the difference, or hierarchy, between genders.

Chapter 5: Time, History, and *The Martyrology*

As we saw in chapter one, Whorf considers time to be one of the fundamental ways that English speakers understand the universe. Nichol's discussion of the language of history helps readers to better understand how they see the universe. History is a particular way of chopping up time, valorizing certain events and peoples within it and forgetting others. History is also beholden to the ISAs that manage what people take to be a neutral and factual historical narrative. Simultaneously, it valorizes itself, situating the discipline of history as the only way to know anything about the past. This is problematic because, as an institution beholden to ISAs, history often perpetuates the ideology that supports dominant groups to the detriment of de-privileged ones.

Barthesian Myth and History

History plays an important role in understanding how Barthesian myths influence thought. Barthes states that "myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things" (110). In order to foreground their influence over thought, Nichol foregrounds the fact that myths are a historical construct, allowing the reader to recognize that myths are not axiomatically true. One of the ways that he does this is by addressing the veracity of history itself, by demonstrating that history, a respectable discipline that finds merit in certain events, is a myth, that readers of signs that refer to history must navigate the values and ideology of their society in order to understand it, and that that interpretation is not natural.

One of the signifiers for the myth of history is "archaism." To classify something as an "archaism" requires acceptance of the power of the academic and professional institution of history, which creates the category of the archaic, both as a

definite period of the past, specifically, and as the past in general. To refer to something as “archaic” encodes it as belonging to the past, either because it is a historical event that occurred significantly far in the past to earn the label “archaic,” or because it is something that, although existing in contemporary times, is conspicuously evocative of that past, such as the use of a word like “thou” in contemporary English, or the existence of a very old building. The sign “archaism,” therefore, signifies the power of history as myth. At the beginning of Book Five Chain Two, a paragram of “archaism” appears: “arch a is m.” This paragram allows the reader to examine the sign (the word “archaism”) as a signifier of a myth. By finding words within the word, Nichol demonstrates that history can only be described by signs that, in turn, get their meaning from history. The signifier “archaism” cannot be natural because it is a construct composed of signs, and such a construction is not a natural process. These signs demonstrate that history as signified is not natural. The lines following this paragram, “a connection seen / bridges tween / four to five / an afternoon & then an evening,” concretize the “arch” of “arch a is m” as being an arch that supports a made bridge between times.

The ‘nature of things’ does not change. Contrary to history, nature is a system of physical laws and states of being that exist independently of time or human interaction. It is a physical state of being that is synchronic and unchanging. In the physical universe, natural states change with time but nature itself does not. The arch in “archaism” is indicative of the fact that history is not natural because history is dependent upon changes in time in order to exist. Furthermore, the arch “is m.” The letter “m” has accumulated meaning throughout the first five books of *The Martyrology*, coming to signify the word “me.” The arch by which one travels through time, therefore, is a personal one, dependent upon the society in which one

lives and one's own reaction to the world. It is not a natural process inherent to all humans. This idea is reinforced by the fact that the bridge is named "arch a," that is, one of many possible bridges, so many that they are designated via alphabetic notation. The myth of history as being not historical, but natural, is undermined by this paragram of one of its signifiers. This indirectly shows that all myths are historical. Use of the paragram reverses what Barthes calls "the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature" (129).

Feminism and History

The way that history describes the past can often appear to be natural. This is problematic because this can often naturalize the invisibility of women. For this reason, feminist theorists have created a paragram: "herstory." Kramarae and Treichler's dictionary entry for "herstory" explain that "When women in the movement use *herstory*, their purpose is to emphasize that women's lives, deeds, and participation in human affairs have been neglected or undervalued in standard histories" (190). Nichol's discussion of history continually keeps women's treatment by standard histories in mind, and it continually plays with language in the same way that the word "herstory" does.

Nichol explicates that historiography excludes women from representation within history: "as if she were part of history / history in me is my story / my vision of the world's end & beginning" (Book One Clouds). The speculative phrasing "as if she were" implies that women are not a part of history. "History in me is my story" implies that historiographical values align with the speaker's values. There have been no female characters so far in this section of the text, which begins with the "Great Migration" epigraph, so "she" functions as a generic pronoun for all women. These lines demonstrate that women are not a part of history; it is "his story." The word is

not explicitly arranged to make this feminist conception of the sign “history” obvious, but the phrase “my story” allows the reader to see the “story” embedded in history, and the fact that the speaker is male means that the pronoun “my” is male. This language demonstrates that women are disallowed from writing their own history, and implicitly argues for the importance of the argument behind the use of the feminist neologism “herstory.”

In *Books 3 & 4*, women’s limited access to the creation of history is made more explicit than in the previous two books, in which the invisibility of women was often reproduced. Consider the lines: “slips off a blouse to reveal her breasts / slips off the skirt & reveals the rest / is history / hers & mine” (Book Three Section Six). The meaning of these lines transitions from sexist objectification to anti-sexist subjectification of women. This transition occurs via the enjambment of the idiom “the rest is history.” The enjambment subverts the sexist meaning of “the rest,” allowing it to be read as referring not to the rest of the woman’s body, but rather as functioning as a part of the idiom. This idiom can then be read as a statement about the objectifying description of the woman revealing her body, rather than such an action itself. It is not that she is revealing “the rest” of her body, but that the objectifying revelation “is history”; sexual and bodily objectification is the position in which women have been placed throughout history.

This position can often appear as natural as the language used to describe it, but the complication of this idiom also complicates that sexist ideology. The use of this idiom is complicated here because of the variety of ways in which one can read it. If one reads this idiom as a complete statement and then reads the subsequent line as another complete statement, it is read as “the rest is history, hers & mine.” In this reading, Nichol makes a statement about the ownership of history. History belongs to

both men and women, and both men and women should have equal access to historical representation, rather than women merely occupying the object position within history, being written about, and being written about by men who, throughout most of history, have held sexist beliefs.

The function of this idiom shifts again, however, through further enjambment: the line “is history” can also be read as the beginning of the question “is history hers & mine?” In this reading, Nichol questions the validity of the ideology that is reproduced by the history. History, when read, both morphologically and ideologically, as “his story,” can be seen as only belonging to men, as being not “hers,” and therefore as being inherently sexist. These lines simultaneously state that history, as a series of events that occurred in time, belongs to both men and women, and questions whether access to history and the ISAs that affect how people think about the events discussed in history, belongs to men and women.

The compounding enjambment of these lines foregrounds the complexity of the act of understanding history, both as an institution that controls what/who is represented, and as a series of events that happened. Furthermore, the fact that the idiom “the rest is history” is the crux of these enjambments foregrounds the fact that these complex questions about history are a part of colloquial language usage. The use of the idiom “the rest is history” in everyday language may be a perpetuation of sexist ideology if history is only “his story.” The use of that idiom, in that case, valorizes male achievement at the expense of female achievement because that idiom is used to summarize the result of a significant event. Nichol uses enjambment to load this idiom with many possible readings, thereby allowing the reader to have a better understanding of how the use of common idioms such as that one may perpetuate sexist ideology.

Additionally, Nichol explicitly addresses the sexism embedded in history via the lines “our/HIS / story” (Book Three Section Eight), which cause the male sign within “history” to be unmistakable. By breaking apart “history,” Nichol shows that it is symbolically “his story,” explicitly engaging with the line of thought that results in the use of the word “herstory.” The word itself contains sexist ideology much as the historical category “A.D” does. Nichol works against the sexism embedded in the word history by turning to a cognate word: archaeological. Nichol spells the word as “ark / Io / logical.” This inserts Io, a female character from a story important to Western history, into archaeology, a word which, like the sign “history,” signifies the myth of history as a certain organization of facts that, due to its particular organization, determines which of these facts are old and important enough to be termed “archaic.” History may belong to men, but Nichol demonstrates that this is only a feature of the conventions of language; archaeology, and therefore history, can belong to women if only English users accept new spelling.

Nichol further explores the limitations of history by examining the terminology used in historiography and in dating: “a.d. a.d. / history’s spoken in / the first four letters // all e to z / outside the head’s / measure of our time // man’s time” (Book Three Section Eight, see Excerpt Ten). These lines argue for the importance of the fact that conventional historiography uses only the first four letters of the English alphabet. The majority of English letters are not a part of history; users of the Gregorian calendar never see these letters when looking at historical dates. This symbolically represents the information that is not available to readers of conventional history. Much as “e to z” is outside the heads of these readers, unconventional historical information is also outside of their heads. The effect of this is that history is “man’s” time.

The most apparent marker of history being “man’s time” is in its use of two of the first four letters of the alphabet, the date marker, A.D. “Anno Domini” is a historiographical and religious name for the current period of history, and, as Spender argues, religious names are “a paradigmatic case of the male naming of the world” (165). The Christian deity is male, so “A.D” is indicative of a male-centred historiography that colours how readers of history interpret the women and men within that period.

A more female-centred version of history would not focus on male-naming, and would not leave “e” and the rest of the letters outside of history: It could instead use the alternate naming for this period of history, “common era”, which includes “e” in its initialism. Although “e,” like other letters, is “outside ... man’s time,” it is within gender-neutral time. Nichol goes on to explain that intellectual understanding of history, “the head’s / measure of our time” (Excerpt Ten), is inherently imbricated with the sexism of history. This is because “A.D” is a part of both the signifier and the signified “head”: “HE is the A.D. / HE is not dead” (Excerpt Ten). The insertion of “is the” into “head” further foregrounds the way that history functions in society and within one’s head as an epistemological schema; “He,” the male, is equated with A.D. This conception of history “is not dead” despite attempts to introduce the more democratic “C.E.” categorizer into popular conceptions of history. Like the deity after whom A.D. is named, the sexism inherent to A.D has not truly been killed. Although he does not specifically address the C.E./B.C.E. dating system, Nichol evokes it in his discussion of the weaknesses and ideologies of the A.D./B.C. dating system. The foregrounding of the fact that these signs can have ideologies inherent to them equips the reader to critically examine the ideologies of history.

Marxism and History

Nichol's poetry, like all art, is not incidentally situated in history, unaffected by the exegeses of its historical period, but is a part of the superstructure of an economic base of a given point in history. Art, as Eagleton explains, is "part of a society's ideology – an element in that complex structure of social perception which ensures that the situation in which one social class has power over the others is either seen by most members of the society as 'natural,' or not seen at all" (*Marxism* 5). One way that Nichol fights against the naturalization of the power of one social class over another is through an explication of author-as-producer. Eagleton explains that this is one way that Marxists see the author, as a producer, explaining that the artist is "a worker rooted in a particular history with particular materials at his disposal... [But o]nce the work is separated from the author's historical situation, it is bound to appear miraculous and unmotivated" (*Marxism* 64). Nichol situates the reader within his own historical context by explicitly describing the circumstances of his text's creation. He foregrounds the role that ideology plays in the production of art.

Nichol combines traditional history with personal history to undermine the power of the ISAs that control which events people believe to be historically important. Michael Ryan explains that when one decides to determine that an event has happened in history, as institutions of history, such as the academic, describe it as happening, he or she closes off alternative interpretations in favour of those determined by ideology. He states:

If one accepts that the historical world is produced as a process of differentiation in which specific events are subsumed by larger chains, series, structures, and sequences, then one must also acknowledge that all knowledge of it which isolates self-identical entities or events from

that differential seriality is necessarily institutional, that is, conventional and constructed. It cannot pretend to consist of the natural, spontaneous, or intuitive revelation of a full truth, the presence of the thing itself, based solely on self-evident axiomatic assumptions and devoid of all strategic exclusions. This, to use a Marxist word, would be an example of ideology. (25)

Nichol takes some of these events that have been isolated by ideology and integrates them with other events along a historical seriality that that ideology normally does not consider to be important. Nichol discusses how the “French & Huron / English and Iroquois” were “natural enemies in the 1620’s” (Book Five Chain One), a fact that is taught in history books and understood by the general public as being historical, that is, as being both factual and as having important long-term consequences, as well as conforming to certain strategies for uncovering knowledge that have been defined and codified by ISAs. These traditionally historical facts are abutted with Nichol’s personal history, such as in the lines: “driving Huron County / pass through Shakespeare Stratford & / the river Avon / language & its shapers / colonization of the Huron tongue / i find i cannot stop these readings” (Book Five Chain One). Here, Nichol discusses the traditionally historical facts of colonization, but he does so by making the reader aware that this is his own reading of his own personal experience of driving through Ontario. Nichol demonstrates that his own historical moment affects understanding of traditionally historical facts. This allows the reader to understand history in the other of the two ways which Ryan describes. Ryan states that in this other form of understanding history, it is impossible to ever fully understand a historical event

because of the micrological strands of differential relations in and around the event. In this sense, the historical event is a ‘text’ which can be deciphered endlessly without ever rendering an ultimate meaning-determination or a full truth or even making present all the microscopic webs of relations that determine the event. To focus or center on an event is necessarily to blur edges or margins, just as to locate the meaning or truth of a text in conscious intention is to blur the margins where the outside of the text, in the form of history, personal life, social relations, institutions, conventions, and so forth, bleeds into the inside corrupting the purity of that conscious and supplying a dimension to the text that is unconscious, but also indispensable and decisively determining. To isolate a single event in history, then, is to a certain extent to overlook history. (24)

Nichol embraces the fact that historical events can never have determined meaning by contrasting his personal history with institutionalized historical events. He foregrounds how his personal life, social relations, etc., influence his own reading of such events, much as they inform language users’ interpretation of language.

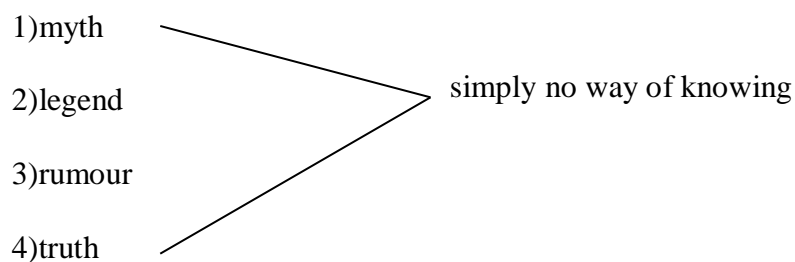
This conception of how ideology affects history serves as a tool for Nichol to examine how words evoke not just institutional historical interpretations, but also personal interpretations. In the lines “c (and en) are / echoes of a childhood set on trains” (Book Five Chain Six), Nichol examines the Canadian National Railroad through the lens of personal history rather than institutional history. He reads the signified CNR within the word “care,” a word evocative of the care of a child, rather than within a word that might be more evocative of the CNR’s importance in Canada’s national history. In doing so, Nichol implicitly argues for a reading of the

word “care” that finds personal history to be more important than institutional history. He describes what the CNR means to him, rather than what it means to Canada. Nichol prioritizes personal history over traditional history to undermine the power of the ISAs to decide which events count as history, and therefore which events are read as having an impact on historical events and the current state of society. The fact that the word “care” acts as the impetus for this discussion despite ostensibly having only the most nominal connections to the CNR demonstrates that how one views history and historical events can affect how one views matters that do not have a direct connection to history. Nichol views the CNR as something that is semantically connected with childcare, so he reads the word “care” as being evocative of the CNR. In this way, Nichol demonstrates that how one interprets historical events can affect how one understands matters that do not even have anything to do with history because of the ways in which he or she interprets language.

Book Five also contains large sections which describe only the history of Nichol and his family, with no traditionally historical facts at all. This personal history undermines the authority of the ISAs to keep the personal outside the historical, and therefore undermines their power to control what and how people think about history. One such way that ISAs exercise their power is through control over the language used to describe past events, such as the signifiers “A.D” and “B.C,” which connotatively signify the authority and expertise of the institutions and persons responsible for writing and interpreting history. Nichol uses his personal history to undermine the limits imposed by the B.C. and A.D markers over what counts as “history.” Consider the lines “line thru time / b.c. / a.d. / b.d. will do” (Book Five Chain Three; Appendix, Excerpt Eleven). These lines introduce a new signifier into the domain of history, “B.D,” a signifier which, though structurally similar to

conventional historical period signifiers, is unique to Nichol. He and his siblings all have a first initial that is either “B” or “D.” “B.D,” therefore, connotatively signifies Nichol’s history, rather than traditional history. Nichol’s readers can only interpret these events via their understanding of Nichol’s personal history, rather than via the ideology of their society.

Nichol uses the language of history to demonstrate that history is not an immutable and infallible locus of knowledge, thereby allowing the reader to recognize that its effect on language is not natural. He does this by addressing words that are often used in and about history, as in the following poem from *Book 6 Books* Book One Part Two:



These four words are signifiers for events that may or may not have occurred in the past. Each has different connotative meanings, but similar denotative meanings. They all evaluate the veracity of a historical event. For example, an event that is described using the “truth” signifier will be perceived both as actually having happened, and as having happened in the way described by traditional institutions of history. Conversely, an event that is described using the “legend” signifier will be perceived as likely having happened, but not as having happened in a way that traditional institutions of history would likely describe it. The connotative meaning of each signifier changes how a reader understands the events that they describe. Because ISAs determine what is “truth” or “legend” in history, they determine which events are considered to be important.

Nichol graphically homogenizes each word through the use of connecting lines, demonstrating that we have “simply no way of knowing” which events have happened and how they have happened. To understand a historical event, people must read that event through signifiers. By homogenizing the signifiers for historical events, Nichol undermines the value statements made about these events and the people involved in them that are implicit in discussion of them by users of the English language. The word “truth” loses its privileged position over the word “legend” in the context of history. The reader is encouraged to understand historical facts in ways other than the ways that are delineated by ISAs. Furthermore, the reader becomes enabled to imagine his or her position in history in a way that is not determined by any ISA, as history is revealed not to be capable of delineating truth from legend.

Similarly, Nichol examines the polysemy of signifiers especially important to the discussion of history in order to demonstrate that any historical knowledge must navigate the fact that all knowledge of history is mediated by language. Consider the poem entitled “(the unknown)” (*Book Six Books Book One Part Four*; see Appendix, Excerpt Twelve). This poem begins with a diagram composed of three words emblematic of naval exploration, “boat,” “shore,” and “water.” The poem then raises questions about the referent of each word “Q: what shore? / Q: which boat?” In this diagram, like in all uses of language, signs depend on context to determine whether they refer to one referent specifically or to the general class of that referent. The line “Q: who’s in the boat?” further complicates the problem of the meaning of the referent of the sign “boat,” demonstrating that even if the reader learns “which boat,” there is still a further unknown. “The unknown,” then, becomes any information not explicitly stated in a text. The diagram of this poem demonstrates that it is missing information about the words that it contains. Historical documents can never explicate

every word of their text, as the process of explication would require the addition of more words. All knowledge of colonialism and of history in general is a process of navigating unknowns, one can never find “truth.” What is “truth,” is only what is considered to be so by the ISAs that control history, other ways of knowing the world are relegated to myth, legend, or rumour.

Nichol demonstrates that historical study and historiography are inherently flawed in their ability to report on real historical facts because they must rely on language to do so, and language is unable to communicate facts in an unmediated and transparent way. This is especially true of the language of history, as there are often ideologically motivated value statements implicit in its diction. Nichol addresses one such problematic type of diction: collective pronouns that describe groups of people. Understanding the function of language that delineates groups of people is important to a Marxist understanding of language and the effects of language on culture because, as Althusser argues, “if theory enables us to understand the laws of history, it is not intellectuals, nor even theoreticians, it is the masses who make history. It is essential to learn with theory – but at the same time and crucially, it is essential to learn with the masses” (23). The poem that begins “us as us” (*Book Six Books Book One Section Two*; see Appendix, Excerpt Thirteen) demonstrates the fact that history is made by and dependent on the masses.

It does so, firstly, via the opening line. The repetition of “us,” followed by “history” in the next line, associates collective identity with history. It also connects two usages of the word “us” through the word “as,” which results in the two collective pronouns being connected through both extent or degree and temporal comparisons. The word “as” can be an adverb that is used to compare two different yet similar things. Functioning in this way, it connects two instances of a signifier that signify

two distinct signifieds, the “us” which is spoken by and which signifies one group and the “us” which is spoken by and which signifies another. These two groups are demonstrated to be similar both via the comparative “as,” and by the use of the same first person pronoun for each, inviting the reader to identify with two different groups simultaneously. The two groups are then further connected via the lines “history // as in / we have one.” There is only one shared history in the sense that all groups of people are part of the real world in which historical events happen. Ideological historiography results in some of these groups, typically the proletariat, being “forgotten” whereas others are “remembered,” but they are all equally a part of history.

The other meaning of the word “as” is that two events are occurring simultaneously. In this sense, the word demonstrates a placement within time, and thereby situates both pronoun antecedents within history. “us” occurs, existing in the world, “as us” occurs. Although historiography may typically only describe one group, such as pre-nineteenth century historiography’s preoccupation with “great men,” the history of the other group simultaneously progresses as the history of the group about which historians write progresses. The two groups’ histories are connected through comparison and by describing their mutual advancement through time. This synchronization of groups removes the artificial barriers created between groups by historiography. The sign “as,” therefore, demonstrates that the reader’s inability to disentangle the two signifieds of the signifier “us” is not a failure of reading, but is rather a feature of the way that Nichol chooses to encode history. Any history of classes, like the history of boats described in “(the unknown),” contains both truths and legends; no matter how much one knows about it, there is still

information missing. If one learns “which boat,” he or she will always be left with further questions.

This poem that begins “us as us” (Excerpt Thirteen) also demonstrates that *The Martyrology* is situated within the ideology of a particular point in history. It does so via the lines “all at once & / together.” These lines are an allusion to an earlier publication of *The Martyrology*, *Book 5*, as the statement is a modification of the tenth chain from that book, “every(all at(toge(forever)ther) once)thing.” This allusion demonstrates that Nichol’s art, too, is a part of history. It shows that *The Martyrology* itself is a part of the historical world, as this earlier book of *The Martyrology* is written and published at an earlier period in history. As Eagleton explains, “we may see literature as a text, but we may also see it as a social activity, a form of social and economic production which exists alongside, and interrelates with, other such forms” (*Marxism* 56). The allusion to Book Five, alongside the discussion of groups in history, situates both these groups and *The Martyrology* within the same social space. The fact that the lines are not reproduced identically to how they appeared in Book Five, but are altered in form, demonstrates that these social spaces changes over time, and that the way that this social space affects how its inhabitants interpret language also changes over time.

The formal differences between how this utterance is communicated in the two books cause the reader to interpret it differently in each book. In Book Five, the recursively parenthetical line, situated independently in Chain Ten without any other lines to influence its meaning, suggests to the reader that he or she should read this utterance as signifying the circuitous and self-reflexive structure of Book Five. In Book Six, the lines are arranged more traditionally, and because of their proximity to the line “us as us,” suggest to the reader that they should be read as an extension of

that line. By suggesting these two possible ways of reading the utterance, Nichol demonstrates that utterances do not refer directly to meaning, but must be interpreted by the reader according to his or her own subject position within a given period of time.

The time-keeping poems of “Book II: A Book of Hours,” titled as “Hour 1” through “Hour 28,” act as continual reminders that Nichol wrote *The Martyrology* throughout a change in time, and are therefore one way in which Nichol foregrounds the existence of the ideology of his society at the specific place and time at which he is writing. Eagleton provides a useful description of the relationship between readers’ and writers’ positions within a given time in history and ideology in art. In his analysis of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, he explains that

[a] ‘vulgar Marxist’ case about [that poem] might be that the poem is directly determined by ideological and economic factors – by the spiritual emptiness and exhaustion of bourgeois ideology which springs from that crisis of imperialist capitalism known as the First World War. This is to explain the poem as an immediate ‘reflection’ of those conditions; but it fails to take into account a whole series of ‘levels’ which ‘mediate’ between the text itself and capitalist economy.

(*Marxism* 13)

He goes on to list a variety of factors which would be required for a complete understanding, such as “why Eliot, despite his extreme political conservatism, was an *avant-garde* poet who selected certain ‘progressive’ experimental techniques from the history of literary forms available to him, and on what ideological basis he did this”

(*Marxism* 14). He continues:

The Waste Land can indeed be explained as a poem which springs from a crisis of bourgeois ideology, but it has no simple correspondence with that crisis or with the political and economic conditions which produced it. (As a poem, it does not of course *know itself* as a product of a particular ideological crisis, for if it did it would cease to exist. It needs to translate that crisis into ‘universal’ terms – to grasp it as part of an unchanging human condition, shared alike by ancient Egyptians and modern man.) *The Waste Land’s* relation to the real history of its time, then, is highly *mediated*; and in this it is like all works of art. (*Marxism* 15)

The Martyrology, too, is highly mediated from the “real history of its time.” However, by tracking the history of the poem through the description of hours, Nichol foregrounds this mediation effect. Each poem in *The Book of Hours* is titled according to the hour in which it was written: for an example, see “Hour 19” (Appendix, Excerpt Fourteen). These titles make the reader aware of the variety of factors with which he or she must contend in order to understand *The Martyrology*. Nichol’s situating of *The Martyrology* within time foregrounds the fact that his language is laden with the ideology of the culture in which Nichol was writing, and is beholden to the dominant ideology of a particular period in time.

Nichol then elaborates upon this mediation effect, showing how the reader must understand the text even at the level of the author’s process of selecting and creating language to properly understand a poem. Individual poems, or hours, within *The Book of Hours*, track progression of time at a level more precise than hourly. As hours are comprised of smaller units of time, minutes, seconds, etc., so too are these poems composed of smaller units of meaning: lines, words, etc. One such poem is

“Hour 19” (Excerpt Fourteen), which repeats the word “heartbeat” in a left-aligned column on each page. The repetitive use of this signifier is evocative of the repetitiveness of the signified heartbeat. The “heartbeat” column creates a biological metronome, keeping the reader grounded in the time that progresses in the reading process. As the reader’s heart beats, so too is the heartbeat signifier repeated; the time involved in reading is represented by the time it takes to experience a succession of heartbeats. This metronome effect informs how one reads the main body of the poem, such as in the lines: “heart of grace/ hart of grease/ herte of gresse.” With these lines, a single utterance is altered with each beating of the heart because each line appears next to the sign “heartbeat”. When the reader reads down the page he or she must be aware that this reading process involves a progression in time. The words do not simply exist as objects on a page, but are diachronic and mutable. In this way, the reading process is connected with the writing process. Reading becomes a tool for grounding the writing of the text within time. The reader is made more aware of the fact that there are a variety of ideological factors that must be understood in order to fully understand the poem.

The ideological process of language selection in writing is further elaborated in “Hour 19” when Nichol alters the heartbeat sign itself by changing the letters that compose it. The new column along the right side of the fourth page of the poem connects writing with the heartbeat much as the left column connects reading with it. Rather than a metronomous repetition of “heartbeat,” this column repeats the morpheme “hear” followed by every letter in the alphabet successively: “hear a / hear b / hear c / heard” etc. Occasionally, this process creates a word, but usually it does not. This is evocative of the writing process; Nichol selecting an appropriate line or word to use, occasionally finding one that works but usually not, and requiring time to

do so. This column connects the heartbeat-as-metronome metaphor to both the reader and the writer, as a heartbeat is felt by the subject and heard by the object. The heartbeat on the left calls out to the column on the right, which “hears” it. It foregrounds the ideologically dependent process of selecting language in time, as the morpheme “hear” is only occasionally connected with actual signs. The reciprocal format of these columns causes this poem to be about its own creation as well as about its own perception. The writing and reading processes are imbricated, threaded together through the commonality of time. The reader is able to recognize that Nichol needs to use the ideology of his own time, ideology that allows him to interpret the heart as an organ that is synonymous with feeling, to understand and write language as much as the reader needs to use ideology to understand and read language.

Ambiguity is an important locus of conflicting ideologies. In his description of the importance of words, Althusser sets apart words that directly engage in class struggle against each other and “other words [that] are the site of an *ambiguity*: the stake in a decisive but undecided battle” (24). The words in the poem, “(some history sketched)” (*Book 6 Books Book One Part Four; Appendix, Excerpt Fifteen*) are important words for the battle between classes because of their ambiguity, ambiguity that is caused by indeterminacy regarding the outcome of the class struggle on behalf of which these words are engaged. This poem is in the genre of a crossword puzzle, but it does not have the “clues” to contextualize those words that are typical of that genre. The words become self-consciously ambiguous. Their lack of context is conspicuous because of the genre conventions of the crossword puzzle. The words of crossword puzzles do not have the benefit of placement within sentences to give them context, so the clues that describe them are the only way that they are disambiguated. The title of the poem is accurate because history is a process of interpreting

ambiguous words according to the influences of ideology. History is only ever a “sketch” of events. The reader of history must disambiguate these sketches by placing them in the context of his or her own culture’s ideologies. The only context available to these words is whichever one the reader brings to them. The words of this poem are taken from the semantic fields of history and religion, ideologically charged topics, so the absence of clues foregrounds the effect that the ideologies of the reader’s culture has on his or her reading of these words. The reader will read the word “law” as either referring to the laws of Christianity or of secular law depending on whether the ideology of his or her culture prioritizes one or the other. The ambiguity demonstrates which ways in which the reader uses ideology to interpret this language.

The words of this poem draw from two linguistic registers with distinct levels of prestige, those used amongst the working class and those used amongst the ecclesiastically educated. Nichol’s use of the two registers directs the reader’s interpretation of the words’ ambiguous meanings towards interpretation and evaluation of the two classes that most frequently speak in those registers. Because of the ambiguity of these words’ meaning, the reader must interpret the words through ideology to determine to which registers these words belong. The use of language from different classes of distinct power is important to the process of exploring the relationship between those classes because, as Althusser argues, “Marxist-Leninist philosophy can only complete its abstract, rigorous and systematic theoretical work on condition that it fights both about very ‘scholarly’ words (concept, theory, dialectic, alienation, etc.) and about very simple words (man, masses, people, class struggle)” (25). This crossword includes both scholarly words, in the form of ecclesiastical words such as hagiography, deus, and sin, and simple words, such as law, age, and world. The scholarly words are either almost exclusively spoken by, or have their

usage controlled by those in positions of power within either the Christian church or academic institutions, such as history, that study it. Conversely, the simple words are accessible by the working class. The reader recognizes these different types of words as belonging to these particular registers because of how he or she interprets them through ideology, not because of the words' literal meaning, which is ambiguous. In this way, "(some history sketched)" acts as a forum for comparison between the language used by the dominant and working classes. This comparison is not mediated by the context of the features of a linguistic structure, grammar and syntax and the like, used by a society in which one class dominates the other. Instead, the reader is able to compare the ideology of these registers at the level of the sign, recognizing the jarring difference in emotive or evaluative reaction between reading a word belonging to a "high-class" register versus reading a word belonging to a "low-class" one.

Conclusion

Nichol breaks the rules of language so that the reader can become more aware of these rules. Once the reader becomes aware of the rules, he or she can better recognize how these rules affect the way that he or she thinks. Nichol equips the reader with the tools to critically examine language not just in *The Martyrology*, but in all instances in which language is used. This can be seen most explicitly in Nichol's abutment of "low culture" and "high culture" forms of communication.

The Martyrology frequently juxtaposes low and high cultures in the form of poetic techniques that are or are not respected by dominant ideologies, such as left justified lines of a stanza versus the interlinking lines of a crossword puzzle. The variety of registers used in the crossword is emblematic of the juxtaposition of low and high cultures throughout *The Martyrology*. This is important both as an act of class warfare, and in understanding ideology itself. Eagleton argues that "to

understand an ideology, we must analyze the precise relations between different classes in a society; and to do that means grasping where those classes stand in relation to the mode of production” (*Marxism* 6). One way in which different classes differ in their relation to the mode of production is in their access to the ability to create art. Jameson explains that art creation is often inaccessible to many people:

the very experience of art today is alienated and made ‘other’ and inaccessible to too many people to serve as a useful vehicle for their imaginative experience. This is so whether it is a question of high art or mass culture; for in both cases, for very different reasons, the experience of the *production* of such art forms is inaccessible to most people (including critics and intellectuals). (146)

Nichol makes his art’s purpose, the examination of language, more accessible via the use of puns. Puns are a strategy for altering language that anybody can use. Nichol valorizes puns, demonstrating that they are a form of art, and that they can be used by a member of any class to examine the function of language in the dialect of their class or others.

Nichol often uses puns to examine language throughout *The Martyrology*, and in *Book 6 Books* he formally explicates the importance of puns to his work by using the word “pun” itself to create puns. In “Hour 22” (*Book 6 Books The Book of Hours*), Nichol states that there is “nothing to cling to but / the puncertainty.” The dual meaning of this statement gives insight into the power of puns to recontextualize language, as this statement recontextualizes both the word “pun” and the word “uncertainty.” Nichol clings to both “pun certainty,” and uncertainty, to both the certainty that a pun will recontextualize language, and that a pun has inherent polysemy. Nichol continues: “you unme death into the punbelievable void / where

nothing i have clung to clings.” Again, the use of “pun” as a prefix conflates certainty and uncertainty, the believability of puns and their unbelievability. These puns syncretize conflicting meanings into a single word, demanding that the reader work to input his or her own interpretation into the word, thereby giving the reader more agency in the process of decoding a sign.

Whether any of Nichol’s puns, and their concomitant words, are certain or uncertain, believable or unbelievable, is dependent on the reader. The reader’s influence on the meaning of a pun exists not just when a pun is used in poetic language, but is true regardless of the type of language in which a pun is used. The reader is enabled to use the same hermeneutical practices that he or she would use on a book of poetry on proletarian and quotidian creative acts, therefore effacing the difference between poetry and casual speech.

Nichol demonstrates that his art is dependent on puns, further poeticizing puns and democratizing poetry. He states: “unless i’ve got a pun / i can’t write it down” (*Book 6 Books Book Three Epilogue*). In these lines, the word “pun” becomes a pun on the word “pen.” This pun is evocative of the sign “pen,” but because it does not actually contain that sign, the sign “pen” becomes less important than the sign “pun.” Nichol places less emphasis on the importance of tools such as pens, symbols of literacy and therefore symbolic barriers to working class creation of art because a member of the working class is more likely than a member of a more dominant class not to have access to privileged forms of literacy. Nichol does not need academic literacy to create art; he needs only the democratic creative impetus of the pun. Nichol’s use of puns places common language and accessible methods of altering language alongside his more academic ones, such as enjambment, which Nichol uses in a stanza on the page before these lines.

Nichol's discussion of puns is only the most explicit way that he connects the language of his poem with all language. There is also the more obvious connection that does not need to be explicitly stated: the language of Nichol's poetry is (usually) the English language. Readers approach *The Martyrology* as a piece of literature that should be decoded according to the rules of the English language. By experiencing language within *The Martyrology*, though, readers are able to find new ways of decoding. These new ways provide some measure of freedom from the patriarchal and capitalist ideology embedded in English, and make readers aware that language does influence thought.

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Appendix

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night

in the fields under the stars

sleeping

sleeping

sleeping

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Andronicus

shadow
stone

shadow
stone

shadow
stone

shadow
stone

shadow
Junias stone

shadowstone

shadowstone

stone
shadow

Buamundus

stone
shadow

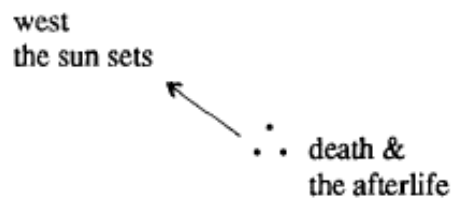
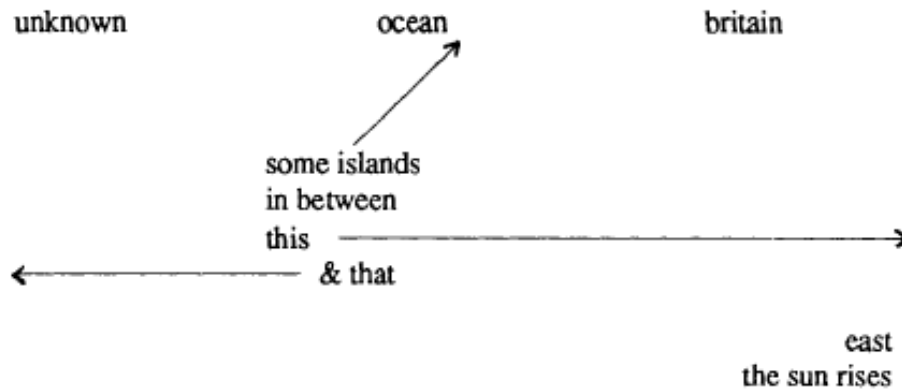
stone
shadow

stone
shadow

stone
shadow

Excerpt One

. (geography)



journeys
into the spirit world

. (a prophecy)

above
the village
atop the hill
these things said:

we will not see it in our lifetime nor in
our children's lifetime nor in the life-
times of their children's children but in
the time of all their children this loving
& this forgiveness will be everywhere
until we will have founded the peaceful
Kingdom God intended for us in this
world

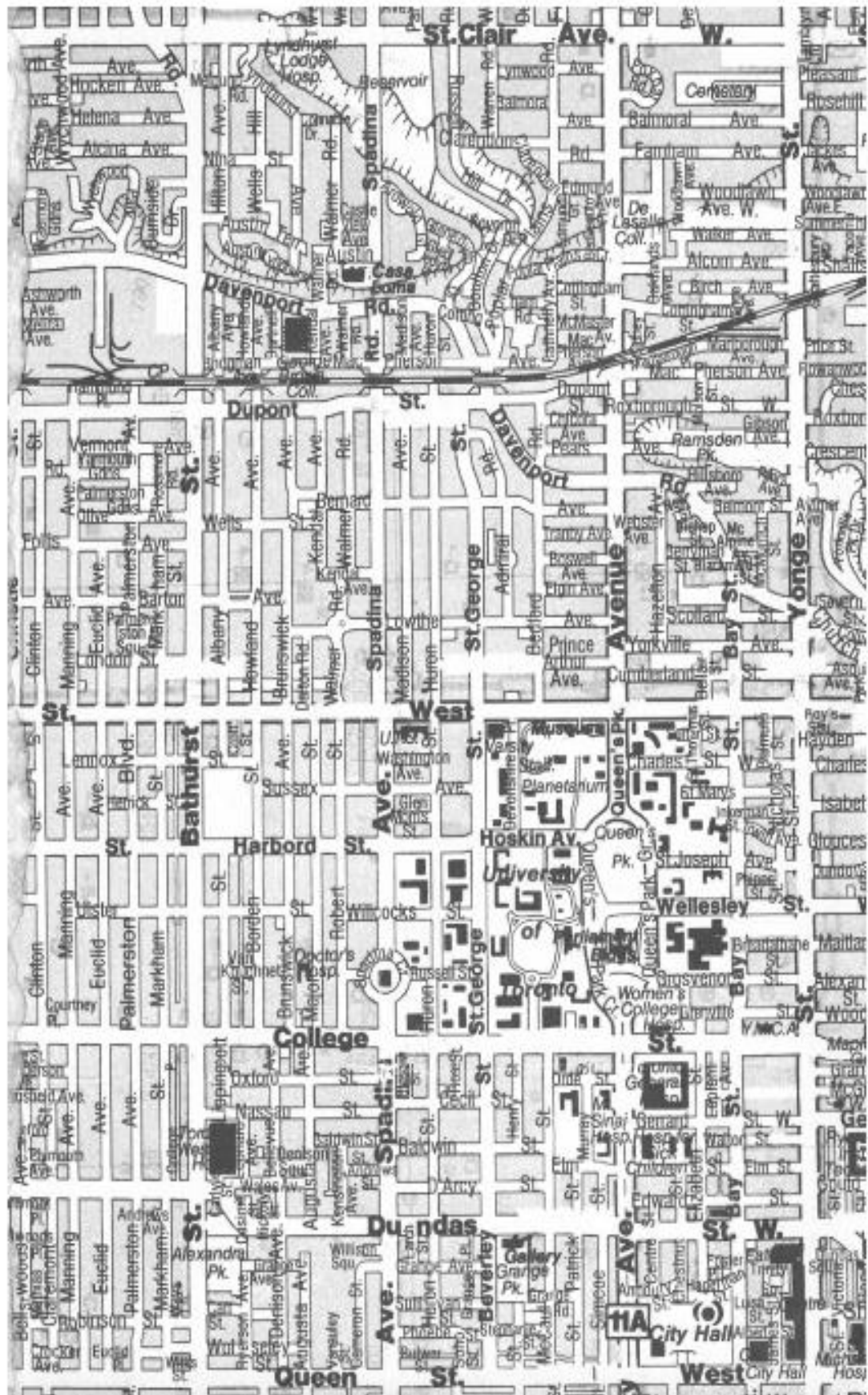
Excerpt Two

.

mismismismismism
mismismismismism
mismismismismism
boatmismismismism
avewavewavewavewav
mismismismismism
mismismismismism
mismismismismism
mismismismismism
mistboatmismismism
avewavewavewavewav
mismismismismism
mismismismismism
mismismismismism
mismismismismism
mistmistboatmismism
avewavewavewavewav

.

Excerpt Three



Excerpt Four

frag/
 /ments re
 /turn

/complete
 the sense

read the lines straight down
 'ken'd al[l]
 cross sea'



the glyph
 (outline of a y or
 sceptre that some sea god might be holding)
 symbol of what power
 rises out of bluer strait
 inseparable from the sea that holds its shape

(geomancy of the streets
 one-way patterns that insist automobility

foot's ascendant now
 reading's

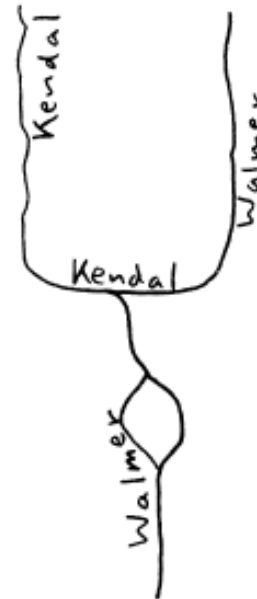
slowed
 (desired's mobility of text
 flex in the flux of what's actual)
 translations of literal ambiguities)

below the curve of Kendal Walmer wavers
 forms the sea a reading can reveal
 an act u all are privy to

('a' 11 times raised to that power
 aaaaaaaaaa

- interpreted different ways
- 1) a sigh (as in lovemaking)
 - 2) a sigh (as of relief)
 - 3) a scream (as in the murder scene
 - long &
 lingering)

takes us where?



Excerpt Five

. (the end)

Andronicus -- apostle —————→ ?

Junias -- apostle —————→ ?

Buamundus -- giant —————→ ?

the known guessed at

thus conclusions

&/or theories

viz: science & history

myth & legend

some sense of

the components of

reality

religion being
a combination of
the real

(i.e.

re(a)l)

& the region

formulaic spelling = re(a)l + region

= re²(a)lgion

where (a) = the fleeing centre
 the probable beginning

barely perceived
 translated (nonetheless) as
 'i'
 self at the centre

makes re²(al)lgion = re²ilgion

the 2
 drops away
 over the
 years
 (lack of
 a written tradition to
 preserve it) &
 the i shifts
 yielding

religion

a region of the real

uncharted
 (largely)

open to
 misconstruction &
 fanaticism
 which does not yield to
 science or
 history (in that
 sense)

thru which
 the named shadows of
 Andronicus, Junias & Buamundus
 flicker
 but are never glimpsed

1978-79

. (details)

pillars
of shimmering glass

(in fact
more pyramidal
in shape &
made of ice)

islands of
fire in
the cold

(volcanic)

monsters

(whales, etc.)

wind & sea

(wind & sea)

Excerpt Seven

of those saints we know the listing follows

saint orm married saint rain
gave birth to saint iff and saint ave

this is the oldest family

saint iff married saint rive
gave birth to saint reat
who married saint agnes
gave birth to saint rand

saint ave married saint raits
gave birth to saint ranglehold
who did not marry

of the other families
these we mention

saint ill married saint ove
gave birth to saint and & saint rike

saint and did not marry

saint rike married saint ain
gave birth to their son
the nameless one

saint aggers wife is now forgotten
gave birth to saint ump & saint rap
gave birth to noone
dying in the fire reat had set

set ablaze by light
 it was the light!
 a candle

(Kendal)

burning

hierarchies suggested in a reading

Wal Mer's pa Dina Madi'[s] son
 (her one &
 only) images of
 ancient lineages

St Orm the saint of ships & seas
 was he Wal Mer's father
 Dina Madi's son
 & if the one
 then all these names could be
 nicknames
 for claimd similur things

(Wal Mer stretches south
 into the bluer strait
 streets
 houses lived in in my time
 short tho it's been
 one-third gone
 still learning
 trying to move on)

more than the grand gestures aspired to
 actions give the truth to speech
 content of a daily life
 our struggle
 (ideals arrayed against the actual i deals) each morning
 step out that door
 onto this wick forms part of the shore
 head north for the bridge
 rise early
 get to work before the sky turns grey with smoke
 worlds of dreams & felt feelings
 memories evoked of childhood despair
 lost loves & lustres in this present world they are too present in
 struggle to return them to the past again
 archaeo logically

Excerpt Nine



within the difference
if exists

tensions a
polarity

who is moved or moves
a distinction a disparity

a.d. a.d.
history's spoken in
the first four letters

all e to z
outside the head's
measure of our kind

man's time



(variation on a line by H.D. – in memoriam)

A.D. on
is dead

let the H
supplant the D
in your sweet poetry

adonis head
HE is the A.D.
HE is not dead

The H is gone from your lips H.D.
soft consonantal breath

the vowels are locked between the dark doors

dead

Excerpt Ten

crying after Donna's death
 nothing left to remember her by
 echoed her in Deanna's name
 the next & last girl to be born
 & Don
 when he came into this world

below the plane the clouds thin
 drawn out so fine one gazes thru
 onto the man marked surface of the earth
 language of fixed fields
 twisting courses of
 Assiniboine or Red rivers
 37,000 feet above Manitoba
 we are moving too
 above the dead who brought us here
 the living let us into this world
 line thru time
 b.c./a.d.

 b.d. will do
 all my parents used to name the five of us
 Bob Barrie Donna Don 'n De-
 anna

 Donna echoed twice
 her death
 sounds in our family's daily speech
 our history cycle really
 acyclic if i step outside
 retain the edge of that perception

high over the Great Lakes
 cloudworld hangs below us
 our world awaits
 below the massed & empty stretches of that place
 Sleeping Giant suddenly remembered
 stretched out in the waters off Thunder Bay
 climbing High Street
 almost every day
 just so i could see his face there
 in the wolf's head that was Superior
 Superior being i could never speak to
 feared to disturb
 as if he might rear up & smite me
 strike me down

Excerpt Eleven

. (the unknown)

boat
shore water

Q: what shore?

Q: which boat?

(this
the whole question of
discovery
i.e.
'Who's on first?')

Q: who's in the boat?

(one + one + ?)

Q: which body of water?

Excerpt Twelve

.

us as us

history

as in

we have one

remembered

forgotten

all at once &
together

the absence inseparable from the presence

gone so much longer Lord than You were with us

.

Excerpt Thirteen

Hour 19:
 9:35 to 10:35 p.m.
 (for Ellie)

heartbeat
 heartbeat
 heartbeat
 heartbeat
 heartbeat
 heartbeat
 heartbeat of the heart dear hart
 heartbeat
 heartbeat hairtō day &
 heartbeat cor
 heartbeat tomorrow
 heartbeat
 heartbeat
 heartbeat
 heartbeat
 heartbeat of intellect
 heartbeat (memory)
 heartbeat ()
 heartbeat
 heartbeat heart of grace
 heartbeat hart of grease
 heartbeat herte of gresse
 heartbeat
 heartbeat stout heart
 heartbeat 'as one doth that taketh a sodyne courage'
 heartbeat cordage
 heartbeat
 heartbeat 'Heart of oaks are our ships,
 heartbeat heart of oak are our men'
 heartbeat women
 heartbeat
 heartbeat
 heartbeat
 heartbeat of affection of

Vita Auctoris

Sam Whittaker was born in 1990 in Windsor, Ontario. He graduated from Belle River District High School in 2008. From there he went on to the University of Windsor where he obtained a B.A. in English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing in 2015. He is currently a candidate for the Master's degree in English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing at the University of Windsor and hopes to graduate in Summer 2017.