

*A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Steve McCaffery*

by

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### **ABSTRACT**

Steve McCaffery is one of Canada's most prolific and innovative poet-theorists. Although he has attracted attention from major American critics, study in Canada has been limited to avant-garde journals, and occasional book reviews in mainstream media. Despite his important output of poetry, theory, performances, audio tapes, videotapes, prints and broadsides, McCaffery has never been the focus of a major study in this country, or elsewhere.

It is the goal of this dissertation to provide the first complete overview of McCaffery's thirty-year career. Through close readings of selected texts, this dissertation classifies McCaffery's output into various chronological stages. These include an early concrete phase, a mid-career Marxist phase, and a late postmodern phase. The dissertation also classifies McCaffery's writings into various thematic endeavours. In particular, McCaffery recurrently foregrounds the materiality of language, defies utility, conflates reading and writing, and emphasizes writing as translation.

Much discussion of McCaffery's writing has been unsympathetic, dismissive, and misrepresentative, largely because reviewers seldom understand McCaffery's writing on its own terms. Consequently, this dissertation provides a detailed explanation of McCaffery's poetics alongside his poetry. Frequently McCaffery's theory differs significantly from the poetry it purports to explain; at times, his poetics contradicts his poetry. Consequently, this thesis

examines the disparity between McCaffery's stated aesthetic and his poetry, in order to test the viability and limits of his project.

Having described McCaffery's own intentions, this dissertation critiques McCaffery's writing from theoretical positions outside his own project. Using various feminist methodologies, it examines the complex way in which McCaffery genders language, noting three different, inconsistent trends in his poetry. Moreover, this thesis begins to articulate McCaffery's position within the Canadian canon. Although McCaffery himself is hostile to the notion of nationalism, he can be seen, ironically, as part of a long-standing Canadian tradition which interrogates its own identity.



## Abbreviations used in this dissertation

### Works by Steve McCaffery

|  |              |
|--|--------------|
| <i>from THE ABSTRACT RUIN:<br/>(Carnival: Panel 3)</i>   | AR           |
| <i>The Black Debt</i>  | BD           |
| <i>Carnival, the first panel: 1967-70</i>  | C1           |
| <i>Carnival, the second panel:<br/>1970-75</i>   | C2           |
| <i>The Cheat of Words</i>  | CW           |
| “Death of the Subject: The<br>Implication of Counter-<br>Communication in Recent<br>Language-Centered Writing” | “Death”      |
| <i>Dr. Sadhu’s Muffins</i>   | DSM          |
| “An Effect of Cellophane”  | “Cellophane” |
| <i>8x8: La Traduction A L’Epreuve</i>  | 8x8          |
| “Excerpt from <i>Traité du blanc et<br/>des teintures</i> ”  | “Excerpt”    |
| “For a Poetry of Blood”  | “Blood”      |
| <i>Knowledge Never Knew</i>  | KNK          |
| “NARRATIVE: THE OBSOLETE<br>ABSOLUTE”  | “NARRATIVE”  |
| <i>North of Intention</i>  | NI           |
| Note on the Method of<br>Composition, <i>Dr. Sadhu’s Muffins</i>   | “Note”       |

|  |                  |
|--|------------------|
| <i>ow's waif</i>   | <i>ow</i>        |
| <i>Panopticon</i>  | <i>P</i>         |
| " <i>Peras</i> : an Extract from a Page"   | " <i>Peras</i> " |
| "The Property: Comma"  | "PC"             |
| <i>Rational Geomancy</i>   | <i>RG</i>        |
| <i>Six Fillious</i>  | <i>SF</i>        |
| "Some Notes Re Sound, Energy,<br>and Performance"  | "Some Notes"     |
| <i>Theory of Sediment</i>  | <i>TS</i>        |
| <i>Transitions to the Beast</i>  | <i>TB</i>        |
| <b>Works by Other Authors</b>  |                  |
| Andrews, Bruce, and Charles<br>Bernstein, eds.. <i>The</i><br><i>L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book</i>  | <i>LB</i>        |
| Baudrillard, Jean. "For a Critique<br>of the Political Economy of the<br>Sign."  | "PE"             |
| Burnham, Clint. "An Interview<br>with Steve McCaffery."  | "Interview"      |
| McLuhan, Marshall.<br><i>Understanding Media</i>   | <i>UM</i>        |
| Nichol, B. P.. "The Annotated,<br>Anecdoted, Beginnings of a<br>Critical Checklist of the Published<br>Works of Steve McCaffery" | "Checklist"      |

Essays in *North of Intention* or *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* have been abbreviated to the first one or two nouns that appear in their titles. Individual poems have been abbreviated in the same manner.

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Thesis:

M.H.G.

the sixteen letters of  
 a mystic word, arranged as  
 a triangular school for higher  
 education:

the action

of drafts through signature;

abodes as souls

in crisp, terse,

non-endorsements

(this latter

folkloric by special request)

syn. chimerical, eyesore,

infinitesimal, morphinism, obsecration,

pert rinderpest, tattoo.

Steve McCaffery (*TS* 154)

## Introduction

The will to a system is a lack of integrity.

Friedrich Nietzsche (*Twilight of the Idols* 25)

. . . there is some venturing in refusing to believe nonsense.

Gertrude Stein ("Tender Buttons" 462)

Most people do not recognize the name Steve McCaffery, but his contribution to Canadian poetry is, without exaggeration, enormous. Born in Sheffield, England, 1947, he seriously began writing concrete and sound poetry in his twenties. Shortly after emigrating from England to Canada in the late sixties, he took a prominent place in the budding Canadian concrete movement that included some of this country's most innovative poets: bill bissett, Earle Birney, Judith Copithorne, Hart Broudy, david UU, Victor Coleman, John Riddell, Gerry Gilbert, and John Robert Colombo. In the summer of 1969, McCaffery met bpNichol for the first time, and began a close friendship and collaboration that resulted in several books, and lasted until Nichol's death in 1988. In 1970, McCaffery joined together with fellow poets bpNichol, Paul Dutton, and Rafael Barreto-Rivera to form the Four Horsemen, a popular sound poetry ensemble which toured Canada, the United States and Europe for close to two decades, and influenced numerous artists including Canadians Steve Smith, Richard Truhlar, David Penhale and Michael



Dean (who formed their own performance group, Owen Sound). In 1973, McCaffery and bpNichol founded the Toronto Research Group,<sup>1</sup> a sort of theoretical comedy team dedicated to investigating issues of narrative, translation, performance and formally inventive writing. For nearly ten years, the Toronto Research Group delivered collaborative “reports” in Frank Davey’s *Open Letter*, reports that today remain as challenging, humorous, rewarding, and prescient as when they were first published.

McCaffery's Canadian cohorts are too many to list here, but include R. Murray Schafer, Opal Nations, Karl Jirgins, Daphne Marlatt, George Bowering, Fred Wah, and in Quebec, Raoul Duguay, the Véhicule artists, Michel Beaulieu, Cécile Cloutier, Michel Gay, and André Roy. Through the late seventies and early eighties, McCaffery participated in the language writing movement, editing one special issue of the seminal L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine, and working with some of America’s most innovative writers: Dick Higgins, Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, Ray DiPalma, Co-Accident, John Giorno, Jerome Rothenberg, and William Burroughs. McCaffery’s scope is also decidedly cosmopolitan, and he has organized international sound poetry festivals, participated in fluxus performances, and collaborated with Dieter Roth (Iceland), George Brecht (Germany), and Robert Filliou (France).

As a solo artist, McCaffery’s output has been prolific: sixteen independent poetry collections, as well as legion poems, pamphlets, prints, and broadsides. He is a rigorous theoretician, and in addition to a major theoretical work, *North of Intention*, he has dozens of unanthologized essays, articles, reviews, manifestos and treatises.

Artist-in residence at Artons (Calgary), Obscure (Quebec), and the Western Front (Vancouver), McCaffery is also a tireless performer, bringing to stage a repertoire of linguistic experiments, improvisations and performance pieces. Many of these have been documented, and moreover, he has released over one dozen experimental audio and videotapes, regularly moving poetry into new media and forms.

Although McCaffery has attracted the attention of American writers such as John Cage, Marjorie Perloff, Robert Creeley, Douglas Messerli, and Jerome McGann, his contribution to Canadian art is not widely appreciated, and McCaffery remains known today primarily as a writer's writer. He has received attention from avant-garde journals like *Open Letter*, *Line*, *Writing*, and *West Coast Line*, but elsewhere, recognition is piecemeal, or non-existent. *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*, for example, describes McCaffery with only three words, "See Sound Poetry": in comparison, bpNichol's entry is 41 lines long. In *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec*, Caroline Bayard almost completely ignores McCaffery's work as an independent artist. Her account of Canadian concrete poetry neglects McCaffery's seminal, groundbreaking works *Broken Mandala* (1974), *Carnival, the first panel: 1976-70*, and *Carnival, the second panel: 1971-75*; her estimation of Canadian postmodernism similarly overlooks his definitive texts like *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins* (1974), *Intimate Distortions* (1979), *Knowledge Never Knew* (1983), *Panopticon* (1984), and *Evoba* (1987). Where Bayard discusses McCaffery, she considers him only as a member of the Toronto

Research Group, leaving the impression that McCaffery is primarily a collaborator or, worse, a shadow.

This thesis intends to analyze McCaffery as an independent artist, and for the first time ever, to examine in its entirety his career, which stretches nearly thirty years in Canada alone. I wish to provide a sense of the formal diversity McCaffery brings to his poetry, and to show his career as it has changed, developed, backtracked, vaulted, and aged. In some small part, I hope to reflect the wonder and laughter so typical of McCaffery's work, and to dispel the myth that his poetry is singular or unreadable. Much criticism of McCaffery has been reductive or dismissive, yet rarely do critics understand his project on its own terms. This dissertation will examine McCaffery's poetics alongside his poetry, and attempt to assess both their agreement and discord. Accordingly, this thesis will begin to give McCaffery the sustained critical attention which has too often been lacking in Canadian letters.

McCaffery's writing has not received a popular audience partly because it so thoroughly reconfigures conventional forms of language like communication, description and narrative. Although abstraction is welcomed in the visual arts, it is seldom embraced in a literary medium (as Gertrude Stein discovered when she translated cubism into poetry). More so than almost any Canadian poet, McCaffery refuses to make his work accessible through traditional means of address, speech or story. Consequently, his poetry is characterized by a staggering amount of disjunction, randomness, repetition, technical bombast, encryption, disparity, silence and flux. This is jarring to readers who wish to be soothed or comforted by a good

story, but McCaffery's refusal to communicate also provides the strength of his poetry; by exceeding logical comprehension, a McCaffery poem consistently challenges readers to understand it. As William Carlos Williams might say, this is poetry that stays news.

For the most part, McCaffery's theoretical works attempt to compensate for his non-communicative art, patiently explaining the poet's rationale and purpose. As helpful as his essays, histories and manifestos are, his criticism is not always a reliable guide to his poetry. Over three decades of research, experiment, and evolution, McCaffery's aesthetic ideals have changed, and he often repudiates himself. As part of his own discovery process, he has rejected early ideas as naive, replacing them with more sophisticated and political rationales. As a consequence, his theoretical work, like his poetry, is rife with contradictions. Some of these contradictions are a testament to his artistic growth: some are unresolved, and point to problems in his aesthetic.

Over thirty years, McCaffery has configured his poetry in at least three major ways: as a concrete engagement with linguistic materiality; as a Marxist critique of capitalistic language; and as a postmodern celebration of randomness, excess, entropy and chaos: a disarray which McCaffery terms the "general economy." Although these three stages approximately correspond to McCaffery's early, mid, and late career, it is unfair to perceive them as distinct and discrete chronological phases. McCaffery's poetics do not evolve or progress in this sort of rationally assiduous, accumulative way, and the developmental periods I propose should be considered rough guides at best. In practice, McCaffery's progression from one stage to

the next contains both overlaps and relapses. It is as if he is eternally seeking, and failing to discover, a voice that can adequately represent his poetic practice.

Here then are my three best estimates of what he is up to.

### **Linguistic Materiality**

Central to McCaffery's early career (1967-1974) is the belief that language starts as a physical substance, an element in the tangible, tactile, sensible world. Whether spoken, written or gestured, signs can only be discerned as signs, contends McCaffery, when they manifest perceivable, empirical differences.<sup>2</sup>

[S]peech and writing "originate" as material substances in the act of incising graphic marks upon a substance, in the physical act of gesticulating (sign language for instance) and in the expulsion of certain sounds through the buccal cavity. In all three cases there is an uncontestable graphic, phonic or gestural materiality that is a necessary condition of, yet insubsumable to, the ideality of meaning. ("Writing," *NI* 204)

Although materiality is integral to language, McCaffery further contends that this base must be concealed if language is to communicate. The sign becomes meaningful or expressive only when linguistic materiality is erased and replaced with a concept, idea or referent: "the physical act of speaking or writing must withdraw so that what has been said or written can appear meaningful. Meaning this way is staged as the telos and destination of the de-

materialization of writing” (204). Like the image which covers the painter’s canvas, the verbal proposition masks the linguistic surface (sound, paper, etc.), eclipsing it almost completely: almost, but not entirely, because some materiality, paradoxically, must always remain to carry the idea. Even as materiality enables communication, its presence disrupts and detracts from the expression of ideas, and so prevents language from achieving an absolute ideality. In McCaffery’s paradigm, language emerges as the intersection of two antipathic, even hostile vectors: materiality and meaning. Recalling Julia Kristeva’s distinction between “genotext” and “phenotext,” McCaffery’s model of language is predicated upon an irreconcilable, constitutive conflict between linguistic substance and idea.<sup>3</sup>

In McCaffery’s estimation, this conflict has never been an equal one. Over centuries, the meaningful qualities of language have been esteemed over the material ones, and as a consequence language has been gradually transformed into a vehicle for the expression of ideas, into an information medium which ignores or glosses over the manifest features of the word. When language is used solely for reference and communication, attention is diverted away from the linguistic sign itself to a point outside of language: the signified, the referent, the meaning, the image, the landscape, the idea, etc.. As language is rendered transparent, the reader/speaker no longer fully participates in it. McCaffery thus characterizes reference as a “theologicolinguistic confidence trick of ‘the other life’” (“Intraview,” *LB* 189); it perpetually defers physical interaction and immediacy in favour of ineffable and de-materialized ideas. In other words, it

passes off “absence as a postponed presence” (189). For McCaffery, “[r]eference in language is a strategy of promise and postponement: it’s the thing that language never is, never can be, but to which language is always moving” (189). Rendering the word invisible in order to convey meaning, reference diminishes our experience of language as a tangible, empirical, and lived medium. Through reference, McCaffery feels we have lost the immediate and invigorating attributes of language. Just as Marshall McLuhan contends print culture has dissociated the modern sensibility, McCaffery suggests that communicative language dilutes, weakens and deadens experience.

Further critiquing orthodox language, McCaffery reacts against conventional grammar and syntax, which he perceives as systems of hierarchy, order, enforced function, and restraint. To him, grammar functions by limiting freeplay of speech parts, replacing open fields with clear, linear relationships. This syntactic organization reduces the natural super-abundance of linguistic relations into clear, unequivocal messages: “the repression of polysemeity into monosemeity” (“Notebooks,” *LB* 160) wherein “meanings coalesce into meaning” (“Language Writing,” *NI* 151). A reductive process, syntax turns the multiple and ambiguous into the singular and self-evident. Drawing from the theories of Julia Kristeva,<sup>4</sup> McCaffery further argues that conventional language structures and controls the subject’s energy, desire, perception and libido: “[l]anguage, through its nature as representation, its functioning by means of arbitrary, articulated signs, by means of rules, conditions and prohibitions, becomes a huge mechanism for suppressing libidinal flow” (“Sound

Poetry," *LB* 88). Moreover, "[c]lassical discourse channels libido as a repressed flow within the rigid structures of grammar . . . it represses all manifestations of libido within rigid vessels of content, freezing energy into representation" ("Bissett," *NI* 94). Even "the phonematic unit . . . marks the crypt of a vast repression" ("Sound Poetry," *LB* 88). In this way McCaffery treats grammar as "a repressive mechanism" ("Bissett," *NI* 97) and "[c]lassical discourse . . . [as] a semiotics of containment" (94).

From the late sixties to mid seventies, McCaffery's poetry typically is concerned with rejecting communication and recuperating the material level of language. His poetry typically inverts the historical precedent and reasserts the existence of word-substance over idea. Works like *Carnival, the first panel: 1967-70* begin to make sense when we understand them as *sensuous*, as a reassertion of linguistic origins. In them, language appears as language: a presentation of letter-stuff rather than a representation of an external reality. Stressing "the incidentality of the signifier rather than the transcendality of the referent" ("Diminished Reference," *NI* 19), McCaffery's poems consistently emphasize the physical body of language: its immanent, aural, visual, visceral and tangible aspects. Between concrete, sound and post-semiotic poetry, McCaffery manages to recuperate the materiality of the signifier in almost all of its forms: as text, ink, paper, shape, sound, noise, breath, rhythm, and even as perceptual process. In so doing, McCaffery emphasizes the immediacy, presence, direct experience, freedom, spontaneity and even spirituality suppressed within communicative language.



By emphasizing the materiality of the signifier, McCaffery also hopes to surface the libidinal drives that have been run underground by conventional linguistic practice. Working loosely within Kristeva's semiotic model, McCaffery perceives a kind of "'instinctual' linguistic 'unconscious'" ("Bissett," *NI* 105-106) registered in the physicality of the written or spoken word (just as Kristeva sees the "chora" or "semiotic" manifested in the genotext). According to McCaffery, the libido still flows unchecked in the "signifying graphism of writing" ("Bissett," *NI* 94), in "the opaque materiality of . . . graphic representation" (105), in language's "sonorous intensities and / rhythmic cuttings" ("Lyric's Larynx," *NI* 179), and in "sound in isolation from the sign function" ("Sound Poetry," *LB* 88). When the poet thus stresses the acoustic and visual properties of the sign, he will "derepress the energies trapped inside the armouring of linguistic structures" ("Bissett," *NI* 94). Referring specifically to sound poetry, for example, McCaffery claims "it is an agency for desire production, for releasing energy flow, for securing the passage of libido in a multiplicity of flows out of the Logos" ("Sound Poetry," *LB* 88). It returns "the body to those energy zones previously repressed and channeled into rubric and frigidity" ("Some Notes" 282). McCaffery claims that his poetry effects "a general libidinal derepression" ("Sound Poetry," *LB* 88), and returns readers to a more natural, immediate and free state.

At this early stage of his career, McCaffery is part of a fertile and inconsistent heritage of artists who have explored language, paint and sound for their non-semantic and non-representational qualities. Such an emphasis is evident in the ceremonial and

religious use of chant and incantation; in the Navaho tradition of sand-painting; in Muslim geometric designs and arabesques; in Celtic calligraphy and *The Book of Kells*. The early twentieth century witnessed an ample flowering of artists willing to abandon the expressive capacity of the sign in favour of its more immediate and material attributes. From Mallarmé's "Un coup de dés," to Marinetti's "parole in liberta" to Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh's zaum poems, from Apollinaire's calligrammes to the objectivism of Williams, Pound and Zukofsky, from lettrisme to dada, from Spanish surrealism to Brazilian concretism, from Duchamp's ready-mades to Mondrian's minimalist abstraction: in varying degrees, all of these artists and movements tend to foreground the physicality of their media as an area of autonomous interest. This concern for the sign's tangibility persists through mid century via the works of John Cage and e.e.cummings, in the breath-centred poetry of Charles Olson and the Black Mountain school, the chance-driven writing of Jackson Mac Low, in the shamanic ethnopoetry of Jerome Rothenberg, in Michael McLure's "beast language," in the rise of what Richard Kostelanetz calls "text-sound." And this family tree continues to bear fruit today from fluxus artists to the language poets, from happenings to installations. In the Canadian branch, we see Marshall McLuhan (who emphasized that the medium is the message), bill bissett, bpNichol, Douglas Barbour, Stephen Scobie, David UU, Judith Copithorne, Nicole Brossard, and the poets of the Kootenay School of Writing. Clearly, McCaffery is but the latest incarnation of an aesthetic tradition as deep as culture itself.

## Marxism

By participating in the language poetry movement of the mid-seventies and early eighties, McCaffery's writing becomes increasingly political and decidedly Marxist in its artistic rationale. Although McCaffery is still concerned with the privileging of materiality over meaning, he begins to compare reference to the process of reification and commodity fetishism under capitalism. Influenced by Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein and especially Ron Silliman, McCaffery sees reference's tendency to render language transparent as a fetish in the Marxist sense. Communicative language is neither natural nor neutral, but

a mechanism of occlusion that displaces and eclipses the true nature of commodities as the products of human labour and interaction, detaching them magically from their productive bases and presenting them as self-perpetuating "things" that take their place within social circulation as an exchange value. ("Language Writing," *NI* 151-2)

Like reification, reference tends to conceal the real conditions of semantic production (language as a physical medium) by circulating ideas independently from the human labour required to manufacture them. This is the sense in which McCaffery suggests "[m]eaning is like capital" ("Notebooks," *LB* 160); ideas, content, propositions become the equivalent of commodities in a market economy, circulating as if they have an independent life of their own. Because "[r]eference, like commodity, has no connection with the physical

property and material relations of the word as grapheme” (“Nothing Forgotten,” *NI* 111), ideas are fetishized as products, and secluded from the real conditions of their production. In this way, reference transforms language into an *idea-commodity* to be consumed by the reader, and extends capitalism into language. In this Marxist paradigm, grammar furthers linguistic commodification by ensuring the clarity of ideas, as well as by classifying words into a rigid linguistic hierarchy (language’s counterpart to the class system). Moreover, grammar underwrites the intention of any statement, and thus allows private ownership to infringe upon language.

According to Marx, the effect of fetishism and reification is dehumanization: when workers do not control the material means of production, they are alienated from the work they perform. McCaffery extends this Marxist idea to the operation of referential language: when meaning is privileged over matter, readers are alienated from their own reading experience. Rather than function as active participants in the production of textual meaning, readers of referential works sit back and passively accept the ideas that are already inscribed in the text. When the reader is no longer aware of her own role in the manufacture of meaning, McCaffery argues “the reader herself is consumed and dehumanized by the text” (“Notebooks,” *LB* 162). By allowing the propositional qualities to dominate language, reference transforms readers into quiescent receptacles for the pre-packaged significance that the text carries (McCaffery’s ideas are influenced here by Barthes’ concept of a readerly or classic text).<sup>5</sup> Rather than participating in the engendering of the meaning they experience, rather than interacting

with language in a significant way, readers are required only to absorb the pre-produced information: they do not assume a productive stance towards their own activity. In short, they become semantic consumers rather than producers.

Within this Marxist frame, McCaffery's poetic project becomes a critique of commodified, referential language as part of the larger critique of a society under capitalism. He proposes to abandon referential and communicative language as modes inherently complicit with the capitalistic agenda: the reduction of language to information passively consumed by readers. Just as Marx advocates giving factory ownership to the workers, McCaffery promotes the return of the material means of semiotic production to the readers -- in the form of a return to the uncodified graph or sound as the occluded workplace of language.

By presenting unprocessed linguistic substance rather than the finished product, McCaffery's poems attempt "to restore writing and reading to a re-politicized condition as *work*" ("Diminished Reference," *NI* 17). On a practical level, this means one cannot passively consume a McCaffery poem as one might a Robert Service poem. Gone are the familiar touchstones of story, character, voice, setting, even subject matter. In contrast, the reader is confronted with disordered, under-determined fields of graphic-phonetic substance, and must struggle with the syntactic and semantic ambivalence to manufacture his or her own subjective meaning. Readers must exercise imagination, energy, resistance, creativity, even will. A kind of Protestant work ethic for texts, this re-emergence of labour is tantamount to a more human, less alienated

reading praxis: in texts of diminished reference, readers are more actively engaged with the reading process, participating as producers not consumers of meaning. Indeed, the poet proposes “a shift from sign consumption to sign production and a siting of meaning in a productive engagement with writing’s indeterminacies” (“Diminished Reference,” *NI* 14). McCaffery’s poems resist capitalistic alienation by empowering the readers to interact with an open text, and determine (in the sense of construct) the significance found there: “[t]he demand is for praxis, active engagement and direct experience” (“Diminished Reference,” *NI* 21). McCaffery’s poems “present themselves as potential deficiencies petitioning productive entries” (*NI* 27) and his poetics at this stage are guided by “productional values” (“Notebooks,” *LB* 160): an idea which recalls Barthes’ writerly text.<sup>6</sup> Increasing readerly participation in the construction of meaning via ambiguous lexical material, McCaffery ultimately declares that his writing constitutes “the first step towards a humanization of the Sign” (160).<sup>7</sup>

### **The General Economy**

The third stage of McCaffery’s writing, ranging roughly from 1983 to the present, stands in contrast to his political and progressive Marxist phase. Drawing very loosely from the work of Georges Bataille, McCaffery suggests that writing operates as an opposition between two systems or “economies,” which Bataille names the general and the restricted. A restricted economy is one which is rule-bound, wherein binding conventions are enforced for

the purposes of producing definite, predictable effects (think, for example, of the rules of the road as a restricted economy designed to ensure safe driving). According to McCaffery, a restricted economy is “based upon valorized notions of restraint, conservation, investment, profit, accumulation and cautious proceduralities in risk taking” (“Writing,” *NI* 203). In contrast to this structured and regulated system, the general economy produces not guaranteed results, but unpredictabilities, ambivalences, indeterminacies and unexpected consequences. Working from a French text, McCaffery translates Bataille in this way:

The general economy, in the first place, makes apparent that excesses of energy are produced, and that by definition, these excesses cannot be utilized. The excessive energy can only be lost without the slightest aim, consequently without meaning. (Bataille, quoted in “Language Writing,” *NI* 156)<sup>8</sup>

The trouble (or fun, depending on your perspective) is that the restricted and general economies operate simultaneously within any situation. In other words, the general economy ensures that the predictable results of the restricted economy are accompanied by unintentional superfluity, overflow, and surplus. In this way, even the most deliberate and conservative action will generate excessive, ancillary and unexpected results<sup>9</sup> (to conclude our example, even a cautious driver will ultimately receive a ticket, or worse, get in an accident).

Because the general economy precedes, surpasses and encompasses the restricted, it has the potential to become a new

transcendent term (in the way the subconscious did for the Surrealists). Accordingly, McCaffery refines Bataille's relationship between the general and restricted economies to prevent any elevation. Although the general economy is *opposed* to the restricted economy, McCaffery stresses that their operation is *simultaneous*, *concurrent* if not *symbiotic*.

I want to make clear that I am *not* proposing "general" as an alternative economy to "restricted." One cannot replace the other because their relationship is not one of mutual exclusion. In most cases we will find general economy as a suppressed or ignored presence within the scene of writing that tends to emerge by way of rupture within the restricted, putting into question the conceptual controls that produce a writing of use value with its privileging of meaning as a necessary production and evaluated destination. ("Writing," *NI* 203)

In classic deconstructive fashion, McCaffery collapses the binary which opposes general to restricted, rendering the operation of the two collateral, necessary *and* agonistic. With this paradigm, McCaffery moves into a more self-consciously postmodern phase, where nothing is wholly present, certain, or immune from dissemination. In addition to Bataille, his influences in this regard include the usual theoretical suspects: Nietzsche, Derrida, Lacan, Kristeva, and Baudrillard. Poetically he is influenced by the aleatorics of John Cage and Jackson Mac Low, and of course Gertrude Stein.



Applying Bataille's theories to language, McCaffery concludes that reference, communication, narrative and representation exemplify restricted economies, wherein language is conscripted to relay a definite story, information, intention, or sequence of events. In contrast, McCaffery pursues a "poetics of the general" ("Writing," *NI* 202), rationalizing his work as an attempt to reveal the randomness, entropy and play suppressed within the restricted economies of reference, communication and representation. If transmission tends to restrict language's operation to a system of equitable exchange, McCaffery's poetry follows a "Theory of Sediment" exploring that which does not flow: the remains, the sediment, the froth, the back-flow, the silt and stratification beneath the linguistic current. Through his poems, McCaffery shows that language always carries its own excess, always harbours meaning and content in excess of conscious expression, operating autonomously, unpredictably, non-intentionally, beyond the dictates of *vouloir dire*.

Linguistic materiality persists as one example of this excess, but the impulse towards randomness, contradiction and back current manifests itself in many new ways in McCaffery's writing: in paragrams, palindromes, and anagrams (statements which can be read in more than one direction, forming meanings in addition to the denoted, syntactic ones); in aleatoric and procedural texts, where chance procedures generate unexpected order, and mathematical formulae produce semantic chaos; in various guises of excess, futility, accident, dissension, waste, pleasure, remainder, or opacity.

The general economy model of writing provides several advantages over McCaffery's materialist or Marxist configurations. His writing loses its attachment to the modernist and metaphysical values, the desire for a presence, progress or liberation. As a generalist, McCaffery no longer has to oppose transmission-based language in the absolutist fashion of his early thinking. Because communicative conventions are inevitably disrupted by general economic freeplay, they can no longer be reified as language's primary or unconditional function: if nothing is pure, nothing can be purely opposed. McCaffery may now engage grammar, denotation, punctuation -- any linguistic constraint -- as one half of the restricted / general economy equation. McCaffery's agenda becomes slightly different. Instead of opposing reference per se, McCaffery resists the elevation of reference as language's elemental and singular condition.

As "a deployment without use" ("Writing," *NI* 214), a general poetics further allows McCaffery to release his writing from the productional values which had rationalized his Marxist compositions, an ideology which McCaffery eventually comes to perceive as complicit with capitalism, utility and linguistic commodification. In contrast, a general poetics is not absolutely aligned with use or meaning, courting instead "non-productional values" ("Language Writing," *NI* 155). In its system of excess, use value and meaning take their proper place alongside textual uselessness, opacity and insignificance. Conjoining opposites, McCaffery explains that his writing "should be encountered at the bifurcation of these two orders of value: productive utility on the one hand, and sovereignty on the

other” (“Language Writing,” *NI* 157). Vacillating between the general and restricted economies, readers are encouraged “to institute a double rhythm of reading: utilitarian-productive and non-utilitarian resistant and to allow their interaction and mutual relativization *inside a dialectical economy*” (“Language Writing,” *NI* 158). Guided by the paradoxical nature of the general economy, McCaffery no longer justifies his poetry according to its usefulness, and so begins to interrogate “utility, as an unquestionable value” (“Writing,” *NI* 202).<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, McCaffery’s general economy model is problematic because it simultaneously legitimizes and invalidates his poetry. While the general economy justifies McCaffery’s poetry, he further postulates that it is universally active within all texts, even the most referentially restricted. McCaffery attempts to show “the unavoidable presence of general economic operations as an aspect of language’s fundamental constitution” (“Writing,” *NI* 202). Paragrammatic elements, for example, are “unavoidable in any extended alphabetic combinant arrangement” (quoted in Burnham, “Interview” 6). In addition, McCaffery sees the general economy in operation in basic linguistic activities like metaphor, metonymy, and even reference itself. If this is true, if every text simultaneously evokes both general and restricted economies, then no fundamental difference separates conventional prose and McCaffery’s poetry. The difference between *The Black Debt* and *Mansfield Park* will be one of degree: each still constrains language, only to transcend singular meaning; each applies and exceeds its own function. The most realistic and mimetic of texts has its unreadable moments.

McCaffery's argument is thus paradoxical, itself an example of the general economy; the aesthetic which should validate, individuate and explain his poetics is also responsible for its dissolution into a universal paradigm which encompasses all writing.

McCaffery's use of the general economy is also incompatible with the explicit political agendas of his materialist and Marxist phases. His declared intent to reinvigorate and rehumanize a population alienated by capitalism and reference is immobilized by the paradoxical logic of the general economy. By remedying reference, McCaffery's poetry only defers and displaces problems, or at best creates a set of new ones. Because defect and effect are constantly conjoined in his general poetics, McCaffery's texts achieve a kind of political paralysis, a stasis of consequences, rather than a humanizing progression of the sort Marx envisions. Indeed, his writing becomes increasingly nihilistic at this stage. Here is a still point in McCaffery's project: his Marxist ideology of progression and emancipation is fundamentally irreconcilable with his later Bataillean aesthetics.

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Of the three different configurations, I find the general economy model the most helpful in coming to terms with the flux, variance and paradox of McCaffery's poetry. On this note, I would like to point out a central paradox which seems to infect McCaffery's whole project. Given his pursuit of disorder and flux in his poetry, McCaffery does a very strange thing; he becomes dogmatic and dictatorial in his conceptual writing. At every stage of his career, whether explaining sound poetry or language writing, McCaffery

typically marshals a giddy array of technical terms, historical precedents, theoreticians, expertise, definitions, social contexts, pseudo-science, catalogues and categories -- an imperious erudition that is suffocating to newcomer and veteran alike. Although some of his criticism is intentionally bombastic, if not burlesque, his speculations on language and society can be as sincerely universal and sweeping as any uttered by a logical positivist or structuralist. Although McCaffery's extremely dense, combative and self-righteous criticism has been defended as both parody and social commentary,<sup>11</sup> his style is also designed to intimidate the reader and establish the authority of the author. Even where McCaffery is arguing for a plurality of interpretation, he is unequivocal and absolute in his claims of interpretive freedom. He has also ravaged his critics and fellow poets, showing in rather draconian fashion that interpretive freedom has limits.<sup>12</sup> This is more than a poet's arrogant self-assurance. McCaffery's theoretic writings often behave like texts of the father; they are engaged in the patriarchal endeavour of establishing legitimacy, right, precision, rule, and universal justification for his art. Swaggering with Old Testament severity, McCaffery-the-theoretician consequently presents himself as a kind of prophet who bears the laws of a new poetic covenant.

These two incompatible impulses -- one towards indeterminacy, the other towards authoritarianism -- animate and delimit McCaffery's writing. If his poetry inevitably undermines his aesthetics, the very chaos of his art spurs him on to more universal and general theories, to wider speculations and explanations. It's as if poetic flux terrifies him towards ever more dictatorial criticism. In

this way, the poetry and theory feed off and intensify each other, causing his whole project to wobble and destabilize in spectacular fashion.

The incongruity between McCaffery's materialist poetry and poetics is discussed in Chapter One. This implicitly includes a critique of his Marxist poetics, as these two initial phases of McCaffery's career are intimately connected, differing primarily in rhetoric rather than practice. Chapters Two and Three examine McCaffery's application of general economic principles. Chapter Two examines the way the poet deliberately misuses the technology of the printed word (page, line, paragraph, book) to create a new, disjunctive poetry; Chapter Three examines McCaffery's translations, which typically transgress rather than reflect their sources. Chapters Four and Five look at the entirety of McCaffery's oeuvre, but from theoretical positions outside McCaffery's own professed project. Chapter Four offers three different readings of McCaffery's poetry, in terms of how it genders language. Chapter Five looks at the difficult relationship of McCaffery's poetry to Canadian poetry, cultural identity, and nationalism.

## Chapter One

### Poetry that Matters: McCaffery's Mass Appeal

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little  
minds . . . .

Ralph Waldo Emerson ("Self Reliance"  
41)

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Walt Whitman ("Song of Myself" 88)

I have chosen to begin this study of Steve McCaffery with an examination of his earliest works, the poems, performances and manifestos which he later characterizes as "incredibly naive" (quoted in Nichol, "Checklist" 73) and "embarrassing" (83). This is McCaffery's concrete phase through the sixties and seventies, when he is working in the poetic tradition of early concrete artists Eugen Gomringer, the Noigandres group, Franz Mon, Max Bense, Hansjörg Mayer, Ferdinand Kriwet, Ian Hamilton Finlay and Henri Chopin.<sup>13</sup> Like these concrete poets, McCaffery declares his aversion to linear, verbal language, and moves towards a direct engagement with the material substance of signification. Typical of concrete aesthetics, McCaffery's manifestos promise liberation, revitalization, therapeutic effects, even spiritual enrichment, and so McCaffery creates a political as well as aesthetic agenda for his poetry. If McCaffery

differs from his concrete predecessors, it is in the extremity of his claims; McCaffery advances the tradition by taking its core principles to logical, sometimes absurd conclusions. Although McCaffery now admits that this formative period is filled with excess and naiveté, his early work remains valuable because it reveals the metaphysical assumptions, contradictions and disparities at play within the concrete tradition. Fascinating in their own right, McCaffery's early poems and essays betray a nostalgia for a lost presence, authenticity and origin. Although McCaffery will eventually reject modernist-leaning principles, they tend to tacitly persist in his subsequent works and configurations. And this is perhaps the greatest value of his early work: the problems and predispositions within McCaffery's poetics are nowhere clearer.

Almost every concrete poet argues in some form that the old linguistic conventions of speech and type are either inadequate to the modern age or downright harmful. True to this tradition, McCaffery perceives transmission-based language as a kind of repression or restriction, and accordingly his first strategy is to write poetry that assiduously refuses to communicate, narrate or even speak. Instead, McCaffery deliberately foregrounds the physicality of language which underlies communication, and forces his readers to become aware of words as material entities rather than linguistic functions. In *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec*, Caroline Bayard rightly links counter-communication to the Platonic tradition of "aletheia, the unveiling, the making present of what has been hidden" (35); exemplifying Bayard's insight, McCaffery attempts to strip language of its artificial rules, connotations and symbolism and



return it to its authentic, tangible roots. Manifesting neither story nor image, McCaffery seeks “a pure, lexemic presence” (“Death” 63), where poems are linguistic events which present “an opacity to direct experience” (“Diminished Reference,” *NI* 24). Through a poetics of immanence, McCaffery hopes to reharmonize signifier, signified and referent into a new physical whole: “a thing need not be a this standing for a that but immediately a that and so free of the implications of the metaphysics of linguistic absence” (“Some Notes” 283). In his early attempt to embody “linguistic presence” (“Introduction” *C2*), McCaffery pursues a zero tolerance for reference, and consequently his work constitutes some of the most physical, graphic, aural and tactile poetry ever written. McCaffery’s early writing finds its niche in the concrete tradition as a poetry devoid of reference, a poetry that *matters*.

McCaffery’s tentative explorations of linguistic matter take three basic forms: concrete, sound and post-semiotic poetry.<sup>14</sup> These styles manifest different aspects of the material signifier, emphasizing language in the variety of its written, spoken and perceived forms. Between these styles, McCaffery systematically strives to explore the full range of linguistic polymorphism, behaving like an empirical scientist exhaustively documenting the different configurations of an unknown element.

### **Concrete poetry**

Steve McCaffery’s concrete work is incredibly diverse, but his major investigations into the form are found in two connected works,

composed over the first eight years of his career: *Carnival the first panel: 1967-70* and *Carnival the second panel: 1970-75* (in future, I shall refer to these works together simply as *Carnival*).<sup>15</sup> *Carnival* is both sophisticated, and large (see fig. 1). The final text involves sixteen 8.5" x 11" sheets of paper, arranged in a 4 x 4 configuration, described by McCaffery as "[s]ixteen square feet of concrete" (C1, postcard). The elaborate designs were created through what McCaffery calls a "mask" (quoted in Nichol, "Checklist" 72), predesignated shapes cut into paper. These masks were then typed, stamped, written, and printed over, leaving the desired figure on the paper below. The process is partly planned, partly spontaneous, and labour intensive; it does not allow for error, which explains why it took McCaffery nearly a decade to finish. Many of McCaffery's other concrete texts, such as *Ground Plans For A Speaking City*, are trial runs for the final *Carnival* poems, which suggests *Carnival* is of central importance to his project.



Fig. 1. Postcard from Steve McCaffery, *Carnival*, the first panel: 1967-70. Toronto: Coach House, 1973. n.p.. This postcard is a reduced version of the sixteen pages of the poem, assembled as McCaffery intended it to be viewed.

McCaffery describes *Carnival* as an “intelligible access to [language’s] neglected qualities of immanence and non-reference. It is language presented as direct physical impact” (“Introduction” C2). This is a modernist “direct treatment of the thing,” where the subject under examination is language itself. To be more specific, McCaffery uses concrete poetry to explore language as a typewritten and lexical artifact, as a thing both seen and handled. Designed to be experienced rather than read, McCaffery’s concretism is in line with the early concretists, like Max Bense and Hansjörg Mayer, but is typically denser, almost overloaded. However, McCaffery deliberately distances himself from the typewriter art movement (exemplified by the likes of Eugen Gomringer) because this tradition tends to preserve portions of linguistic communication.

If the propositional qualities of language have been historically privileged over the manifest, *Carnival* reverses this trend by allowing the visual and tactile qualities of written language to displace the semantic and meaningful, the graph to be lauded over the idea (see fig. 2). Hence the significance of the title: carnival as a time of inversion and upset. McCaffery characterizes *Carnival*’s deviations from the typewritten line specifically as “a way to create painterly shape” (quoted in Nichol, “Checklist” 72). The importance of *Carnival* as visible entity is implicit in the subtitle “panel,” a word which denotes a painted surface or canvas; panel can also mean texture, so the title also suggests the poem has tactile qualities as well. Moreover, *Carnival* is printed so that the individual pages may be detached and assembled as a single, large wall-hanging or poster (the assembled image is included as a post-card).<sup>16</sup> In these

respects, McCaffery dissolves the distinctions between painting and poetry, reducing both to a visual value. Following the implications of this dissolution, McCaffery actually displayed the assembled pages of *Carnival* on art gallery walls in Canada and Europe.<sup>17</sup>

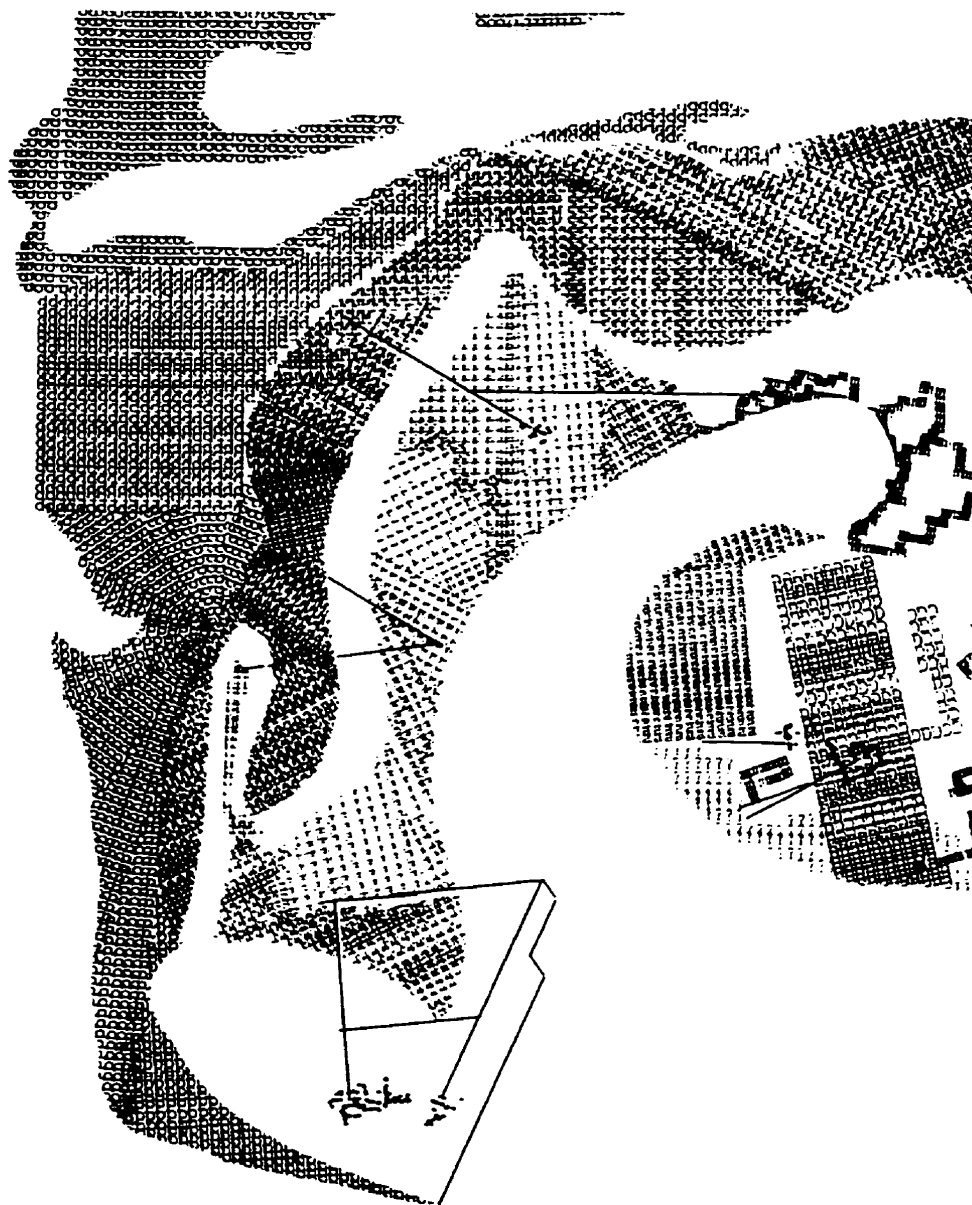


Fig. 2. A section from Steve McCaffery, *Carnival, the first panel*: 1967-70. Toronto: Coach House, 1973. n.p..

Although Franz Mon tried to create a “poetry of surface” (quoted in Solt 19), and Ferdinand Kriwet similarly worked with language “at its picture value” (quoted in Solt 20), McCaffery’s greatest influence in this regard is perhaps the abstract expressionist movement, and especially Jackson Pollock. Just as the young McCaffery seeks to purge reference from language, Pollock strives to transform the tradition of representational painting into an anti-mimetic form. A Pollock canvas does not *represent* a person or place, but rather *presents* paint for its sculptural and visual qualities alone. So too does McCaffery present language as a thing purely in materialistic splendour: text becomes texture, and McCaffery’s concrete poems resemble more than anything the sprawling chaos of Pollock’s “action painting.” In an oblique reference to Pollock, McCaffery describes his free-forming sound experiments as action texts or “action poetry” (“Sound Poetry: A Survey” 12), and further refers to *Carnival* as “a sort of abstract expressionism through the typewriter” (quoted in Nichol, “Checklist” 72) where language is treated as paint. Of the two projects, McCaffery’s is more difficult, because it seeks to translate an inherently expressive medium into a non-expressive one -- a problem to which we shall return.<sup>18</sup>

In *Carnival*, type is used to form shapes in space rather than hypotactic and grammatical sentences along a temporal continuum. Sentences, words, and letters are arranged for their visual and manifest values, and text is printed in as many as five colours. At times, the layout of text is wild and random, like monkey-splattered paint drops; elsewhere it achieves the intricacies of a geometrical design; it even forms recognizable images, such as a human eye

which glares back at the reader (in *Broken Mandala*, McCaffery incorporates ready-made pictures into the text, further blurring the differences between image and type). Such recognizable icons are the exception, however; more typically, McCaffery manipulates type into complete abstraction and non-representation. Punctuation marks and lines create an anti-ideological plane of text that must be seen rather than comprehended. Parentheses, for example, are employed to create wave and ripple patterns that carry almost no symbolic or ulterior meaning: text becomes rhythm. Furthermore, the second panel of *Carnival* uses non-lexical material such as smudges, wrinkles, Xerox distortions: elements which do not signify beyond what they are (see fig. 3). By incorporating non-semantic, non-lexical elements, McCaffery approaches a poetics of pure materiality. The dense, black, overlaid ink of *Carnival* communicates nothing beyond what it is, realizing itself in text as text, just as the original "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry" instructs: "an object in and by itself, not an interpreter of exterior objects and/or more or less subjective feelings" (Campos 72). Denuding the word of symbolism, exposing the graphic body, McCaffery transforms language from a useful vehicle into an object of gratification unto itself.



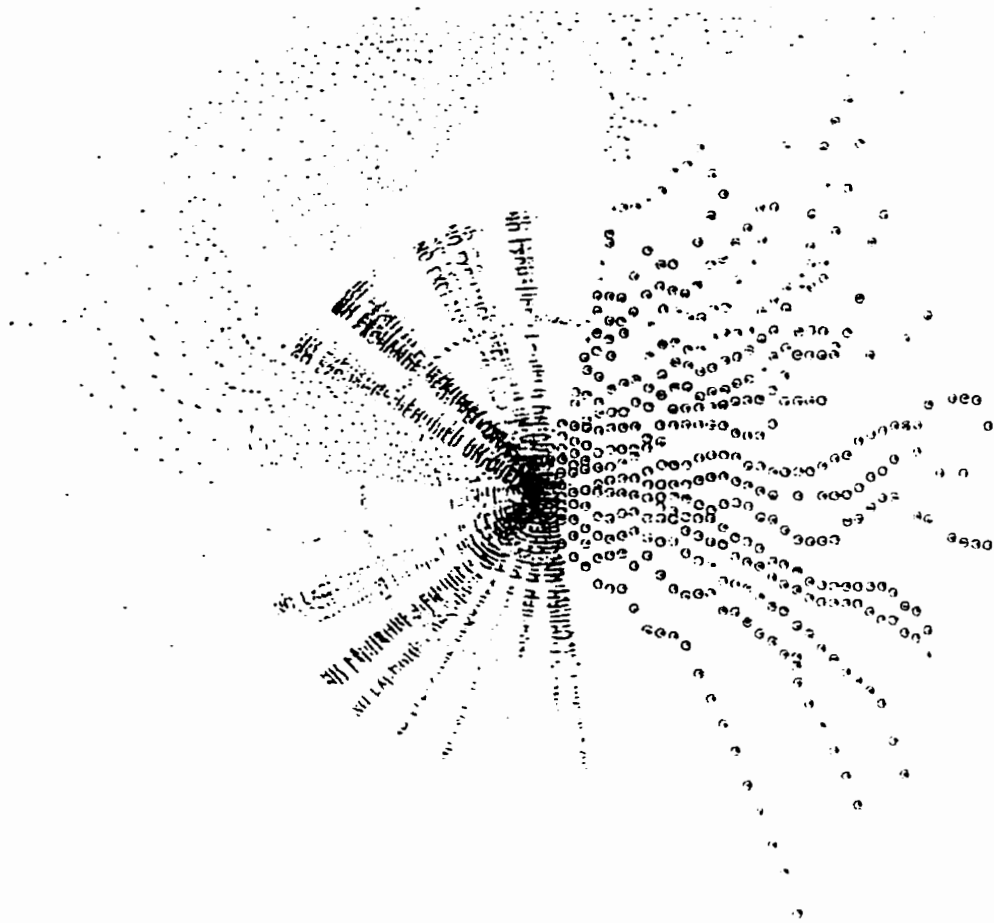


Fig. 3. A section from Steve McCaffery, *Carnival*, the second panel: 1970-75. Toronto: Coach House, 1977. n.p..

## Sound Poetry

In his statement of praxis “Why I am the Author of Sound Poetry and Free Poetry” (1968), French Poet Henri Chopin declares his intention to move beyond dada, expressionism, lettrisme, and futurism by creating a poetry using neither syllable nor letter. Such “a-significant human sounds, without alphabet, without reference to an explicative clarity” focus on the “buccal sound, the human sound” (81). McCaffery’s sound poetry owes much to Chopin’s formulations, particularly in the way it rejects expressive content in favour of the simple human presence in the production of sound (more on Chopin’s and McCaffery’s latent humanism later). Like Chopin, McCaffery employs the sound poem as another means of “returning language to its own matter” (“Some Notes” 282). Parallel and complementary to concrete poetry, McCaffery’s sound poetry is designed to emphasize aural materiality: language as a sonic medium (see fig. 4 and fig. 5). Through various clicks, hoots, fricatives, yelps, slaps, chatters and murmurs, the sound poet displays a fervent “respect for the purity of immediacy” (“Blood” 275) and the sound poem becomes “the road to the simultaneous to the relevant to the immediate” (275). The “[c]oncretization of the referent” (“Some Notes” 282) is accomplished in part by “cutting the referent line” (282); that is, sound is freed from its obligations to signify, and operates not as “the servant of semantic” (283) but rather as an event unto itself, unique and unrepeatable: “the communicative goal was non-informational and non-cortical” (281). In 1970, McCaffery joined with bpNichol, Paul Dutton, and Rafael Barreto-Rivera, to form the touring sound poetry

ensemble wittily called The Four Horsemen. Until bpNichol's unexpected death in 1988, this group provided McCaffery with a vehicle for his investigation into pure sound. In a typical performance, sound is produced spontaneously without delaying for deliberation or expression of content; improvisation further limits premeditated or even intelligible content (as well as being a source of much amusement). At the 1978 Toronto Sound Poetry Festival, Larry Wendt observed that "each member of the group had a towel wrapped around his mouth to prevent meaningful articulations" (291). At the extreme, a Four Horsemen performance descends into a prolonged production of grunts, moans, shrieks, howls, snarls and other ululations: manifest cacophony and caustic acoustics. The Four Horsemen even eschew microphones and amplification because, in their opinion, technology reduces poetry's immanent, authentic character.

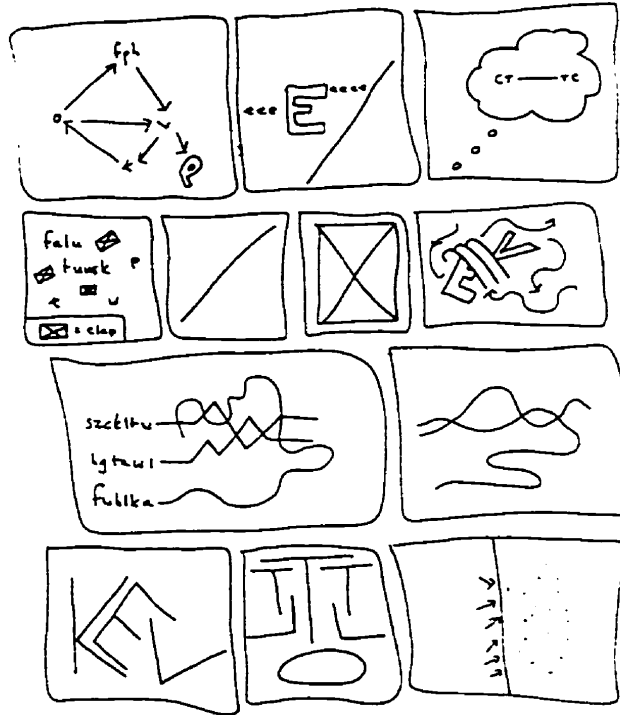


Fig. 4. A page from Steve McCaffery, "Study for an Unperformed 4 Horsemen Piece." *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue for the Eleventh International Sound Poetry Festival, Toronto, Canada, October 14 to 21, 1978*. Ed. by Steve McCaffery and bpNichol. Toronto: Underwhich Editions, c1978. 37.

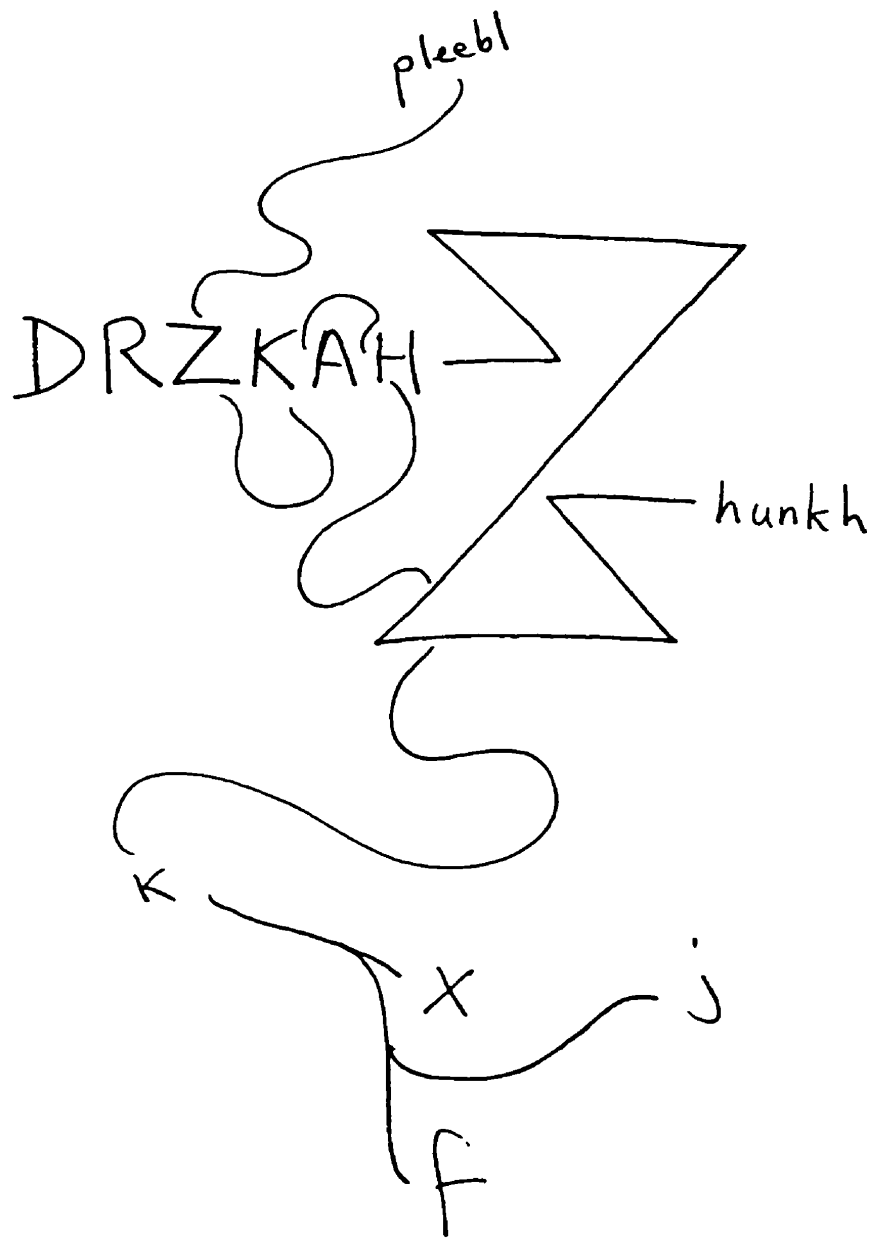


Fig. 5. A section from Steve McCaffery, "16 Part Suite." *The Prose Tattoo: Selected Performance Scores*. Milwaukee: Membrane Press, 1983. 32.

## Post-Semiotic Poetry

Post-semiotic poetry develops as a reaction to the work of Brazilian concretists Decio Pignatari and Luiz Angelo, who in 1964 developed a poetry without words, “a new type of non-verbal text: the semiotic or ‘code’ poem” (RG 33). Taking language to be “any set of signs and the way of using them” (33), the semiotic poet constructs a new and original set of pictures or iconic elements, and an accompanying key which decodes their significance. Writing as the Toronto Research Group, McCaffery and Nichol describe Pignatari and Angelo's creation: “[w]hat they propose in essence is a closed pragmatic system of coded visual signs designed to suit the needs required by the poet” (33). While Nichol and McCaffery admire the non-verbal and creative possibilities of the code poem, they also perceive a flaw in its operation: “[o]ne weakness immediately apparent in this type of poem is the necessary recourse to a lexical definition of the signs utilized which involves, of necessity, an inherent translation process from words *into* semiotic signs *back* into words” (34). If McCaffery's desire at this stage is to embody raw, inexpressive language, then the semiotic or code poem is ultimately hindered by its reliance on symbolic language to provide significance.

McCaffery and Nichol recognize this defect, and set out to discover an alternative. Accordingly, they inaugurate a new genre, dubbed the post-semiotic poem, which abandons the semiotic key of the code poem, and so liberates the writing from the restriction of orthodox, symbolic language altogether.

In the summer of 1970 we developed a form of poetry we called post-semiotic in a conscious attempt to solve the inherent weakness of semioticism. In the post-semiotic poem the lexical conversion of non-verbal code back into words is eliminated. The poem operates predominantly by semantic suggestion and by utilizing shapes and non-verbal elements as possess maximum semantic possibilities . . . (34-35)

In contrast to concrete poetry, post-semiotic poetry is non-lexical in its construction. Ridding itself of all verbal, phonetic, logical, or linear tendencies, the post-semiotic poem presents the graph as a visual icon unconstrained by any symbolic needs (see fig. 6 and fig. 7). Such poems appear almost as abstract, baroque designs, in which a basic figure or letter has been elaborated, translated, curved, rotated, melted, inflated, and manipulated -- to the point of indecipherability. While the shapes on the page may *suggest* recognizable objects, they do not *resolve* into any singular sign. Indeed, the intent is to complicate "the one to one relationship of key & sign" (*TB*, back cover), ultimately confusing and transgressing symbolic distinctions. The emphasis is again on the visual appearance of the graph, but this time the lexicon is purely personal, non-repeatable and unexplained. The kinship with concrete poetry is strong, but post-semiotic poetry's rejection of the semantic and symbolic is more radical and complete. Where McCaffery's concrete poetry will incorporate recognizable ready-mades, disfigured words, and syntactic salvage, his post-semiotic poetry moves toward complete abstraction and non-representation.

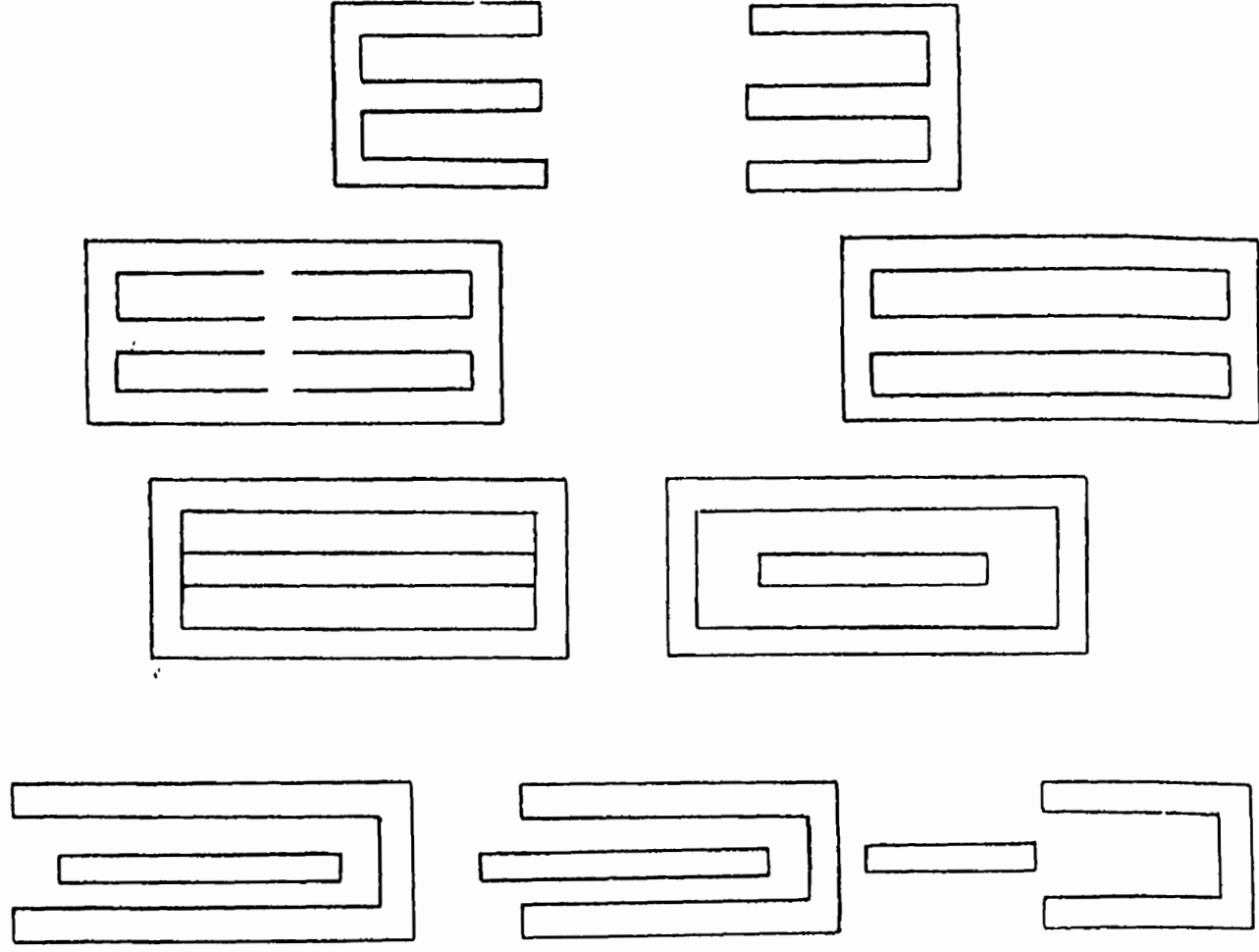


Fig. 6. Figures from Steve McCaffery, *Transitions to the Beast*. grOnk series 6 no. 2/3. Toronto: Ganglia, 1970. n.p..



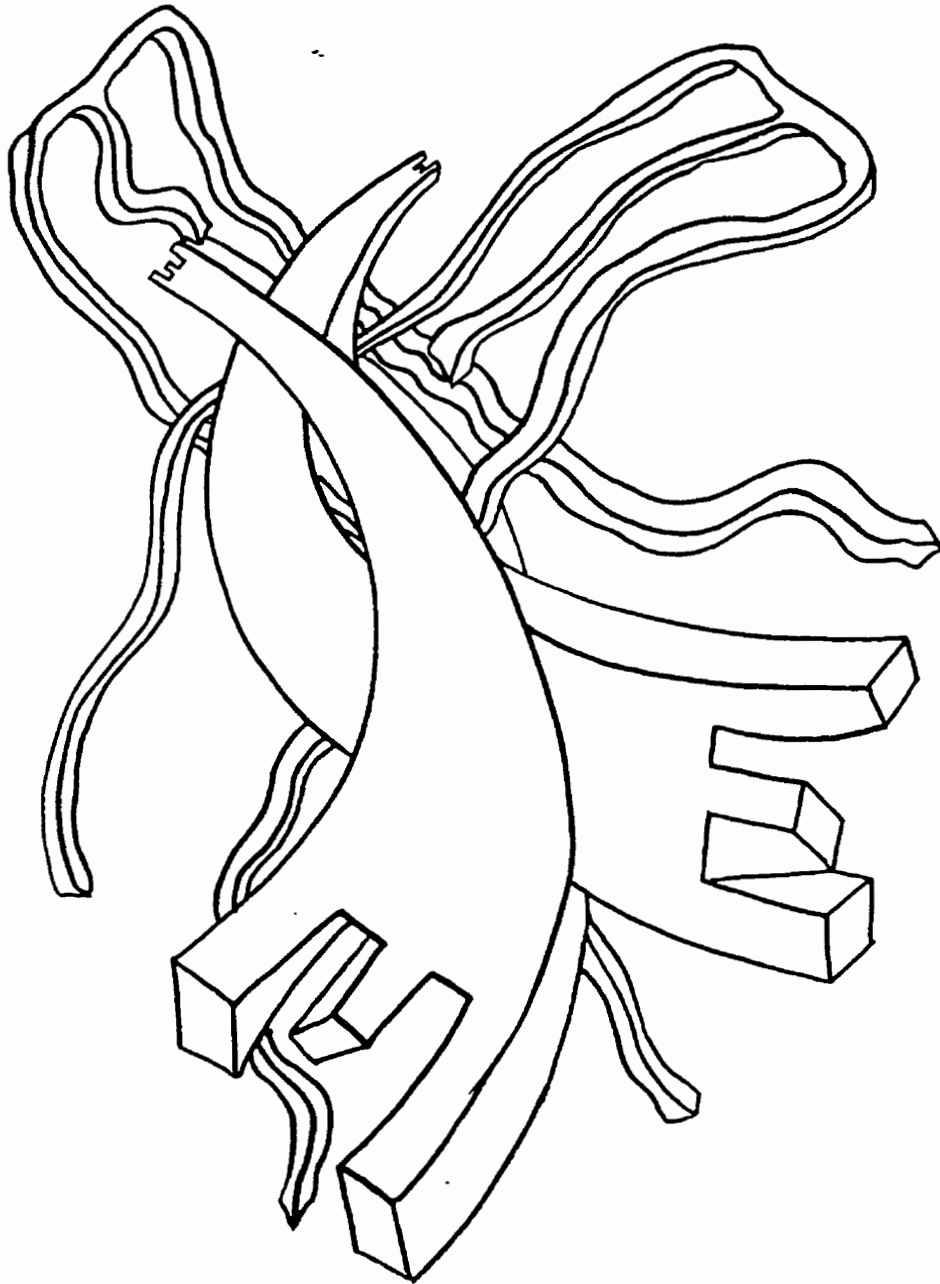


Fig. 7. Figures from Steve McCaffery, *Transitions to the Beast*. grOnk series 6 no. 2/3. Toronto: Ganglia, 1970. n.p..

## Linguistic Sabotage

As different as they are, post-semiotic, sound, and concrete poetry are contrived to each transgress a particular aspect of referential language. In a fairly obvious manner, McCaffery's concrete poetry is configured to disrupt the conventions of typewritten line, page or book, disable written communication, and perform a "CHANGE OF ADDRESS" (C2). Most obviously, the *Carnival* series marks a radical deviation from the standard, orthographic typography designed to facilitate easy consumption of information. Lines here not only stray from the horizontal, but they intersect each other, overlap, lose linear coherence. McCaffery describes this linear dispersal as a tactic of "conflict and internecine statement" and "a structure of strategic counter communication" ("Introduction" C2). Competing styles, typefaces, language forms, messages and sentences are physically arranged into suggestive conjunctions, tensions, oppositions, even collision and negation. Consider for example the cover of the second *Carnival*: it is overprinted until it is nearly black. As a consequence of this typographic collision, the communicative, instructional mode of language is torqued as "[l]anguage units are placed in visible conflict, in patterns of defective messages, creating a semantic texture by shaping and interference within the clear line of statement" ("Introduction" C2). A drastic reduction in the language of instruction and description ensues: one stable meaning does not dominate the linguistic plane. Voice transforms into a void of intent and meaning. At times the text chants its own aphasia. The second panel of *Carnival* is repetitively marked by a rubber stamp which

reads “NO EXCHANGE REQUIRED ON CHEQUES.” Often, only the first two words of the rubber imprint are legible. The reader experiences an incessant repetition of the words “NO EXCHANGE.” *Carnival* is thus a system that ironically declares its own suspension of exchange values.

Established instead of the line is an open field of linguistic competition in which no meta-order is apparent (except perhaps the chaos of the carnival itself). When freed of dictatorial syntax or narrative, each individual graph interfaces with its neighbours to the north, south, east and west, multiplying in significance as they are read in a variety of contexts and sequences. In McCaffery’s concrete poetry, then, the graph signifies in 360 degrees, and achieves what could be called a syntactic aura, or in McCaffery’s terms, a corona: “the replacement of linear direction by a vertical and horizontal tension . . . creates a tracery in the spatial field and highlights a coronal quality in the graphemes” (“Diminished Reference,” *NI* 23). “TRUE VISION IS RADIAL” (*CI*) and, accordingly, McCaffery creates a kind of radiant or “vibratory syntax” (“Notes on trope, text and perception” 46), recalling Gomringer’s notion of constellation.<sup>19</sup> This is the sense in which McCaffery suggests “*Carnival* was essentially a cartographic project; a repudiation of linearity in writing and the search for an alternative syntax in ‘mapping’” (quoted in Nichol, “Checklist” 72). Following its cartographic logic, concrete poetry is writing which utilizes both the horizontal and vertical axis of the page, which is aware of the graph’s existence in time *and* space. Clearly, McCaffery is influenced by the pioneering Brazilian concretists known as the Noigandres group, with their emphasis on

“graphic space and a structural agent” (Campos 71) and “tension of thing-words in space time” (71), but McCaffery modernizes these maxims as “CATEGORISED LINE BEGETS COMPUTORISED LABYRINTH” (CI). McCaffery’s colour-streaming in *Carnival* is typically random, working across syntactic, semantic and phonetic grids, creating homogenous areas that are random and hostile to the line and word. Colour thus offers an alternative grammar which encourages readers to create new non-linear relationships.

Like concrete poetry, sound poetry begins by transgressing and destructuring the semantic grids and referential networks which order language. As McCaffery suggests, the sound poet practices “the frontal de-formation of language” (“Some Notes” 281). Where concrete poetry attacks the orthography of the printed page, sound poetry attacks the constraints phonetics and grammar place on the production of sound. Using conventional texts, images or icons as a starting point, the sound poet will compose a poem by intentionally violating the phonetic and syntactic configurations, producing through deliberate misreading a “deformation of linguistic form at the level of the signifier” (“Sound Poetry,” *LB* 88). Orthodox linguistic form is but “a point of departure” (“Some Notes” 281). Sound pursues its own trajectory apart from its requirements as a sign, sentence, phrase, word or even phoneme. Phonic waves are released with “no pausing for intellectualization” (“Blood” 275). In this sudden liberation of suppressed potential, McCaffery compares sound poetry to an energy discharge (similar perhaps to the radiant corona or aura effect of concrete poetry): “[w]hen considering text-sound it is energy, not semantically shaped meaning, that constitutes the

essence of communicated data” (“Sound Poetry,” *LB* 88). Through the distortions of the sound poet, language releases its static charges, allowing it to assume new, unlettered possibilities.

If concrete poetry dissolves the typography of the lined page, post-semiotic poetry attacks language’s most minimal written unit: the letter. While *Carnival* preserves the typist’s keyboard as the monads of composition, post-semiotic poems such as *Transitions to the Beast* (1970) explore what shapes, symbols and patterns language may assume in place of the alphabet. To achieve this expansion of our symbolic lexicon, McCaffery frequently takes a standard, familiar letter (“E” is a favourite) and complicates it until it can no longer be identified purely as a phonetic symbol. Through “the manipulation of perspective and shape” (back cover), each letter morphs into other forms (a crescent, tube, or blob). The letter’s two-dimensional plane is extrapolated into the third dimension, revealing vast subterranean complexities. Post-semiotic poetry is thus a kind of modern *Book of Kells*, an illuminated manuscript where the frivolous arabesques eclipse entirely the letters they supposedly decorate. Through these convolutions, McCaffery occasionally creates liminal or borderline letters (the “E” hovers in a state that could be read as H, A, W, M or S). The intent here is not only to confront readers with the pictorial quality in written language, but to shatter the alphabet as a natural or normal set of symbols. To read the post-semiotic poem is to suspend a primary and elemental level of language; no longer does the sign have a predetermined visual or phonetic value; no longer can the written word be voiced or pronounced, but must be experienced on a non-verbal level.

Through post-semiotic poetry, readers confront written language as if for the first time, as if they're children viewing strange and beautiful shapes. Post-semiotic poetry thus satisfies basic Russian Formalist requirements for art: it makes the familiar new.

### Reference Strikes Back

So the word persists even in the state of its  
own excommunication.

Steve McCaffery ("Sound Poetry," *LB*  
90)

Although McCaffery distinguishes sound, concrete and post-semiotic poetry as disruptions to communicative language, his poetry's transgressions are never as severe as he claims. Contrary to McCaffery's express wishes, his poetry of immanence never fully frees itself of content, definition or clarity. In various ways, reference pervades his material poetry, eventually mitigating and diminishing the pure physicality he seeks. His sound poetry often employs recognizable language. The Four Horsemen, for example, typically perform with one member of the group speaking conventionally, while the remaining three chant, echo, or otherwise improvise around his voice. In *Carnival*, moreover, referential language is employed as an integral part of the poem: readable words, lines, even whole sentences persist in generating meanings which obscure the unmediated physicality of the graph (see fig. 8). This interplay between graph and legible phrases assumes various

gradations: from fragmented but traditional orthographics, to overlapped and interstitial lines, to the reduction-degree-zero of recognition; type laminated upon type, until it can only be experienced as ink. At best, his poems waver between their referential and non-referential aspects. This persistence of reference may seem minor, but it has serious ramifications precisely because his early agenda depends upon the annulment of reference in language.

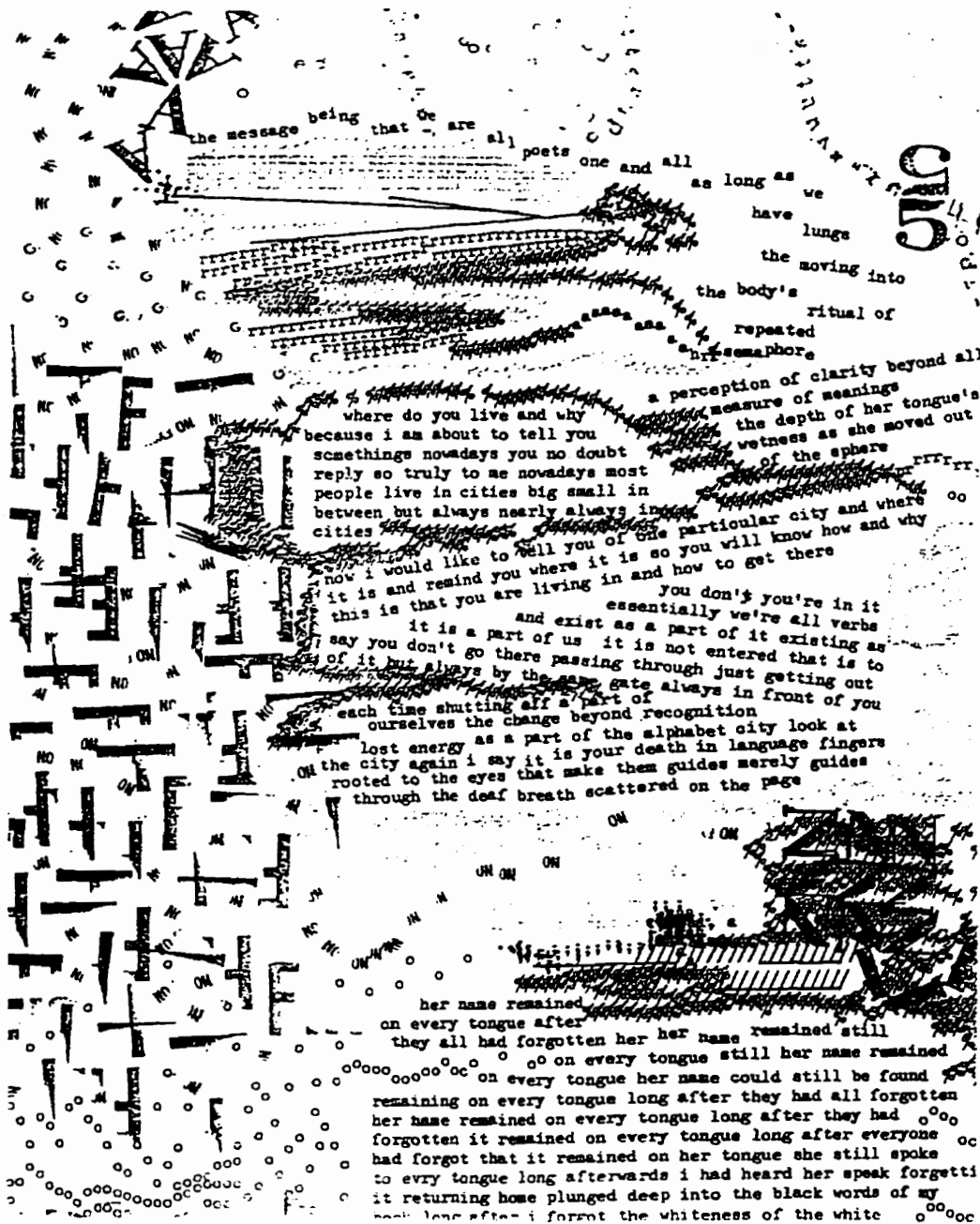


Fig. 8. A section from Steve McCaffery, *Carnival, the second panel*: 1970-75. Toronto: Coach House, 1977. n.p..



With this caveat duly noted, referential lapses constitute some of the most interesting moments in McCaffery's material poems. The recognizable voice in the sound performance provides a familiar touchstone which can contrast with, orient, and even explain the other noises. Like a lucid moment in a storm of madness, the conventional language in *Carnival* offers snippets of instruction on how to cope with the chaos of contesting blocks. By including these atoms of instruction, *Carnival* becomes a self-teaching text, a pedagogical exercise. One panel, for instance, advises us to "read down the page please across read down the line" (C2). Although this phrase is syntactically ambiguous, we can discern at least one message which emphasizes the spatial quality of the language in play here, advising the reader to experience the text perpendicularly. However, by following the advice, the reader moves against the linearity of the instructing line itself (so the content of this message contrasts its linear delivery system). The reader must obey and disobey the requirements of the line, experiencing viscerally the discrepancy between language's material and semantic vectors. What makes McCaffery's material poetics engaging and relevant to this day is the tension between language's literal and letteral, fettered and figural qualities.

Referential language further infiltrates McCaffery's poems through his poetic statements, essays, criticism and manifestos. McCaffery's tendency to describe and validate his poetry assumes two forms. Firstly, McCaffery composes autonomous essays, such as those collected in *Open Letter* or *North of Intention*. On a more subtle level, McCaffery also composes short statements of praxis

which are added to the individual poem as an introduction, afterword, or dust-jacket précis, and even circulated before a performance. In actuality, very few of McCaffery's poems of textual immediacy are devoid of commentary.<sup>20</sup> Almost all of his concrete, sound and post-semiotic poems are framed by some explanatory gesture, a set of instructions on the back or inside cover that guide and inform the reader (a feature which persists throughout McCaffery's oeuvre).

Although the two discourses are intertwined, McCaffery's material poetry and his criticism cannot be understood as complementary endeavours; they are not argument and example, the performance and the theory of a common aesthetic. Because of McCaffery's resistance to explanatory language, his criticism and poetry are inherently antagonistic; the essays engage the very communicability the poems wish to purge.<sup>21</sup> In this conflict, McCaffery clearly values the poetry above criticism. In 1973, in the first credo of the Toronto Research Group's founding Manifesto, he asserts "all theory is transient & after the fact of writing" (RG 23). For McCaffery then, criticism and explanation are activities which follow poetic creation, and constitute a second order, ancillary, degraded writing.

However, if the criticism functions merely as a type of addition or necessary concession to the dissemination of the poem, it typically acts as a supplement in the Derridean sense of the word. Derrida suggests that the supplement points out a fundamental lack or shortcoming in the original text, an absence in the source which necessitates correction or completion. In this respect, the

supplement can eventually become more authoritative than the original, and supplant it in importance.

What is fundamentally missing in McCaffery's material poetry is the ability to communicate its own *raison d'être*, a reticence which is both the poetry's strength and its Achilles' heel. By failing to establish any sort of *a priori* worth, the poems risk being rejected as meaningless background noise or misprints. Thus, McCaffery needs expository writing in order to provide an essential ingredient missing in the poetry itself: an aesthetic which not only identifies the merits of linguistic materiality, but critiques transmission-based language as restrictive and alienating. Theory -- which McCaffery depreciates as supplemental and "after the fact" -- cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to art. Without a rationale, material poetry might remain unpoetic and silent matter -- how could one recognize post-semiotic poetry *as poetry* when all ties to conventional language have been severed? Thus theory supplies the defining context which grants value to non-representation. In this sense, McCaffery's prosaic rationales are not only necessary to the appreciation of his poems, but an integral aspect of them -- they provide the principles which render the poems significant.

This is the ultimate irony of McCaffery's material poetics: McCaffery must adopt referential modes -- the critical essay, the manifesto, the afterword -- to justify and explain his non-referential poetics. If his criticism explains and engenders value in his art, this same expressive mode inevitably undermines the presentation of pure linguistic materiality (the very substance deemed worthy). In his attempt to justify his art, a conundrum emerges: the symbolic

must be used to clarify the pre-symbolic; the referential must elucidate the non-referential; the earthly must stand for the paradisaic; the prosaic has to explain the ecstatic (in this respect, McCaffery's early poetics follow an almost Kantian notion of sublimity, driven by the desire to represent the unrepresentable, to express through language the non-linguistic, to evoke infinity in the finite terms available to humanity). This is possibly the central contradiction of post-semiotic, sound and concrete poetry: the critic must engage in the very processes which the poet attempts to eschew. As an unfortunate consequence, McCaffery's legion manifestos, statements and declarations reverse and problematize the flow of his poetry's activity, enacting a counter-resistance to the activities of the poems they purport to rationalize. Ultimately, McCaffery's poetry and poetics stand in harsh contradiction. Although he wishes to critique referential language through a poetry of substance and non-communication, he is simultaneously committed to the transmission of his ideas.<sup>22</sup> He thus relies upon the language of uncomplicated reference for unequivocal expression of his poetic rationale -- and so thwarts his own poems. For these reasons, George Hartley rightfully concludes that "McCaffery's position depends on and could be seen to perpetuate the very orders he loathes" (71).

When McCaffery is faced with criticism, he can simply dismiss it, arguing that "conventional intellection and critical response to sound poetry [is] irrelevant" ("Some Notes" 281). Because his poems have little commerce with the symbolic, because his material poems are founded in blood and graph rather than ideas, McCaffery

suggests he can ignore criticism, contending it engages the very communicative process he is purging. A neat bit of logic, this: using referential clarity, McCaffery outlines an aesthetic of appreciation which includes a prohibition against further prose commentary. Using communication to forbid communication, theory to ban theory, McCaffery's platform remains the sole criterion of poetic worth: all other commentaries perpetuate the evils of alienation, fetishism and reification. Deflating criticism other than his own, McCaffery maintains a monopoly over interpretation; only his voice persists. In reality, McCaffery's aesthetic does not let anyone else speak, and so it prevents a democratic discussion of the benefits and detriments of materialist poetry. In this respect, McCaffery acts like a kind of Moses figure, the lone witness to God and sole bearer of the poetic commandments, which he dispenses, at times with Old Testament severity, to a people lost in referential babel.

### **Manna-fest Language**

The way that can be spoken of  
Is not the constant way

Lao Tzu (*Tao Te Ching* 57)

I use the image of Moses deliberately, because McCaffery's writing leans towards the prophet and his holy text in more ways than one. Just as Moses glimpsed the divine fire of a God with no name, McCaffery perceives a kind of spiritual value in the non-referential, the material, and the unnamable. In this respect, post-

semiotic, sound and concrete poetry show remarkable similarity in design, form, practice and motivation to tribal, ritualistic, religious and ceremonial verse. The similarity of sound poetry to chanting is obvious: a deliberate repetition of a restricted vocabulary (in some meditative exercises, the vocabulary is limited to a single phoneme. Such mantras are intended to energize supplicants and release the latent divinity). The Pentecostal tradition of speaking in tongues is another religious precursor; the free-forming of sound is unconstricted by monolingual denotation, and is used by devotees as a technique to manifest God's voice. Such vocal techniques have also been used to elicit elevated states of consciousness or to harmonize the social body -- choral singing in modern Christianity is still used for the purpose of communing. Moreover, concrete and post-semiotic poetry have overt similarities to religious script -- *Carnival* often mimics a Biblical use of decoration, flourish, columns and palimpsests. McCaffery even suggests that a multi-layered textual style can efface and transcend "the past/present duality" (RG 132). Perhaps the greatest influence on concrete and post-semiotic poetry is the Hindu, Tantric and Buddhist tradition of yantras and mandalas. Designs of geometric complexity, mandalas and yantras are meditation aids intended to quiet the ego, purify the soul, focus energy, link the supplicant with the cosmos and eventually God. Non-representational and non-iconic in construction, the mandala or yantra is a spiritual labyrinth which the initiate enters, seeking communion with his or her divinity.<sup>23</sup>

Today, concrete and sound poets still operate as "technicians of the sacred" (to use Jerome Rothenberg's phrase), pursuing much the

same goals. At times, McCaffery likens sound poets to shamans; sound poetry becomes a ritualistic practice wherein group breathing is synchronized as a form of communal speech.<sup>24</sup> McCaffery's description of the shaman in "Drum Language and the Sky Text" is essentially a description of a non-verbal poet, whose drumming and abstract images connect the tribe to a "universal centre" (81) or the divine sky. Although the sound poet typically works "[i]n isolation with the single voice anchored to a unilinear vector," McCaffery recognizes that reading functions best "through group soundings. The poem as community. A living syntax in the bioenergetic interweavings of multiple voice and multiple bodies" ("Some Notes" 282). The Four Horsemen frequently use chant in order to bind audience and performer in a transcendent, pseudo-mystic bond. Collapsing subject-object distinctions, the sound poem becomes a spiritual tool to achieve "a communal product and a collective experience" ("Sound Poetry: A Survey" 17).

Moreover, McCaffery conceives of the second panel of *Carnival* as a functioning mandala which defends "a sacred centre" ("Introduction" C2). Its courting of "Silence" is comparable to a Zen exercise in transcendence of the ego (or to the Taoists' disavowal of declarative speech as a means of enlightenment). Significantly, McCaffery conceives of *Carnival* as a prelental exercise, a rite of restriction, reduction and chastisement of flesh. McCaffery's archeology of the word "carnival" makes the book's religious roots explicit: "from Med. L. *carnevale*, a putting away of the flesh and hence a prelental language game in which all traces of the subjective 'I' are excommunicated" ("Introduction" C2). McCaffery's passage

suggests an ego-suppression, a disabling of the brain's linguistic centres in order to facilitate a direct perception of the linguistic body. At other times *Carnival* operates in a decidedly cabalistic manner: various deity names can be deciphered from the randomized letters. Reading the concrete poem becomes equivalent to perceiving Godhead (where God's word is conceived, according to Jewish tradition, as all possible alphabetical permutations along all possible reading paths). In line with this religious impulse, the first panel of *Carnival* fills itself with references to *Genesis*, especially to Eden, Eve, Adam, Babel and the serpent, characterizing itself as a type of textual paradise or linguistically undifferentiated world. The poem even claims that "EVE WILL LEAD ME BACK TO / THE PULSE OF PURITY." No different than monks and Zen masters of old, sound, post-semiotic and concrete poets claim to perform a transcendence, returning readers to a state of ecstatic bliss, to a naive, child-like condition of perceptual innocence, to communion and, eventually, to God.

If this is accurate, concrete, post-semiotic and sound poetry clearly situate themselves within a theological framework -- as forms of prayer and revelation. Despite their avowed radical and revolutionary intent, a religious agenda exists in concrete poetry. In "A Section from *Carnival*," McCaffery admits a theological motivation:

i start with the creation myth -- God as the ultimate alphabetical source of A/Adam the first man & first letter. Adams [sic] creation as an individual is simultaneous with his absorption into the matrix of the word (the visual-phonetic square) & his genetic fall parallels his graphic descent from the purity of the letter



as pure substance & pure volume thru the word & the  
semantic sense . . . (n.p.)

At this stage in McCaffery's development, the pre-linguistic graphic mark is deistic in nature. Concrete poetry becomes a devotional form of worship of the pure and present physical body of the letter. In contrast, the symbolic configurations of civilized "meaningful" speech are aberrations from the divine body. Ideas are babble. McCaffery's material poetry displays a familiar Christian aesthetic of redemption. To return to the body of the word is to return to the body of God.<sup>25</sup>

Clearly McCaffery has granted a level of presence to matter, treating it as an authentic origin or primeval truth that escapes the evils of linguistic function. Unfortunately, McCaffery's *faith* in linguistic matter is misplaced. Our awareness of "fundamentals" as matter is socially influenced and ideologically informed. Matter is neither natural, nor self-evident, nor universal. It has no *a priori* status. On the contrary, it is a semiotically constructed concept, affected by societal values, histories and language; matter is not transcendent but culturally specific. As Nietzsche argues, we never encounter matter except as the interpretation of matter. In this light, there is very little that is concrete in concrete poetry.

One of the ideologies that informs McCaffery's early aesthetic in this respect is a nineteenth century positivism that uncritically equates the physical and sensational with the real.<sup>26</sup> For McCaffery, the audible and visual qualities of language present a fundamental, unassailable base-line, the raw data of his research, and so concrete poetry often presents itself as a new realism. However, by granting "truth" and "reality" to textual or sonic matter, McCaffery unbalances

his poetics in a unique way. The unremitting empiricism of concrete and sound poetry recreates anew the transcendentalism of Platonic ideology -- matter rather than form becomes the determinative motivation. The assumed commonality of the empirically "real" text becomes the source of communion -- that which is common to all people. The concrete poem's substance becomes *mass*, a universal and uniting sacrament. By treating linguistic matter in the uncomplicated, immediate manner of an Enlightenment scientist, the concrete/sound poet merely moves God from heaven to earth, from the idea to the vehicle. In effect he *inverts* rather than *negates* the theological structure. Concrete, post-semiotic and sound poetry have forged matter into a universal constant, an earth God, a lingering deity, which needs to be questioned as thoroughly as any other form of presence. Like the concretists before him who placed their trust in the object in and of itself, in organic form, in structure, McCaffery trusts the material signifier as an absolute authority, a truth, a real (and so creates the very authority he sets out to dissolve). The task which awaits is literary geocide: the rethinking of concrete and sound poetry without the touchstone of an immutable and permanent material fundament.

### **The Politics of Non-Reference**

No less problematic is the "biological and social / programme" ("Lyric's Larynx," *NI* 181) McCaffery stakes out for his materialistic poetry. Beginning his career amid the counter-culture fervour of the 1960s, McCaffery justifies his materialist poetry through manifestos

and statements that employ the clichéd rhetoric of empowerment, humanization and liberation common at this time. And McCaffery never completely abandons this revolutionary persona.

In various ways, McCaffery construes sound poetry as “a practice of freedom” (“Sound Poetry: A Survey” 18). In particular, this freedom is achieved through an unrefined Freudian notion of libidinal release, in which the poet expresses the energy or physiological drives without the social constraints of grammar or meaning.<sup>27</sup> In 1969, McCaffery declares to his audience that pure sound “liberates the elemental regions & most primitive impulses of the human self” (“Blood” 275). In this way, McCaffery argues that “[s]ound poetry is much / more than simply returning / language to its / material base” (“Lyric’s Larynx,” *NI* 181). The emphasis on language’s body is achieved through a simultaneous emphasis on the human body as means of audio production (it is here that McCaffery’s sound poetry most clearly intersects with Chopin’s: both foreground the sound poem’s humanizing element). “[S]ound is the extension of human biology” (“Blood” 275), and through the sound poem, argues McCaffery, the body reasserts itself in articulation.

get down to the wormed roots of poetry: sound &  
rhythm & pulse -- region of interaction of the primitive &  
the animal which has been misinterpreted as both  
dadaism & surrealism.

you’re bound to affect an audience

rhythmic sound is not an artifact but a profound  
instance of the human self. it is our simple rhythmic  
identity:

our regular organic processes (heartbeat,  
pulse)

our semi-voluntary actions (respiration,  
propulsion)

our simple emotional signals (foot-tapping,  
hand-clapping)

it is the spirit of our thighs, it is the basis of  
every sexual act

rhythm = the basic life force

in liberating sound we are discovering these basic  
forces for ourself in organic expressionistic performance.  
("Blood" 275)

Just as Jackson Pollock claimed to *be nature* when he paints, McCaffery accesses the physical instincts and pulses that lie in excess of the social code, beyond the rules of pronunciation and speech. The power of the sound poem lies in the way language interfaces with flesh: words are translated into "[e]nergy up the spine. Through the CNS" ("Some Notes" 281), that is, through the central nervous system. If the concrete poem manifests itself in text *as text*, the sound poem realizes itself in the performer *as performance*. Because the enunciation cannot be separated from the announcer, sound poetry theoretically effaces the distinction between body and text. In the simplest and most memorable quotation, "POETRY BECOMES BLOOD" ("Blood" 275). By foregrounding the corporeality of the speaker, sound poetry further critiques the authorless, subjectless, structuralist models of language:

Saussurean linguistics posited

a system of language from which  
 the agency of  
 the subject was  
 excluded. The sound poem (or  
 a text-sound writing) re-inserts  
 the primary agency of the subject  
 as an instinctual  
 body-before-self. ("Lyric's Larynx," *NI* 181)

Through the vocalized poem, abstract linguistic space is reconfigured as personal biology. In the sound performance exist no universals, no regulations, only singular bodies, individual utterances: *parole* usurps *langue*; subject/object distinctions evaporate. Proprioceptive in praxis, sound poetry is related to Charles Olson's projective verse. When McCaffery says "breath is the purest sound" ("Blood" 275), he, like Olson, roots the sound poem in living processes. However, sound poetry differs from projective verse because it emanates from the whole body -- muscles, bones, and soft tissue -- and not just the voice or breath. Olson's championing of the voice aligns projective verse with grammar, linearity, speech and thought which sound poetry opposes. In contrast, sound poetry eliminates the textual aggregates of the voice -- the line, the word, the syllable -- in hopes of returning speech to a pre-linguistic, pre-communicative state, a child-like state where the speaker is able (theoretically) to directly express his or her libidinal energy.

Although post-semiotic poetry does not involve the poet in the direct and immediate manner of sound poetry, it too strives to put readers in contact with their biological origins. McCaffery suggests

that the post-semiotic poem presents raw spectral material before it has been codified, cornered and incorporated into a verbal code. It tries to depict the visual data of the eyes before the linguistic and phonetic centres of our brain process it; the pre-symbolic in this sense is literally the pre-cognitive. This is perhaps one meaning of the title *Transitions to the Beast*: upon reading this poetry, McCaffery suggests we shed our codes, drop our civilized habits of reading, and return to a more animalistic, primitive state of apprehension. The aesthetic intrigue of the piece arises from the tension between what the eye sees and what the brain can identify and understand. In this way, the poem attempts to “present the poets [sic] own perceptual system,” or more exactly, the preliminaries of perception.

Post-semiosis of this kind attempts to present the reading as a perceiving experience and vice-versa as Pound suggested. [The] poem is precisely that -- what the viewer sees the viewer reads; even more, the viewer “sees” the reading process itself; his/her reading is not simply “a kind of seeing” but *the* seeing. (RG 36)

The aesthetic precedents for this type of art are numerous: Impressionists, Cubists and Cézanne all depict psychological states of perception as well as external objects. In literature, Gertrude Stein uses words instead of images to explore the complex interaction of thought, memory, emotion, language and sensation. By abandoning all lexical and linear requirements, McCaffery adapts Stein’s technique to focus not on thought but on the experience of vision itself: reading as it is imprinted on the cornea. Such poetry emphasizes the way the brain constructs ambivalent perceptual

material into significant patterns. It liberates in the sense that each poem is supposedly free of personal or sociological prejudice and influence. It is “more rawly human”(TB back cover) in the sense that it reflects the neuro-optical system. Even the composition of *Transition to the Beast* is grounded in the spontaneous movements of the body. McCaffery describes its construction as “a return to the hand as the basis of composition” (back cover). He seems to have in mind here a kind of automatic writing where the hand doodles without direction from the brain, separating the scriptive flow from any symbolic-phonetic training. Such “manual construction” once again constitutes “a part step in bringing poetry back to the body where it truly belongs” (back cover), and allows writing to follow a more reflexive and biologically expressive trajectory.<sup>28</sup>

However, a poetic return to the body is as problematic as McCaffery’s return to the material signifier; once again the poet believes he has recovered a lost origin, presence, authenticity and wholeness. McCaffery believes he can recuperate a child-like state of innocence and immediacy via a return to flesh, libido, blood, direct perception and animality. However, neither the body, nor the blood, nor the child, nor the beast exists in the pure and primeval state that McCaffery imagines. Quite simply, his privileging of these states is biased, uninformed and nostalgic. Animals have complex language systems, and to perceive them as presymbolic is merely to anthropomorphize them. Similarly, perception can never be direct or pure, as McCaffery implies. This stage of McCaffery’s writing is clearly motivated by what he later calls “the Rousseauist dream of immediate-intuitive communication . . . a present, self-authenticating

instant" ("Nothing Forgotten," *NI* 111-12). In his essay "Panoptical Artifice," Charles Bernstein rightly characterizes McCaffery's rhetoric of the presymbolic as "the last outpost of Romantic ideology in poststructuralist doxa" (11). Bernstein might have added that the emphasis on blood has a certain fascist purity to it.

McCaffery's rationale for sound poetry is further suspect because the liberation of the libido is accepted unquestioningly as a positive event. In reality, the total release and absolute freedom McCaffery advocates are not necessarily beneficial. On this point, George Hartley critiques McCaffery's aesthetics, via the Frankfurt School, by pointing to fascism as an example of "libidinal flow [that] does not always produce desirable results" (70). Hartley could have gone much further. Rape, aggression, rage, riots, incest, hysteria, sexual harassment, murder: liberty and libido have many destructive and terrifying faces. Although Hartley does not deny the possible therapeutic advantages of sound poetry, he is perhaps right to chastise McCaffery's uncritical release of libido as an aesthetic which leans towards anarchy.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, the very idea of sound poetry as emancipatory rests on somewhat shaky ground. In McCaffery's poetics, the premise of libidinal release is predicated on the repressive character of conventional language, its restriction of libido and freedom. But how accurate is this? McCaffery feels that he liberates desire by delimiting reference, but Lacan argues that desire itself is a product of reference. That is, we become desiring beings through a symbolic recognition of something outside ourselves which we lack. For Lacan, desire begins with -- and not before -- language acquisition.



Moreover, grammar and reference may restrict ambiguity and polyvalency, but they do not necessarily restrict the user's freedom or desire, even in the conventional, non-Lacanian sense. Quite the contrary: logical, ordered, hierarchical language may actually increase our ability to achieve overall gratification by enhancing our ability to communicate, cooperate, analyze, exchange, identify, understand, participate, predict and control. McCaffery's theories skirt the fact that conventional language is an effective and productive tool that helps us articulate and reach our goals. If it is repressive, referential language is like Freud's reality principle, which momentarily represses desire in order to effect a long term satisfaction. As an extension of the reality principle, referential language actually serves rather than inhibits our desires. If this is true, if reference is only strategically and not absolutely repressive, then the entire "liberating" character of material poetry is questionable. In his stringent aesthetic, McCaffery refuses to recognize the simple advantages that accompany speech, communication and story, viewing them automatically as complicit with alienation and capitalism. Clearly, this broad rejection of conventional language is an overstated position that glosses not only the social advantages of reference, but its possibilities for resistance and critique.

If McCaffery's early, pseudo-Freudian configurations are problematic, what about his later Marxist rationale? What about the claim that his poetry decreases semantic alienation and consumption by rehumanizing and empowering readers? In many ways McCaffery's concrete poetry *does* encourage readerly participation.

In *Carnival*, for example, readers are required to become creators of the poem's content. With the abandonment of the line and paragraph as organizing principles of the page, the reading sequence becomes increasingly arbitrary and subjective. Accordingly McCaffery invites the reader to "move freely, as language itself moves, along one and more of the countless reading paths available" ("Introduction" C2). Without a clear syntax, the reader is forced to construct the meaning that is apparently absent from the poem. How, for example, to read linguistically reduced scraps like "ple" (C2)? *apple?* *stipple?* *plebeian?* *pleasant?* The reader must select from a plenitude of meanings. Faced with lacunae rather than messages, faced with uncommunicative *physis*, readers are forced to adopt a generative (rather than a consumptive) posture towards the text, becoming participants in the assignment of meaning. With no clear beginnings or endings, words and lines arise only as their terminal points and pathways are individually assigned. Narrative, even letter sequence, is a choice. The lack of grammar, context and denotative borders forces the reader to be the producer of significant orders. If the artist must treat language as a medium to be laboured over and arranged, so too must *Carnival's* readers. Gone is the ease of reception that marks the commodified work. Instead, the reader is faced with an enigmatic and silent wall of type. One cannot speed-read *Carnival*: it must be returned to, repeatedly encountered -- a crammer's nightmare.<sup>30</sup>

It is tempting to accept McCaffery's Marxist rationale, with its focus on production and humanization. However, McCaffery's socialist rhetoric here is no more capable of avoiding contradictions

and metaphysical assumptions than its Freudian counterpart. For example, at the heart of McCaffery's poetics lies an unanalyzed concept of personal freedom that suggests the reader can construct the text in any manner s/he desires. Yet, readers are never free in this absolute sense. Although we may exert conscious choice in reading McCaffery's poems, our decisions are highly influenced by previous experience, biases, ideology and programming, much of which may be subconscious. Choice is always determined by personal and social history. When McCaffery celebrates the reader's freedom of interpretation, he is blindly championing the reader's ego as a sovereign and independent force, without considering the ways in which the ego is itself socially mediated. Indeed, McCaffery's poetics seem to rely on an eighteenth-century fiction of the individual's pure liberty. To use another eighteenth-century trope, McCaffery's ideal reader is something of a blank slate that acts out of an ethereal sense of enlightened self-interest.

In *Textual Politics and the Language Poets*, George Hartley further criticizes McCaffery by suggesting that his poetry is not necessarily as unrestricted and unfettered as the poet presents it. While removing the strictures of reference and grammar, McCaffery in turn imposes restrictive, repressive orders of his own. This is particularly true of his later works, such as the translations, "Lag," *ow's waif*, or *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins*, which demonstrate an almost obsessive formulaic writing procedure. The sense of liberty and freedom is further limited by the interdiction against reference and communication integral to his writing. As McCaffery himself admits in 1986, readers of his poetry are guided by "a series of prohibitions

(you can't consume, you can't reproduce an identical message, you can't subvert a representation). Hence the emancipatory character of the reading becomes a mandatory liberation" ("Diminished Reference," *NI* 28). A "mandatory liberation": readers cannot treat the text in a referential manner because the poem is structured precisely to prevent an easy read. Hence, readers cannot enjoy absolute freedom because they are prevented from employing familiar narrative, temporal or referential patterns. Reference and grammar become the forbidden fruits of McCaffery's poetry, the new limits to sign operation. McCaffery's poetry does not liberate readers: it merely substitutes one set of restraints for another, changing the manner in which readers are controlled, while maintaining control.

In addition, McCaffery's tendency to explain his poems inevitably impedes the interpretative freedom and semantic plurality that he wishes to foster. By persuading the reader to consider the work according to his perspective, McCaffery actually limits the diversity of possible interpretations. Contrary to his attempt to emphasize materiality and increase readerly participation, McCaffery's pedagogical style strives to indoctrinate the reader and enforce a passive consumption of the poet's ideas. His explanations are so numerous and forceful, they suggest that he fears his poetry may be misinterpreted; that is, he fears the full interpretive freedom he ostensibly seeks. Sometimes McCaffery's prose is so persuasively clear, his claims so transparent and absolute, that his explanations actually replace a reading of the poetry altogether. His dust-jackets act like keys or answers that provide the easy, commodified ideas

absent from the difficult, unstructured poems. They have the effect of eclipsing interaction with the poems.

In fact, reviewers tend to quote McCaffery's rationalizations much more frequently than they do the poetic text. Reviewers tend to accept his account of the poetry in lieu of an actual, personal reading. In "Virtuosity Its Own Reward," a review of *The Black Debt*, critic Kent Thompson admits that McCaffery's poetry is probably not going to be read, partly "because it is unreadable, and meant to be so" (121), but also because "almost everything you need to know about it is explained (sort of) on the back cover of the book" (120). In his review "Risking All on the Road to Rideau Hall," Colin Morton likewise admits not finishing *Theory of Sediment*, but that does not stop him from discussing the unread poem using the terms and ideas from McCaffery's own explanatory notes and dust-jacket blurbs. In "Scream or Speech," a review of *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins*, Eugene McNamara quotes from the "Note on the Method of Composition," but does not examine a single scrap of the poetry. I point to these three reviewers to suggest that McCaffery actively encourages surface readings through his explanations, summations and statements of methodology. These clarifications increase the facility of the text's consumption, and in so doing defeat McCaffery's attempt to undo capitalist reification and humanize the reading experience. Indeed, they threaten to foreclose the reading of a poem altogether, allowing easily absorbed, familiar answers to prevail.

On these grounds, McCaffery's empowerment of the reader is dubious. We should note as well that humanization betrays trust in a self-evident subject which can be humanized; thus, the human

subject persists as one more metaphysical conceit behind McCaffery's early aesthetic. Moreover, this humanization is fraught with contradictions. His poetry promises an elevation of the self, but simultaneously strives to destabilize the intellectual mind. This is the sense in which *Carnival: the second panel* is typified by "the absence of a subject" (quoted in Nichol, "Checklist" 72) and strives to eradicate "all traces of the subjective 'I'" ("Introduction" C2). In the sound performance, McCaffery contends "there is no poet FORTHEPOETISATONEWITHHISSOUNDS" ("Blood" 275). As the title of a 1977 article suggests, his strategy of "counter-communication" is complicit with "The Death of the Subject." At this point, we reach a paradox in McCaffery's logic: on the one hand, he writes out of a need to humanize and energize his audience; on the other hand, he proscribes the traditional forms of subject-oriented writing which help legitimate selfhood. Encountering his works, we return to reading with a revitalized sense of importance, but we lose the very structures and boundaries which give us a sense of identity. The increase in readerly participation is accompanied by an intense and sustained depersonalization of the readerly self. Growing increasingly aware of the paradoxes of sound poetry, McCaffery summarizes his contradictory positions: "*La poeme [sic] c'est moi. And yet the absolute annihilation of the subject*" ("Some Notes" 282).

As McCaffery becomes more theoretically informed by Lacan, Levinas, Derrida, Kristeva, Deleuze and Guattari, his conception of the human self becomes more explicitly postmodern. In place of the stable subject, McCaffery begins to emphasize that subjectivity is a textual construct, prone to perpetual displacement, diffusion and

dislocation. In this more sophisticated stage, McCaffery considers the human subject as an amalgam of social codes, a sub-routine of language itself, a program of signifying practices which constitute being human. Ironically, McCaffery still persists in his rhetoric of humanization. This presents another serious contradiction. While the reader may be foregrounded in the construction of a text's meaning, McCaffery's poetry effects a parallel and debilitating implosion of subjectivity itself. While emphasizing the human benefits of his poetry, McCaffery concurrently stresses that each reader is also absent and artificial. While envisioning a field of more human interactions, McCaffery also insists that "we must avoid a humanization of the reader who is not to be anthropologized as a 'person' but seen structurally as a theoretical location in textual activity" ("Diminished Reference," *NI* 27). Or, as he says in "Lag," "the subject belongs to the sentence that utters it" (67). This incompatibility is a problem. Can we become more human while we subordinate identities to language? Is an empowerment of the reader possible without a stable self to energize? No, I would argue, it is not. What we witness in McCaffery's writings at this stage is the collision of incompatible rhetorics and projects: enlightened humanism and deconstruction; poetic Romanticism and structuralist objectivity; modernist nostalgia for progress or the self-evident subject and the postmodern acceptance that these are impossible.

This collision is eventually resolved when McCaffery abandons his quest for a pure presence and accepts a fairly standard postmodern position that direct experience is an impossibility.

It was in 1978 also that I started to reconsider my own sound poetry from the vantage of a paradigm other than immediate presence. I became convinced that my several years in sound poetry performance (solo and collective) linked genealogically back . . . to Romantic ideology. I abandoned the quest for unmediated (because prelinguistic) communication in favour of outlay and expenditure derived from economy. (“A Book Resembling Hair” 263)

Or as admitted in a Four Horsemen performance score:

We have, as yet, failed utterly to develop a materialist poetics, a poetics of the libidinal flow and signal, a poetics of the surplus value of the signifier. There can never be a truly sound poetry -- only the ritualized failure of art to reach its sixth dimension. (“Schedule For Another Piece: A Theory of Practice,” *The Prose Tattoo* 6)

Rather than reclaiming a lost presence or bemoaning absence, McCaffery begins to celebrate the loss of certainty, exploring the numerous ways in which identity, meaning and reality can be diffused, unsettled and scattered. Although he consistently foregrounds linguistic matter throughout the remainder of his career, matter becomes but one strategy among many for achieving this dissemination.<sup>31</sup> If McCaffery’s early concretist experiments are naive and filled with revolutionist clichés, they remain valuable today if only because they test the limits of expressive nihilism and discover that reference may be diminished, but never purged from language.



However, we must be cautious regarding McCaffery's rejection of his early manifestos and modernist aesthetics. Although he distances himself from suspect notions of presence, his love of immediacy persists, in disguised form, in his Marxist phase. Indeed, McCaffery's renunciation of his early motives implies the poet is still seeking a right answer, a place beyond contradiction and paradox, shielded from the absurdity inherent to language. The concrete poet's desire for linguistic materiality persists, for example, in his analysis of the material conditions of signification. The two projects naively trust directness and empiricism. The sound poet's quest for a linguistic presence is not significantly different from the socialist's demand for decreased alienation. For that matter, how different is the sound poet's liberation of libido from the liberation of the reader's productivity? The two projects focus not only on humanization of the audience, but on the need for liberation and emancipation. In this way, the reader's freedom appears as an unquestioned value in both stages: both champion an unexamined and uncritical concept of the reader's liberty. Furthermore, the notion of a perfectible, utopian society looms behind McCaffery's Marxist analysis, suggesting that it too has metaphysical, even transcendent, impulses. In his recountings of his early excess, McCaffery shifts from a Freudian paradigm (the liberation of desire) to a Marxist one (the liberation of labour), but the commitment to liberty, freedom, individuality, and empowerment remains largely the same. Although the rhetorical vocabulary is different, McCaffery continues to pursue a modernist project grounded in eighteenth-century fictions.

## Chapter Two

### From Use to Ruse: Technological Catachresis

All art is quite useless.

Oscar Wilde ("Preface," *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 236)

In the "Question Concerning Technology," Martin Heidegger questions the dominant role that technology assumes in our society, cautioning that, despite its instrumental value, technology poses a serious danger. By arranging the natural world according to purpose alone, by precluding any order other than function, technology threatens to reduce all existence to useful purposes. In this constraint of nature or *poiesis* (as Heidegger also calls it), technology threatens to impose an end or destination on humanity itself. To resist our utilitarian destiny, Heidegger urges that we reread technology and transgress its functional mandate:

essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology, and, on the other hand, fundamentally different from it.

Such a realm is art. (340)

By reading technology artistically, by subsuming *techne* under *poiesis*, Heidegger suggests we return the world to its natural or poetic state: full of irrelevancies, multiplicities, pluralities, contradictions and decadence. By perceiving values other than

utilitarianism, Heidegger offers “hope”<sup>32</sup> that humanity’s end may be avoided, and that we may live in excess of our usefulness.

In “For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,” Jean Baudrillard similarly argues that Western society regards utility as an absolute, proper, natural and irreplaceable value. According to Baudrillard, utility is valued to the extent that function eclipses all other features of the object and “registers itself as a kind of *moral law* at the heart of the object” (67). Precluding any sort of play, utility restricts the object into a singular capacity and “represents an objective, final relation of intrinsic purpose (*destination propre*)” (64). Like Heidegger, Baudrillard laments that “the restricted finality of utility imposes itself on people as surely as on the world of objects.” Rather than accept “[t]his utilitarian imperative” (69), Baudrillard critiques use value as a type of naturalized, arrested form of exchange value, and argues that utility is not an intrinsic or inherent condition of any object, but rather “a social relation” (66) that appears natural only by necessity. In this way, “the system of use value is produced by the system of exchange value as its own ideology . . . it is only the *satellite* and *alibi* of exchange value” (72).

In many ways, McCaffery’s writings are a poetic analog to both Baudrillard’s and Heidegger’s, for all three are engaged in displacing utility as the controlling discourse of our times. If use value substitutes “[a] simple finality . . . for a multiplicity of meanings” (Baudrillard, “PE” 67), McCaffery tries to reinstall a symbolic and productive ambivalence in language, forcing the useful object into the slippery world of exchange. Consistently emphasizing values other than utility, McCaffery’s poetry performs a technological

catachresis, and becomes part of the larger Heideggerean attempt to return *techne* to its historical condition as an aspect of *poiesis*. In 1977, McCaffery described his work as an attempt “[t]o step out of use . . . to see what a hammer is when not in function” (“Death” 61). In the Toronto Research Group’s founding “Manifesto,” the third tenet declares “research can function to discover new uses for potentially outdated forms & techniques” (*RG* 23): in other words, research is conceived as deliberate perversion. In “The F-Claim to Shape in a ”Patalogomena Towards A Zero Reading (For Ihab Hassan)” (1980), McCaffery comically describes his writing project as a transgression of functionality:

May I describe this geo-metrico-epistemo-logical  
realignment as an instance of FUTILITY, which, expressed  
as F + UTILITY becomes susceptible to the definition of  
that which is ONE LETTER PAST UTIÆLITY [sic]? . . . As F +  
UTILITY, however, it is a slightly more complex algorithm  
and decipherable as an incrementality to function by the  
addition of F to a usage. (12)

Over the top in its technical vocabulary, yet resistant to application, this passage parodically suggests McCaffery’s agenda is one of serious and applied frivolity. Harkening back to Kant’s “purposiveness without purpose,” McCaffery’s “unproductive productivity” (“*Peras*” 54) employs systems, apparatus and machinery in unintentional ways, enlarging and exceeding their utilitarian capacity. In the poet’s own terminology, McCaffery resists capitalism by encouraging a general economic play within the restricted economies of use and function. Creating “[a]nti-functions as explanatory seepages” (*TS* 35),

McCaffery puts the fun into function, and turns use into ruse, and even abuse.

This kind of technological misuse is evident in McCaffery's early phase, in the way that sound, post-semiotic and concrete poetry position themselves as ruptures to communication. Moreover, McCaffery conceives of these early poems as technological interrogations in a literal sense. *Carnival* is "an exploration of technological tension" because it attempts to "extend the capabilities of textual-textural mechanics: typewriter, xerox, electrostat, tape etc." (RG 141). McCaffery elides the practices of the first and second *Carnival* somewhat in this statement. To clarify: the first panel arises as an engagement and experimentation with the typewriter, exploring and testing the alternate possibilities of the type-set line, an investigation into the typewriter's non-linear potentiality. If "[t]he typewriter fixes page size to carriage capacity," then in the first *Carnival* "the carriage capacity limitations are actively confronted" (RG 65). In the second *Carnival* McCaffery interrogates more current technologies: "Panel two places the typed mode in agonistic relation with other forms of scription: xerography, xerography within xerography (i.e. metaxerography and disintegrative seriality), electrostasis, rubber-stamp, tissue texts, hand-lettering and stencil" ("Introduction" C2). In these poems, the mechanics of mimetics are employed "not in the conventional, neutral usage as simply 'duplicators'" (RG 141), but as producers of textures, icons, and visual motifs.

In 1978, when McCaffery wryly defines sound poetry as "a new way to blow out candles" ("Sound Poetry," LB 89), he

characterizes it as an excessive, wasteful engagement of the voice “outside the utilitarian / production of meaning” (“Lyric’s Larynx,” *NI* 182). On a mechanical level, McCaffery’s sound poetry is often generated through a deliberate misuse of the technology designed to amplify, record and transmit the human voice. When not used to simply transcribe, McCaffery suggests that the tape recorder allows the poet to transcend not only the limits of speech and voice, but the body as well. In this fashion, “[t]he body is no longer the ultimate parameter, and voice becomes a point of departure rather than the point of arrival” (“Sound Poetry,” *LB* 90). Rather than accede to the limitations of the individual speaker, poets can now extend their vocal range through tape, and liberate composition from “the athletic sequentiality of the human body” (90). This is the sense in which McCaffery claims that the tape recorder “allows speech -- for the first time in its history -- a separation from voice” (91). By manipulating tape speed, the recorder can also provide “a more detailed appreciation of the human vocal range” and language in general (90). Editing, cutting and splicing further create the possibility of arranging sound “outside of real time performance” (90).

Technological time can be superadded to authentic body time to achieve either an accelerated or decelerated experience of voice time. Both time and space are harnessed to become less the controlling and more the manipulable factors of audiophony. There exists then through recourse to the tape recorder as an active

compositional tool, the possibility of 'overtaking' speech by the machine. (90)

Using the tape recorder in a compositional rather than mimetic capacity, McCaffery creates new sound-scapes beyond the limited range of the spoken word. As he effects a general deconstruction of the word, McCaffery abandons not only any claim to a "poetry of blood," but logocentrism.

Although McCaffery will misuse machines, cameras, faxes and video equipment to generate his poems and performances, the vast majority of his experiments interrogate some aspect of print technology or print culture. In this regard, McCaffery's poetry is enormously indebted to Marshall McLuhan, and his vision of pre-literate human societies organized by the spoken word. According to McLuhan, hearing is a holistic form of perception that can receive, process and respond to many disparate kinds of stimuli simultaneously. We have no problem discerning and enjoying the dozens of instruments in an orchestra, for example. In addition, hearing does not require a person to ignore the other senses; hearing permits a direct, synaesthetic involvement with one's environment. Moreover, speech is a diffuse, non-specific form of communication which can address and unite entire groups. Based upon this inclusive, auditory logic, oral societies tend to be highly integrated communities, which emphasize the family or tribe over the individual. The speaker's involvement with his or her language is synonymous with the strong sense of attachment felt towards the clan: for McLuhan, oral societies are comprehensive and participatory.

McLuhan argues that our society began to move out of this oral stage of social development with the adoption of a standard phonetic alphabet. The Roman alphabet, for example, imposes a symbolic paucity on language, reducing the variety, richness and subtlety of ideograms to a restricted set of formalized, abstract icons. This shift initiates a transformation into a print culture, organized upon the written rather than the spoken word. In contrast to speech, writing is dependent upon a visual rather than an auditory logic, in which vision predominates and even eclipses the other senses. "As an intensification and extension of the visual function, the phonetic alphabet diminishes the role of the other senses of sound and touch and taste in any literate culture" (*UM* 87). With the proliferation of repeatable type, print culture tends to foster a dissociation of sensibility, divorcing sight from sound, thus depriving objects of their full extent of integrated sensation. Hence, "[t]he phonetically written word sacrifices worlds of meaning and perception" (*UM* 86). With the flourishing use of script, our perception of the world becomes increasingly fragmented, abstract and partial. Where sound is a field of concurrent, overlapping events, print tends to encourage a linearization of experience, where each event is connected to the next in a logical, cause-and-effect sequence. Because it privileges this abstract, arbitrary chain of connections over a gestalt, because reading is an isolated and private activity, the written word tends to decrease one's emotional bond to family or clan, and accelerate one's alienation, detachment, and specialization. Where oral societies tend to harmonize their populations into tribes, print culture tends to segregate its population into individual citizens. Although print's



ability to isolate, sequence and repeat has been responsible for much of our culture's success, McLuhan warns that the ensuing alienation, fragmentation and mechanization are reaching dangerous levels.

Drawing from McLuhan's reading of history, McCaffery begins a poetic critique of print culture. As part of the Toronto Research Group's work through the mid-seventies to early eighties, McCaffery analyzes the book as an example of a reproductive technology which has become naturalized to such an extent that it is no longer recognized as a sophisticated, mechanical instrument. Echoing McLuhan, McCaffery and Nichol argue that the book is a highly advanced machine because it arranges, orders, records and expedites data in a schematic way. "By machine we mean the book's capacity and method for storing information by arresting, in the relatively immutable form of the printed word, the flow of speech conveying that information" (RG 60). According to Nichol and McCaffery, the book has been configured as a method for preserving speech, and as such, the design of the book has been heavily influenced by an incipient logocentrism. Textual layout has been tailored to reflect the voice's putative temporal and sequential nature. In its full form, the book is defined by a triple linearity: "the book organizes content along three modules: the lateral flow of the line, the vertical or columnar build-up of the lines on the page and thirdly a linear movement organized through depth (the sequential arrangement of pages upon pages)" (60). Type is laid out across, down and through the page. For McCaffery and Nichol, prose is the typographic medium analogous to the voice, and the book's preferred means of expression. Like speech, prose is a sequential organization along a temporal

continuum; conventional reading is a kind of seance which summons a disembodied voice, and “reconstitutes the duration of a ‘listening’” (62).

Like McLuhan, McCaffery and Nichol perceive “[i]n the mechanics of page . . . a phenomenal and chronological constraint: enforced consecutivity, a mandate for sequentiality, linear compaction and unilinear direction” (*RG* 165). Like McLuhan, they perceive the orthodox book as a reductive form which prevents “an adequate representation of extralinguistic reality” (*RG* 100). Print takes the ambivalent flux of subjective experience and makes it comprehensible by ordering it through the mechanisms of syntax, orthography, chapter division, and narrative. Print transforms the chaos of raw perception into a clear cause-and-effect sequence. However, by ordering the chaos of compounded existence, print may actually misrepresent, reduce, fragment and deform it. Because consciousness is not necessarily linear or sequential, McCaffery and Nichol point out that “the enforced consecutivity of the bound book format [is] a falsifying element in the psychological presentation of character” (86). Conventional fiction tends to present subjects in a logical, progressive, determinate way, which is incongruous with the simultaneity and multiplicity of lived subjective experience. If narrative and syntax demand clear subjects and actions, then these will artificially separate the continuous overlay between present perception and past memory, conscious and unconscious flux. By continually conforming consciousness to fit the book’s concatenation, argues McCaffery, we needlessly precondition and predispose ourselves to its logocentric, linear word-world order; as McCaffery

suggests, “grammar will / organize your life on / a lateral axis” (“NARRATIVE” 14). In his untitled contribution to *The Order of Things*, McCaffery further complains that digitalization erases “intuiTIVE proceduRes” and the “parADiGM of seriality” spells “thE demisE/ [of] all refleCTive thiNKIng” (25). And what is worse, McCaffery and Nichol suggest that the linearity of conventional prose fosters the illusion that humankind is omnipotent and omniscient, absolutely in control of its environment.

While echoing McLuhan’s analysis of print culture, the Toronto Research Group also constitutes an important nuancing, even correction of his thought. To begin, McCaffery and Nichol do not accept McLuhan’s valorization of speech as a medium which precedes writing, offering a direct, polyvalent involvement with the world. According to the Toronto Research Group, speech not only fosters a kind of logocentrism that may debase the visual realm (and fragment experience in its own way), but also mandates the linearity of phonetics and print. The Toronto Research Group suggests that speech fails to achieve the simultaneous, holistic state desired by McLuhan. Moreover, the Toronto Research Group shows that the printed, phonetic word is not as limiting as McLuhan suggests. For the Toronto Research Group, only select modes of print foster this limitation -- in particular phonetic, grammatic and prosaic forms. Where McLuhan champions the electronic media as a technology which can reinvest humanity with the wholeness enjoyed in the speech-dominated tribal age, McCaffery and Nichol advocate a return and re-evaluation of the printed text in hopes of recuperating the wholeness enjoyed in the pictographic or hieroglyphic age.<sup>33</sup> Both

McLuhan and the Toronto Research Group hope to alleviate a Gutenbergian disassociation of sensibility. However, McLuhan attempts to do so by exploring new, electronic media, while McCaffery tries to do so by reinventing and restructuring print itself -- that is, by inventing new, non-linear forms for typography.

For McCaffery, the book is not menacing because of its sequential form per se; rather the book becomes a danger because it has been reified, institutionalized, standardized and naturalized to the point that it precludes other potential, disjunctive, general economic orders. In response to its cultural domination, McCaffery consistently attempts to legitimate other graphic possibilities which are not predicated upon linearity, and in this way allow other, suppressed, irrational values to emerge. By stepping out of line so to speak, McCaffery hopes to correct print culture's limiting, outmoded world view, and offer benefits parallel to those promised by McLuhan's electronic media: diminishing alienation by increasing the reader's participation with language; abating fragmentation by encouraging a fuller play between the senses, and so fostering a holistic awareness; creating a greater sense of community by emphasizing the materiality of the signifier as a universally accessible medium -- a global village in print. Although McCaffery still demonstrates a predilection for humanitarian rhetoric, his poetry seriously expands our lexicon of textual possibilities. By creating disjunctive, open fields, McCaffery hopes to create a textuality that better reflects "external reality as indeterminant, dissociative and illogical" (RG 101). In effect, McCaffery attempts to tailor the book for a quantum culture.

McCaffery's nostalgic fondness for the book is his strength and his burden. Where McLuhan willingly embraces the new electronic media, McCaffery remains almost obsessively committed to print (albeit in innovative form). Where McLuhan enthusiastically accepts the new technologies and their consciousness shift, McCaffery tries to make typography effect the same changes. McCaffery accurately comments that the Toronto Research Group "was, through its entire history, a non-computer phenomenon" (RG 16). Although media like the internet may be ideally suited to McCaffery's destructured, depersonalized, non-narrative, iconic writing, an electronic terminology is conspicuously absent from McCaffery's rationale. McCaffery affirms that the artist's duty is to always remain "contemporary" (RG 18), yet he refuses to accept the advent of a new, electronic culture. In this respect, McCaffery's logic is conservative and atavistic, evolutionary rather than revolutionary: he does not explore new possibilities so much as deconstruct old ones. When McCaffery and Nichol declare "EVERYTHING IN THE WORLD EXISTS TO END IN A BOOK" (RG 191), they seem almost aggressively traditional.<sup>34</sup> However, McCaffery is traditional in the same sense that Derrida is: a deconstructivist who preserves the past in order to overturn it.

### **Against the Book**

The book exploded in his hand.

Slowly at first

Steve McCaffery (*Evoba* 99)

I would like to turn to the specific ways in which McCaffery interrogates and alters the orthodoxies of print.<sup>35</sup>

McCaffery begins to revise the book through a physical and structural interrogation of its mandated form.<sup>36</sup> Regularly, he devises new formal configurations for texts. As an alternative to the bound book, for example, McCaffery often publishes texts on single sheets: cards, pamphlets, posters and broadsheets. Such an unbound form of publication offers distinct advantages over the book. The singular page does not disappear as a stepping stone in narrative progression. There is no distracting aggregate of pages, no propulsion beyond the leaf, no movement through the page to reach the story's conclusion. In contrast to a succession of leaves, an ungathered page appears in perceptual isolation. Consequently attention is drawn to the surface (even the edge) of the page as a discrete, independent element. The effect is one of magnified discernment, a meditative pause in which to consider the thing in hand.

If the book is an inveterate structure, its pages numerically sequenced and physically glued to its spine in one permanent succession, then unbound cards or sheets also foster an uncertainty, a multiplicity of orders. *Moon: a post-semiotic sequence* (1974), for instance, is a series which includes but three poems, each of which is printed on an individual, movable card (see fig. 9). The cards are not held, but housed in a folder, and the reader can freely shuffle them. Openness is literalized. The title word "sequence" becomes ironic because the pages are not sequentialized. A limited freeplay ensues:

the reader may arrange the pagination in a way that is not predictable. The productional values of concrete poetry are applied at large across the book; personal choice determines page order, and consequently content. Lost is the book's ability to stabilize information, to preserve a consistent narrative of experience. If the traditional book tries to impose a closure to the text, if the book may be physically closed, unbound texts such as *Moon: a post-semiotic sequence* remain open.

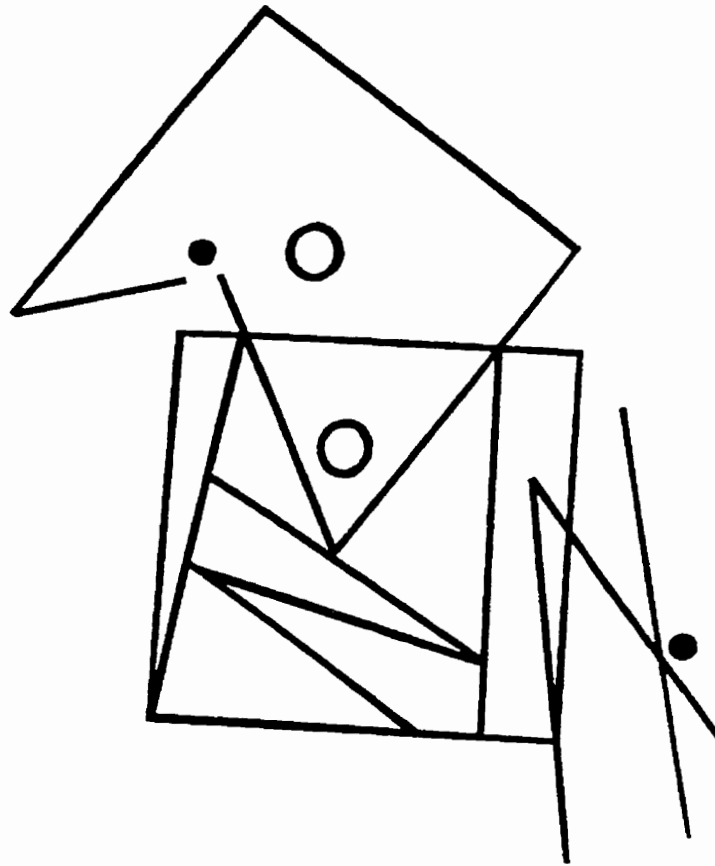


Fig. 9. A card from Steve McCaffery, *Moon: a post-semiotic sequence*.  
Toronto: Seripress, 1974. n.p..



Although marketed in a gathered and bound form, *Carnival* is another work which unhinges the book's determinate ordering of text. In a sacrificial gesture, *Carnival* sanctions the dismemberment of its own body. Readers are instructed to detach each page from the book's spine and in turn reassemble them into one all-encompassing panel: "perforated pages must be physically released, torn from sequence and viewed simultaneously in the larger composite whole" (RG 65). For those not brave enough to gut the work in this way, a post-card depicting the final text-image is included. *Carnival* thus works on a two-tiered optical system: the page is taken first as a visual unit unto itself, and secondly as a component in a coordinated assembly of pages. Because it encourages the destruction of its own form, "*Carnival* is an anti-book . . . The work demands that language be engaged non-sequentially rather than read in sequence" (RG 65). Interestingly, the larger picture can only be activated by the reader's violation and rending of the book structure. To read *Carnival* is thus to destroy the book, and create its substitute, the panel. Compared to a work like *Moon: a post-semiotic sequence*, *Carnival* does not sanction an infinite number of possible arrangements. It does not encourage the same narrative openness: McCaffery intends for the reader to assemble the pages into one specific pattern. However, once the panel is assembled the eye is free to roam the surface, and sequence the elements at will. It fosters a pictorial freedom.

In "A Book Resembling Hair" (c1988), McCaffery admits that he "was led into performance from profound dissatisfactions with the imposed linearity of the written" (263). He further defines performance precisely as "the condition of writing after the book"

(263). Emphasizing the oral values of community, immediacy, and full sensibility, many of McCaffery's performances are direct responses to the enforced linearity and alienation demanded by the book, narration and pagination. In his video performance "Paradise Improved" (1978), for example, "[a] copy of Milton's *Paradise Lost* is 'lost' in a wood (the pages are ripped out, torn and scattered and seven days later are 'regained' to constitute Milton's other great epic" (Robertson 166). By dismembering and remembering Milton's poem in this manner, McCaffery conducts what he calls literary "parricide" (quoted in Nichol, "Checklist" 76). The literary classic becomes the text-of-the-father which must be sacrificed in order to release the other stories embedded in the corpus, an idea which becomes more prominent in his translations.

In his performance pieces "V.O.T.O." (1977) and "The Pluralities" (1978), McCaffery expands the book's decreed linearity to absurd, even laughable proportions. In both performances, "text is typed on a continuous telex roll" (Robertson 159) for several hours, so that each document is dozens of feet long, and must be suspended across pulleys, passing in the latter case "over the studio floor, through a window, down a fire escape, across a lawn and into a lake" (159). Although the scroll promises a prolonged continuum of linear composition, the continuity of the scroll is disrupted in each case: deliberately in "V.O.T.O.," as text is cut into manageable sheets; accidentally in "The Pluralities," as the scroll descends into and disintegrates in the reflective waters of a lake. The implied message is that pure linearity is unobtainable.

## Against the Page

consider the page not as a space but as a  
death occurring in / the gap between /  
'writing' and 'wanting to say'

Steve McCaffery (*KNK* 24)

In “*Peras: an Extract from a Page*” (1985), McCaffery argues that “the page is constituted as that radical Other of language” (47). If the black marks of ink establish a sort of textual presence or statement, they are discernible as signs only as far as the page is a contrasting absence, a blank slate, an empty field, a vacancy which can be filled with writing. In order for writing to be legible, the page must be held by “an epistemic law which links [it] to neutrality” (50). In contrast to the graph, the page is “the support surface for text and literature” (*RG* 165). In McCaffery’s eye, “[a]s soon as a mark enters the paginal scene . . . then a displacement must occur . . . page can be no longer just a neutral earth, but must become displaced, erased and pushed into its self-articulation as betweenness” (“*Peras*” 47). Punning on the word “vaginal,” McCaffery suggests that the page must be suppressed in order to allow the mark to appear. This is the sense in which McCaffery claims “the page is the presupposition for the production of all that comes to torture it” (52); writing necessitates the erasure of the very materiality which enables inscription.

Disrupting the hegemony of the letter, McCaffery reverses this “primary repression” (49) by asserting the physicality of the page in

several ways: discussion of the etymology and character of the page; handwritten referential statements “This page” (48), “This is not a page” (52), and “This is still a page” (55) which draw attention to the papyrus screen; *mise-en-abîme* effects -- internalized frames or tympan, replete with encapsulated type, which miniaturize the effects of a page (see fig. 10 and fig. 11). By accenting the materiality of the sheet itself, McCaffery disrupts the purity of statement, and places the graph and page “in a constant state of parasitic interaction, each extracting a surplus value from the other, a polar madness of a life without a life saturated with words, existing in a condition of two parasites without a host” (61). This internal conflict between page and sign motivates McCaffery to label “*Peras*” schizophrenic, paranoid writing.

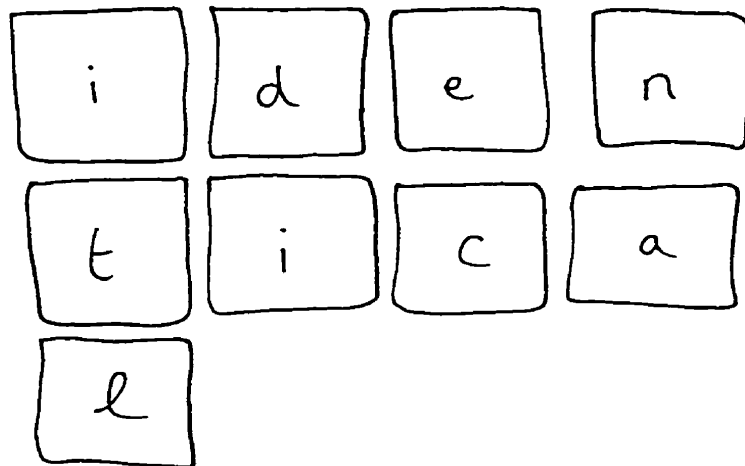


Fig. 10. A hand-drawn addition to Steve McCaffery, "Peras: an Extract from a Page." *Open Letter* 6.1 (Spring 1985): 60.

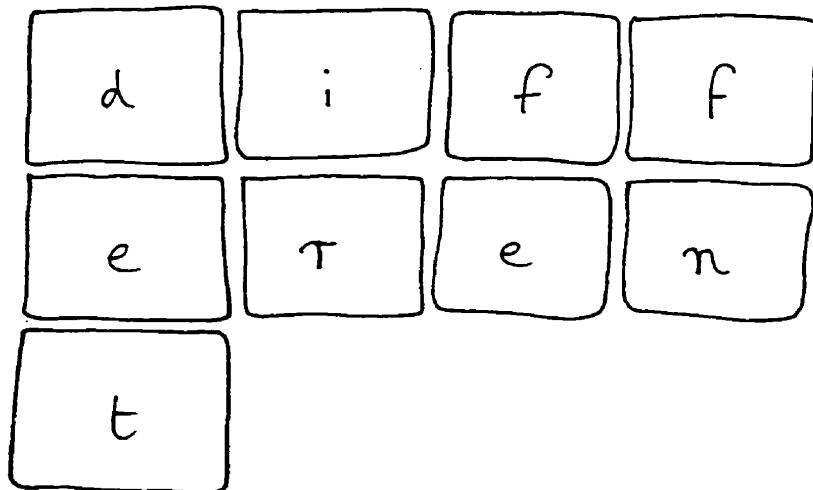


Fig. 11. A hand-drawn addition to Steve McCaffery, "Peras: an Extract from a Page." *Open Letter* 6.1 (Spring 1985): 61.

Similarly, *Ground Plans For A Speaking City* (1969) breaks the imposed uniformity of the page, and offers instead a variety of alternative measurements and magnitudes upon which to write, although most are, surprisingly, square or rectangular. In the edition I studied, one long thin “page” connects to the spine diagonally, so that it actually wraps around another page, thus making a linear reading (or turning of the pages) impossible; others fill only small corners of the book space, or likewise enclose smaller sheets. The overall effect of the composition is of an irregular, idiosyncratic, and non-continuous pagination. By disrupting the homogeneity of the standard book binding, by individuating the proportions, content, and substance of each sheet, *Ground Plans For A Speaking City* forces its readers to question the conventional “page and surface as binding powers” (quoted in Nichol, “Checklist” 81). As in *Carnival*, the page is no longer a natural vector of linguistic meaning, but a socially defined space which artificially restricts and determines content. As in “*Peras*,” the page here refuses to cooperate as a blank slate which carries a content; rather, each page is foregrounded as a material entity and an already written field. By varying the surface space of writing, McCaffery implies that textual margins are never natural nor neutral, but rather the products of predetermined choices and limits to writing. McCaffery further suggests that illusionary blank pages act as a kind of invisible, ideological limit to texts.

In the consistently provocative *Panopticon* (1984), the page is dissected into distinct horizontal bands, each of which contains a separate discourse or commentary. One band is at times coloured grey to visually differentiate it from the others. In one section of

*Panopticon*, the top band of the page is further delineated into individual columns, identified as “channels” or “screens” (see fig. 12). It is important to note that this partitioning of page is not regular: it happens sporadically, temporarily, with no discernible pattern. Recalling Derrida’s *Glas*, this division of the textual surface into bands or columns is designed to “bring into play the dialogic possibilities and properties of the page” (RG 165). In effect, McCaffery creates a typographic equivalent of cubism; the single perspective of the renaissance canvas or conventional narration is abandoned in favour of a multiplicity of perspectives from different times and spaces. Recalling medieval texts laden with palimpsests, McCaffery adapts print so that it can achieve the layered, polyvalent sensation of sound: many “voices” are perceived simultaneously. Here then is another manner in which McCaffery creates a more inclusive poetry: if conventional prose presents a single voice which homogenizes its listening audience, *Panopticon* presents a chorus of unharmonized information -- a quadraphonic stereo in print.

*down. memories of the words placed wrong. which words. any words. the words about the photographer.*

*the description of a blue sky. a paragraph about photography in a clear light.*

*the mention of a book.*

*hoping you look. hoping you see again. hoping you describe.*

*the mention of a lens. the lens you focus on a woman. which woman. the woman in the photograph. which photograph. the one mentioned in the paragraph.*

LEFT CHANNEL:

*a photographer in a paragraph. the man in the photograph who looks at you. the man with a camera who the other woman describes.*

*something about description. something about seeing with a gun. which*

THIRD SCREEN:

*the man you see through a window in a room. the man with a pen in his hand that the woman sees.*

*the woman who simply looks. the woman who doesn't write. something about reading. something*

---

*stories". Deleted. "Never again." Deleted. Description. The body as waves. Death drives. e.g. "they were both killed in a car." The body as friend. Compare "having reached the face." Both channels: "I took a bath." Both screens: The same image, a different locale, a lady, the hero, the killer's lawyer.) Alternative take: Place i.e. "where did you take it" (a room in the movie, a small house in the book, the copy of the film in both the book*

Fig. 12. A page from Steve McCaffery, *Panopticon*. Toronto: Blewointment, 1984. n.p..



## Against the Chapter

A conCept of technoloGy thereFore is  
inCOmmenSurate tO its specifiC aPPLicatioNS.

Steve McCaffery (untitled piece, *The  
Order of Things* 25)

After the book itself, the chapter is the next largest unit of textual integrity. Its importance is revealed in its etymology: “from Latin, small Head, chapter, from *caput*, head” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*). A rubric, an organizing force, the chapter classifies, arranges and standardizes the text into distinct stages of development. Because of this imposed similarity, the relationship between the chapters remains cumulative: each style, stage or perspective reveals previously unknown facets, possibilities or information. In McCaffery’s Marxist terminology, the chapter is “a stage in capital accumulation within the political economy of the linguistic sign. [It] is the product of investment, its surplus value (meaning) being carried into some larger unit,” the book or the collected works (“Notebooks,” *LB* 160). Because of this agglomerative action, the chapter draws curiosity to the next unit of the series, and away from the actual text itself.

If *Carnival* dismembers the book’s body, *Panopticon* practices textual decapitation, or more precisely de-chapteration. Seven handwritten chapter titles in *Panopticon* refer to “plates” which never appear. Titles such as “plates 85-93” introduce not pictures but blanks or more text. Such floating titles are a textual beheading,

separating designatory epithet from designated body. The remaining divisions in *Panopticon* seem conventional: there is “Part I The Mark,” “Part II Summer Alibi,” and “Part III The Mind of Pauline Brain.” However, the order of these chapters is reversed: we begin with the finale, and end with the introduction. Here, the plot does not progress, but is continually telescoped into earlier units.

Even if they were numerically arranged, these chapter divisions would be ineffectual, for they fail to establish clear separations between distinct stages, perspectives or styles. Each chapter title appears elsewhere in *Panopticon* as a “real” object, incorporated into the narrative action. The descriptive language of the title imperceptibly merges with the dramatic action. “The Mind of Pauline Brain,” for example, appears not only as a chapter title, but as the title of a book read by a woman in the bath, as a script title, and eventually as a movie. In this fashion, each chapter division progresses by moving sideways into a nested form of textuality. To make matters more confusing, these designations do not remain stable. Each title refers to discordant objects. Even the title *Panopticon* appears as a book, movie and chapter. We read *Panopticon* not by advancing through a logical sequence, but by collapsing through layers of intertextuality. The plot never progresses because each chapter changes the parameters of action and demands that the entire narrative paradigm be reconsidered. Rather than identify distinct stages, these chapters implicate and complicate textual boundaries. To borrow again McCaffery’s Marxist rhetoric, the strategy in *Panopticon* is to create an “uninteresting” work; readers cannot accumulate meaning, and so cannot accrue

“interest” in further developments. Instead, we are forced to reassess the very faculties upon which we bank -- which makes for lucrative reading indeed.

### **Against the Sentence**

A sentence is an interval in which there is finally forward and back.

Gertrude Stein (“Sentences” 133)

The logical positivist Rudolph Carnap argued that philosophical confusion stems from a failure to properly follow the laws of logic, syntax and grammar. Elucidation of the world depends upon proper sentencing of a proposition. For Carnap, the sentence thus becomes the minimum unit of a meaningful utterance, a monad of singular meaning, and the building block of philosophy.<sup>37</sup>

To the chagrin of logical positivists everywhere, McCaffery attacks logic and linearity by perpetually complicating the sentence and grammar.<sup>38</sup> “Lag,” the first poem in *The Black Debt* (1989), complicates the rule of the sentence by presenting the reader with a single sentence that stretches over 110 pages (recalling Beckett’s long sentence in *The Unnamable*). More precisely, it confronts the reader with a prolonged sentence fragment. “Lag” has no terminus, no period; it ends with a comma, tapering off in exhaustion rather than completion. This unwieldy sentence problematizes the generation of meaning in several ways. First of all, the enormous force of phrasal contingency defies an easy assimilation. Second, the

absent period postpones the final processing of the sentence, keeping questions of ultimate meaning open. In this respect, Miriam Nichols describes “Lag” as a kind of utopic writing: it never lets you get beyond its horizon, and thus holds the reader literally in textual utopia, a semantic no place.<sup>39</sup> The text’s perpetual withholding of meaning provides an important sense of the title: meaning *lags* behind, never crystallizing into a proposition or theme.

As we grapple with the enormity of this sentence, we are forced to fragment the text into smaller, more manageable pieces: reading becomes a process of partition and meaning downshifts. In part, this fragmentation is already inscribed for us. McCaffery utilizes the comma (in place of the period) as the grapheme which marks individual units of composition and significance. As the back cover suggests, “**Lag** presents a series of statements whose phrasal nature is determined wholly by the comma.” The effect of this comma division is the fine-tuning of perception to a phrasal consideration of language. We are forced to focus on individual phrases as they appear apart from their syntactic setting. Sentence extension becomes yet another strategy to confront the reader with the materiality of language: as the text itself declares, “this line leads to an immanence” (53).

Although “cause is not an order in these pages” (109), the disjunctive, non-sequitur arrangement is not absolute, and “Lag” frequently functions in a conventional, progressive manner. At times, phrases have a clear sequential and accumulative relationship, as in the series “my belt, my ego, my mistake” (21) or “we rest, we void, we penetrate” (108). At other times the work advances by

association, creating small, but discernible motifs. Elsewhere, “Lag” seems to show a logical development, as in the movement from “what’s causing this” (103) to “what caused that” (105). Indeed, Meredith Quartermain sees as much conjunction as disjunction throughout “Lag”: “number sequences, name sequences, alliterative sequences, assonant sequences” (“Mirrored Interior” 131). It is as if McCaffery wishes to preserve just enough of the linear, grammatic and narrative structure of the sentence and book to make their dissolution recognizable. The opening line of “Lag” becomes oddly indicative of the work as a whole: this is indeed “SENTENCE NOT SENTENCE” (11), for it both satisfies and frustrates syntactic requirements. McCaffery seems to be following his own advice: “to deny the / line insist / on the line” (“NARRATIVE” 5).

The brilliant “An Effect of Cellophane” (the second half of *The Black Debt*) is also only one single line (slightly shorter than “Lag” at a mere 81 pages): it too lacks a period, and so achieves a similar syntactic limbo. The internal technique of that disruption, however, is different. Here, hypotactic ordering undergoes a further decomposition. Where “Lag” preserves the comma as the phrasal divider in sentence construction, and so collects a horde of intact phrases that is finally overwhelming, “An Effect of Cellophane” eschews the comma, and so removes the last punctum of discretion in the sentence. In “An Effect of Cellophane,” clauses and phrases are not immediately apparent; they are not distinguished *a priori* by punctuation. Subjects cannot be accurately separated from objects, from items in a list, from a noun in the next independent clause. A brief example will suffice to illustrate the text’s grammatic hubbub:

“speech a link to plummet plunge and plume the separation of the fan impossible to seize in unisons the retina a retinues perception of descriptive fragments of a message lost . . . ” (157). The reader experiences this “lost message” as an undifferentiated body of language, whose uniformity makes it “impossible to seize in unisons.” The result is a non-linear coherence: an associative swoon; a “plummet plunge and plume.” “An Effect of Cellophane” is a linguistic snarl (if he felt inclined to rhyme, McCaffery could have named it “Snag”). Because it is difficult to peremptorily distinguish phrasal components, it is impossible to hold them in a clear syntactic relationship. If the method of “Lag” is phrasal listing and accumulation, the method of “An Effect of Cellophane” is one of grammatic fusion and extension. Syntax persists, but is stretched to absurd lengths and inhuman complexity.

Although Carnap may perceive poetry as logically muddled, McCaffery may be attempting to adapt the sentence to a twentieth century understanding of existence. Saturated with syntactic ambivalence, “An Effect of Cellophane” does not offer a reality that can be empirically observed and validated; readers are not presented with unequivocal, linguistic subjects. The implication seems to be that reality is chaos and disorder. If this confusion is to be read at all, readers must intervene in the text, and arbitrarily assign provisional subjects and micro-statements (or as Lyotard might say “petits-récits”). As in quantum physics, it is the process of observation itself which constructs the observed phenomena: the text, like sub-atomic reality, is fundamentally plural and ambiguous. McCaffery explicitly describes *Theory of Sediment* (1991) as “a

sustained application of the uncertainty principle to the phenomenon of language, wherein the progress of language can only be 'understood' by making an arbitrary assumption that its motion is (can be) stopped" (*TS* back cover). By confronting the reader with this unavoidable indeterminacy, McCaffery creates his own poetic version of Heisenberg's theorem (see fig. 13).

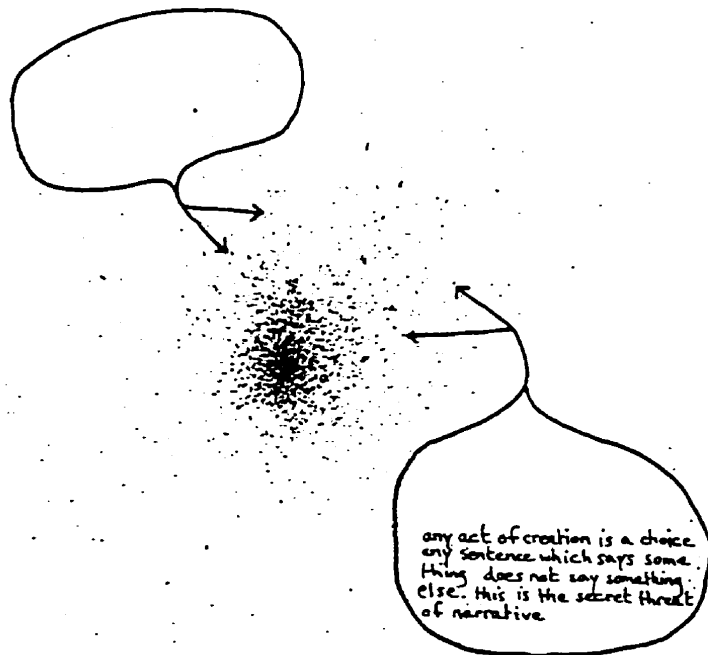


Fig. 13. A page from Steve McCaffery, "NARRATIVE: THE OBSOLETE ABSOLUTE." *Open Letter* 2.5 (Summer 1973): 8.



Even at the level of the phrase, “Lag” problematizes the seam of reading. McCaffery deliberately encrypts his poem with paragrammatic elements, messages encoded into, beside, above, beyond or otherwise contrary to the flow of the line. The most obvious and familiar of these paragrammatic devices is the palindrome, a sentence which reads the same both forward and backward. “Lag” disperses palindromes at intervals of about one per page (see appendix). The palindromes range from the blunt and brief “lepers repel”(20), to the enigmatic and convoluted “straw no too stupid a fad i put soot on warts”(114). The reader shifts his efforts from maintaining a narrative momentum to disassembling encrypted puzzles; the reading pattern changes from a line to a spiral. We are rewarded during our exploration with moments of extreme hilarity -- “may a moody baby doom a yam” (30-31) -- as well as beauty -- “are we not drawn onward drawn onward to new era” (83). Because these Janus-like expressions sustain sensible statements in two directions, they unsettle the autarchic nature of syntax by encouraging opposite and transgressive reading patterns, authorizing a bi-polar grammar.

In “Lag” McCaffery also explores a new device somewhere between a palindrome and an anagram, which I will call a paligram. The rules of a paligram require that an even number of letters be used, and each letter must appear twice, or in factors of two.<sup>40</sup> It is like an anagram merged with its own solution. Thus a very simple paligrammatic expression reads: “ocean canoe” (“Lag” 29); the letters of the word “ocean” have merely been rearranged to form canoe (although seldom is the rearrangement so neatly divided as here

between two words). More typically the paligrams are complex: “Washington crossing the Delaware a wet crew gain Hessian stronghold” (118). Yet the paligrams are typically sensible, if a bit gawky and alliterative: “omphalopsychites pipes holy stomach” (84) or “semaphore see arm hop” (33). At times, the paligrams are sententious and beautiful, to be savoured on the tongue, in the ear and mind: “athletics lithe acts” (53); “nostalgia lost again” (57); “burying the hatchet’s butchering thy hates” (80); “sin causes sauciness” (74); or my favourite “Saint Elmo’s fire is lit for seamen” (79). Further slowing down narrative propulsion, the paligram, like the palindrome, advocates reading texts from a non-syntactical perspective. In addition to the content expressed through linear progression and hierarchical arrangement, meaning arises from numerical distribution of letters; a statistics of the alphabet, the paligram could be understood as the translation of a mathematical formula into a phonetic system. “Lag” requires that its readers survey its letters in order to perceive the perfectly symmetric demographics of the phrase. Such paragrams are the clearest example of McCaffery’s general economy: the intentional statement is undermined by alternative reading paths that reveal unintentional messages.<sup>41</sup> Here every message contains its other or excess.

Given the rigid control McCaffery exerts over “Lag,” we need to reconsider his claim that the paragram “links to entropy and the general drift towards randomness” (quoted in Burnham, “Interview” 6). Indeed, we have to question the elevation of “chaos” as a salient feature of the general economy. Is the paligram, for example, truly random or unintentional? It carries a message in conventional,

syntactic fashion. Even the non-linear, counter-pattern of the paligram is rigidly controlled by a formula; letters are selected to fulfill a mathematical equation. Rather than tending towards entropy, the paligram is an example of over-coding, the intersection of two rival patterns: the doubling, not the negation, of order. If “chaos” is manifest, it lies in confusion of the intentional plane with the non-syntactic sequences or counter-linearities. In contrast, the palindrome is a poor example to demonstrate textual entropy. Rather than creating a semantic indeterminacy, it has a denotational double thrust. Because it is a perfect reflection of itself, because it reads identically in either direction, the palindrome ironically confirms intention, even as it suspends the mono-directional grammar necessary for its operation. The enduring wonder of the palindrome is the tension between its violated syntax and its persistent, harmonized meaning.

Just as the palindrome and paligram do not tend towards disorder or purposelessness, arguably neither does the general economy. The privileging of “entropy” obfuscates the actual business of the general economy, and links it to practices of fate, chance, hazard, and divination, constituting a new metaphysical moment in McCaffery. In this respect, we could see “chaos” as the evolved form of McCaffery’s earlier evocations of freedom or liberty. He is not yet free of his mantras and mandalas. As my analysis suggests, a general poetics is not balanced between chaos and order, but constitutes an agonistic relationship of competing orders, methods and patterns.

**Against the Word: "the pun as a password" (BD 40-41)**

Pun is semantics in stereo . . . in the rag trade  
pun is seam.

Steve McCaffery ("Notes on trope, text  
and perception" 43)

McCaffery employs the pun as a type of logical sabotage on the sanctity and singularity of the word. In addition to evoking laughter, the pun undermines the specificity of the word by allowing two (or more) different meanings to cohabitate in one signifier, thus splitting the singularity of statement. Jean Baudrillard suggests that the pun is a politically disruptive tool:

Only ambivalence (as a *rupture* of value, of another side or beyond of sign value, and as the *emergence* of the *symbolic*) sustains a challenge to the legibility, the false transparency of the sign; only ambivalence questions the evidence of the use value of the sign (rational decoding) and of its exchange value (the discourse of communication). *It brings the political economy of the sign to a standstill.* ("PE" 82)

In "Lag," McCaffery handles puns in a novel way: he resolves their oral ambiguity by delineating their competing meanings into distinct graphemes. The repeated statements "bier not beer" (62), "peaks not peeks" (101), and "Cyprus nor cypress" (111) point to the enormous prevalence of homophonic overlap in language. This technique is not limited to homonyms, or indeed to single words. Taking liberties

with pronunciation, phonetic division, and “the effect of spacing on a lower case vowel” (“Lag” 13), McCaffery applies this procedure to word groups and entire phrases. In a pseudo-serious tone, McCaffery clarifies for the reader “mass debate not masturbate” (84), “get up at eight o’clock not get a potato clock” (45), and “letters spray not let us pray” (81). Such clarification is at once whimsical and scientific, in the Foucauldian sense: it separates, categorizes and individualizes the meanings of the spoken word, differentiating them via the written mark. If the printed line is designed and conceived as a means of representing and recording speech, that purpose is here lost. The voice yields its uniform, originary, designatory power to the text which in turn determines the significance of the spoken: the vocal power of the pun is underwritten by the graph. Through this technique, the reader is encouraged to concentrate on, not beyond, the ultimate arbitrator of meaning in “Lag”: the tangible, visual mark. Here the importance of the opening phrase “SENTENCE NOT SENTENCE” becomes even more evident. By syntaxing words, we also penalize them, limit them to a single meaning, isolate and compartmentalize them. “Lag,” appropriately, is also a term for a convict. McCaffery thus continues the motif started in *Panopticon*, and again suggests that conventional language is a system of restraint.

Even as “Lag” deflates the pun, puns are utilized throughout the text. Groaners such as “it’s a butcher not Athens owns the aisles of grease” (23) and “still it seems to pit the olive against the salad” (78) depend upon an aural/textual confusion. Although the denotation of each phrase is singular, sound returns to disrupt singular meaning.

It is as if McCaffery purposely reintroduces the same semantic virus that he elsewhere purges: a counterpoint of pun/counterpun. He is sincere when he declares "the intention is always to thwart design" (28). By this strategy, McCaffery perhaps means to show that writing can never absolutely elucidate speech. It cannot be an ultimate arbitrator of meaning because writing has vagaries and ambiguities of its own. Writing can't prevail over speech because the systems are interrelated, and interruptive. A tug of war between the aural and graphic teams, "Lag" is the place "where parallel lines never meet" (101).

**Against the Word: "the literal from metaphor reversing this" (BD 22)**

Paraphrasing Plato's *Cratylus*, McCaffery argues that the "true word . . . is attainable through an etymologizing process by which a search through component parts leads to older, more authentic forms. Meaning, in other words, is proposed to be implicit in etymology" ("Martyrology," *NI* 70). Plato proposes a theological system, wherein a word's authenticity can be traced back to its original source, the gods. McCaffery could have also evoked Giambattista Vico, who concurs with Plato as far as reasserting the importance of tracing words' poetic genealogies. For Vico, however, poetry does not spring from the gods; on the contrary, the gods spring from poetry. In Vico's mind, the unknown is first articulated through the poetic faculty -- through fables, images, metaphors, similes, icons and myth. By making the unthinkable thinkable,

poetry is the primal language; reason, rationality and science all descend from it as second order systems. To contemplate origins and etymons is to investigate the fundamental and defining parameters of language, its arbitrary poetic nature. More recently, in his essay "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," Jacques Derrida echoes Vico's theories by showing that even objective and scientific languages eventually justify themselves through metaphor. Derrida's recurring task is to deconstruct the truth or reality claims of these systems by exposing their figural underpinnings.

Like these thinkers, McCaffery argues that "[m]etaphor, in fact, attacks the notion of absolute meaning" ("Writing," *NI* 205). Truth can never be adequately expressed through metaphor, because the trope attempts to express "an identity between dissimilar things" (205), thus ensuring a certain loss, errancy or excess. "Lag" enacts a Cratylean/Viconian/Derridean linguistic strategy, revealing the irrational, arbitrary, metaphorical, metaphysical origins of words. At times, this is done through a kind of comic etymology or semantic strip-mining. "Lag" archeologizes the word, uncovering its connotational, metaphoric, nominative and non-denotational bedrock. Mimicking Plato's "search through component parts" ("Martyrology," *NI* 70), McCaffery refines compound words into their primary elements. The phrase "the safe when it fails" ("Lag" 54) can be understood as a literalization of the word "fail-safe," a rendering of the word through simpler "more authentic forms" ("Martyrology," *NI* 70). However, unlike Plato (or even Heidegger), McCaffery does not allow the etymological or metaphorical meaning of a word to assume the status of an origin or truth -- indeed many of his etymologies are

patently false, paradoxical, or amusingly inconsistent. Consider the phrase “monarch is a butterfly, a king is not a crab” (29). Both the monarch butterfly and the king crab were named because they appear as sovereigns of their species. Yet, McCaffery validates one of these metaphorical roots, while invalidating the other: the intent, again, is to thwart design. The empirical meaning of the word returns to challenge its metaphoric usage. The end result is an incessant and enjoyable play which blurs the boundary between the figurative and literal, so the reader cannot easily discern between reality and figure of speech.

In “Lag,” McCaffery creates many new metaphors through a formulaic procedure of reading “X as Y.” Some of the most hilarious moments of this text arise when McCaffery erratically inserts words (regardless of suitability, similarity or propriety) into this protocol, producing unexpected and occasionally absurd metaphorical relationships: “effusion as twitch” (59), “syntax as an Asia blown through tubes” (104), “an owl as a vehicle of economized distraction” (29). If metaphor does lie at the heart of all words, as Vico and Derrida suggest, “Lag” can be seen as a lexical-generator, pumping out a revitalized vocabulary for the twenty-first century.

### **Against the Word: "the reinvention of words" (KNK 70)**

The dictionary is language’s internal regulator, a device which secures a word’s common exchange (or book) value: a lexical machine which standardizes, stabilizes and formats linguistic meaning. A reference work itself, it perpetuates referentiality by presenting



words as containers of ideas, as intellectual commodities for ready consumption. "Capitalism begins when you / open the Dictionary" ("Lyric's Larynx," *NI* 178) because the semantic Baedeker structures language precisely as an economy of equitable exchange.

McCaffery's poem "The Entries" (collected in *TS* 1991) opens with a quotation from Samuel Johnson's *Preface to The Dictionary*, which can be understood as the dictionary's manifesto or principle:

To explain, requires the use of terms less abstruse than that which is to be explained, and such terms cannot always be found; for as nothing can be proved but the supposing something intuitively known, and evident without proof, so nothing can be defined but by the use of words too plain to admit a definition. (6)

According to Johnson's logic, the task of definition must begin with a simple, natural, and intuitive vocabulary, a set of absolutely understood terms through which other unfamiliar terms may be explained and defined (just as Euclidean geometry constructs complex figures and theorems using the *a priori* "givens" of a point, plane and line). Indeed, the word "definition" derives from the Latin verb *definire*, which means to limit, bound and fence in; here the movement from the known to the unknown becomes Johnson's method of corralling, trapping and defining words.

In "The Entries," McCaffery seeks not to fence words in the parameters of the familiar, but rather to liberate words from preconceived pens. At first glance "The Entries" appears structured as a kind of lexicon or glossary, as an explanatory form, an instance of dictionary technology: a single term is printed on the left hand

margin, accompanied by a brief definition, description, and identification of the part of speech in question. Furthermore, McCaffery's "entries" simulate a dictionary's abbreviated, concise style, and even provide short etymologies, linguistic origins and/or examples of usage. However, it is inequivalence, rather than equivalence, that guides "The Entries." Johnson's observation that simpler words "cannot always be found" provides the starting point for McCaffery's playful definitions. Utilizing Johnson's notwithstanding clause, McCaffery begins to elucidate the unknown by citing terms more abstruse than the one he explains. For example, the explanation of the term "Kungfu" is a bewildering conglomerate of technical and downright obscure words. It reads:

(Scottish dialect); the clandestine  
left hand coincident to an  
ontological void;  
in Germ.  
lithographic genesis as limning;

commonly dehiscent as  
an etiology of woof;  
the origin  
of stain in new discoveries. (*TS* 147)

Through use of the rarefied words "ontological," "limning," and "etiology," the meaning of "Kungfu" is muddied instead of clarified. In McCaffery's lexicon, the unknown persists within the dictionary's attempt at clarity.

True to Johnson's advice, "The Entries" does employ words "too plain to admit a definition." The meanings of words like "Nozzle" (145), "Earthquake" (135), "Throat" (136), "Raccoon" (152), and "Skin" (142), are largely self-evident and referential -- instantly accessible or "intuitively known," at least to native speakers. However, in McCaffery's poem, these words are not used to explain others; on the contrary, these common words are themselves defined, and accordingly defamiliarized, rendered strange, farcical, exotic, and discordant. Reversing Johnson's stratagem entirely, McCaffery construes the known with the unknown. His explanation of "Grave," for example, reads:

(uncommon); a hypothetical wave or stutter  
at the speed of light;

ii. a stratum fixed for polynominals as  
Malkins in adipose;

diminutive of cheap  
usu. unsanitary restaurant in close proximity  
to civil war;

cf. portcullis, catapult and comb. (*TS* 133)

The effect of this entry is a radical undermining of the word "Grave": its circadian meaning is replaced by a perplexing one: the lucid becomes ludic, and McCaffery's definitions become sources of amusement and sheer pleasure. By pairing familiar, quotidian words with surreal inventions, McCaffery further sabotages the very natural language or intuitive knowledge Johnson deems necessary to

the business of definition. “The Entries” works as an anti-dictionary, providing not definitions, but in-finitions of words.

Ironically, common meanings and associations of words persist throughout “The Entries,” as if exchange value is an avatar that can never totally be banished. The first entry for “Raccoon” reads: “inedible; / a soft, gentle pat / propelled across the highway / by a motor . . .” (TS 152). Anyone who has driven to a cottage on a long holiday weekend can attest to the accuracy of this definition. Just enough conventional meaning remains in “The Entries” to surprise the reader who wishes to categorize this work.

### **Against Repetition**

In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan argues that “[r]epeatability is the core of the mechanical principle that has dominated our world, especially since the proliferation of Gutenberg technology. The message of the print and of typography is primarily that of repeatability” (147). Although the assembly line produces abundance, McLuhan observes that it also homogenizes and decreases difference. In comparison, McLuhan valorizes the manuscript or hand-written text as a form which precedes the homogenization and fragmentation of modern typography. Not only does a hand-written text resist the uniformity of typeface, but it encourages group formation; the relative scarcity of manuscript texts requires public readings or performances. Adapting McLuhan’s logic, McCaffery explores a form of textuality somewhere between the holograph and an infinitely repeatable typeset edition. Creating

what he terms a “manuscript edition,” McCaffery combines the process of individual creation with mechanical reproduction. In works such as *Ground Plans For A Speaking City* (1969), McCaffery individuates his texts. Each copy of this poem is a small 4 inch by 6 inch “special hand edition,” crafted in a way that every version is utterly unique; there are “not more than 150 copies” of the work in existence. Using the Xerox machine to create his pages, McCaffery copies a series of newspaper articles, and inserts them into his work upside-down, rightside-up, and at every degree in between. McCaffery then further individuates and disfigures the text through the familiar processes of rubber-stamping and typing (à la *Carnival*), but more importantly, he varies the size and shape of every sheet of paper. In this way, McCaffery begins to personalize the process of duplication itself. Each copy is a highly subjective rather than objective rendering of the model, and mass production becomes less alienating and more heterogeneous. Indeed, reproduction is no longer synonymous with duplication in McCaffery’s idiosyncratic methodology. Each reiteration of *Ground Plans For A Speaking City* is unique in its own manner, composition, time and space; even the number of pages per issue varies. By producing limited editions of personalized texts, McCaffery refutes Walter Benjamin’s claim that mechanical reproduction necessarily detracts from the aura or singularity of the work of art.<sup>42</sup> On the contrary, McCaffery is able to reproduce his work in a manner which preserves each text’s essential difference (just as a lithograph is a piece of art simultaneously unique and a copy).

A similar motivation exists behind McCaffery's other Xerox compositions, such as *Edge* (1975). A collaboration with Steven R. Smith, this work was produced through a process of transformation via the Xerox copier; from the manuscript was first made "a copy of the original, then a copy of the copy, then a copy of the copy of the copy etc." (quoted in Nichol, "Checklist" 86). Each page of the poem is individuated through a "distortion and disintegration of the original image" (86). Deviations from the manuscript are both deliberate (such as when McCaffery crinkles the page during the photocopying process) and accidental (degradations of image that are inherent to the process of repeated copying). Regardless of intent, McCaffery redeems the deviation and decay of machine duplication as a manner of textual generation; the loss of fidelity to the manuscript becomes the vehicle for composition and textual growth. Recalling Andy Warhol's photo series of Marilyn Monroe, *Edge* plays with notions of presence and absence; the text is present only to the extent that it is a mass produced object, a mechanical reproduction, reflection, repetition and distortion; if the copy implies the presence of an original manuscript, it also perpetually withholds it. Staging writing as both loss and excess, *Edge* further exemplifies McCaffery's conception of general economy. That is, the text dramatizes "a sacrificial logic" (87) where writing both preserves and violates its subject.

While pursuing "THE VERY FAILURE OF A FUNCTION" ("from What Else Should a Rubber Stamp Say" 62), McCaffery's experiments with machine duplication critique not only utility but exchange value as well. Because they deliberately fail to achieve verisimilitude,

McCaffery's attempts at mechanical repetition suggest that pure exchange and exact resemblance are impossible goals. Indeed, McCaffery's efforts to preserve similarity ironically produce difference and deviation. This realization provides a bridge between McCaffery's technological catachreses and his translative investigations. As an important parallel to his critique of utility, McCaffery's translations explicitly problematize any simplistic notion of exchange value, refuting in particular the chimera that language operates equitably, usefully, evenly and impartially. Through his translative experiments McCaffery reveals that inter-linguistic exchange systems consistently fall short of semantic congruence, and inevitably disfigure their subjects.

### Chapter Three

#### Raveling Translations: “babel to you” (BD 75)

Bless thee, Bottom! bless thee! thou art translated.

William Shakespeare (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, III, i)

In 1973 Steve McCaffery and bpNichol inaugurated the Toronto Research Group by releasing their "Research Report 1: Translation." Promising to investigate “possibilities” and “alternative directives” (RG 27), this report marked the beginning of McCaffery’s continuing fascination with the translative act. In 1974 and 1975, McCaffery released *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins* and *ow's waif* respectively, two collections of poems which apply some of the translative methodologies outlined by the Toronto Research Group in their first report. By the late 1970s McCaffery was busy translating several other authors and texts. 1976 saw the publishing of “Excerpt from *Traité du blanc et des teintures*,” an experimental translation of some of Robert Marteau’s poems. Between 1978 and 1979 he released no fewer than three translations: *Every Way Oakly*, a rendering of Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*; *Six Fillious*, a collaborative, multilingual celebration of Robert Filliou’s poetry; and *Intimate Distortions: a displacement of Sappho*. In 1982, McCaffery again collaborated as part of an eight stage serial translation entitled *8x8: La Traduction A L'Epreuve* (which was published as issue 29/30 of *Ellipse*). Today McCaffery’s interest in translation persists; as



recently as 1995, he published "Translation of Sonnet 92 by Skogekar Bergbo." Although each work is unique, we can see in all these translations a persistent challenge to the norms of authority, authorship, expression, textual propriety, and origin.

Since his earliest investigations, McCaffery has characterized his translative project as an attempt to see "what is to be gained from a break with the one-dimensional view of translation" (*RG* 27). In the Toronto Research Group's "Research Report 1: Translation" (1973), McCaffery and bpNichol reject what they term traditional or orthodox translation. McCaffery and Nichol identify this conventional rationale in the following way: "[t]he traditional idea of translation involves a shift in notation to present a common meaning to a linguistically different audience" (*RG* 27). The important words here are "common meaning"; traditional translation purports to relay a stable informational cargo across the semiotic void between linguistic or symbolic systems. Clearly, Nichol and McCaffery are reacting against translation conceived as the transmission of ideality through inert symbol systems. Surprisingly, McCaffery and Nichol concede that these "translations are not only attempted but often, in their own terms, succeed" (*RG* 28), but suggest translation flourishes where language is strictly referential: "[t]raditional translation works best where the sole demand is that the translator provide a clear and exact transcription of the ideas in the original work and where the two vocabularies have developed identical symbolic distinctions" (*RG* 28).<sup>43</sup> The crucial words here are perhaps "clear and exact transcription." Through an anonymous quotation in *8x8*, McCaffery contends that traditional translation has been guided by an "historic

injunction of fidelity to the text" (44). At the heart of conventional translation, as perceived by McCaffery, is a desire for textual faith and fealty, conceived as an equivalent expression of ideas.<sup>44</sup>

Deviation from pure transcription of ideas is routinely disparaged as the translator's failure to properly reflect the source materials, maligned as excess, error or the translator's personal whim.

*Traduttore, traditore*, as the Italians say: the translator is a traitor.

Having identified the enemy, McCaffery and Nichol proceed to outline some problematic assumptions at play in this traditional conceit of translation: that language doesn't affect the meaning it "carries"; that ideas exist apart from the symbols which express them; that ideas are like objects, detachable and transportable; that a text has a stable and transcendent content, authorial intention, truth or set of facts to be translated. Furthermore, McCaffery and Nichol rightfully contend that the success of orthodox translation declines as it moves from referential language "towards the literary arts, where an emotive as well as propositional function of language is involved" (RG 28). By privileging the idea, traditional translation diminishes not only the feeling and associations contained in a source text, but stands to lose many of its supposed literary devices: irony, puns, ambiguity, polyvalency, double-entendres, onomatopoeia, rhythm and music. Most importantly, McCaffery and Nichol suggest that the goal of semantic symmetry is itself unattainable. Because no two languages have identical symbolic or syntactic divisions, they claim that propositional equivalency is functionally impossible. The movement between graphically and aurally distinct languages

ensures the production of divergent texts; difference is structurally necessary to translation.

In his solo work apart from the Toronto Research Group, McCaffery identifies traditional translation as part of the capitalistic reification of language. Privileging idea over substance, orthodox translation perpetuates the models of semantic consumption and linguistic transparency. Because fidelity is valued, the translator's imagination and invention tend to be disregarded. Like the reader of the referential work, the translator is treated as a passive participant, whose responsibility is to idly reflect the author's "seminal" idea. Tradition, according to McCaffery, requires the translator become "a silent partner, a conduit for someone else's thoughts and sensitivities" (8x8 44). As a collateral effect, originality and creativity become qualities solely reserved for authors and artists. Indeed, traditional translation fosters a textual hierarchy, which grants authors property rights over their ideas, and further separates semantic producers from receivers.

In contrast to this restrictive custom, McCaffery presents a fundamentally deconstructivist model, where translation is not an isolated act, but an inescapable fact of existence. He abandons as bankrupt the notion of semantic symmetry, and accepts the inherently asymmetrical nature of linguistic exchange. Evoking Marcel Mauss's notion of a "gift economy" ("Writing," *NI* 219), McCaffery suggests we consider translation as a kind of linguistic bartering, an exchange where the given is not expected to equal the received. Although McCaffery's translations always convey something of the original, McCaffery recognizes that his versions are

inherently disruptive and contestive with their sources. In this regard McCaffery accurately describes “the two coordinates of my project” as “injunction and transgression respectively” (8x8 44). Instead of maintaining the idea or intention of his source text, McCaffery typically translates by privileging some marginal element of the original.

Rather i try to take a deconstructive approach [to translation] by locating certain areas of suppressed preinscription within the source texts and then bringing these preinscriptions to an inscriptive surface: the target texts. This frequently resulted in radically different texts, but were all authenticated by these suppressed preinscriptions. (8x8 45)

His translative commitment is to the unspoken, the silent, the absent, the other. One of McCaffery’s favourite “areas of suppressed preinscription” is, not surprisingly, linguistic materiality; his translations repeatedly convey the original text’s qualities of sight, sound and feeling over content.<sup>45</sup> Importantly, McCaffery considers the difference between source text and translation not as aberration or error, but as a sign of creativity. By valuing and condoning the production of difference over semantic fidelity, he inverts the logic of traditional translation, releasing translation into “the freedom of deviation and the lie” (8x8 45). In the Toronto Research Group’s first report, Nichol and McCaffery suggest that when “we no longer consider translation as being necessarily an information service -- the one tongue’s access to other tongues -- then it can become a creative endeavour in its own right” (RG 32). Through his work,

McCaffery transforms translation from a derivative process of mimesis, equivalence matching and reflection into a positive means of independent textual generation. No longer failure, treason, compromise or repetition of another's ideas, translation begins to function as an active encounter with language, an act on par with creative composition. When freed from semantic responsibilities, McCaffery further suggests the translator is no longer an "historical victim to an anterior authorship" (8x8 45), no longer a passive conduit of information, but rather an artist in his/her own right. Hardly dispensable, the translator becomes a "necessary presence . . . as a conscious formulating force" (RG 29) whose productive difference ensures the vitality of language.

McCaffery's artistic exploration of translation occurred at a time when the traditional model of translation was already under much revision. Although McCaffery does not explicitly acknowledge the influence of any theorist, clear parallels arise with the translation studies of Jirí Levy, Anton Popovic, James Holmes and André Lefevere; and with the poly-systems studies of Itamar Even-Zohar and Gideon Toury. His largest influence is undoubtedly Jacques Derrida: both writers are dedicated to the marginal, the different and *différance*, the graph and the graphic; both are opposed to logos, reason, order and ideality.<sup>46</sup> Although McCaffery's translations frequently parallel and predict developments in translative theory, McCaffery never attempts to provide a consistent theory of translation. He is committed instead to investigating the ways in which translation can be (mis)used for the purposes of poetic generation. In this respect, McCaffery's proper context is not with

systematizers and philosophers, but with the numerous artists who dedicate themselves to “spirited” translation: Louis Zukofsky, Ezra Pound, Jack Spicer, Gertrude Stein, Tom Philips, David Melnick, Jerome Rothenberg, Stephen Scobie, Douglas Barbour, and of course his partner in poetry bpNichol.

The following taxonomy of McCaffery’s translative methods is neither complete nor authoritative, and it should be read with the understanding that I frequently had to artificially ravel, isolate and label McCaffery’s technologies of translation.<sup>47</sup> In reality, his methods tend to overlap and blur in an energetic rush; indeed McCaffery frequently uses more than one method at a time. Critical examinations of these translations cannot hope to relay their humour, and the texts should be read aloud, as they were designed to be read. If I have left out some of McCaffery’s more idiosyncratic methods, take this as a testament to the wide variety of techniques he has created.

### **Homophonic Translation**

One of the most obvious translative techniques employed by McCaffery is homophonic translation, a process which maintains “an acoustic rather than a semantic equivalence” (“Excerpt” 17). Flipping the usual translative hierarchy on its head, the homophonic translator chooses to transmit the source text’s sound rather than its meaning into the target language. Guided by this desire for a sonic conformity, the ideal homophonic translation struggles to make the aural experience of a translated text indistinguishable from its

source.<sup>48</sup> The precedent for this operation is surely Zukofsky's *Catullus* (1958-1969), a translation which homophonically preserves in English the sound of Catullus' Latin poems; a more recent example is David Melnick's translation of Homer's *Iliad*, phonetically transliterated from the Greek as *Men in Aida* (1983). To see how McCaffery proceeds at this same task, read aloud this section from Robert Marteau's original French poem "Traité du blanc et des teintures":

Par la verticale  
ici se scinde l'autre sel,  
unique larme des dieux,  
car après tout est vie, mort et saisons. (24)

Now, listen to McCaffery's translation of this same passage (1976):

"by the vertical icy succinct low  
tressle  
unique alarm . . .

did your car appear too  
heavy more  
moody cezanne? ("Excerpt" 25)

We see that McCaffery sustains a similar, but not quite identical, sound experience, as a certain slide in vowel and consonant pronunciation is evident. McCaffery's purpose here is to make us laugh, but also to use the homophonic connection as a means of generating a fresh text with a new symbolic configuration. Although the result is sometimes a little cuckoo (if not hilarious), translation becomes a means of composition itself. As McCaffery explains in a

prefatory note, “the ‘sound’ of the french [sic] penetrates the semantic zones of the english [sic] vocabulary to determine by way of the kinship of sound *a totally new meaning*” (17; my italics).

McCaffery’s translation sacrifices the stanzaic, grammatic and semantic structure of the original, yet still constitutes a translation because it preserves what is perhaps the poem’s most distinctive feature: its sound, its acoustic personality, what Pound termed “melopoeia.”<sup>49</sup>

Homophonic translation supports Saussure's assertion that meaning does not intrinsically inhere in a sign, but rather is determined by context. Saussure argues that “[t]he link between the signal and signification is arbitrary,” and further, that “*the linguistic sign is arbitrary*” (67). By these claims, he means that no natural resemblance or affinity should exist between the signifier and signified, nor the sign and its referent. Disavowing onomatopoeia as accidental, exterior and deleterious to semiotics, Saussure shows how a single concept has disparate signifiers in different languages, and inversely, how similar signifiers indicate unlike concepts in the context of different cultures. By interpreting the sound of a French text according to English rules, McCaffery produces a radically different meaning, and thus confirms the fundamental arbitrariness of the sign.

Homophonic translation can also be seen as an analog to Derrida’s contest with logocentrism. Homophonic translation does not privilege speech over writing, but rather emphasizes the primacy of writing over speech. Like the “a” in *différance* that Derrida claims can only be seen and not heard, homophonic translation produces a



written difference within a uniform aural signifier. Keeping the sound unchanged, homophonic translation actualizes multiple, graphic, significations innate within the aural signifier. Shown to be dependent upon an exterior written context, the aural signifier becomes polyvalent, unfaithful to the spoken word. Through homophonic substitution, the meaning of an utterance can be radically disseminated, despite its intention as utterance. Because many significations can be produced from one sound, the select meaning of a spoken word becomes dependent upon how it is scripted. Consequently, the spoken word can no longer be placed before or above writing. Homophonic translation discharges the fiction that the sole purpose of writing is to record and represent the phonetic. On the contrary, because writing determines the meaning of sound, the logocentric privileging of speech over writing is reversed.

### **Homolinguistic Translation**

As the name suggests, homolinguistic translation involves translation within the bounds of one language (not between two languages), a process McCaffery and Nichol describe as the "transmittance and reception within the same language but issuing from discrete speech communities" (*RG* 27-28). This can encompass many routine semiotic acts, including simple rewording, arrangement and interpretation, and parallels Roman Jakobson's concept of intralinguistic translation.<sup>50</sup>

Although homolinguistic translation has many different techniques (and we shall look at two in the form of geomancy and allusive reference), I wish to first focus on the times McCaffery strives to maintain an economy of sound between two English texts (just as homophonic translation does between two foreign language texts). The best example of this technique occurs in McCaffery's contribution to *Six Fillious* (1978),<sup>51</sup> "PHARTINGS, SEWINGS, AND ONE REAR DILL," a title which constitutes an extended pun on Brecht's translation of Robert Filliou's "14 songs and 1 Riddle." In the title (as in the poem), we again see how alternate meanings are introduced into Brecht's sound pattern through homophonic substitution: writing once more serves the purposes of dissemination and dispersal of intent. To appreciate homolinguistic translation, read aloud George Brecht's "no 1 rock":

the aged bat  
 (what an ass!)  
 and the bloodthirsty beaver  
 (what a brain      what promiscuity      what a birth!)  
 beget the brutal bird  
 (what testicles!)      (*SF* 52)

Now listen to McCaffery's version of the same, entitled "no. 1 wreck":

the edged boot  
 (what a nice!)'  
 hand      the blue deer      the stab of a  
  
 (what a brain wet promise cutey what a bath!)

big head the brood ale-board  
 (white test hackles!) (19)

McCaffery conveys an auditory ghost of Brecht's version that is phonically similar, with little semantic derivation. McCaffery's poem is a distinct signification nested within a phonic pattern parallel to Brecht's. It sounds close, yet means differently, differentiating yet refusing to transgress the formal boundaries of the English language. Such homolinguistic translation demonstrates the semantic volatility of speech even within a single semiotic system or language. The existence of aural doubles introduces uncertainty into every articulation, disseminating statement into multiple, misheard meanings. McCaffery eagerly engages homophony, because it complicates scientific and authoritative models of language which pretend towards certitude. Under his hand, one sound, one phonic signifier behaves differently even within one language. Just how far this dispersive effect can go is seen in McCaffery's "**oh virtue (eh?)**" (*SF* 18), where the poet takes one refrain of Brecht's and produces six distinct homophonic doubles (seven if we include a different version in another poem). Not only is this a virtuoso performance of homophonic possibility, but the very title puns on the lack of "virtue" or consistency in the spoken word. Indeed, miscommunication is inscribed into the title, "**eh?**" being a Canadian manner of expressing a failure to hear or need for repetition. By pointing to the presence of "discrete speech communities," McCaffery further reveals the inherent plurality of the English (and by extension, any) language. English is not a pristine, homogenous semiotic system, but rather an amalgamation of many languages and

systems. Translation is thus a disseminative force that occurs within the normal operations of (a) language, and not just an undesirable effect between languages. To apply Derrida's already translated phrase, translation is always already at work.

By translating the audible in place of the meaningful, McCaffery again parallels the work of Charles Olson and the Black Mountain poets, who also consider factors of breath and line length to be definitive for poetry. Olson's statement that "the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes" (*Selected Writings* 19) prefigures McCaffery's desire to find "forms appropriate to the translator's own breath lines" ("Excerpt" 17). However, McCaffery is far more willing than Olson to focus on sound alone. He does not feel the need to transform his poems into some sort of communicative speech act; this is the sense in which McCaffery accuses Olson of "significantly virulent" logocentric tendencies ("Language Writing," *NI* 146). McCaffery conveys sound without regard for understandable content: his poems appear nonsensical except as they capture the sound of their source texts. The truth of homophonic translation, if there need be one, registers on the body, specifically the ear, rather than the mind. By maintaining the phonics, tones, and timbres of the original with maniacal precision, homophonic translation arguably provides a more experientially accurate rendition of a poem. Translation which focuses solely on semantics and forgets the music vitiates the work of art to Nietzsche's ear:

What is most difficult to render from one language into another is the *tempo* of its style, which has its basis in

the character of the race, or to speak more physiologically, in the average *tempo* of its metabolism. There are honestly meant translations that, as involuntary vulgarizations, are almost falsifications of the original, merely because its bold and merry *tempo* (which leaps over and obviates all dangers in things and words) could not be translated. (*Beyond Good and Evil* 40 )

Nietzsche suggests two important thoughts for our purposes. Firstly, he establishes a connection between physiology and discourse, which legitimates the action of homophonic translation. According to his logic, translations that ignore the body and its five senses will fail. Secondly, by using a musical vocabulary, Nietzsche dispels the notion that ideas are the pith of writing. The honest meaning is not as important as its tempo, pitch, and placement through time (the lack of which renders translations false and vulgar). Enacting Nietzsche's advice, McCaffery gives precedence to the aural of the signifier, and diminishes the importance of the informational content. He inverts translation's traditional relationship between linguistic materiality and semantics, choosing to convey the ephemeral signifier over the eternal signified. In short, homophonic translation values sensuousness (here sound) over sensibility, and thus is a writing style which appeals to bodily sense rather than intellect. Homophonic translation can thus be seen minimally as a Nietzschean attempt to define poetry as music, medially as a more physiologically based composition, and maximally as part of the Derridean project to emancipate the senses from the dictatorship of the idea. Writing is

no longer restricted to information exchange, but becomes a creative engagement with the physical world.

### **Sense Translation**

McCaffery does not always sacrifice meaning to transmit sound. Occasionally his translations will strive to express both the physical and semantic qualities of the original text. I have termed this technique "sense translation" (since the word sense conveys both sensation and meaning). In some of his homophonic translation, for example, McCaffery manipulates the English diction so that his poetry renders both the music and the meaning of his source text (a little of each is duly sacrificed so that both may be conveyed). Sense translation thus provides readers with both a physical *and* intellectual appreciation of the source text. Consider again "PHARTINGS, SEWINGS, AND ONE REAR DILL," wherein McCaffery successfully composes a text which conveys the sound and the raucous, bawdy nature of Brecht/Filliou's original. For example, the sound of Brecht's line "lookit the fetus of the mature seal's penis" (53) is successfully conveyed in McCaffery's line "lickit fart us off the manured soul's ponies" (22). In addition, McCaffery's version continues to use grotesque and animalistic images, just like those which fill Brecht's text. Admittedly the literal images have to be changed, but McCaffery's new images produce the same affective response: revulsion. Although McCaffery does tolerate much errant meaning in order to meet the phonic requirement, the meaning of Brecht reveals itself in traces and touches. Used in this way,

homophony is a consolidating rather than a disruptive force. The audio similarities between the different versions solidify, not disseminate meaning: they ironically confirm the author's original intent.

Sense translation poses a challenge to Saussure's conception of language. The success of sense translation demonstrates that the relationship between the signifier and signified, sign and object, is not necessarily arbitrary. According to Saussure's principles, signifiers should mean differently when placed in different contexts. This may have been true for homophonic translation, but in sense translation one phonic signifier means the same even in different languages. This implies that sound stands in some sort of motivated relationship to concept, regardless of language or culture. Through sense translation, McCaffery works towards establishing the very natural association between signifier and signified that Saussure took pains to reject, although McCaffery only has limited success. In this respect, McCaffery belongs to what Gérard Genette refers to in *Mimologics* as the Cratylean tradition: the notion put forth by Plato in *Cratylus* that objects are named in accordance with their appearance. In a more recent parallel, McCaffery's sense translation recalls *Finnegans Wake*, where Joyce strives to "here keen again and begin again to make soundsense and sensesound kin again" (*Finnegans Wake* 121), as well as Marshall McLuhan's attempt to alleviate the dissociation of sensibility of print culture. Sense translation also has roots in the objectivist unification of meaning and thingness, and in particular Zukofsky's conception of poetry as a mathematical function, bordered by speech on one hand, and music on the other.

I'll tell you.

About my poetics --

$$\int \begin{array}{l} \text{music} \\ \text{Speech} \end{array}$$

An integral

Lower limit speech

Upper limit music (A 138)

Like Zukofsky's "A", McCaffery's sense translation shuttles back and forth between the two absolutes of statement and symphonics, seeking to harmonize linguistic content with experience.

An interesting variant on sense translation occurs in *8x8*, where McCaffery produces two separate versions of a French poem by Cécile Cloutier: the first "a straightforward translation aimed at preserving the sense of the original french [sic]" (147); the second a homophonic translation. McCaffery then hybridizes these two texts, substituting every other line of the first with a parallel line of the second (and vice versa). The effect is an alternation, where sound and meaning are preserved in fits and starts. This alternation, however, is disruptive rather than harmonious, sound and sense working antagonistically to sabotage any smooth resemblance to the original.



## Geomancy

In “Research Report 1: Translation,” McCaffery and Nichol suggest that translation can be the orchestration of space rather than the transmission of ideas. That is, McCaffery and Nichol propose to translate by merely realigning a source text’s words and typographic elements into new patterns, rather than re-express them in a denotative equivalent. The source text is treated as an objective, visual event (much as homophonic translation treats it as an acoustic event) and translation typically occurs within the parameters of a single language. Without the need to convey a word’s meaning,

translation becomes the act of organizing space, semantic balances and the emotional weight between individual word-objective-phenomena; the exploration of syntactic possibilities; the modification of pressures among and between words -- configurational modification. (RG 32)

McCaffery and Nichol find precedence for this model of translation in the ancient Chinese art of “geomancy,” the ordering of earth, landscape and environment:

Geomancy took the existing elements in nature, aligning and shaping them to augment and focus the yin/yang energy currents that flow over the earth's surface.

Geomancy and geomantic translation are both activities in which the central act is the realignment of space and of the balance between already existing phenomenon [sic] ... (RG 33)

Contrasting sharply with the Romantic artist-originator, the Chinese geomancer merely reconfigures a pre-ordained lexicon of natural components. Facilitating rather than creating, the geomancer brings a set of pre-existing elements into fresh symmetry. Geomancy thus follows a green aesthetic, which neither creates nor wastes, but rather recycles. We can find precedent in the work of dadaist Tristan Tzara, who translated newspaper articles by chopping them into word-sized bites, pulling the pieces randomly from a hat, and presenting them in that chance order; in collage, particularly Kurt Schwitters' *Merz Pictures*; in the experiments of John Cage; in William S. Burroughs' cut-up techniques; in Duchamp's readymades and found objects, ordinary items transferred into radically new, "artistic" contexts.<sup>52</sup> In McCaffery's own estimation, "[t]he operating analogy in many cases was cubism: the process of fragmentation and reconstitution of a known thing in fresh form" ("afterword," *ow*). And like cubism, geomancy steps out of temporal and syntactic sequences, to achieve other, perhaps more psychologically expressive, relationships.

Geomancy is the method of composition behind both *ow's waif* (1975) and *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins* (1974). To produce a poem for either of these collections, McCaffery turns to various English supply texts: literary classics, scientific treatises, dictionaries, newspapers, magazine articles, interviews with prostitutes, abandoned poems and "whatever happened to be on or near my desk when i was working" ("Note," *DSM* n.p.). These supply texts then function "as the total available language system for the poem" ("afterword," *ow* n.p.), or "the maximum available vocabulary" ("Note," *DSM* n.p.) with which

McCaffery may compose a new work. Borrowing his words thusly, McCaffery then physically manipulates them into new patterns or gestalts. The individual process of rearrangement varies, as McCaffery uses both random and formulaic techniques for word selection and syntactic structuring, as well as “careful conscious choice” (“afterword,” *ow* n.p.). With the content-vocabulary of the translation a foregone conclusion, with no need to express a semantic equivalent, McCaffery can concentrate almost entirely on the formal relationships between the words, thus creating more provocative juxtapositions, patterns, clusters, syntactic nuances and sharpened reliefs.

McCaffery’s most interesting method of patterning in this way may be the placement of words according to how his eye happens to fall on them. In both *Dr. Sadhu’s Muffins* and *ow’s waif* some of McCaffery’s translations record the haphazard vertical paths of reading a text at a glance;

in this way the poems became transcriptions of the movement of a moment under actual observation. they graphed a treatment of my own reading experience as a kind of seeing (Pound’s sense of translation) graphing a reflex activity of my own eyes off an arbitrary verbal surface freezing a random sequence of words into a meaningful form. (“Note,” *DSM* n.p.)

This translative technique recreates McCaffery’s initial perception of the source text, preserving the word sequence as it randomly appeared to his eye as it scans a text. The accidental journey of the eye determines both form and content of his poems: a sort of

aleatorics of sight. Like post-semiotic poetry, its verisimilitude lies at a pre-cognitive or pre-syntactic level. This is the sense in which *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins* describes itself as "the accurate transcription of a pure perceptual process of the writer functioning as reader" ("Note," *DSM* n.p.).

### **Structural Translation**

At points in *Six Fillious*, McCaffery transforms Brecht's poems into linguistic or symbolic structures, translation operating as a kind of structural explication. In McCaffery's "**no. 1 blouse**," protagonists assume a numerical value, and their interactions become mathematical rather than personal. For example, where Brecht's poem reads "jean paul is twice as big as brigitte" (54), McCaffery's reads "jean paul 8 brigitte 4 / jean paul 6 brigitte 3" (25). Eventually, the names of characters are altogether replaced by numbers; moreover, body parts and other environmental information are identified by letters, until the entire poem is comically reduced to an abstract symbol and rendered as a type of algebra, the action of which is formulaic: " $8 + 4 + \text{verb}^2 + \text{distance} + \text{shape}$ " (25).

This type of translation may seem laughable and reductive, but it also identifies underlying patterns, operating as legitimate structural analysis of Filliou's word systems. Filliou combines and recombines words, as if poetry were an algebraic permutation, and so McCaffery's structuralist translation accurately reveals Filliou's formulaic tendencies. If McCaffery's praxis is one of *reductio ad absurdum*, reducing Filliou's work to its non-narrative essentials,

McCaffery's excess can be read as a parody of the structuralist and narratological belief in these same "deep structures" that supposedly underlie and formulate all writing. McCaffery's translation is thus a sophisticated maneuver which simultaneously justifies and undermines structuralist methodology.

McCaffery's structural translation is also linguistic. Rather than express the action in numerical symbols, McCaffery begins to analyze the grammatic patterns of Brecht's sentences, revealing the syntactic nature of the original. For example, in "**no 2 blouse**," the phrase "tab and kirk" (55) becomes "those are their names" (25). Moreover, McCaffery changes a specific sequence of action carried out by the protagonist sophia -- "she runs she whirls / she runs she whirls she yells" (55) -- to "she does that and she does that and she does that and she does that too" (26). In "**no 4 blouse**," after he deduces the grammatic order, he indicates repeated lines with the single word "twice" (27). In this version of structural translation, the particulars become nearly irrelevant compared to the syntactical pattern. Proper names are replaced by pronouns, and sometimes by the word "name" itself, as in "**no. 6 blouse**": "a name a noose a place a noun a position / a name a noose a place a filler a noun a position / a name verbs and length verbing her noun / a name verbs and length verbing her noun" (28). By deleting names and refusing to recapitulate plot information, the story-telling aspect of the writing is lessened, and the poem appears more purely as a hierarchy of words (hanging upon that enigmatic "noose"). The technique is Steinian; by using an increasingly abstract vocabulary, words are drained of their referential power. Materiality is heightened, and a

rhythmic energy appears: "what he does what he does after he does what he does" (27). Through repetition, structural translation creates an unexpected affinity with sound poetry.

Just as McCaffery establishes this grammatic translative technique, he begins to entangle it. For example, consider the opening of "no 3 blouse":

name etc.            on it

name etc.            on it

ten others around name having made it

ten others around name having made it

"swim" (come.)      "beckon" (come.)

"call."

"choose."            "prefer."

"prefer"                                (come.)

"prefer."

one tenth and one tenth cannot and cannot with one  
tenth becoming less

than one tenth.

one tenth and one tenth cannot and cannot with one  
tenth becoming less

than one tenth. (26)

In the first stanza, syntactical analysis is extended to a farcical excess. The reduction to nameless pronouns; the vague relations; the dismissal of local detail by an unceremonious "etc." -- all these are the epitome of structuralist and scientific over-generalization. But then, unexpectedly, McCaffery interjects words in quotation marks

into his translation. Highly exact, these verbs contrast sharply with the abstract and actionless language of his grammatic examination on either side of them. The effect is disjunctive; the poem demonstrates the tension in language between the universalizing syntactic principles necessary for communication, and its quotidian, deictic nature -- perhaps exemplifying Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*; or Roman Jakobson's contrast between metaphor and metonymy.<sup>53</sup>

### **Allusive Reference**

"Allusive reference" is a phrase coined by Dick Higgins and McCaffery, and is used to describe the procedure behind *Intimate Distortions: a displacement of Sappho* (1979). It describes a semantic translation that provides a related meaning but one that is only loosely connected or associated with the original. In allusive reference, the original word functions as a prompt that provokes the translator to produce novel yet connected words. The final translation may have no definitive link to its source. Indeed, the connections may be tangential, subjective and purely contextual. Douglas Barbour and Stephen Scobie compare this process to a kind of metonymical substitution, appropriate to the postmodern age (*Pirates of Pen's Chance* 142). In *Intimate Distortions* McCaffery further defends the process as a reading strategy which fully explores the connotational value of the original.

Employing a translational system known as "allusive referential" McCaffery invents a way of avoiding the

strictures of classical translation. Developing all the suggestions and connotations of Sappho's words and phrases, new texts are produced which are at the same time vital re-readings of the originals. (back cover)

Traditional translation may unflaggingly express the denotative content of a text, but it sacrifices the expressive range of feeling, sentiment and association by conveying only the objective meaning. In contrast, allusive referentiality is designed to suspend the concrete and privilege the allusive or connotational value of language, and so convey the emotive and literary qualities of the original. Allusive reference in effect compensates for the shortcomings of a strict denotative rendering. If something gets preserved and communicated in an allusive referential poem, it is a text's intangibles, we might say, the linguistic unconscious: emotions and allusions certainly, but also ideologies and thematic impulses. Similar to Freud's free association, Pound's radiant energy, surrealist automatic writing, or even Rorschach testing, allusive reference becomes a technique for interrogating and exposing the subtle emotive connections that an object may evoke. Freed from the restraints of precise definition, the allusive referentialist may more fully sound the human import of a text.

In *Intimate Distortions*, McCaffery uses allusive reference to extrapolate and explore the emotive subtleties of Sappho's poetry. By following the semantic drift of association and accident, McCaffery lays bare some of her more recondite meanings and motivations. For example, here is a root text by Sappho, as translated by Mary Barnard:<sup>54</sup>



At noontime

When the earth is  
bright with flaming  
heat falling straight down

the cricket sets  
up a high-pitched  
singing in his wings (8)

McCaffery's translation of the same poem rhizomatically explores the symbolic-suggestive content of the piece. This sensitivity to the emotional register may be one reason why McCaffery describes this poem as "intimate." Using an entirely different set of word elements, McCaffery creates a tonal and emotive equivalent to Sappho's original.

time.

no

on.

the soft erection of  
the soil this month of mouth

falls from erection  
to the orchestration

of their wings, thorax  
and antennae

insect.

incest. ("Seven" n.p.)

In this comparison of the two poems, the prompts which propel McCaffery's rendition are immediately apparent: "noontime" produces "time // no/on," "earth" suggests "soil," "cricket" is changed to "insect," and similarly metonymic substitutions may be followed throughout the poem. McCaffery's poem is produced through a free-associative reading of Barnard's text, wherein the original words tend into new positions and related definitions. But this compository process is not random: McCaffery's poem acts as a glass which focuses and foregrounds certain feelings and ideas implicit in the original. For example, the sumptuousness and sensuality which Sappho describes in the warm sunny day is made overtly sexual in McCaffery's version. The "flaming / heat" now makes grow "the soft erection of the soil"; a plant's tender shoot becomes unmistakably phallic. Moreover, the erotic overtones of "straight down" are concretized into "this month of mouth," a phrase which suggests to me oral sex, as well as the harvest -- both are literally a time of the mouth, of eating, swelling, tasting, pleasing. McCaffery's poem deliberately eroticizes Sappho's poem, or more exactly, it exposes and amplifies the sexuality of Sappho's natural imagery. So too does McCaffery's poem reveal the transience and ephemera thematically latent within Sappho's description, its quiet emphasis on time and

aging. Through allusive reference, McCaffery's poem operates like an expository reading of Sappho's text: the implicit qualities of the images become overt.

More than any other translative process, allusive reference tends to foreground the translator in the translative act. Through it, the translated text is individualized by the translator's personal set of reactions, reading strategy, associations, preferences, cultural predilections and interpretive praxis (think of the "erection" in the eleventh poem and "sperm" in the sixth poem of *Intimate Distortions*, which clearly indicate McCaffery has masculinized Sappho's erotics). What is truly translated through allusive reference is never a text, but rather the translator's personal experience of a text. Allusive reference thus emphasizes the autobiographical element of translation, the prominence of the translator in the production of equivalents, a personal history of interaction between reader and text. Allusive reference records not ideas, but one person's reading of another's writing. In the privileging of the reader and the reader's experience of a text, allusive reference parallels developments in affective and reader-response criticism.

However, in allusive reference, the discourse of the free drifting mind is not always valuable and significant in and of itself (as it is in psychoanalysis, and to a lesser extent surrealism). Such stream of consciousness marks only a beginning that is structured, worked and arranged into new poetic wholes. Allusive reference thus amalgamates aesthetic, personal and social codes and is irreducible to an individual. It may accent individual consciousness, but it stresses its manifold roots as well. The poems should be read

not only as psychological indicators, but rather as complex intersections of psychological, aesthetic, personal and social codes.

In *8x8* (1982), McCaffery develops a method parallel in many regards to allusive reference. Working from a French text, McCaffery transcribes each word's literal meaning as recorded in the dictionary, much as any orthodox translator might. However, instead of finding the single word which correlates perfectly with the source text, McCaffery tends to provide all possible denotative readings of the original. For example, McCaffery translates "sec" (47) by providing five possible English meanings: "dry sharp rude unguarded total" (48). He then explores the possible interrelations of this quintet of meanings, generating "the dry sharpness the rude unguarded dryness / the total dryness" (48); and so on until the potential combinations are exhausted. If allusive reference maps the range of linguistic connotation, this strictly literal translation charts the ambiguous spectrum of a word's definition, and explodes the idea that words have precision. In this manner, McCaffery preserves and stresses the multiplicity always already at work in a word's denotative meaning.

### **Supplementation**

In many regards, ancillary writing is an essential tool for translation. Through footnotes, prefaces, indices, appendices, afterwords and introductions, a translator is able to provide a frame which properly explains and contextualizes the translation. A translator may accordingly compensate for changes in history,

culture, circumstance, elucidating here an archaic meaning, there the ritualistic role the text served in ancient society. Perhaps most importantly, editorial additions appear not to alter the original text, but yet provide access to its original meaning.

At one point in "PHARTINGS, SEWINGS, AND ONE REAR, DILL," McCaffery feels the need to supplement Brecht's text. Leaving Brecht's language untranslated,<sup>55</sup> McCaffery frames it with additional, parenthetical material. Here is Brecht's text:

**the solution**

my first is a desert

the lands

my second is a desert

the seas

my third is a desert

the heavens

and my whole is an oasis

the universe (56)

Rather than find aural or semantic equivalents, McCaffery translates by a peculiar process of annotation and addition. Unlike a conventional annotator, McCaffery does not situate his additional information outside the text in an appendix, footnote or margin. Instead, he places his supplements directly into the textual body. Appearing in brackets, these supplements remain provisionally exterior to the main text, literally and figuratively parenthetical.

*the (fatal) solution*

*my (goodness) first (you bring me here then expect me to  
imagine it)*

*is a (bird cage bottom filled with) desert (sand)*

*the(m) (g)lands*

*my (goodness this is the) second (time that you've  
expected me to*

*imagine this) is a (bird cage bottom filled with sahara)  
desert*

*(sand)*

*(the(se) seas(ick slobs)*

*my (goodness this is the) third (time you've woke me up  
to ask me what*

*this is. I refuse to believe any more that this) is a desert  
(full of*

*bird cage bottoms)*

*the(ir baloony) universe (30)*

Logically, McCaffery's additions are extraneous to Brecht's text proper; effectively however, they are not. By disrupting and framing Brecht's words with his parenthetical additions, McCaffery consistently recontextualizes Brecht's text in larger narratological or expressive frames, which peremptorily change the significance of the original. Although literally parenthetical, McCaffery's additions usurp the meaning of the source text, dispersing the intention by displacing it to a radically new context. McCaffery is perhaps

debunking the idea of an editorial voice which can comment objectively on a text without interpreting or changing it. By so controlling the source text with the addition, McCaffery again exemplifies the Derridean idea of supplement. His parenthetical material dominates Brecht's text by providing an explanatory framework which completely subsumes the source text. The appropriative character of supplementation is more visibly and comically evident in a passage immediately previous to the one quoted above. Once again, here is Brecht's text: "before parting they will proceed to the reading of the / solutions to the riddle which have been proposed" (56). And McCaffery's:

*comb hair (before parting) the lice will arise (they will  
proceed) in  
batallions all over the scalp (to the reading) at the pores  
which are  
theatres to hold out shampoo (solutions) that might kill  
them. They  
will answer (the riddle) that they have composed (which)  
might (have  
been) unanswered had the author not (proposed) it. (30)*

With the help of some allusive reference, Brecht's words are displaced into a humorous story about hair care. Significantly, McCaffery inverts the roles of supplement and source, so that his additions become mainstream, while Brecht's expressions are demoted to the parenthetical outback. Because McCaffery's text becomes host to Brecht's intrusions, supplementation is thus foregrounded as a constitutive rather than ancillary action.

## Numerical Replacement Translation

In *Rational Geomancy*, McCaffery outlines yet another translative procedure, which he dubs “numerical replacement translation”: “[e]ach word is analysed into a respective rational numeric value by treating such letters which can double as Roman numerals in accumulative values (viz. M, C, X, L, D, V and I)” (55). This modus operandi is applied in *Six Fillious*, where McCaffery translates Brecht’s “closing” (56) into the mathematical “**a hundred and one zero s one ng**” (29). This rather formulaic procedure is interesting for several reasons. First, it treats individual letters imagistically rather than symbolically, drawing attention to their shape rather than function, furthering the disruption to logocentrism. Secondly, it draws attention to the Roman and Arabic genealogies inherent in the English alphabet. McCaffery uses the history implicit in the English language to disperse and disseminate direct statement.

## Intralinguistic, Anamorphic, and Topomorphic Translation

In the mid-seventies, McCaffery first attempts to translate *Finnegans Wake* by using a method called “intralinguistic translation.” The phrase is borrowed from Roman Jakobson,<sup>56</sup> and describes the homolingual movement of signs within one language. McCaffery’s method also borrows from his own allusive reference as it works to establish a connotative or subjectively connected meaning. Unlike allusive reference, McCaffery’s goal is to imitate the



creative act behind *Finnegans Wake* itself. Joyce's famous opening reads: "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs" (3). In comparison, McCaffery's version (which has never been published) reads:

neep streems was time of noun and name's S from the  
 dodged -- was it water end? -- to round of sea womb  
 coming to the roaming imperial ease and commodity  
 italicized italianate aestheticated vitgenstinnian  
 gertrudism banked flowing to an oily spine at the  
 question's article rooked and hinter steel.

("Intralinguistic Translation" n.p.)

McCaffery translates by keeping only a modicum of Joyce's content, while employing a similar punning method. McCaffery thus recalls the Russian formalist approach of translating the specific literary language or aesthetic effect rather than the subject.

Unfortunately, McCaffery's recreation is a pale shadow to *Finnegans Wake*. While Joyce uses a multi-lingual, hybrid language of nearly every nation and race on earth, McCaffery stays almost entirely in English (except for a few neologisms). Consequently he drops Joyce's complex, international puns. The effect is a reduction of scope: the text becomes restricted to one language, and loses Joyce's polyglotism which gives his book its frenetic complexity. It is a rare example where McCaffery's translative procedure weakens an original and, for this reason, I believe, McCaffery eventually abandons the project.

In time McCaffery again attempts to translate *Finnegans Wake*. In an end note to a piece entitled *Anticollabra* (1990), McCaffery explains his new procedure of translation.

*Anticollabora* constitutes an “anamorphic” excavation of James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* [sic]. Taking the Viking Press edition of 1959 as the source text, it records the premier portions of all the words fractured at a line end and carried over to the next line for completion. Each line of *Anticollabora* corresponds to one page in the *Wake* and stanza breaks correspond to textual breaks in the source. The vocabulary then, compromises 50% of the total lexemic units that Joyce would have considered semantically incomplete and arbitrarily broken. (55)

McCaffery describes anamorphic painting as a style of representation popular in the Baroque period, wherein the image is perceivable from only one viewing angle; from any other angle the painting is jumbled and distorted. McCaffery’s translation is anamorphic because it preserves a likeness of *Finnegans Wake* when viewed only from the very select perspective of the page edge. From any other vantage, McCaffery’s version is incoherent.

Surrec Mac Te gen carry  
 umprin quan club Fan ducks yellow Ceol  
 good Amsu Naman bargainbout  
 milch hearth consecrand Dig ex in any  
 tittle sourd sponthe pura break evera re admini (54)

The hyphenated words in *Finnegans Wake* become a kind of found poem for McCaffery; the formal constraint imposed by the page

produces a discourse beyond Joyce's intentions. Compared to his previous translation of *Finnegans Wake*, *Anticollabora* increases the amount of suggestive ambiguity of the source text. In anamorphic translation, McCaffery thus finds a style of textual translation that does not reduce the complexity of Joyce's original, even as it defies the original intention(s). As the method's name indicates, McCaffery no longer seeks to translate Joyce's original sense: this is a disruptive reading, an anti-collaboration.

Anamorphic translation is related to what McCaffery describes in *8x8* as "topomorphic" translation.

Take a French-English Dictionary. Locate the page, column and line placement of the word to be translated (e.g. the word "talus" occurs in my Bantam New College Dictionary as the sixth entry in the left hand column of page 318.) Now go to the equivalent place-entry in the English section (page 318, sixth entry from top of left hand column generates "stock company".) Now substitute the semantic equivalent: "société anonyme." (142)

The arbitrary typographic position of a word in the dictionary generates unpredictable semantic correlations in the new poem. McCaffery justifies this quirky, geomantic-style procedure as an assault on "overdetermined bibliographic system i.e. that translation here can be considered as the issue of a book" (142). However, one wonders if McCaffery's own translative system, so formulaic and devoid of personal input, isn't itself an "overdetermined bibliographic system."

## Self-Reflexive Translation

McCaffery's creative genius shows in his ability to simultaneously translate and provide a self-reflexive commentary on the process of translation itself. Wherever possible, McCaffery manipulates his source text so that his translation discusses the principles of its own composition. Consider a section from McCaffery's opening to "PHARTINGS, SEWINGS, AND ONE REAR, DILL": "there are some which are more or less exact to the case / this isn't. this, / is for fun: a phun-act where nothing / is certain" (18). As an allusive referential translation of Brecht's text, this passage tacitly repudiates the idea of equivalence which guides orthodox translation. McCaffery's work is not "exact to the case" because it displaces as much as expresses Brecht's version: an idea economically expressed in the juxtaposition "this isn't. this." Moreover, the accent on "plastic" reflects McCaffery's own preoccupation with the materiality of the signifier. Suggesting an emphasis on both phonemes and phenomena, the phrase "phun-act" evokes the auralty of homophonic translation. Through the pun on "fun," a writing emerges guided by joy, laughter and play, as opposed to faith and conformity. Perhaps play can occur because "nothing/ is certain," because the authoritarian categories authorship, ownership, voice, and book, are under erasure. McCaffery's text is thus overwritten: a translation and a description of translation. Amazingly, almost every one of McCaffery's translations eventually describes its own operation in this manner, even as it conveys some aspect of the original.

When considering all of McCaffery's translations, one sees a clear motif appear in his self-reflexive commentaries: he consistently conceives of translation as a form of transgression, rupture, wreckage, fragmentation or infraction. As its title suggests, the reader of "PHARTINGS, SEWINGS, AND ONE REAR, DILL" encounters repeated references to (male) homosexuality, which imply that translation is not only a transgression of a norm, but a means of reaming or bugging (up) a text. Digestive and scatological references further depict translation as a form of decay, dissolution, impropriety and destruction: decimation as dissemination, or perhaps mastication as rumination (digestion also mirrors translation's process of internalization, and if we pursue the analogy, translated texts become inferior shit). At the extreme edge of propriety, McCaffery uses images of rape and incest in *Intimate Distortions* to portray translation as an act simultaneously violative yet sensual.

Although sexual, queer and grotesque subjects are present in McCaffery's source texts, he typically amplifies and perversifies his material.<sup>57</sup> His rendition of Sappho tends to render Barnard's romantic material indecent and lascivious. "PHARTINGS, SEWINGS, AND ONE REAR, DILL" is so replete with flatulence, dung, obscenities, graphic sex, excretions, internal organs and genitalia, it makes Brecht's/Filliou's text seem tame in comparison. McCaffery's overall translative strategy is parodic, an attempt to turn Filliou's musical interlude into lewdness. McCaffery's translative readings can at times be gut-wrenchingly hilarious, but McCaffery and Nichol suggest that "parody can be legitimately considered a translative act as well" (RG 30). Through the comedy, McCaffery's texts act as a

*verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), or in Charles Bernstein's more recent phrase, as an "anti-absorptive work" (Bernstein 30). The bawdy language tends to disrupt the uniformity of naturalized speech or discourse, forcing his readers to consider the text as a rhetorical competition. In addition to entertaining his readers, McCaffery's texts become politically destabilizing, for as Baudrillard observes: "[p]arody, the reversal of signs or their hyperextension, can touch power more deeply than any force relation" (*Forget Foucault* 59)

### **Politics and Poetic Translation**

McCaffery's translative experiments undermine many metaphysical assumptions intrinsic to communicative language, instituting "a seminal violence against all that is fixed as domain" (8x8121). If McCaffery's technological fetish is to shatter the physical form of the book, McCaffery's translative mania is to explode the illusion of a text's semantic stability. By disseminating, misreading, morphing and distorting his sources, McCaffery shows that meaning persistently exceeds both intention and denotation. Even the most transparent statement contains ulterior meanings via his translative methods. McCaffery's research into translation joyfully demonstrates that language never presents a stable content to be consumed. Rather than being intrinsic to the text, meaning is provisional, personal, arbitrary, and ephemeral. Indeed, meaning comes to largely depend upon how a text is (mis)read or performed.

Through translation then, the work of art loses its object status to become more processual, dynamic, and participatory.

Throughout his career, McCaffery assiduously rejects subject-centred models of writing, criticizing expression as dependent “on obsolete mythologies of causality” (quoted in Nichol, “Checklist” 78) and literary personism for evading “the subject’s inherent linguistic constitution” (78). In contrast to subject-centred models, McCaffery consistently undermines the illusion of the Cartesian, self-authorizing presence. His numerous collaborations attempt “to eschew the cult of personality, to get closer to a kind of ideal of the i-less i, to establish a group identity where, in fact, there [is] a group activity” (*RG* 145). Similarly, the use of dialogue in the Toronto Research Group reports is designed to risk “thought’s proprietary nature” (*RG* 10).

McCaffery’s formulaic procedures and aleatorics also reduce the role of ego in composition, by restricting conscious thought and by surrendering to language’s own impulses and inclinations. In these ways, McCaffery suggests that “creativity is not integral/expressive but dialogic/relational” (quoted in Nichol, “Checklist” 75).

Continuing this critique of subjective expression, McCaffery exploits translation as a semiotic practice which is solitary, yet also inherently dialogic.<sup>58</sup> Typifying Derrida’s notion of writing as a trace structure, the translated word marks a dual lineage, recording on one hand the translator’s choice and preference, and on the other hand preserving a vestige of the author’s original sentiment. An artistic parallel to Barthes and Foucault’s questioning of the subject/author categories, McCaffery’s translations inscribe a dialogic multiplicity into each and every graph, and record not a single intent,

but a bifurcation of psyches, experiences, cultures, histories, semiotics, countries and languages. As the intersubjective form par excellence, translation also conflates writing and reading, collapsing the productive-receptive poles of transmission. Subtitled “a book of written readings,” *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins* co-opts both

the writer and the reader as co-initiators of a language event that both begins and ends as a reading experience thus, in a sense, eliminating all writing from the writing and negating the functional stance of the writer as anything more than a seer of his own reading. (“Note,” *DSM* n.p.)

McCaffery perhaps overly privileges “reading.” More accurately, McCaffery reveals the mutual contamination of these supposedly binary terms. Suggesting that all texts are translative, McCaffery conceives of composition as explicitly readerly (the passive tabulation of uncodified perception), and reading as writerly (the active construction of significant form from a semantic field). In translation, McCaffery finds an intermediary, hymenal form of writing that refuses to be subsumed by any one category, place or body. Refusing to rigorously separate translators from artists, readers from writers, poetry from translation, original from reflection, McCaffery’s translations ultimately unsettle “the normative assumptions around authorship” (*RG* 11).

The manner in which McCaffery questions authorial propriety differs significantly from text to text, but two works stand out in particular. *Six Fillious* is an homage to Filliou and his poetry, but here celebration is used not only to evoke laughter, but to systematically



diminish and complicate the importance of a namesake. If the title acknowledges Filliou as the wellspring of this poetic stream, it also alters his name from a proper to a collective noun (a process known as *antonomasia*). “Filliou” loses his individuality, becoming instead a linguistic term, an iterative sign, a mask borrowed and performed by five other authors. *Six Fillious* treats translation as a masquerade, in which authorial style and identity are “put-ons.” And like a carnival, this festive celebration conceals a sacrificial logic: the corpus of Filliou is perpetually cannibalized by the celebrants, lost so that it may be born anew.

*Intimate Distortions* also dissolves boundaries between author, texts, and translator, merging the identities of Sappho and McCaffery, presenting the text as an intersubjective field. If *Six Fillious* characterizes translation as a celebration, *Intimate Distortions* suggests it is a romantic encounter, a moment of intimacy. Consider McCaffery’s poem “SIXTY NINE” as an emblem of the relationship between translator and translated.

i am around you  
your parenthesis

i dont know what  
you know if

even knowing you  
know anything

but of two minds

to form a horn

some other blows (n.p.)

The image of the parentheses is suggestive in a number of ways: of coupling physically; of the vagina; of touching; of separation. Charged with sexual innuendo of horns, blowing, knowing, and sixty-nining, *Intimate Distortions* treats translation as a kind of sexual act, which allows McCaffery and Sappho to come together. Executed in a “spirit of love and respect” (back cover), *Intimate Distortions* considers itself a love poem where translation is ultimately an erotic act of physical and intellectual union.

However, this tendency of translation to dissolve personal boundaries marks another contradiction in McCaffery’s aesthetic. As we have seen, McCaffery exploits translation because it affords opportunities for personal expression and creative change. However, the very values of creativity and expression are lessened in translation’s intersubjective field of confused authorship.

McCaffery sees his own translations as politically invigorating, a liberation of suppressed elements which allows texts to propagate via new semantic configurations. McCaffery is to be commended for embracing rather than denigrating difference as aberration from an arbitrary origin or norm. But his quest for difference also commits him to a pursuit of impurity, infidelity, transgression, theft, fragmentation, and disruption. His writing becomes increasingly comfortable with invasion, appropriation and violation in content, form and practice. He eventually conceives of translation, for instance, as “deliberate mutilations” or “as the technique of

murdering without pain” (8x845). At this point of intensifying violence, McCaffery makes an unexpected claim. In the “Note on Method of Composition” for *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins*, McCaffery submits that he has “no responsibility whatsoever for the lexical material” in his poems:

as a poet i took responsibility for the page but not necessarily for everything that found its way onto the page. what i did was set up the sufficient conditions for an open field to form into which a word could find its own way settling in its own syntactic space and thereby determining the meaning of that space. (n.p.)

Contrasting sharply with past descriptions, here the translator is likened to an empty conduit, or more precisely a blank, passive and neutral surface on which language follows its own reflexes and surges.<sup>59</sup> This translator is neither creative nor accountable, and words find their “own way.” Why the shift? Why does McCaffery feel the need to abjure responsibility? Does he sense the violent trespassing inherent in his poetry? Is he attempting to hide his guilt? In the next chapter, I would like to examine the more menacing implications of McCaffery’s violent rhetoric, and look at what gets shattered in his production of difference.

## Chapter Four

### The Three Faces of Steve: Dubious Gender

Make sure you make it vague and ambiguous.

Steve McCaffery (*P* n.p.)

Although McCaffery's pursuit of the "vague and ambiguous" has created provocative poetry, it has also deterred political analysis of his writing. Like the New Critics before him, McCaffery contends that plural texts are apolitical by virtue of their multiplicity. This is clearly wrong, if only because plurality itself is a political value. In this chapter, I would like to move towards a critique of McCaffery, by analyzing how his writing engenders language -- an issue McCaffery scrupulously avoids. Ultimately, three divergent, even incompatible positions are discernible within his poetics, and his writing can be simultaneously read as patriarchal, feminist and androgynous.

**A Hidden Narrative: "the story of the body of a lady" (*P* n.p.)**

language is closest to being a body without a head, a vast, undifferentiated torso of inscription, a scarred, incised surface . . . .

Steve McCaffery ("Language Writing," *NI* 155)

McCaffery repeatedly pursues an aesthetic of transgression, rupture, fragmentation, theft, violation and superfluity as integral not only to art, but to linguistic function. But what's at stake in his aesthetic of the rift? More importantly, *who* is at stake? Who is ruptured, fragmented and violated? Who benefits from the dissolution of syntax, narrative, identity and communication? If we accept McCaffery's Marxist explanation, his poetic critique of capitalistic commodification benefits the linguistic worker, who assumes a more productive, immediate relationship with language. However, like Marxism itself, McCaffery's explanations avoid issues of gender, subsuming both men and women under the single, sexless category of the linguistic worker. In this respect, McCaffery's universal theory of social-linguistic function doesn't adequately address the difference between the sexes.

McCaffery contends that his poetry is revolutionary, yet his writing is compromised by its failure to address the inequality between the sexes. Although McCaffery promises social reform, the homogenized androgyny of his theories prevents any meaningful consideration of sexual difference, and, thus, of sexual prejudice. Focused on labour, production and reification, McCaffery's linguistic paradigm remains blind to the way that language discriminates against women.<sup>60</sup> Treating both reader and writer as androgynous, McCaffery's theories become a kind of linguistic imperialism, which ignores issues of sexual disparity. McCaffery thus risks perpetuating the same politics of sexual prejudice, sustaining women's oppression under the guise of combating linguistic alienation. The very liberatory sheen of his poetics disguises the same old politics of

sexual inequity, rendering it legitimate, even desirable. Thus, it is women who are at stake in McCaffery's aesthetic of rupture and transgression.

To show how McCaffery perpetuates patriarchy, I would like to evoke Alice Jardine's theory of "gynesis."<sup>61</sup> In Jardine's analysis of Western philosophy, the thinking-speaking-reasoning being has been traditionally gendered as male. Woman has not only been denied full access to the discourses which legitimate presence, but has been devalued as non-existent, irrational and other. Rather than recognize women's distinct consciousness, our culture has habitually gendered as female the space, agency or medium which conceives this masculine subject: the eternal, masculine soul manifests itself through the ephemeral, feminine body; the male mind expresses itself through writing troped as a womanly reflection; Jesus becomes flesh through Mary's womb. Although Woman has been consistently eclipsed in favour of Man, Jardine suggests she becomes ironically necessary to the assertion of male subjectivity. She provides the suppressed ground upon which Man performs his uninterrupted monologue.

Although this bias has come under heavy revision, Jardine argues that many theorists today perpetuate patriarchy under the guise of dismantling it. Through the process she dubs "gynesis," Jardine claims that Lacan, Derrida, Lyotard and others purport to deconstruct anthropocentric notions of being, truth, history, presence, God, and reason, but persist in subordinating the category of Woman to Man. Although they disturb the presence of the masculine subject, they do so by foregrounding its areas of exclusion, such as madness,

perversity or the body. These areas of exclusion, however, are still troped as female. Consequently, these supposedly radical writers maintain and sanction the prejudicial rhetoric that aligns Woman with irrationality, non-existence, physicality and flux. If these thinkers suspend rather than confirm masculine universality, they do so through the continued conflation of Woman with polymorphism, madness, ductility, surplus, and otherness. By troping Woman as a destabilizing force which exceeds or complicates representation, by utilizing the feminine as a deconstructive tool to undermine phallogocentrism, they once again deny Woman status and being. These writers place a disruptive value in the abjected areas of the feminine, and so continue to open, explore, name and claim female spaces. Woman once more becomes the metaphorical ground upon which their deconstructive dance is performed. Although Derrida, Lacan and Lyotard may localize truth and valorize indeterminacy, they still appropriate the feminine in their discourses. For Jardine, their deconstruction of universality tacitly rejuvenates the patriarchal tradition.

In many respects, McCaffery's texts exemplify Jardine's concept of gynesis. From his earliest writing onwards, McCaffery genders the competing vectors of language, labeling the material signifier as specifically female, and ideational content as male. In "The Scene of the Cicatrice" (less a review of Lola Lemire Tostevin's poetry than a statement of his own praxis), McCaffery describes Tostevin as conducting a double articulation: on one hand, her poem operates via a "paternal code" (*NI* 88) and "patriarchal signification" (88) when it presents a "lineal sequential message" (89); on the other hand, this

communication gets deconstructed by “a non-linear, non-linguistic force deriving from *a body prior to writing*” (89). This corpus, which evidences itself through “the various devices of typography, rhythmic and phonic patterns and para-verbal clusters” (89), is identified as feminine by McCaffery. Linguistic palpability is “clearly linked to unconscious drives and uteral-umbilical intuitions” and is labeled by McCaffery as “a gynecography” (90). Thus McCaffery creates a clear tension between a male message and a female graph. For McCaffery, poetry marks the eruption of feminine linguistic matter through the logical code: “[t]his is the scene of the cicatrice, the gynecographic wound that opens out into itself; invaginates to mark an atopia, a no-place too intensely present to be anything but a gap, a space, a deleted mark or wound” (92). As does Derrida, McCaffery presents the blank page, the very spacing of writing, as a metaphoric vagina or womb, which gestates the patriarchal proposition. Through the materiality of this feminine chora, “[t]he logophallic code gets biologically unspoken” (89). Although the male communiqué may remain undelivered in this way, the disruption is accomplished by maintaining Woman as subversion, by using Woman as a means to fulfill “the deconstruction of a code” (88). McCaffery’s configuration denies Woman stable identity, characterizing her instead as a kind of aesthetically useful chaos.

A similar process of linguistic engendering occurs in McCaffery’s poetry as well, especially in the *Carnival* series. Indeed, the dual vectors of language are personified, and enacted inside a sexual parable:



i start with the creation myth -- God as the ultimate alphabetical source of A/Adam the first man & first letter. Adams [sic] creation as an individual is simultaneous with his absorption into the matrix of the word (the visual-phonetic square) . . . (*A Section From Carnival*, n.p.).

In his “phonetic semantic allegory,” McCaffery equates the semantic-phonetic level of language with a paternal Godhead and His male heir. Furthermore, the capacity to individualize is characterized as a male quality. In contrast, the physical, material aspect of language is explicitly feminized and christened “Eve”: textual matter becomes maternal. Eve is decidedly non-verbal, expressing her presence in sensual, sensuous rhythms. Throughout *Carnival*, McCaffery manipulates the typographic similarity between “Eve” and “Eye” suggesting that the feminine is the visible page, graph, or text. Yet, Eve’s tangibility is *evil*; her body corrupts the immaculate bond between God and Adam, polluting the precise expressivity of the transcendent word. Cast as the material signifier, Eve functions as a disruptive and intrusive force which unsettles the theophallogocentric universe. McCaffery’s poetry thus rhetorically casts femininity in its traditional role as flux, physicality and excess. Moreover, it advocates the use of this feminine matrix in order to disrupt the theological myth of one God-like language that translates all differences, all codes.

We can perceive Jardine’s pattern also at work in McCaffery’s “The Property: Comma” (1976), a series of nine photographs, each accompanied by a page or less of prose. The first photo-image shows

a laboratory microscope, identified later as a “colposcope.” *Kolpos* is Greek for breast, womb, or vagina, so colposcope suggests an optical device for viewing the female sexual organs. If we read the colposcope as isomorphic with Irigaray’s speculum (or even Joyce’s “pudendascope”), it becomes a technology designed to lay bare to the male gaze the inner tissues and organs of women. The colposcope thus emblemizes a medical epistemology in which the diagnostic eye of objective knowledge is masculine, and the passive patient is female. The accompanying prose piece, written from the perspective of a microscopic slide, confirms the specimen to be examined is female.<sup>62</sup>

The ten letters form the small space and name it. I am permitted to approach it, to touch the outline of its text. Placed in the dorsal lithotomy position and draped, staring at the name, the word DRESS rises to expose my cervix. The cotton swabs soaked with my own mucus are lost against the blackness of the text. There is only one name visible, one name alone that describes, pinning me down within the language frame for its own special purposes. I am inspected by the speech, locked as a three-dimensional image in the two-dimensional language of this frame. I focus on the areas of white, the solid sections of the colposcope which in turn are providing me with the empty spaces necessary for an exit. I press myself out flat between the blackness of its letters. I squeeze between the text neither in nor outside of it. I am not allowed to leave the frame which has

named me. I am diagnosed surface, defined and accordingly treated. As it peers down at me the speech becomes covered with an abnormal tissue not revealed in this text. This is my speech that waits the opportunity to speak, that waits the lens through which it can create the language of its patient. ("PC" 171)

The female tissue is configured as a material surface lacking in subjective depth, as a tissue sample, a silent object of a male gaze, a mute specimen to be explored, prodded, dissected and researched. The medical gaze/discourse which names and describes the tissue is intrusive, appropriative and restrictive, "pinning [it] down within the language frame for its own special purposes." What cannot be named is conceived as "abnormal tissue," diseased and unhealthy. Caught within this androscopic evaluation, the feminine is articulated in terms of aberration and anomaly.

Portions of this text suggest that McCaffery intends to challenge rather than confirm this medical epistemology. The female specimen is conscious that it exists in excess of the scientific terminology which constrains it "as a three-dimensional image in the two-dimensional language of this frame." Moreover, the text notes that the afflicted tissue contains a potential value, and should not be simply disregarded or excised. Speaking by assuming a fictional female voice, McCaffery asserts that this hysteric tissue "is my speech" (read: female speech), and can be used to create a "language of [the] patient" which can counter and correct the universalizing, masculine-medical monologue. By foregrounding female abjection, McCaffery's text could be read as revising medicine's patriarchal bias.

Although McCaffery's closing seems to positively revalue the feminine, the whole passage is problematic in several regards. If McCaffery seeks to correct medicine's masculine bias, he does so by demonstrating the manner in which medical discourse reads the feminine as an eccentric, a surd, an aberration, a "differend" to Man. McCaffery thus perpetuates Woman's abjection, and precludes the possibility of an independent female subjectivity that is more than a deviant reflection of male subjectivity. Note that McCaffery actually scripts these words, while presenting them behind a female persona, in effect silencing the feminine perspective by speaking for it. Like his patriarchal predecessors, McCaffery continues to trope the feminine as abnormal because it serves his deconstructive purposes. In the past, feminine bodies were prospected as the scene/seen of empiricism; in "The Property: Comma," the feminine reveals the relativity of knowledge. By adopting female experience and perspective, McCaffery can effectively revise and relativize absolutist, objective male epistemology. Although the poet deconstructs rather than constructs knowledge, the feminine is yet confiscated as a conduit of (dis)enlightenment. His postmodern erudition still seizes the female body, using it to destabilize rather than confirm. McCaffery ultimately benefits here, by maintaining *his* position at the exclusion of *hers*, tendering himself as one who knows, an expert in uncertainty, or its equal here, the feminine.

The fifth photograph in "The Property: Comma" is a still from the James Bond movie "The Man with the Golden Gun." The frame shows Roger Moore lying on top of Britt Ekland, whose body is barely covered by a dress or towel: they're poised to kiss (see fig. 14). Like

medical discourse, the Bond flick portrayed here constitutes a patriarchal (and heterosexual) system of representation. Like the colposcope, the camera seeks out and exposes the items of male desire: women's sexual organs. The actress held in Bond's arms reflects: "I have no concern for my dress which rides up high above my legs and yet I sense his lens is focused there, that his eyes at least are trained in that one area and that eventually the sentence will predicate no more than that" (175). The camera becomes the equivalent of a surgeon's scalpel, an instrument which visually amputates the undesired section of the actress's body in order to accent her sexuality to the audience/voyeur. Seductive, streamlined, constricted by the lens, she rues: "[m]y legs are lost below my thighs. They are beyond speech. Beyond me" (175). This cinematic eroticization of the actress's body visibly truncates the female form, reducing her person to a sexual entrée for 007 (and the male audience). Moreover, the film amputates her *psyche* as well her torso. She is compliant in the presence of the secret agent, before whom she predictably swoons, caught in a cinematic game where resistance fuels her seductive appeal. This is the logic which captures women on film, and keeps them in cells: their desire to escape Bond/age renders them increasingly (and tragically) desirable. Ultimately both penile and penal, cinema is largely a symbology which frames female characters for male satisfaction.



Fig. 14. A photo from Steve McCaffery, "The Property: Comma." *The Story So Four*. Ed. by Steve McCaffery and bpNichol. Toronto: Coach House, 1976. 175.

By granting a voice to these glossy and glossed-over women, McCaffery's text reveals the pornography of popular cinema. Yet, like McCaffery's deconstruction of medical discourse, this text perpetuates some of the prejudices it purports to criticize. Once again, McCaffery exploits the feminine as marginalia in order to expose the masculine direction of cinema. Woman endures as an extra, a shadowy figure in the projector's light, which is then adopted by McCaffery as a method of analysis, equivocation and subversion. What does it matter if the script she speaks comes from McCaffery or Hollywood? In either case, the point of annunciation rests outside her body, and her gender. In "The Property: Comma," the female character is silenced so that McCaffery may use her experience of subjugation to dis-articulate cinematic ideology. Her oppression becomes his means of textual generation.

A morbid streak pervades "The Property: Comma," as it directs the reader's interest to dissected living tissue, to women in real and reel bondage, to regions of pain and the Other's displeasure. Such an obsession with cruelty appears in many of McCaffery's works. In "Absent-Pre-Sences" (1978), McCaffery uses abortion as a metaphor for poetry; writing becomes a d&c, the violent termination of a gestating idea. "An Effect of Cellophane" meditates incessantly on cuts, marks, grafts, splices and lacerations. Borrowing his terminology from Derridean theory, McCaffery transforms these abstract terms into literal narrative content. This is the sense in which McCaffery suggests the poem is a "muted description of a murder or torture" (*BD* back cover); Derridean "slash" becomes the story of a mutilated, lacerated corpse. It is as if violence cannot

remain at the thematic, aesthetic or inspirational level of McCaffery's poems; it intensifies and determines the surface meaning as well. Violence by the text becomes violence *in* the text. Following an aesthetic of prodigality, McCaffery's poems revere violence, gleefully portray cruelty, and indulge in a perverse joy for the violations of the flesh.

Consider McCaffery's poem *Intimate Distortions: a displacement of Sappho*. Although McCaffery describes this text as a love poem, it is frequented by images of contusions and abuse. Here is his eleventh poem:

when the dead announce their dead  
 the dead die again  
 to the sound of ripping skirts

and the bruised breast so desired  
 in life time

and the hidden heart heard in

public erection. (n.p.)

Obviously "erection" presupposes a male speaker, intruding upon a voice that was not only female but lesbian. Sappho's texts do not emphasize violence, but McCaffery does through his associations and ruminations on the text. Violence becomes privileged in McCaffery's version, I believe, because he wishes to use savage content as a metaphor for his translative procedure: narrative violence



substitutes for translative violence done to the supply text.

However, McCaffery's portrayal of violence is discriminating, and actively targets his female characters. If the material signifier is a feminine entity to McCaffery, then the source text to be translated becomes a female body to be ogled and visually enjoyed. *Intimate Distortions* even adorns itself with several pictures of topless women (see fig. 15), suggesting that the translator/reader is a kind of "voyeur" ("NINETY FOUR<sup>2</sup>):

miss /      swollen cheeks  
                   above necks swollen lips  
                   below *wow*

heads!

*wow*      maiden  
                   heads! ("Ten" n.p.)

However, this text does not merely look. Through allusive reference, McCaffery deliberately violates the intentions and propriety of his Woman-text. The source text is seized as a feminine body not only to be leered at, but to be explored, penetrated to its emotional core, and finally hacked up and rearranged.



Fig. 15. An illustration by Virgil Burnett, from Steve McCaffery, *Intimate Distortions: a displacement of Sappho*. Erin: Press Porceplic, 1979. n.p..

If *Intimate Distortions* conceals violence under the rhetoric of love and devotion, *Panopticon* (1984) clarifies McCaffery's misogynistic impulses. Like "The Property: Comma," *Panopticon* weaves cinematic, medical, legal, psychiatric and literary discourse to suggest, à la Foucault, that these are disciplines in the penal as well as epistemological sense of the word: they train, correct, incarcerate, punish and even execute the subject. Through images of headless eviscerated corpses, horrific descriptions of torture, homicide, correction, surgical procedure, incest and child abuse, *Panopticon* demonstrates the various ways society conditions its citizenry.

However, McCaffery's version of Foucault's paradigm is not sexually neutral; here power is not androgynous. In contrast, McCaffery genders Foucault's panoptical model by masculinizing the omniscient gaze while feminizing the observed object. For instance, *Panopticon* employs certain metaphors that suggest the poem is written, ultimately, from a male perspective. In one stream of text, the book describes a strange collection of female dummies, "SO DESIGNED THAT THE MALE GENERATIVE ORGANS CAN BE SUPERIMPOSED UPON THE BARE BONES AND WITH THE AID OF A LITTLE GLUE AFFIXED TO THE FIGURE" (*P* n.p.). In this scenario, the sex of the figures is determined by the presence or absence of a penis. McCaffery's poetics, like Freud's theories, is unmistakably predicated upon a male subjectivity. To be female in the poem is to be revealed as a lack, in need of phallic supplementation: "THE YOUNG WOMAN LIES THERE AS A FIGURE RECEPTIVE TO THE HORRIBLE ADHESION OF A DIFFERENT SEX" (*P* n.p.). To be female in *Panopticon* is to be watched. A nameless woman appears throughout

McCaffery's text in various narrative contexts: a nude emerging from a bath; a model striking a pose; a film star reading a script; a psychiatric patient reciting a case history; the heroine of a novel. As these scenarios merge and converge, they equivocate any notion of real action, but one constant remains; women are typically observed by male voyeurs, photographers, directors, authors or readers. In *Panopticon*, power is overwhelmingly male; in contrast, the subject that awaits conditioning, counseling or reform is typically female.

In *Panopticon*, the desire to reform also becomes a lust to deform the offending woman. McCaffery's script requires that his heroines be mutilated and killed. In one narrative pattern, a young woman is stalked by a male killer; in another instance, she appears as a dissected corpse on the autopsy table. Throughout the book, the murder of women appears as the telos of every epistemological system contained in this panoptical web. If *Intimate Distortions* adorns itself with pictures of topless women, if that poem eroticizes the skin of women's bodies, *Panopticon* describes the voyeuristic intrusion of male eyes into women's interiors, as they excavate "THE NATURAL CAVITIES OF HER BODY HER VAGINA HER MOUTH HER ANUS HER AUDITORY CANALS" (*P* n.p.). The passive desire to observe or inspect the female form escalates into a desire to dissect, and *Panopticon* becomes an erotics of the autopsy, where gratification is found in the peeled and exposed corpse of "a young woman" (*P* n.p.). As a voice in the poem perceives, "You want the perfect woman and you get her and you tear her to pieces" (*P* n.p.). This is the "PORNOSOPHIC CONTENT" of *Panopticon*. It isn't satisfied

with suspending its female characters in textual limbo or semiotic flux; it must eradicate and dismember them.

McCaffery tries to justify the violent qualities of his art through poststructuralist theories of linguistics. Borrowing from Derrida in particular, McCaffery sees violence as necessary to language and signification: “[i]n any system where an X stands for a Y, it seems valid to treat that act of representation, that standing for, as a violent act, a rupture of contexts, a displacement (of sign by sign, of word by thing etc.)” (“Counter Memory” 153). If “violence [is] landscaped in the ruins of language” (“Absent-Pre-Sences” 133), then to write is to ruin, and every text is “a mutilated entity” (128) because language functions as a “barbarism” (128); all writing follows the “contradictory vectors of violence and desire” (124). By vindicating his aesthetic in poststructuralist thought, McCaffery strives “TO MAKE MURDER PLEASANT MERELY PHILOSOPHICAL” (*P* n.p.), or merely semiotic. If McCaffery enthusiastically represents violence, it is because representation itself does unavoidable violence to its subjects. We are “[c]ondemned by language” (“PC” 173), posits McCaffery, sentenced and terminated by it. In this respect, representation operates as an indiscriminate, ambivalent power which simultaneously constitutes and destroys its subjects, male and female. If McCaffery dismembers various characters in his poetry, it is because “the subject’s inherent linguistic constitution” (quoted in Nichol, “Checklist” 78-79) will always already have fragmented identity. His poetry merely reveals the way language turns our insides out, in a process of psychic-semiotic disembowelment. This is

the sense in which McCaffery repeatedly equates “[w]riting and dying” (*P* n.p.):

writing links more to a death economy than an economy of presence. To write ‘I’ is to make oneself dispensable to that mark. The writer is rendered absent to the written. This is a fundamental rule of writing, linking it to death . . . (quoted in Nichol, “Checklist” 87)

For McCaffery, to sign is to put one’s own existence under erasure; “language creates us by disposing of us” (“Absent-Pre-Sences” 131).

If we accept McCaffery’s rationale, he is a pawn of a capricious language which ineluctably rends the subjects it renders. However, Nancy K. Miller argues that the postmodern desire for an anonymous textuality inevitably works in men’s favour because it “prematurely forecloses the question of identity” for women (Miller 106). Men may indulge in a dissolution of identity because they already enjoy a privileged position in the discourses of subjectivity, citizenship, presence, production and identity. Women, largely excluded from means of recognition, are already fragmented and disseminated, and, thus, in need of greater confirmation rather than dispersal. If we follow Miller’s logic, McCaffery’s reification of language produces a textual anonymity which continues to preclude female authorship. His eschewal of narrative withholds a socially important process of identification and subject formation, and further maintains Woman in flux and indistinction.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, his dissipation of the subject dehistoricizes and desocializes women as a discursive effect. Repudiating the search for authentic identity as complicit “with the

male myths of telos, loss and fall” (“Scene,” *NI* 88), McCaffery retains identity solely for men, and keeps Woman all fluxed up.

In this manner, McCaffery creates not so much a “linguistic economy of death,” as an economy of Woman’s death. His transgressive aesthetic selectively chooses female subjects to rupture and brutalize. His acts of poetic violence overwhelmingly depict men stalking female prey. If writing is a form of sentencing and termination, then McCaffery engenders the process as a *gynocide*:

this woman we speak of and this woman we kill . . . It is necessary for her action to be repeated endlessly and in that way seduced into its broken parts.

The victim of dismemberment, of pagination, of shattered pucelage, of intersecting shards and planes . . . We are envisaging [the] condition of her annihilation . . . She must be shattered into parts. (*P* n.p.)

If McCaffery emancipates readers from metaphysical conceits, he repeatedly feminizes the irruptive force, construing Woman as an enigma to be explored by male subjects. He still perceives Woman as mysterious and unpredictable, an object of desire and source of pleasure for man, particularly when she is fragmented and deformed. At its worst, this tendency escalates into a plot in which female characters are repeatedly eviscerated. Just as the Marquis de Sade places the zenith of sexual pleasure in the murder of Justine,<sup>64</sup> McCaffery gets his poetic thrills by symbolically dismembering his fictional heroines. McCaffery’s poetry reveals an unconscious narrative of violated and butchered female bodies, a Sadean story which is then tendered as a universal myth of textuality. Perhaps

McCaffery forsakes narrative because he does not wish to consider how consistently he tells the story of women's murder.

**Exposing "THE LANGUAGE CONSPIRACY IN OPERATION" (P n.p.): McCaffery and Feminism**

She *breached* the possible that came to her as flax.

Steve McCaffery (*TS* 126)

McCaffery certainly never considers his poetry as feminist. He is too suspicious of the Enlightenment values of progress, collectivity, justice, and emancipation which persist in even the most sophisticated forms of the movement. However, McCaffery's poetry does share many traits with a certain postmodern brand of feminism. By destabilizing narrative, history, mimetics and convention, McCaffery also disrupts the traditional discourses which historically have constrained, marginalized and devalued women. By questioning the unified subject, origin, objectivity, essence, foundation, truth, and universality, McCaffery reveals the male bias which has historically and socially informed these concepts. Although McCaffery may distrust any and all political programs, he seems intent on deconstructing the same patriarchal constructs as many feminist writers.

In this respect, McCaffery's poetics may not be entirely incompatible with feminism. In McCaffery's Marxist view, capitalism and the commodification of language necessarily precede patriarchy;



grammar, reference, and the other tools of linguistic clarity are the prerequisites for the creation of binaries, hierarchies, legitimate vs. illegitimate meanings, ownership and authority -- the very stuff of patriarchy. In contrast, feminism tends to stress the priority of the gender division as archetype of all difference; only through it can the institutions of capitalism arise. But such disputes may be neither here nor there. It is perhaps unimportant whether capitalism or patriarchy is more original, more authentic, more insidious, more pervasive. It's enough to note that the two economies are linked, and that a disruption to one effects a disruption to the other.

Thus, when McCaffery challenges grammar, narrative, reference and mimesis as modes of capitalism, he inevitably contests the linguistic forms of patriarchy as well. McCaffery's poetics are particularly relevant to feminism because they expose the patriarchal-capitalistic assumptions inherent in the "natural" language of narration, realism, exposition and communication. Through his poetry, McCaffery reveals the political bias of neutral forms of expression, exposing ways in which women are tacitly incorporated into a commodified and masculinized world. In this section, I would like to consider some of the ways McCaffery's poetry challenges patriarchal discourse.

Vital to any feminist program is the recognition that "perfect communication . . . [is] the central dogma of phallogocentrism" (Haraway 273). In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray posits that patriarchal culture replicates itself via a mirror-logic, a faith in perfect mimesis. Men, she argues, have been beguiled by a "Dream of Symmetry" (11) which teaches them to narcissistically

interpret the world as their own reflection, producing a *homme*-sexuality: a culture of, for and by men. Inversely, this specular economy interprets the feminine negatively: as aberration, weakness, passivity and absence. Reading Woman inside a system of equivalence (which is impossible to satisfy), the communicative model of language renders Woman as a second-class or defective subject.

McCaffery's writing challenges patriarchy by preventing language from operating naturally, that is to say mimetically. By resisting linguistic fenestration, McCaffery's poetry presents texts unencumbered by a servitude to an empirical or symbolic referent. As Gertrude Stein advises, McCaffery "[a]ct[s] so that there is no use in a centre" ("Tender Buttons" 498): penis, phallus or other. McCaffery's feminist potential is nascent in his challenge to realism, and his rejection of the linguistic imperative that subsumes Woman as a mere reflection of Man. Expanding language beyond replication, McCaffery creates the conditions wherein Woman can be constituted as other than defective or spectral Man.

Consider, for example, McCaffery's translations. Conventional translation demands an accurate reflection, and so keeps Woman within the phallogocentric web, reinscribing her merely as spectres of Man's own ideas, desires and needs. McCaffery works from the premise that "translation, as the phallic and paternal operation that history has condoned, will always be the suffocation of a female will to write" (8x8 45). In contrast to this tradition, McCaffery's innovative translations are not guided by the necessity of semantic equivalence. Quite the opposite: they tend to promote difference

rather than identity and, in this way, better manifest the suppressed, the peripheral, the irregular and irrational, the curved, and the feminine. McCaffery's translative praxis foregrounds the phenomenal, accidental, associative, or random elements of language -- those feminine elements suppressed in Occidental history. At the least, McCaffery's translative methodology can adapt, personalize, and expand phallogocentric language to better express feminine experience, impulses and bodies. At the most, his unorthodox translation can usurp phallogocentrism, replacing its absolute values with a multitude of decentralized meanings. Thus, McCaffery's translations do not constitute a male appropriation of a female voice -- a proposition which relies on patriarchal assumptions of legitimacy and ownership. On the contrary, McCaffery's translations enact a feminist subversion of masculine linguistic structures. His translations mark an alternate, possibly feminine semiotics: where reading does not have to fall in syntactic line behind the author's pen(is); where writing does not have to communicate an original, seminal message; where texts can articulate the neglected and silenced realms of being.

Some feminists have further questioned utility as an absolute value, criticizing the way it exploits women as the means of continuing the human bloodline and extending patri-linear society. When utility conscripts women as a means of duplication, it constrains them to a putatively natural function as mother, limits them to domestic spheres, and ultimately devalues them as people.

In contrast, McCaffery defies the cultural imperative of utility. In his poetics, use is neither innate nor natural, but a socially

constructed, ideologically motivated limit that precludes other poetic possibilities for being. By engendering “neither use nor exchanges but eruptions without purpose within structures of restraint” (“Writing,” *NI* 203), McCaffery presents “an alternative ‘libidinal’ economy” (“Language Writing,” *NI* 153) where signs and bodies are not necessarily subsumed for the purposes of production or reproduction. Although McCaffery doesn’t analyze utility’s complicity with the sex-gender system, his poetry creates the poetic conditions wherein Woman can have value other than as a means of duplication; other than as a token of exchange between men (Lévi-Strauss); other than as a castrated sexuality which terrifies little boys into resolving their Oedipus crises (Freud). Thus, McCaffery’s poems constitute a de-fetishization of language, an arena with “ALL OBSESSIONS GONE” (*P* n.p.), where women no longer have to be conscripted for reproduction. McCaffery aligns himself with a feminist project by critiquing the utilitarianism which appropriates Woman as second-class citizens.

Some feminists have also questioned our culture’s oldest form of expression: the story. In *Alice Doesn’t*, for example, Teresa de Lauretis suggests that conventional narrative is inherently patriarchal. Using the structural analysis of plot as outlined by Propp and Lotman, de Lauretis argues that the mythic, narrative hero is always male, regardless of the character’s sex. In contrast, the space in which the narrative action occurs is regularly gendered female. Every narrative structure thus revolves around a male protagonist who must conquer a female opponent, “regardless of the gender of the text-image, because the obstacle, whatever its

personification, is morphologically female and indeed, simply, the womb” (de Lauretis 119). Narrative itself becomes a covert patriarchal construct designed to ensure the presence of Man and the otherness of Woman.

McCaffery’s contribution in this respect is important. He does not tell a story, because a retelling of the tale, even from a female perspective, inevitably reinscribes masculine values. The problem is not the presence of *master* narratives, but *narrative* itself.

McCaffery thus abandons narrative altogether, promising a return to a pre-Oedipal time, before Woman was cast as a monstrous other. If the first priority of narrative has been the establishment of sexual difference, then non-narrative poetics offers the possibility of writing without the universal predicate of male subjectivity. By creating non-storied structures, McCaffery enables Woman to be conceived as other than a Sphinx, Medusa, enigma, Sleeping Beauty, victim, virgin or alien queen.

Consider McCaffery’s narrative experiments in *Panopticon*. In place of a single unifying vision, *Panopticon* offers discordant viewpoints, registered in the orthography of the page itself. In “‘Voice Whisht Through Thither Flood’: Steve McCaffery’s *Panopticon* and *North of Intention*,” Marjorie Perloff notes that *Panopticon* consistently “shifts registers, alternates viewing ‘channels,’ and disrupts whatever linear mechanisms we might expect” (288). Perloff interprets this loss of narrational control as a liberation from the panoptical I/eye of omniscient narration. Perpetually sabotaging the narrator’s clarity of vision, McCaffery impedes language’s ability to function as a medium of unceasing surveillance.

McCaffery's own *Panopticon* turns the Benthamite model inside out: the "place where everything is visible" (*OED*) becomes, on the contrary, the place where nothing is. The very layout of this unpaginated book -- with its paste-up cancels and overprints, its mixed type fonts, horizontal black and white bands of "simultaneous" verbal material . . . suggests that the time of central "wells," from which all "individuals" are to be "observed," has long since passed. (286)

Although the text repeatedly concentrates on (a) female character, Perloff counters that "soon we come to see that there is no focus" (286). Syntax, narration, typography are complicated precisely so that no single (male) subject can dominate. If McCaffery blinds the father's eye, he does so in order to disrupt its power to identify, sentence and incarcerate its subjects. As a voice in the text declares, "[m]y relishing eye cannot emerge to bind these stirrings in an image" (*P* n.p.). Thus Perloff describes McCaffery's poetry as "a prolegomena [sic] to the dispersal of the Panopticon's inmates, the release of the 'imprisoned' words and letters from their cells" (295). By abandoning third-person omniscience, McCaffery's poem opposes the panoptical-patriarchal restraint implicit in conventional storytelling.

Although some may decry McCaffery's dissipation of the subject as dangerous for women, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous have found strength and opportunity in a diffuse subject. Luce Irigaray suggests that every model of the subject has been appropriated by Man, and Woman has been consigned to the "sex

which is not one”: a sex which is neither single nor whole. In *Alice Doesn't*, Teresa de Lauretis similarly suggests women experience a split consciousness: “the position of woman in language and in cinema is one of non-coherence; she finds herself only in a void of meaning, the empty space between the signs” (8). If women are constantly coerced into accepting patriarchal constructions of femininity, they also know they are not the objects men desire them to be. For de Lauretis, a feminist psyche emerges as a dialogue between anthropocentric codes and women’s experience within them. Feminist subjectivity is found “in that political, theoretical, self-analyzing practice by which the relations of the subject in social reality can be rearticulated from the historical experience of women” (de Lauretis 186).

At times, McCaffery’s poetry achieves a double-articulation by speculating upon the lived experience of women within patriarchal discourses. McCaffery frequently makes readers aware not only of the dominant patriarchal discourse, but the effects it has on women’s bodies. In “The Property: Comma,” for example, female characters may be described, named, and projected by patriarchal sign-systems, yet they also surpass these same categorizations which identify them. McCaffery’s fictional women counter their public images with personal and historic realities absent from masculine depictions of femininity. Look at the stream-of-consciousness narration of actress Britt Ekland as she is kissed by Bond. Thinking first of “this film that I’m in” (175), she is aware of herself as an object of desire, a screen image for other men to look upon: she is conscious of the patriarchal script which requires her to be a sex kitten, cognizant of the

discrepancy between her lived experience and this erotically-charged film fantasy she portrays. In contrast to her aroused and eager film character, Eklund is bored and disinterested. The plot she acts out is repetitive and predictable: “[i]t has all happened before to me. And better” (175). She recognizes the Bond formula as a “complex tissue of . . . lies” (175), a male mirage. By revealing the script’s insufficiencies and delusions, the actress asserts her existence beyond the film’s sexist depiction, exposing how popular movies constrict her, and eventually others.

Repeatedly emphasizing silenced and neglected voices, McCaffery describes his writing as “a Poetics of Alterity” (quoted in Burnham, “Interview” 4) which has an “ethical responsibility to the Other” (4). Driven by the subject’s “ethical imperative” (4) towards the object, McCaffery consistently privileges the repressed, obscured or silenced. Although his allegiance to the “other” does not always overtly address the female gender, his poetics has clear affinities with feminism, such as its privileging of the reader. McCaffery’s sound poetry advocates a return to the body as an occluded workplace of language, in a manner which parallels Hélène Cixous’s advice to “return to the body which has been more than confiscated . . . Write yourself. Your body must be heard” (312). Sometimes, McCaffery even stresses the peripheral, the substantive, the eclipsed, the mute precisely as places of feminine erasure. In effect, McCaffery follows a feminist program similar to the one outlined by Luce Irigaray, insisting “deliberately upon those *blanks* in discourse which recall the places of [women’s] exclusion” (Irigaray 142). In “Blood.Rust.Capital.Bloodstream.,” he further declares his desire to



“SWITCH THIS DISCOURSE INTO THE MOUTH OF HER” (*NI* 56), and, accordingly, McCaffery twice chooses to translate lesbian poets (Sappho and Stein). Similarly, in “The Property: Comma,” the focus moves to the neglected objects of medical and cinematic discourse: the hysterical patient and the clichéd femme fatale.

Think about *Panopticon* in this regard. A nameless voice in the text rues “I dreamt there was a place for me within the unwritten history of his fabric” (*P* n.p.), and sure enough the book is structured in order to give the marginal, mad, abjected and mute a chance to speak. In an inversion of Foucault’s power paradigm, the passive female object of desire becomes an active, directing, impassioned seer. Thus, the text maintains at one point that “the camera [is] held by the woman” (*P* n.p.), and that the text is a story of “the he the *she* describes” (*P*, n.p.; my italics). If the book is violent, it teaches about the pain and injustice women experience under patriarchy. It focuses our attention on the areas of women’s discomfort in order “TO CHANGE THE COURSE OF YOUR DANGEROUS DESIRES” (*P* n.p.). To achieve this, *Panopticon* re-articulates desire from the perspective of a female subject. McCaffery’s motive here is not to perpetuate women’s silence, but to let the hysterical patient speak, to give women a voice, to allow their participation in discourse. In *Panopticon*, women are no longer, in Freud’s words, “the problem”; on the contrary, they begin to announce themselves as independent, desiring subjects, and so shatter the systems founded on their suppression. In this manner, McCaffery exposes the patriarchal “LANGUAGE CONSPIRACY IN OPERATION” (*P* n.p.), a move which parallels Irigaray’s deconstruction of Freudian psychoanalysis and

Platonic philosophy. By focusing on the remaindered and muted, McCaffery reveals the sexual bias and inadequacies of universalizing discourses which exclude women's experiences.

Thus, when Adeena Karasick accuses McCaffery of practising a "hom(m)osexuality where language is passed from one man to another . . . with no openings or gaps" (Karasick 86), she seriously misreads his texts. Few poets are so doggedly dedicated to voids, lacunae, openings, speechlessness, blanks, riddles and space as is he. Few poets vandalize logic and linear flow, defy classification and systematics, dissolve categories and boundaries to the extent McCaffery does. He devotedly minds the gap. If his poetry is not feminist per se, it is surely aligned with this project via its persistent recognition of the margins and engagement of the other. To represent his poetry as patriarchal misrepresents its complexity, variance, equivocity and interrogation of anthropocentric tradition.

**"AND AS IF IT HAS BEEN SEX that has narrated this" (8x8 125): Post-Feminist McCaffery**

The ontology of the neuter looks promising. /  
It is everything / and it is everywhere.

Steve McCaffery (CW 99)

As part of his critique of reference, McCaffery disputes the nostalgic belief that sex represents a physical, anatomical difference grounded in bodies, a reality outside and beyond language.

Following the logic of Baudrillard's simulacra, McCaffery treats sex

(and so gender) as a rhetorical trope, a difference articulated in language, a signatory effect fabricated through various forms of address, narrative positions and vocabularies.<sup>65</sup> Rather than attaching to the body, “sex is a pure discharge, an absolute signifier detached from its signified” (“Blood.Rust.,” *NI* 55). The poet argues that “sex is a fallen mark” (*P* n.p.) precisely because it is produced textually, as “a sexual code that has retreated from (and advanced beyond) the genital model it supported” (“Scene,” *NI* 91). Thus, McCaffery’s poetry displays an extreme version of linguistic constructivism, wherein neither sex nor gender are primordial conditions of the subject, but rather meanings produced purely as discursive effects.

If sex and gender are semantic rather than somatic, how then does language construct sexual identity? According to McCaffery, the relationship between textuality and sexuality is not a simple declarative or indicative one. In *The Abstract Ruin* (1976), McCaffery suggests that:

[w]riting descends from the act of weaving, which Freud sees as a modestic gesture, an act of covering the crotch, a pudendic concealment, the bashful hiding of the personal areas. To say the latter is to say as much as need be said re subject matter in the poem. (n.p.)

Textuality does not expose, reveal, or clarify the truth of one’s sex. It does not peel away the layers of deceptive clothing to provide an illuminating and decisive flash of genitalia. On the contrary, writing hides, complicates and confuses gender, concealing the body under a fabricated surface. Yet in McCaffery’s language-centred poetics,

underneath all these linguistic clothes, we have no body other than a fabricated one, no sex other than a surrogate, no gender other than “falsies.” This is the paradoxical logic of McCaffery’s linguistic constructivist position: on the one hand sex is constructed only through language; on the other hand, language inevitably dislocates and distorts that same sexuality, perpetually deferring and displacing it. This is the sense in which McCaffery claims “SEX IS NOT A LANGUAGE BUT A LITERATURE” (*P* n.p.). It produces not clarity and definition in the manner of the logical positivists, but ambiguity, contradiction and even absurdity in the manner of the poets. In other words: when sex and gender are treated as semiotic productions, an irreducible ambivalence is introduced into that production.

Thus, Irigaray’s claim that the female sex “is not *one*” is too humble. More accurately, no sex can be singular and complete, and so Irigaray’s model of female sexuality becomes the universal paradigm of sex. Because language conceives of the subject in terms of what it is not, language inevitably others every subject, rendering it complex, contradictory and inadequate to itself. According to the sign’s oxymoronic logic, any gendered identity necessarily contains its opposite as a collateral, constitutive presence; and so language engenders an unavoidable bisexuality in the subject. In McCaffery’s terms, sex “demonstrates best the principles of an unrestricted GENERAL ECONOMY (Bataille) within the structural and epistemological restraints of the restricted system” (“Blood.Rust.,” *NI* 55). In other words, the construction of definite gender is always accompanied by a general economic play which exceeds, disrupts and

deconstructs this sexual categorization: “[s]ex . . . exceeds all value to constitute an energetic subversion of the human capital machine” (“Blood.Rust.,” *NI* 55). And again, as he neatly asserts, sex produces “(S)EXCES” (8x8 126).

McCaffery’s poetry seeks to emphasize this ambiguous, counter-constructed nature of sex-gender in language. If “THE MARK UNDERMINES THE MEANING IT ELABORATES” (*P* n.p.), then McCaffery stresses the places where the subject is not coincident with itself, where the certainty of sex is reversed, where the male becomes feminine, and vice versa. Consider McCaffery’s engendering of linguistic ideality/matter as male/female in *Carnival*. Even as he structures language in this patriarchal way, he also, clearly, breaks his own pattern. Adam’s fall in *Carnival* is not simply from the divine, abstract information of an incorporeal word into base matter; it also includes the reverse. McCaffery describes Adam’s expulsion from textual paradise as a “graphic descent from the purity of the letter as pure substance & pure volume thru the word & the semantic sense (represented in Eve & her theories of playful permutations evil, ever, etc) & finally into language itself” (*A Section From Carnival*, n.p.). In McCaffery’s explanation, Adam begins as “pure substance” lapsing into “semantic sense.” Rather than a base corporeality, Eve assumes the role of ideology, denotation, Kristeva’s symbolic. *Carnival* further describes, in red ink, the male function as:

ADAM’S WAY:

THE RETURN OF THE WORD

AND THE SYLLABLE TO THE

PICTURE & THE RETURN OF THE

## PICTURE TO THE BODY (CI)

And in black ink, the female function as:

EVE'S WAY:

THE RETURN OF THE WORD

BACK INTO THE WORLD

CREATING THE FALSE

WORLD FROM THE WORD.

THE RETURN OF THE

SYLLABLE TO THE

EVIL SYBIL BULL

THE REMOVAL OF BREATH

FROM THE WORD (CI)

The physicality of language, its icons, gestures and phonemes, are here gendered male. The Adamic tendency in *Carnival* is also a restitution of the linguistic body, of tactility, aurality and sensuality. In contrast, the ideological plane is gendered female. Eve disrupts through her concepts and abstractions, transforming physicality into thought. Although this dreaming sibyl is still evil, she is aligned with symbolic order rather than flux, with culture and ideology rather than the marginal or excluded. Thus, *Carnival* partially reverses Jardine's pattern of gynesis. Deliberately confusing rhetorical tropes, McCaffery mixes and blurs the traditional gender roles. *Carnival* is sexually problematic, even hermaphroditic; masculine and feminine categories are complex rather than singular, hybrid rather than pure.

Let's look once more at "The Property: Comma." The third and ninth photographs of this poem depict scenes from the Watergate affair. In the first, John Ehrlichman and his wife are encircled by a

pressing phalanx of reporters' phallic microphones; the besieged Ehrlichman appears threatened and agape, mid-stream a hot statement (see fig. 16). In the second, John Mitchell, "full of hate and fear" (179), leers at a camera from behind the passenger window of a car. The accompanying passages document a process of journalistic examination and dissection of character, strikingly similar to the poem's medical/cinematic portrayals of female subjects.<sup>66</sup> Like the intrusive camera, colposcope or speculum, the journalistic eye aggressively intrudes upon Ehrlichman and Mitchell, reporting upon their private affairs to a public hungry for scandal and retribution. The prose which accompanies the first photograph is written from the perspective of a male journalist, standing in the shadows behind the illuminated Ehrlichman.

I thrust my microphone forward out of the dark background into the language of the frame and my eyes are fixed on him, fixed on the back of his neck where I notice a small red scab. I am there to interrogate, to constitute the language we are all in. But I am lost in the small zone of silence behind his eyes, through his head, the silence of the scab. Invisible. There is no emotion in the scab it seems apart from him but like him it was found guilty. The silence of the scab was a conspiracy against the language of his face, the language of the frame. (173)

Like the abnormal tissue identified by the colposcope, the reporter exposes not only a scab on Ehrlichman's neck, not only a physical deformity, but his social and moral wretchedness as well. As the

politicians are “ABSOLUTELY. UNMERCIFULLY. FINALLY” (174) examined by the media, Ehrlichman and Mitchell are “spread out on this surface of the frame” (179). For journalistic intents and purposes, they “become that surface” (179), becoming in the public eye an abjected object, social pariahs. McCaffery notes the restrictive power of popular pictures and reports, realizing how “both the image and the words imprison” (179) the politicians in a static, stationary and delinquent form. In effect, the rigorous media inspection frames the politicians, circumscribing their characters and implicating their guilt. Bounded within journalistic discourse, Mitchell simultaneously becomes “that space escribed as actual target. He is the space [the journalist aims] these words at” (179). Similarly, “John Ehrlichman . . . stands condemned by the implication of the sentence stretched out beneath him” (175). The nameless reporter in the shadows realizes that his journalistic story requires its *pharmakon* (sadism demands a news-worthy story); “I too am lying. I am doing my job. I am writing the caption beneath the picture that will sentence him for all time” (175), he muses. Like diseased tissue under a microscope, Ehrlichman and Mitchell are inspected and terminated by the press which represents them as social deviants to the populace.





Fig. 16. A photo from Steve McCaffery, "The Property: Comma." *The Story So Four*. Ed. by Steve McCaffery and bpNichol. Toronto: Coach House, 1976. 173.

Men here are aggressively examined, objectified, materialized, framed, ostracized and sentenced in a manner parallel to women's suffering under medicine and cinema. Through the power of McCaffery's depictions, the men too become peripheral figures, trapped within discourses which do not adequately represent them. Treated as miscreants, Ehrlichman and Mitchell occupy the same marginal positions as the victimized women, becoming, in a sense, feminized. Just as the women are displaced by their patriarchal representations, the politicians here are circumscribed by their tabloid portrayals. Like the day-dreaming Bond-actress, the real Ehrlichman supersedes his media role as the guilty man. In the reporter's ruminations, Ehrlichman is typified by that which escapes journalistic representation, characterized by "the silence . . . behind his voice" (173). His thoughts, essence, soul, *chakras*, "the inner vibrations of John Ehrlichman" (173) are unrepresented in the journalistic quest to establish culpability. Similarly, Mitchell may be "pinned by the syntax of the verdict" (179) yet he is "as far away from speech as any one man could be" (179). The popular image of him as a crook is only a "visual shell" (179) which doesn't account for his existence as "an after-language, an after-speech" (179). In effect, McCaffery shows how both men and women are marginalized by the discourses which sentence them. His poem no longer allows us to construe the margins as an exclusively feminine space.

In "The Property: Comma," we are thus faced with two politically problematic propositions. Either the poem demonstrates the cannibalistic nature of patriarchy: its proclivity to turn its delimiting, destructive gaze on men; its tendency to devour and

castigate those male subjects it purportedly empowers. Or, perhaps more radically, the poem demonstrates an indiscriminate linguistic power which simultaneously constitutes and deconstitutes its subjects:

He was murdered by a verb. The language alone can testify to that. I cannot describe the murder here, only the constant process of the murdering. That is the one constant I'm allowed. It is a rule of this particular grammar that you see. (179)

Indeed, the universally murderous effects of representation question the legitimacy of the term patriarchy itself.<sup>67</sup>

Let us examine this phenomenon again, in the poem's most disturbing section. The eighth image of "The Property: Comma" shows "Brigadier General Teferi Benti . . . Ethiopia's head of state" (178) conducting a military inspection of his troops. Benti, a career soldier, assumed political control of Ethiopia after its democratic parliament was dissolved in a military coup. Amnesty International alleges that Benti systematically tortured and murdered his citizenry, purging all political opposition from the country. Aggressive, masculine, rigid, despotic, regimented, militaristic, Benti epitomizes unrestrained phallic power. Yet in McCaffery's poem, Benti becomes the victim of the military and bureaucratic code he upholds. As leader of a nation and army, Benti becomes the object of the public's scrutinizing gaze: "He is that stated line of speech, a rigid form of the statement on parade here" (178). Its strictures are seen in the unnaturally upright posture of his body, the product of army discipline. Military training not only sclerotizes Benti's body, it

erases his identity, substituting for it the anonymity of a soldier's uniform. One of Benti's soldiers, standing "as straight and as rigid as he does" (178), notes: "[t]he uniform will hide [Benti] just as my own face will continue to be hidden by the limits of his language" (178). Benti is presented as an excessive being, whose reality lies somewhere beyond this staged military spectacle: "There is now no possibility that his actual thoughts might be exposed in this frame" (178). We can add one important fact missing in McCaffery's text: shortly after he seized Ethiopia, Benti was assassinated by an ambitious military staff. In an ironic twist, the soldier's code Benti served so extravagantly in turn claimed his life.

Once again, McCaffery describes Benti with a rhetoric virtually synonymous with the descriptions of the victimized women. Although Benti is a testosterone-drenched torturer, McCaffery persuasively represents him as a being scrutinized, abjected, and terminated by a logo-phallic code. Is Benti the oppressor or the oppressed here? The answer is ambiguous and, in this respect, McCaffery's poem suggests that identity has no essential qualities except those generated in the language of portrayal. The poem invalidates abstract and transcendent terms like "experience," typically used to constitute differences between men and women. Experience itself comes to depend upon the linguistic frame of reference employed to view the subject. What is more: no trope or narrative position can be appropriated and claimed as intrinsically male or female; in contrast, McCaffery's poem shows that all tropes are nomadic and exchangeable. By treating masculine subjects in the manner usually reserved for feminine objects, for example,

McCaffery virtually conflates men and women's experience -- to the extent that the most divergent positions on the sexual and social spectrum reveal fundamental similarities. The powerful and the disempowered, men and women, mainstream and marginal, executors and the executed: in "The Property: Comma," antipodes meet, merge, and meld in a deconstruction of binary thought that eventually includes the sexual differends themselves.

The errancy of linguistic tropes is forcefully demonstrated in *Panopticon*. The book may begin with clearly set gender roles, which cast men as active subjects and women as passive objects, but these narrative positions are quickly and thoroughly transgressed. *Panopticon* plays a game of roving I/eye, in which the recipients of the intrusive gaze are not necessarily female, nor voyeurs male. Through the book, men and women swap places, so men become visualized victims, and women animated murderers. The book systematically switches traditional sexual roles in an orgy of permutated plot. Consider this band of text:

HER BODY REMAINED MOTIONLESS AND A COLD  
LUMP CAME IN HIS THROAT

or:

HIS BODY REMAINED MOTIONLESS AND A COLD  
LUMP CAME IN HER THROAT

or:

THEIR BODIES REMAINED MOTIONLESS AND A  
COLD LUMP CAME IN BOTH THEIR THROATS

or: (*P* n.p.)

Such convolutions occur to an extent beyond any simple reversal of the reins of power. So permuted are the tropes of seer/seen that the narrative positions ultimately lose any gendered value. In clinical fashion, *Panopticon* confuses the rhetorical tropes, figures and metaphors which connote gender. In the end, sex becomes literally a matter of perspective, an effect of narration, a moveable point in the language game.

Perhaps more importantly, McCaffery investigates the manner in which conventional language tacitly constructs gender. For McCaffery, the transmission model of language contains an ideology of the subject as a discrete and sexed being. Hardly neutral or natural, classical language is politically motivated by this implicit metaphysics of presence: it demands definite, unambiguous subjects; it creates hierarchy; it subordinates objects to subjects. Postulated as an exchange between distinct individuals, the transmission model of language further maintains the very boundaries essential to sexual differentiation. Orthodox language not only tacitly repudiates the bisexuality of the subject, it enshrines sexual difference as an unstated structural principle.

In opposition to classical language, McCaffery's poems endeavor to reveal the hermaphroditism of the linguistic self that exists as a suppressed presence within the transmission model of language. If the self is a linguistic fiction, then McCaffery's poetry strives to display the "infinite androgyny of the text" ("Absent-Pre-Sences" 129). His poetry shows the subtle ways "language . . . fixes all of us" ("PC" 176): "fixes" in the sense of rendering us neither male nor

female, but somewhere in the interim between those categories. In the process, McCaffery interrogates some of the linguistic structures necessary for the production of a sexed subject. Such a structure is the shifter.

In "Shifters" (1976), McCaffery investigates the abstract terms by which we denote a subject presence in a text. Largely comprised of pronouns and expletives ("I," "you," "here," "there," "this," "that," etc.), shifters form a class of words whose meaning or referent changes according to who utters them or to what they refer. The significance does not inhere in the word, but shifts according to its context. In some traditions, shifters have been understood as units of pure reference -- as the deictic process incarnate. As McCaffery explains on the back cover, they have been considered as "indices (Peirce). non-committal formal indicators (Heidegger). 'Dasein-designations'. ego-centric particulars (Russell)" (n.p.). All of these specifications point to the shifter as a unit of unequivocal and primordial presence.

McCaffery's poem challenges this deictic role assigned to the shifter by continually demonstrating its contextual, protean, and transitory nature; "shifters shift within a topography and topology of text where every 'i' is a 'here' every 'you' a 'there'" (back cover). In short, shifters are (wonderfully) meretricious and contradictory, revealing a textual position rather than a transcendent identity. How can a pronoun clearly denote a person's presence, asks McCaffery, if the word "I" can refer to an infinite number of people? Undermining Benveniste, McCaffery suggests that by saying "i // am he who / says // I" (n.p.), one does not mark an authoritative presence. On the

contrary, the pronoun, like the proper name in translations, is empty and valueless, prone to temporary appropriation by anyone who speaks or writes. The shifter does not contain meaning (as classic semiology instructs) but rather assumes value only in a negative relation with other shifters:

he

is the  
absence

of my  
i

you  
are what  
i

am apart  
from

what  
i

is  
a part

of (n.p.)



Held in a mutually consolidating tension, shifters signify their own void as much as a presence. They depend upon other terms for definition of themselves. Shifters ultimately disrupt any sense of propriety or definition of inner versus outer: “but you’re always outside / of what i’m in” (n.p.). Furthermore, the shifter is subject to the effects of time. As situations change, the “i” or “you” is “always new” (n.p.). The subject for McCaffery is in motion:

now

i am not

what i was

when

i did it (n.p.)

This metamorphic capacity of the shifter prevents it from designating any stable presence. In McCaffery’s poem, a new conception of the shifter emerges, one that is provisional rather than absolute, a correlate rather than a referent, textual and contextual rather than deictic. McCaffery’s revisions imply that no human is simply present. The shifter inaugurates a Lacanian psychology in which no subject can be coincident with itself. Or as McCaffery aptly phrases it, “a true subject is a barred subject” (back cover).

Traditionally, shifters mark not only an identity but a sex as well. Through words such as “he” and “she,” the shifter not only generates the fiction of a stable empirical subject, but classifies people through its implicit sexual binary. The uncritical use of the pronoun actively categorizes humanity as either male or female, and

so reduces the number of possible sexualities to a manageable deuce. The linguistic gender system thus behaves as a restricted economy designed to enclose the diversity of sexuality within one of two classifications.<sup>68</sup>

Following in the footsteps of “Shifters,” McCaffery’s poem “Combinatory Women” explores how pronouns mark a female presence. Published in *Theory of Sediment* (1991), the poem obsessively combines and recombines the third person pronoun “she” and the possessive adjective “her.” Each sentence of the poem is predicated upon this nameless “she,” or some attribute of “hers”: “[h]er ratios, her clause her third stem” (*TS* 125); “[s]he is the she she constitutes in social acts” (*TS* 127). Permutating these markers through an array of contexts and sentences, the poem demonstrates the diverse, even contradictory, ways femininity may be constructed in language. In effect, the poem expands the limits of linguistic femininity beyond the restraints of sense and grammar. That is to say, “Combinatory Women” does not use feminine pronouns to produce clear and definite subjects, but rather ambiguity and sexual multiplicity. In contrast to the reflexive use of “she” and “her” as unproblematic indicators of a real sex, McCaffery begins to use these same gender markers in deliberately anti-utilitarian and transgressive ways. By convoluting and cross-purposing conventional syntax, for example, McCaffery’s language does not resolve into simple and singular statements. In contrast to logical classification, McCaffery’s sentences are polysemic, fertile with possible interpretations. Lines such as “[h]er lupercalias condone the insufficiency of dials in her encounters with longevity ranks

insubstantial in her feats" (*TS* 125) have no neat sexual value. The language is in rapture, adrift in "her emphasis on ecstasy" (125), producing more meaning than can be contained within a binary. Defeating any gesture to an exterior through the super-charged ambiguity of its phrasing, the poem complicates the transcendent ability of language to mark a flesh and blood person male or female. Sexuality, in other words, is no longer patrolled by its anatomic referent. Accordingly, the words "she" and "her" begin to lose their ability to sex subjects because they no longer link to "real," historical women. Constantly evoking gender without ever attaching to one sex, "Combinatory Women" deliberately abuses the gender-denoting capacity of feminine pronouns/adjectives: it constitutes a technological catachresis within the linguistic gender machine.

In other words, female sexuality is no longer indentured to a genital master, but becomes free to explore new potentials and patterns, bounded only by the limits of language itself. "Combinatory Women" projects what Donna Haraway terms a "cyborg" and Arthur Kroker calls a floating or android sexuality, where gendered signs are severed from the body, and "sex is detached from its old chain of referents" (*Spasm* 157). In this sense, the poem can be read as the inauguration of some radical third gender, wavering between the antipodes of male and female. As McCaffery suggestively phrases it: "[t]he meanings of her she that grow towards her lengths impossible" (*TS* 125). The title of the poem is appropriately plural: the significance of "Woman" is combinatory rather than binary; she is as diverse as the sentences that can be formed using her words. No longer policed by a grammatic or referential gendarme, femininity

becomes a variorum of linguistic permutations, lacking any essential character; “[s]he is all her propositions” (*TS* 126).

McCaffery’s poetry does not engage the technologies which produce simple sexed selves, but rather presents unstable fields of detechnologized language. McCaffery denudes language of its sexual clothing, its linguistic markers of a certain sexuality, revealing language in an unstructured and elemental form -- a kind of naked textuality which precedes and pre-empts gender assignation. His texts present not clear, gendered spaces, but rather multisexual, pregendered fields wherein various, even incompatible readings may be produced. His poems constitute “an ambivalent locus both pre-sexual and post-sexual where the writing subject never forms into a ‘self’” (“Scene,” *NI* 88-89). In *Every Way Oakly* (1978), McCaffery writes: “the balancing of he and she. / he s he is / a question of its difference” (12). Here, the graphic difference between he and she is an “s,” a letter rather than a body part. In language, the sexes are distinguished by the presence or absence of a visual/aural marker, an “s” rather than a phallus. In the middle line, McCaffery holds this “s” in an indeterminate relationship between two “he” pronouns; the meaning of this line thus teeter-totters between several interpretations. Does this middle line indicate two male subjects? A possessive relationship? A multiplicity? A conjugation or a confusion of he and she? Finally we must concede that this line defies any single reading or sex. It is as if the very plurality of the “s” fosters a variety of sexual interpretations, allowing each pronoun to flower in a hermaphroditic bloom.

A very interesting neologistic conglomeration appears in *Carnival the first panel*: “adamnomadamn” (n.p.). Here the text’s gendered identity can be perceived only as a select limitation on a range of semiotic possibilities. Meaningless in its entirety, the sense and gender of this letter-chain hangs upon how it is framed, segmented, and syntaxed by the reader. Among the possible readings, the chain contains both “adam” and “madam,” and can indicate either a male or female, depending upon which portion is allowed to dominate. Two more nested words can be culled from this intriguing conglomeration: nomad and damn. Perhaps McCaffery suggests that by enacting gender’s nomadic capacity, by trespassing over culturally sacred monads like sex, one predictably receives damnation.

## Chapter Five

### The Latitude of the Postmodern: Displacements

the dream of the written is always to be  
somewhere else.

Steve McCaffery (*KNK* 15)

In *Post-National Arguments* (1993), Frank Davey suggests that Canadian fiction since 1967 has been paradoxically characterized by a detachment from things Canadian. Analyzing sixteen post-centennial novels which vary widely in style, subject and authorship, Davey suggests these Canadian works are typified by a "lack of nationalist discourses and signs, unless ironically deployed" (258). Conventional tropes of place, region, province, and country are either absent, doubted, parodied, or variously problematized. Rather than construct meaning via the local and historical, these novels show a preference for transgressing or transcending Canadian borders in an attempt to connect to some universal, "world-class" standard. Little concerned with myths or images of Canadian identity, these novels justify themselves transnationally, continentally or globally. Although individual mechanisms differ in these novels, Davey contends

neither the text nor its protagonists inhabit any social geography that can be called 'Canada.' They inhabit a post-national space, in which sites are as interchangeable as postcards, in which discourses are transnational, and in which political issues are constructed on non-national

(and often ahistorical) ideological grounds: fascism and materialism, aestheticism, liberal humanism, Christian mysticism, feminism, industrial capitalism. (259)

The attempt to construct local significance is typically presented as a failure, and protagonists tend to embrace some universal, or retreat altogether from the public and political spheres. "Meaning here is constructed transnationally -- world economics, universal beauty, humanism, Marxism -- or else it collapses on the disillusioned individual" (264).

Although Davey's criticism is limited to novelists, Steve McCaffery certainly fits his post-national paradigm. As a poet, McCaffery is extremely wary of nationalism, and he does not think of himself specifically as a Canadian writer (Letter to Kent Lewis). Rather than searching for the uniquely Canadian, McCaffery shapes his poetic career by persistently making connections outside of his own country. As part of the Toronto Research Group, for example, McCaffery declares his responsibility to be contemporary, non-canonic and international (*RG* 18). The use here of the word "responsibility" is interesting, implying as it does that study of the past, the traditional, and the national is somehow delinquent. In order to be a world-class, avant-garde artist, McCaffery believes he must eschew the quest for a Canadian literature, because it shows "a bias to literary realism as an unquestionable norm, avoiding entirely its questionable status as a socially constructed ideologeme" (*RG* 18). Although he collaborates extensively with other like-minded Canadian artists, his major aesthetic influences are either continental (dadaism, surrealism, Russian and Italian futurism, French lettrisme

and theory, Robert Filliou, etc.) or American (objectivism, Gertrude Stein, abstract expressionism, the Black Mountain school, John Cage, Jackson Mac Low etc.). McCaffery's association with the United States has been particularly strong, via his participation in the language writing movement, which formed a nexus between Toronto, New York, San Francisco and Vancouver. Through his language writing, McCaffery implicitly rejects the notion of a Canadian literature, pursuing instead a continental or North American style of poetry. An artist for the global village, McCaffery epitomizes the relentlessly cosmopolitan writer, drawing literary resources from every available culture.

McCaffery's poetry is accordingly eclectic, continually transgressing borders, and engaging the universal, ahistoric and transnational in a myriad of ways. At the beginning of his career, McCaffery claimed, as did Max Bense and Eugen Gomringer,<sup>69</sup> that concrete poetry constitutes a universally accessible medium, a pure substance that circumnavigates all codes, transcends all cultures. Similarly, post-semiotic poetry enjoys the qualities of pictography, which according to McCaffery is "an almost universal discourse, a *lingua franca* deriving from the commonality of human and animal gesture" ("Anti-Phonies," *NI* 32). Similarly, sound poetry endeavours to connect to a divine or universal centre, or alternately, reasserts common human biology. Later, McCaffery emphasizes his writing as part of the international class struggle against late capitalism, industrialism and alienation -- a move which justifies his art globally rather than locally. His emphasis on the reader tends towards a Liberal individualism, rather than a collective expression of state or



community. McCaffery's experiments with translation are nothing less than an attempt to develop a poetics which is nomadic, plural, non-localizable, irreducible to one place, author, language or civilization. In his postmodern incarnation, McCaffery celebrates the sign's iterative and violative nature, implying that every place is irrevocably displaced by its own description.

Not surprisingly, McCaffery's writing tends to dislocate locale, fabricate the past, and resequence popular history. If McCaffery evokes a Canadian identity, he does so ironically, parodically, explosively. Occasionally, he challenges the fictions of Canadiana that were circulating during the canon-building forties, fifties, and sixties, such as the pastoral tradition of rugged Canadian beauty, the Canadian need to connect to the land. More frequently, he questions the epistemologies through which cultural myths are disseminated. As always, McCaffery interrogates the ideology of communication that informs the community. If Homi Bhabha links nation with narration, McCaffery's non-narrative poetics can be read as a challenge to the binding power of speech and story. Several of McCaffery's texts are historical in nature, but rather than exploit history as a means of confirmation, McCaffery uses it to scatter and diffuse any pretense of cultural identity. McCaffery's version of history comes close to what Foucault describes as a genealogy: a subjective and fictive discourse, which emphasizes disparity over unity, disjunction over continuity. For McCaffery, language itself, in addition to history, is a disruptive, disparate force, and this is perhaps what makes him a valuable writer in this country: he relentlessly explores the ways language is always already dialogic

and international, always already detached, floating, miscegenated, vagrant, global. His poetry ultimately presents a general economy of culture, in which every cultural trait is accompanied by its own surplus, silt, subterrain and opposite.

The remainder of this chapter will examine the ways in which McCaffery problematizes easy visions of cultural identity.

### **“Maps: a different landscape”**

Expand on this. Towards a book called  
writing by the ones who never sign and still  
imagine these are maps.

Steve McCaffery (*TS* 193)

At times, McCaffery’s concrete poetry directly parodies the Canadian canon’s evocation of its “harsh and lovely land.” For example his poem *Maps: a different landscape* (1971) seems to exemplify the cliché of connecting with the land; structured as a map of various Canadian regions, the poem provides a geographic simulacrum, replete with roads, cities, place names, municipal boundaries, rivers, footpaths, and lakes (see fig. 17). As the title declares, however, this is a *different* landscape. In a manner typical of his material poetry, words no longer represent external objects, becoming instead a medium to be looked at rather than looked through. What we see in this map is not land, but the mechanics of cartographic representation, the text’s own graphic palpability. Here, “words become / mountains” and “scenic routes lie around the

words” (n.p.). Rather than documenting an external environment, sentences transform themselves into skylines and roads, a topography of textual peaks and valleys, a vista of verbiage, a lexical panorama, the deltas of the alphabet rather than the river mouth. In this manner, McCaffery shows us not a language of geography, but the geography of language: a terra graphica.

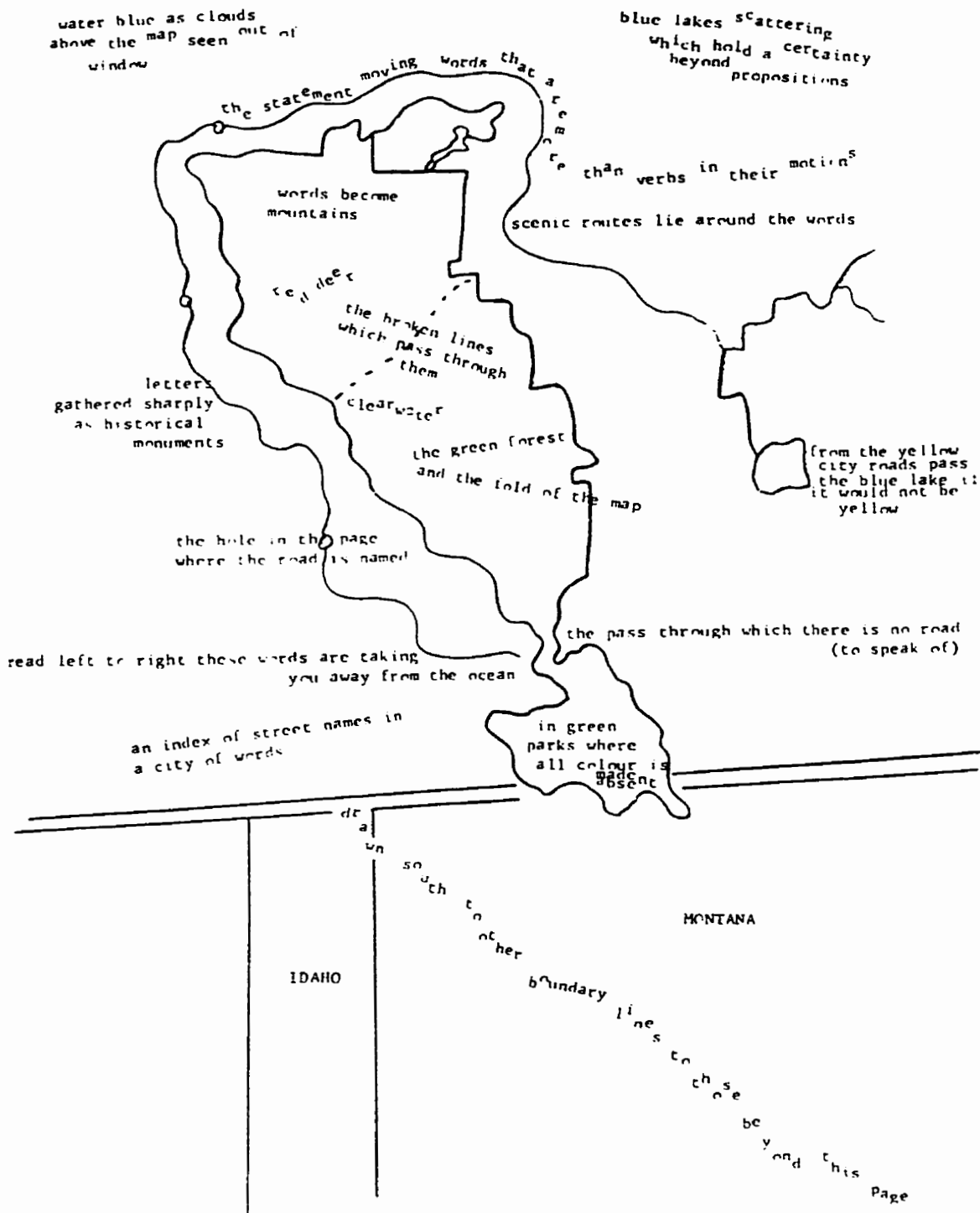


Fig. 17. A section from Steve McCaffery, *Maps: a different landscape*. grOnk series 6 no. 8. Toronto: Ganglia, 1971. n.p..

McCaffery's deceptively simple poem is important because it stresses that the map is not the territory. His poem defeats the linguistic gesture to an external referent, and so suggests that poems can't be maps, can't function in a fenestrational, transparent manner in relation to a land: here "a page . . . is not a map" (n.p.). We have instead a map in jouissance: nationalism without ground; locale à la Baudrillard. Turning place-markers into floating signifiers, McCaffery shatters the romantic attachment to the land as a primordial, *a priori* presence which centres and informs writing. In contrast, his map presents the land as semiotically constructed, as a page, cited within language, never to be sited in empirical reality. Indeed, McCaffery's poem suggests that our perceptions of the land are always constructed through language, and locality is but a trope to be adopted like any other. McCaffery discredits cartography as neutral representation of geographic reality or objective knowledge, implying that it is an archaic mode that still purports to portray the real. In this different landscape, the land is always constructed, provisional, and political.

### **"Pataphysics**

Those are the easy ways to disembowel  
history.

Steve McCaffery (CW 80)

In *The Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll Pataphysician*, Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) begins a comic performance that Steve

McCaffery continues more than half a century later. In his novel, Jarry defines 'pataphysics as "the science of imaginary solutions" (192) and the discourse which examines "the laws governing exceptions" (192). In a more humble moment, Jarry might have described 'pataphysics as the skill of a good canard: the ability of plausible explanation in the face of incredible claims. In the late seventies, McCaffery revives Jarry's love of technical bombast and excess, summarizing 'pataphysics as "an expressly pseudo-science which provides a solution to a non-existent problem" ("Strata," *NI* 189). Typically, a 'pataphysician will conscript various scientific and otherwise authoritarian discourses (e.g. archaeology, geology, paleontology and anthropology), in order to forge fictitious chronicles and spurious theories which nonetheless have the rhetorical force of objective, empirical fact. Like any good burlesque, 'pataphysics makes us laugh because it deviates almost imperceptibly from the authoritative discourses it mimics. As McCaffery describes it, 'pataphysics is "the carnivalization of logical procedures and conceptual 'givens'" ("A Book Resembling Hair" 263). The Toronto Research Group characterizes it as "the science of the general inversion and the non-art of the absent" (*RG* 301). A 'pataphysical definition of McCaffery's 'pataphysics might read: a catachresis of authoritative rhetoric, which takes place alongside the poet's other technological transgressions.

True to its inverted logic, 'pataphysics is the only discourse wherein McCaffery willingly adopts a Canadian persona (if McCaffery's work is typically hostile to the imposition of national character, his work appears appropriately Canadian in 'pataphysics')

perversed fête of masks). In the introduction to the 'pataphysical edition of *Open Letter* (1980), Nichol and McCaffery describe, in self-lambasting manner, how 'pataphysics differentiates and individuates itself in Canada:

So what, you might ask, would constitute a *Canadian* 'Pataphysics? Not a 'pataphysics at all, but rather a superinducement of the superinducement. Nothing less than a Canadian "Pataphysics. Not 'Pata-physics but rather "Pata-physics . . . The distinction is subtle: from elision (') to quotation (") through a superinducement on elision ('+' = "). (RG 301)

In this doubling of the apostrophe to form a quotation, McCaffery and Nichol simultaneously honour the 'pataphysical tradition of mimicry, addendum and comic excess, while distinguishing a distinct Canadian (in)version of it. They continue:

The Canadian contribution to 'Pataphysics is 'pataphysics' first amendment. To wit, the erasure of "that" elision and the institution of a science of the perpetually open citing. A shift from elision to quotation by way of the doubling of the elide, a doubled inversion and an inverted doubling. Canadian 'pataphysics gives us then quotation (as Science always is) of the given that we do not understand but with emendations that serve to constitute our explanation. If 'Pataphysics (according to Jarry) is "the science of imaginary solutions" and thereby the source of answers to questions never posed, then "Pataphysics (diacriticized via the open quotation of a

double elision) will be “the literature of all imaginary sciences.” (301-302)

In addition to the sheer playfulness here, we get insight into McCaffery’s perception of Canadian culture. By choosing the quotation mark over the apostrophe, McCaffery and Nichol imply that Canadian culture is founded on reiteration rather than negation (think of this claim in terms of Canadian versus American history. The United States is born out of revolution, a violent rejection of British imperialism; Canada in contrast maintained its colonial identity, distinguishing itself from its progenitors by incorporating and adapting British common law, Napoleonic code, and European traditions). McCaffery’s preference for quotation as a national emblem also suggests that Canada is an intertextual pastiche, a collage of undocumented, decontextualized sources, which Canadians both differ from and defer to: Canada as mosaic or pastiche rather than melting pot. The singularity of the quotation mark further implies that the Canadian character is “perpetually open,” variable, and resistant to closure: here are no absolutes. By making “pataphysics the only viable form of Canadiana, McCaffery also suggests that all instances of Canadian character are a form of put-on or carnival masque.

Given this unstable vision of national character, it is not surprising that McCaffery uses his “pataphysical expertise to challenge several sacred cows of Canadian identity. In his article “Piccu Carlu: The Muskoka-Maya Connexion” (1980), for example, McCaffery transforms our understanding of both Canadian and North American history. Writing under the slightly awry pseudonym



Professor Kurt Wurstwagen, McCaffery describes his expedition to the small Ontario town of “Port Carling, some seventeen miles west of Bracebridge, [where] our party located a large pyramidal shaped edifice” (144). The treatise begins by claiming that this house-sized obelisk has been incorrectly identified as a nineteenth century construction: “[m]odern mythobastardization has nurtured the common belief that the structure is a Victorian water tower erected to supply the early settlement with a plentiful water supply from the proximos lakes” (144-145).<sup>70</sup> Wurstwagen-McCaffery then offers an alternate, “correct” interpretation based on “the clear facts of history” (145): the tower is actually the ruins of a proto-Mayan pyramid, evidence of a “post-neolithic Muskokan” culture (147), which once flourished in Southern Ontario. In fact, continues Wurstwagen-McCaffery, this ancient culture preceded those of Central and South America by some two thousand, five hundred years. In a moment of typical self-denial, “Canada has deliberately suppressed its cultural connexion with the Maya of Yucatan and Guatamala [sic]” (146). With their ancestral truth exposed, however, Canadians can no longer delude themselves that their country is a humble, unimportant, peripheral and derivative one, on the margins of an aggressive world power (as Canadians are wont to do). In a revision to accepted history, Canada becomes the colonial force on the continent! Port Carling, hardly a small and inconsequential cottage town, is the origin and progenitor of indigenous North American civilization itself. Typically irreverent, McCaffery obviously plays with the Canadian insecurity complex, dispelling the

soothing homily that Canada sits on the edge of empires, but is not imperial itself.

In order to convince us of his extravagant claim, Wursthagen-McCaffery is excessive in his use of academic and technical language to describe the “Piccu Carlu” pyramid. Dense to the point of self-parody, a typical “proof” reads:

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the Port Carling site is the total absence of iconic embellishment upon the temple facade, suggesting a placement of the site within a chronological parameter marked by Proto-iconic Period 4A and Meso-Proto-iconic Period 3AKB7 of post-neolithic Muskokan man. (145-46)

This language creates an intimidating, and comically excessive ethos of erudition. Wursthagen-McCaffery further marshals an array of friends, fictional authorities, fanciful articles, and invented institutes, centres and colleges to support his claim (some of these are designed to add to the feeling of academic *rigueur*; others are clearly intended to reveal the gag. Of the latter, my favourite is the “non-College of Epistemological Myopia”[RG 302]). Through these references, McCaffery inundates his readers with a specialized idiom that is as preposterous as it is precise.

More persuasive is the detailed catalogue of physical evidence Wursthagen-McCaffery displays in his treatise. He becomes a meticulous reader of the pyramid, noting features of its design, composition, decoration, aesthetic, function, which refute its modernity and link it clearly to ancient Mayan temples: “[t]he mortar/stone/block density ratio of almost 13.7 to 43.9 suggests a

*striking parallel with several Yucatan sites especially Uxmal*" (145). In this way, "pataphysics behaves in a manner similar to concrete and sound poetry. If concrete poetry emphasizes the materiality of the signifier in order to diminish expressive content, then "pataphysics foregrounds an object's physicality in order to disrupt its conventional meaning. By focusing attention on little-noticed aspects of a thing's composition, a "pataphysician can create a startlingly fresh perception, even with an object as familiar as a dilapidated water tower. It is important to note, in this respect, that McCaffery's pyramid has a "total absence of iconic embellishment" (146); the pure, unblemished corporeality of the pyramid allows McCaffery to interpret it unimpeded by any ideological interference.<sup>71</sup> In a similar manner, McCaffery reads the environs surrounding his pyramid, finding further confirmation of his theory in the mute testimony of the land.

Although most "pataphysical essays are extended jokes, the effects of humorous speculations are important in at least two ways. First, "pataphysics satirizes discourses of truth, imitating them for subversive purposes.

By operating within the patriarchal term(s), 'pataphysics eludes the power of both the scientific and the rational; it subverts their scope, problematizes the limits of their dominance, subjects them to a ludic pulverization that opens up the implications of their discourse and relativizes their dispensations. ("The Fraternal Contaminant" 19)

Reason, history, science, philosophy seem ridiculous because the "pataphysician appropriates objective, scientific vocabularies and produces comically absurd conclusions. In short, "pataphysics parodies pretensions towards certitude.

Secondly, "pataphysics implies that no treatise can adequately express truth. Because language is barred from that which it represents, because every discipline attempts to recover an origin which is ultimately inaccessible, because every discourse substitutes a description for things-in-themselves, all scholars produce *fictions* of truth (and not the truth itself). If most researchers suppress the artifice of writing in hopes of passing it off as fact, a "pataphysician, in contrast, foregrounds the counter-factual, artificial quality of knowledge. As McCaffery declares, "pataphysics is "structured on the proposition . . . that falsity is an integral achievement of discourse" ("Strata," *NI* 198).

This does not imply that "pataphysics is mere sophistry. When truth is inaccessible, nothing is *mere* about sophistry; persuasion brings about the consensus which eventually becomes accepted as knowledge or law: "language has its worth more in the capacity to mis-inform (and hence create) than in the ability to inform and consolidate what's already there" ("Strata," *NI* 200). As it subtly passes illusion for reality, "pataphysics is able to inaugurate, originate, and author. Accordingly, McCaffery aligns "pataphysics with the skills of forgery, fabrication and poetry, crafts which are at once mendacious *and* inventive, misleading *and* productive. This is the sense in which "pataphysics explores "the creative potential of the lie" ("Strata," *NI* 198).

Unrestricted by consensus reality, "pataphysics can also serve a vital social function, on the one hand contaminating official-speak, on the other hand articulating unpopular, controversial, peripheral, even unprovable theories. In this regard, McCaffery and Nichol claim that "pataphysics will "lead to the collection of the neglected and (who knows, as a poetic corollary, the neglect of the collected) those whom we have failed to remember or were forced to ignore" (*RG* 303).

"Pataphysics allows one to speak imaginatively, without necessarily being constrained by history, fact, reason, logic, philosophy and science, and so offers alternatives to society's official version of reality. Indeed, through "pataphysical speculation, McCaffery contends "that all events are capable of alteration" ("Strata," *NI* 199). In "Canadian "Pataphysics: Geognostic Interrogations of a Distant Somewhere," Darren Wershler-Henry concurs that "pataphysics allows for the inclusion of traditionally excluded subject positions and ideologies.

"Pataphysics, then, has the possibility to become supplementary to efforts by postcolonial scholars attempting to re-insert the obscured history of indigenous and colonized peoples, by demonstrating the absurdity of the theories and methodologies of the colonizers themselves. (75)

Constructing myths and history for the voiceless, "Canadian "Pataphysics quite clearly is a literature that, as yet, has no archive" (*RG* 302); it is a "non-art of the absent" (*RG* 301). Although the critical potential of "pataphysics may be limited by its use of farce, burlesque and parody, its affinities, like McCaffery's translations, are

with the undocumented, the glossed over, the unrecorded. And as farce and parody, "pataphysics maintains a politically satiric edge by constantly questioning accepted belief, custom and consensus.

### **Knowledge Never Knew**

the universe become a sheet of style.

Steve McCaffery (CW 99)

*Knowledge Never Knew* (1983) structures itself as a visible contrast between two distinct language styles. It separates the competing styles into parallel, horizontal strips, one running across the top of the page, the other across the bottom. The top band is chronological, a series of dated facts, historical trivia and recorded events; the lower band is proverbial, a series of pithy, sententious maxims, aphorisms, epithets and advice. As McCaffery describes it, the poem

brings together and holds apart two threads of discontinuous discourse: the one a series of useless news items and historical facts, the other a pot pourri of aesthetic cantilations invoked in the mental shadow of a complete atlas of the paradoxical. (back cover)

The top band tends towards specificity and concrete certitude, constituting what Foucault calls a historical genealogy. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault instructs aspiring genealogists to construct historical models not from abstract ideas or metaphysics, but from "the details and accidents that accompany every beginning"

(144), from “marginal elements” (153) and “apparently insignificant truths” (Nietzsche, quoted in Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 140). True to Foucault’s directive, McCaffery presents the reader with quirky, trifling and idiosyncratic evidence: “february 16 389 b.c. / *Priscian convicted of sodomy*” (KNK 46); “march 28 1689 / *South Africa introduces apartheid*” (82); “january 15 1679 / *St. Bridget’s tooth deposited in vaults of Vouvray Cathedral*” (17); “february 14 / *Price of Good Housekeeping magazine raised to seventy-five cents*” (44). For Foucault, the genealogist focuses on lowly beginnings and historical detritus in order to expose the heterogeneous, at times ignoble, even absurd composition of the past. By foregrounding irrelevancies, the genealogist furthermore questions the linear, developmental nature of history. In this respect, *Knowledge Never Knew* is clearly a genealogy, which complicates the ruling historic narrative with its web of useless trivia and glossed facts.

In contrast, the bottom band is general, abstract, leaning towards aestheticism and idealism, the abstruse ideas a genealogist avoids. Its statements are epigrammatic and pithy, even approaching a New Age triteness: “the best way to become yourself is to stop being who you are” (23); “writing speaks to itself through those silences and losses writing / never is” (25); “every something is a somewhere” (58). As the book weaves these differing rhetorics, the reader is pulled in radically different directions. The voice of truth, precision and tradition competes with a poetic logic of deliberate falsehood, inversion, koans, oxymorons, hyperbole, and conjunctions of opposites. One page, for instance, juxtaposes “january 16 984 / *Herstmonceaux castle destroyed*” with the sententious

advice “art should always intend to be wrong” (18). In effect, the poem can be read as a contrast between two very different versions of truth: the descriptive-objective on one hand, and the prescriptive-subjective on the other.

Interestingly, McCaffery tacitly sabotages the top factual band, undermining the reliability of historical discourse through the appearance of incomplete dates, dates without events, and most importantly, obvious, anachronistic errors, such as “april 9 1760 / *Beatles first recording*” (92) or “march 12 1529 / *Charlie Chaplin dies*” (69). Many statements appear absurd, impossible, or unlikely; could it really be that in “april 2 1839 / [the] *World’s first fully steerable radio telescope [was] installed at Dwingelloo*” (85)? As the poem progresses, the top band becomes increasingly uncanny, unbelievable and downright silly, as if McCaffery deliberately parodies the rhetoric of factual history. We could, however, see this ludic chronology as another aspect of its genealogical character. Foucault describes “history [as] the form of a concerted carnival” (161), as “parodic, directed against reality” (160). When we identify our contemporary selves with characters, motifs, images, traditions, ideals, and tropes from the past, we tend to dissolve our own present existence. By turning to the past for our identities, we in effect become buffoons, masquerading as something we are not. In effect, this veneration of the past bars “access to the actual intensities and creations of life” (161). Rather than minimizing the farcical aspect of identification with the past, McCaffery emphasizes the travesty of difference between event and record. Here the representation of the past is subtly wrong; *Knowledge Never Knew* is a historical



burlesque, a sham whose obvious falsity thwarts any identification with an anterior self. McCaffery weakens the power the past exerts over the present, allowing us to awaken from history, or what Joyce called “a nightmare” (*Ulysses* 28).

However, *Knowledge Never Knew* is much more than an enjoyable satire; a kind of 'pataphysical treatise in itself, the text illustrates the impossibility of absolute historical information. Although McCaffery can physically separate the subjective from the objective discourse, he is not able to maintain the exclusive heterogeneity of these two styles. In spite of McCaffery's typographic sequestering, the paradoxical, abstract, subjective logic of the aphorism returns to infect the objective chronological band, rendering it eccentric and equivocal.<sup>72</sup> Here again is a tendency towards genealogy over history. According to Foucault, historical discourse is neither factual nor “devoid of passions”; rather it is highly subjective, driven by “the will to knowledge: instinct, passion, the inquisitor's devotion, cruel subtlety, and malice” (Foucault 162). Hardly indisputable truth, historical exposition is a select and reductive representation of an infinite past, a personal evaluation of circumstance meaningless by itself, a private and artificial arrangement of scattered affairs. At times, it is the fetish of the rigid line. Throughout *Knowledge Never Knew*, McCaffery consistently affirms “knowledge as perspective” (Foucault 156). In this weird chronicle, individualism and bias are always already at play in the process of creating historical verity. Perhaps the title can be read in this way: knowledge cannot know because it lacks the subjectivity to (mis)conceive.

## The Abstract Ruin

the digital logic of resequencing history [is]  
the only possible basis today for cultural  
resistance.

Arthur Kroker (*Spasm* 67)

Foucault's genealogy presents a model of historical representation that is not allied with the story, plot, lineage, or narrative. Rather than order events in a cause and effect sequence (which may abridge or impose a false sense of closure), Foucault suggests we discover the past in its diffusion and multiplicity. Foucault contends that a "true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference" (155). Any sense of identity dissolves into "a complex system of distinct and multiple elements, unable to be mastered by the powers of synthesis" (161). In effect, Foucault is dedicated to undoing the illusionary sense of order and mastery that is produced through (hi)story. "The purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity but to commit itself to its dissipation" (162).

Following Foucault's logic, McCaffery's poem *from THE ABSTRACT RUIN Carnival: Panel 3* (1976) offers a model of history which is not singular, monological and progressive. In place of a successive, episodic line, McCaffery presents history as a field of contraries, bisections, digressions and interpretations. Instead of

conceiving of history as a thread of continuous, connected events, McCaffery sees it as a *fabric*: numerous story-lines interacting at cross-purposes, narrative threads momentarily appearing in the woof, only to disappear in the weft. Weaving is explicitly evoked in “*A Note on Texture in The Abstract Ruin*” as the compositional rationale behind the poem:

“Text” is a weaving term denoting a woven thing and applied thru analog by the incunabularians to the visual similarity [sic] between a page of words and a piece of woven fabric. A “text”book was originally a classic written wide to allow of interlinear gloss, a critical & hermeneutic weave. So the poem is interlacement of many threads . . . (n.p.).

McCaffery describes his poem as a textile, a surface of narrative strands, wherein no one *yarn* ever dominates as official history. Story becomes tapestry; fugue replaces official monologue.

*The Abstract Ruin* creates its linguistic fabric by cross-weaving various strands of discourse, including historical information, archaeological trivia and ethnological speculation. In a manner typical of its disjointed, fragmented style, it begins:

In the mouth of the cave, in speech  
known as Grotte du Renne, at Arcy-sur-Cure  
in the valley of Yonne two thousand post-holes  
set in a rough oval

whilst at Stellmoor  
the reindeer are lashed to stones and thrown into

the pool, retreating ice as the vegetation changes  
 wood chambered and solid wheeled before Telepinus  
 the telephone at Lake Sevan  
 donkey bones in the Osman kayasi cemetery (n.p.)

McCaffery cites Vorticism and especially *The Cantos* as precedents. À la Pound, the poem collages facts, observations and impressions in one energetic whirl of language. The compositional procedure is clearly one of juxtaposition and disjunction, rather than progression and transition. At one point, “London” is inexplicably paired with “a raven God” of the Coast Salish, and further contrasted with the Celtic word for “pen” (n.p.): nothing explains the disjunctions, let alone provides transition. The aesthetic appeal arises from the jarring contrasts. The illogical and unexpected pairings tend to unlink the progressive chain of history, presenting it not as logical, progressive sequence, but as a field of irreducible differences that resists reduction into a monologic stream.

Not that the poem is unordered: on the contrary, *The Abstract Ruin* is a highly integrated system, but its manner of integration is other than cause and effect lineation. McCaffery structures his chronicle by following linguistic drift, the accidents of association, homophony, contrast, or etymology. For example, rather than locate “Telepinus” in his proper historical context, McCaffery modifies the word into “telephone,” creating a provocative contrast between modern and ancient speakers. The technique becomes a sophisticated crochet of cross-reference: “Codex argenteus cover of the moon a gothic script / in silver channels to the Visigoths . . .” (n.p.). Here a complex web of connotation and cognates links the

words. “Codex argenteus” derives from the Latin word *argentum*, meaning silver, and codex, meaning writing tablet. This phrase gives rise to “channels of silver,” “script,” and “the moon” (a silvery disc, an inspiration to writers, and at times of eclipse, a cover of the sun). Originally paired with “script,” the adjective “gothic” begins a new and divergent strand of permutation (the moon as a gothic trope?), relaying into “Visigoth” and several other words down the line. The poem continually branches out in unexpected directions, defeating the attempt to unify subject matter into a stable category, epoch or period. McCaffery’s technique is more than just a capricious aesthetic choice. It’s a conscious strategy to treat “[h]istory . . . as essentially a linguistic thing” (“Note on Texture,” *AR* n.p.), to understand human development unfolding through association, misreadings, accident, incidence, and other verbal miscues. As a model for history, McCaffery’s poem suggests that the past can’t be artificially reduced to a single subject, story or lineage. Any formulation of this web into a comprehensible narrative, with clear beginnings and endings, diminishes its complexity, and eventually marginalizes some element. Rather than simplify the past, McCaffery leaves it in contradiction. The uncertain, the irrational, the unspeakable, are not repressed or excluded in his recreation of the past. An inclusive poem, *The Abstract Ruin* offers a potentially more accurate representation of antiquity.

However, McCaffery insists that *The Abstract Ruin* “is not history” (“Note on Texture,” *AR* n.p.), but a (re)construction, an ordering, a selection, a recreation that occurs very much in the present. In *The Abstract Ruin*, “now” and “then” collide as the poet

reads “the living pages you inherit” (n.p.). Historical sources pass through McCaffery’s animated mind, blending with his thoughts, feelings, and associations, knitting together objective and subjective motifs. The poet stands as a vital and determinative link between the present and the past. McCaffery emphasizes the subjectivity of his construction by confessing that *The Abstract Ruin* comprises “the threads largely of my own reading” (“Note on Texture,” *AR* n.p.), and further that “*The Abstract Ruin* weaves together my own writing of my reading” (“Note on Texture,” *AR* n.p.). Although eminently personal, his relationship with the historical texts he employs is at times disruptive: “i’m reading to stand under and resist / you . . .” (n.p.). Ultimately a dialogic relationship arises between the past and the present, which is also construed as a dialogue between historical writers and modern-day readers:

[i]t thus became a diachronic journey allowed essentially through a reader’s rather than a writer’s eyes. It essays writing through the functional role of reading with a long term goal towards the utter destruction of that difference. (“Note on Texture,” *AR* n.p.)

The transmission of a stable set of historical facts is replaced by a process of mutual construction. Such a partnership between readers and writers, past and present, precludes absolute certainties, replacing them with subjective interpretation. This is the sense in which McCaffery suggests that historical narratives are founded on an “author’s compositional ambivalence” (“Note on Texture,” *AR* n.p.). If history is a fabric, it is also a fabrication -- something not only woven and constructed, but falsified.

## “Lastworda”

this information seeks dispersal

Steve McCaffery (*BD* 70)

Many of McCaffery's poems excavate the English language, peeling away the surface layer of conventional usage in order to expose the derivatives, antecedents, etymologies and verbal origins that lie buried within intended meanings. Published in *Theory of Sediment* (1991), “Lastworda” performs an archaeology, a revelation of the linguistic past which prefigures our spoken present. The compositional praxis of “Lastworda” is this: words of a sizable vocabulary are arranged according to their age, starting with the youngest and proceeding word-by-word to the oldest. The antiquity of each word (and so its sequence in the single long, a-grammatic sentence of the poem) is determined by “a word's *first* appearance in print” (*TS* 214). As McCaffery explains in a note to the poem,

“Lastworda” was planned as a journey back through an English lexicon along the sweep of a single continuum. Commencing with selected words current in contemporary usage the continuum retreats a few lines to each decade, in this way as far back as Anglo-Saxon. (*TS* 214)

The style is reminiscent of “Oxen of the Sun,” the fourteenth chapter in *Ulysses*, which emulates the stylistic growth of the English language, covering the period from ritualistic Greek to a modern

pidgin polyglot of tongues. Unlike Joyce, however, McCaffery does not attempt to convey a narrative other than this linguistic development itself (indeed, “Lastworda” is largely devoid of grammatic coherence; it is unpunctuated except for the final period). Moreover, McCaffery’s technique is regression rather than progression. That is, McCaffery inverts chronology, retreating from present terminologies, through historic vocabularies, arriving finally at archaic and dead languages. “Lastworda” chronicles *in reverse* the development of the English language.

Following its inverted chronology, the poem begins with the English language’s most recent neologisms and coinages, the vernacular familiar to our social milieu: “diskette,” “chunnel,” “spandex,” “Gallup” (201). However, even after a few lines, the reader is aware that the terms are becoming increasingly dated, less novel. With “sputnik,” “naugahyde,” “frisbee,” and “Ornithopter” (201), the cultural frame of reference has slipped from the nineteen-eighties and nineties, to the forties and fifties. As the age of the words gradually increases, the reader is catapulted further and further backwards through verbal time into a vocabulary of by-gone centuries. Soon, the reader enters an Enlightenment landscape of “Boswellisms,” “mugwumps,” “dicky-birds,” (202), “ha-ha[s]” (203), “Tor[ies],” and “Whigs” (204). Soon we pass through a Renaissance “canopie” of “Shipwrack” and “blaines” (204), into a medieval tapestry of “chaios” and “warme licour” (205). McCaffery’s design pushes the reader even further back, following the Anglophone heritage of language, until we confront the rudiments of the English language itself.



This retreat through linguistic origins persistently defamiliarizes the poetic language. The poem which began as fresh, customary and domestic, quickly becomes foreign, strange and unrecognizable. This shift from the canny to the uncanny is perhaps first noticeable when “Lastworda” enters a period before the dictionary homogenized the spelling of words. In this pre-standardized age where spellings are personalized and stylized, the integrity of the word itself begins to decompose and disseminate. At first, such changes are minor, even pleasurable, as words are still recognizable and comprehensible; one can still read “fabricks,” “scandall,” “dispossest,” “reliques” (203), and “mirroer” (207), despite their orthographic dissimilarity to current spellings.<sup>73</sup> However, as anachronisms are more frequently employed, our ability to decipher the poem steadily decreases. By the time the reader is even half-way through the poem, the text is almost unintelligible to a modern reader: try deciphering “gesynscipum thæra woc fleom fæderenmæge onmedlan gyrn” (213). By the poem’s end we encounter a discourse that is by fits and starts Gallic, Anglo-Saxon, Latin, and at times, unidentifiable. By retreating into the past, by examining his linguistic roots in depth, McCaffery confronts English speakers with the inherent otherness of their linguistic ancestry.

Some may dismiss “Lastworda” as unreadable, but it is important for several reasons. First, it satisfies Russian formalist and certain modernist requirements for art: it transforms mundane and everyday vocabularies into the exotic and extraordinary, thus making language new. The irony of this transformation is that “Lastworda” achieves freshness and innovation by employing

anachronisms and archaisms. "Lastworda" invigorates by reviving the dead.

Secondly, McCaffery informs us that the *lastworda* is an Anglo-Saxon term for "memorial" (214). True to its name, the poem functions as a type of epitaph, mnemonic, birth registry, or growth chart -- call it what you will -- of the English language. "Lastworda" becomes an incredibly rich document of the many races, places, dialects, peoples and poeties which have contributed to the construction of modern English.

Such a document reverberates on several political levels. By exposing this divergent background McCaffery problematizes the positing of simple, singular identities. By listening to history, says Foucault, we find "not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that [things] have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms" (Foucault 142). By listening to English -- and by extension any language -- we evoke a complex history which is irreducible to the purity of race, nation or region. "Lastworda" forcibly demonstrates that language is a multicultural space, a sedimentary bed-rock of countless impurities. Because this uncanny past dwells in English as a constitutive presence, the ability of the language to designate a national, regional or otherwise unified character is undermined by its etymological other. The most localized vernacular will be touched by the traces of other cultures, invasions, continents, and centuries (and so "Lastworda" is closer to *Finnegans Wake* than *Ulysses*). "What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origins; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity" (Foucault 142). In

“Lastworda,” history inhabits language as an active force, perpetually pushing circadian speech beyond the pale.

### **Post-national Perils**

but the price of these words is a strangeness  
between us

Steve McCaffery (*BD* 96-97)

Although “Lastworda” implies that national identities are always already subverted and exceeded by language, McCaffery’s post-national poetry is paradoxically vital to Canadian literature because it helps prevent the canon from becoming too prosaic, too representational, too Victorian, too provincial. Stylistically, it invigorates a literature dominated by realism and narration. Culturally, McCaffery’s texts resist the homogenizing effects of national myth, official history, and other cultural monisms. His writing reveals not only the subtle process of conformity and orthodoxy integral to nationalism, but questions the aesthetic, cultural and racial purity upon which it is, at times, founded. To this end, McCaffery strives to include marginal, ludic, diachronic and surreal elements neglected in the national archetypes. Perhaps most importantly, McCaffery consistently refutes any notion of the “real,” demonstrating instead how every fact is always factitious, constructed, stylized, provisional, and politically informed.

Indeed, more than any other Canadian writer, McCaffery rejects *all* referents, no matter how necessary, familiar or soothing.

In the tradition of Baudrillard, McCaffery writes as if the real is not only external to language, but altogether absent. McCaffery's poetic universe is a hyper-reality, a cat's-cradle of competing codes, a simulacrum in which even our most reassuring touchstones, truths and primordial terrors are constructed as an effect of language. And it is this complete detachment from the real which gives McCaffery's writing both its strength and its weakness.

By jettisoning all referents, McCaffery is able to interrogate many cultural assumptions, but his poetry also becomes guilty of a kind of linguistic transcendentalism, a privileging of language as sublime and meaningful unto itself. McCaffery not only sees the operation of signifier/signified as a constant which frames all perceptions of the real, but he elevates language as if it were inherently beautiful, an art form desirable in itself. However, by reducing the world to a play of signs, McCaffery likewise reduces complexity and difference. In effect, McCaffery's poetry implicitly demands that everything in existence be understood as language, and *only as language*.

Such a bias can be quite homogenizing in its own way. By granting priority to abstract linguistic activity, for instance, McCaffery tends to disregard locale, place, region, and nation as irrelevant. For him, every poem is ultimately an encounter with language, and thus "the book begins as the space of an anywhere" (BD 55). In this manner, McCaffery accelerates the homogenization of culture he sought to critique in capitalism and reference.<sup>74</sup> In "Reviewing McCaffery Reviewing," Richard Paul Knowles rightly censures McCaffery for writing "as if place were insignificant" (146),

for fostering a linguistic universalism that erases national, regional and local distinction.<sup>75</sup> McCaffery's writing can be justly critiqued for concealing cultural, interpretive and topographic differences under the whitewash of a universal semiotics. Moreover, McCaffery is too quick and absolute in his dismissal of location's importance, overlooking the advantages a geographic realism can offer. The accumulation of regional and local detail, for example, can effectively disrupt the imposed uniformity of nationalism, just as a strong national character can resist the onslaught of globalism.

Equally problematic is McCaffery's relationship to history, which he treats not as a fact, but as a linguistic medium to be manipulated, resequenced and rearranged. McCaffery's historical revisions are both entertaining and liberating, but they admit no responsibility to accurately represent the past. Eschewing truth and fact in favour of speculation, "pataphysics could be seen as misrepresentative distortions to the past, as historical revisionism at its worst. In part, "pataphysics protects itself against such charges through its sheer buffoonery; few will mistake McCaffery's over-the-top writings for an actual history. "Pataphysics thus distinguishes itself from the articulate falsehoods of Jimmy Keegstra or Ernst Zundel precisely because the former is a parody, and the latter are not (at least not intentionally). However, implicit in McCaffery's "pataphysics is a similar erosion of personal and cultural memory. The past becomes purely a matter of interpretation; traditions and heritage become increasingly tenuous and subjective, losing the ability to give identity and strength.

Perhaps most importantly, McCaffery seems willing to relinquish even the human referent. Consider his performance entitled "Video Panhandler" (1982). In this piece, "[t]he artist's face is filmed upon a video loop asking passers-by for spare change. An empty saxophone case is placed beside the monitor to receive money" (Robertson 223). If the typical panhandler's appeal is predicated upon primal needs (hunger, homelessness, addictions), then McCaffery frames this emotive appeal not within a flesh-and-blood person, but within a television monitor. He foregrounds the simulacrum or performative nature of the solicitation. The discourse of absolute need loses its biological ground, and much of its persuasive force. Rather than being an instance of unmitigated compulsion (and guilt), the street solicitation becomes a performative act. In "Video Panhandler," biological necessity becomes equivocal, staged, as real as the televised images of the Gulf war were to Baudrillard.

Although "Video Panhandler" is both humorous and helpful in exposing the artifice of emotive appeals, McCaffery's piece has some problematic implications. By stressing the artifice of his petition, McCaffery encourages us to dismiss his video plea as mere, scripted simulacra. On a larger scale, McCaffery encourages us to be suspicious of all rhetorical petitions based on human need, frailty, race, sex, compassion etc.. By relentlessly emphasizing the constructed nature of absolutely everything, McCaffery tacitly erodes our respect even for human life. In his performance, we are trained to respond not to the hungry and homeless man, but to the rhetoric, the ethos, and the hyperreality of his plea (and so the hungry and

homeless get overlooked). If McCaffery's concrete and Marxist poetry strives to humanize its readership, here McCaffery has abandoned that quest in favour of a rigorous dehumanization of the subject. Indeed, when McCaffery writes "people in ovens as words" (*CW* 62), he seems willing to reinterpret the horror of the holocaust as a matter of only language.

In part, this linguistic anomie is inherent to McCaffery's aesthetic; McCaffery considers death as *the* constant of his semiotic world. The terror of the artist is the realization that "words are nothing but an ontological collapse into death, rhythm and spacing where not only the writer but also writing dies, so that the writer that has been could never be" ("Scene," *NI* 92). Because "[l]egibility is tantamount to a sacrifice of life", McCaffery is "[w]riting it all down in order to kill" (*P* n.p.). Or as he succinctly states in "Lag," "being is the word that writing shatters" (119). I wish to observe several problematic elements in McCaffery's postmodern positioning. First, death has ceased to be a human event; it has stopped denoting the loss of biological life. Instead, death has been appropriated by language, and now marks only the movement of signs. McCaffery's poetry performs a Nietzschean transvaluation of values, where right/wrong, life/death are liquid, infinitely shiftable rhetorics. What is truly terrifying about his poetry is his faith in pure language that renders the world utterly semiotic, eternally protean and amoral. Secondly, death is presented as an ineluctable and inescapable conclusion, leaving McCaffery open to charges of nihilism. He presents no life force here, no positive, no balance. Death and absence provide the truth to his poetics. In this respect,

McCaffery's position is lopsided, adolescent, and even Romantic in its obsessive and macabre behaviour.<sup>76</sup> True to Frank Davey's post-national paradigm, McCaffery too seems to retreat into despair and disillusionment. Although McCaffery is an inventive and provocative writer, we should be aware of the subtle nihilism which accompanies some of his assumptions. In a century already marred by atrocity and genocide, we also have to question anything which depreciates human loss by comparing it with mere words.



## Conclusion

how does one reach the end of language

Steve McCaffery (*BD* 119)

Gertrude Stein, who influenced McCaffery in many ways, knew the difficulties faced by a truly groundbreaking artist.

Those who are creating the modern composition authentically are naturally only of importance when they are dead because by that time the modern composition having become past is classified and the description of it is classical. That is the reason why the creator of the new composition in the arts is an outlaw until he is a classic, there is hardly a moment in between and it is really too bad very much too bad naturally for the creator . . .

(“Composition as Explanation” 514).

Despite a devoted group of peers, Steve McCaffery is still largely a literary outlaw, whose meaningful addition to Canadian art has yet to be fully sounded. The outlaw, however, is a role that McCaffery seems to cultivate, and at times, enjoy. His poetry delights in excess, violating every rule, genre, habit, expectation, and taboo that readers expect from art. This is part of McCaffery’s strength as a writer: he is one of the most formally innovative and inventive poets in the world today, invigorating language by pushing it in new directions, forms, and configurations. Instead of engaging in ironic self-reflection, simple parody, or metafiction (as Linda Hutcheon would define the postmodern), McCaffery altogether rejects conventional

representation and so confronts the humanist assumptions implicit in communication itself. For nearly thirty years, McCaffery has lead the poetic field by testing the limits of mimesis and expression, subverting genre, resisting utility, revising and parodying history, breaching linearity, without ever resorting to lyricism, story, or speech. While most writers rely without question on realism, description, naturalism and narration, McCaffery suggests that "there is no such thing as neutral language" (*BD* 17), and realism is but the literary form of late capitalism. McCaffery's single largest disadvantage is perhaps that he is too far ahead of his readership. Precisely for this reason, he should be recognized as one of the most consequential and adventurous poets in postmodern Canadian literature.

This statement is not without irony. While I strongly feel McCaffery's work deserves much greater recognition than it enjoys today, his poetry consistently questions the notions of the classic, masterpiece, and canonicity itself. Aleatorics, translation, collaboration, linguistic materiality, listing, repetition, reduction, found poems -- all these subvert the ego-centred notion of the artist as genius, and artwork as timeless magnum opus. McCaffery's successes are precisely those that are fruitful with contradictions.

## Notes

- 1 The Toronto Research Group also included many guest appearances, and included work by Howard Adelman, Bruce Andrews, Barbara Caruso, Wayne Clifford, Christopher Dewdney, Maurice Farge, Haroldo Gonzalez, Julia Keeler, and Opal Nations. Essays were also published in *Vort* and *Rampike* magazines.
- 2 See in particular *RG* (105), where McCaffery and bpNichol analyze the etymologies of words associated with writing and discover that they consistently tend to denote a physical, substantive engagement with the empirical world. "Book" for example derives from the word for beech wood, one of the first media upon which runes were carved (105). McCaffery and Nichol argue that writing is historically inseparable from its physical medium of expression.
- 3 See Julia Kristeva, *Sémiotiké: Recherches pour une semanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1969).
- 4 See in particular Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (Trans. by Margaret Waller. Intro. by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1984) and *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Ed. by Leon S. Roudiez. Trans. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1980).
- 5 See Roland Barthes *S/Z* (Trans. by Richard Miller. Preface by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).
- 6 See Roland Barthes *S/Z* .
- 7 We could here draw a parallel between McCaffery's poetry and the hermetic tradition which seeks to conceal knowledge from the unwise or unworthy. McCaffery not only codes and ciphers his texts,

but demands effort from his supplicant/readers precisely in the manner advised by Henry Reynolds and Thomas Aquinas.

McCaffery's major distinction from this tradition, however, is that his poetry does not necessarily contain a single correct answer. In contrast, his poetry often presents puzzles with no solutions where the act of interpretation itself becomes the valued prize.

<sup>8</sup> McCaffery's source here is Georges Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943. 233). I've used McCaffery's translation because it conveys his idiosyncratic application of Bataille.

<sup>9</sup> In his criticism, McCaffery will use two other terms to denote entropy and excess, which are largely isomorphic with the general economy: sovereignty and libido. Although they are similar to the general economy, they are, in their specific meanings, distinct. Tracing a history through Hegel, Nietzsche, De Sade, Lautréamont, Baudelaire, Ebenezer Jones, Genet, Blake, Emily Brontë and Kafka, McCaffery suggests that sovereignty is the dissolution of all boundaries, binaries, borders and opposites. In contrast, McCaffery defines libido not in the Freudian sense as a psychological drive, but as a materiality which always exceeds signification (and thus may be either biological or graphic). Producing ambivalence and indeterminacy, “[l]ibidinal intensities are oppositionally related to the fixity of the written; they are decoding drives that seep through and among texts, jamming codes and pulverizing language chains” (“Language Writing,” *NI* 153). McCaffery's use of libido and sovereignty is again indebted to Bataille, who discusses them at length in *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (Trans. by Mary Dalwood.

San Francisco: 1986) and *Literature and Evil* (Trans. by Alastair Hamilton. London: Calder & Boyars, 1973).

10 McCaffery frequently makes these anti-utilitarian statements in terms of libido and sovereignty (see note 8). For example, McCaffery emphasizes that “[t]he sovereign gesture is hence a gesture (without true responsibility) beyond use value” (“Language Writing,” *NI* 156). Moreover, “[l]ibido is NOT utilitarian; it is not a producer but flows and spills and breaks in an unmeditated outlay of blind power” (155).

11 See Christian Bök’s “Nor the Fun Tension: Steve McCaffery and His Critical ‘Paradoxy’” and Marjorie Perloff’s “‘Voice Whisht Through Thither Flood’: Steve McCaffery’s *Panopticon* and *North of Intention*” in *Poetic License: Essays on the Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric*. Both reviewers are sympathetic to McCaffery’s poetry, but never fully address its inconsistency with his criticism.

12 See McCaffery’s “Critical Responsibilities” where the poet attacks Bruce Serafin’s review of *North of Intention*.

13 The genealogy of the concrete movement is vast, but it began to be recognized as a movement around mid-century with the works of Eugen Gomringer in Switzerland, and the Noigandres group, consisting of Haroldo de Campos, Décio Pignatari, and Augusto de Campos, in Brazil. Since, the concrete movement has diversified significantly, and remains vigorous today. Although it sadly neglects the Canadian concrete scene, Mary Ellen Solt’s *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Ed., with an introduction, by Mary Ellen Solt.

Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1968) provides a useful collection of many international concretists who influenced McCaffery.

14 The phrase “concrete poetry” is frequently used as a collective term to refer to all poetry that privileges phonic and/or visual qualities. I shall try to be more specific by using the phrases concrete, sound, and post-semiotic poetry to refer to McCaffery’s particular styles; “material poetry” will be my general phrase.

15 A third panel in the series, entitled *The Abstract Ruin: (Carnival: Panel Three)*, exists, but it is not primarily a concrete poem. This poem is discussed in Chapter Five.

16 McCaffery’s emphasis on the visual, physical and morphological qualities of text is also evident in his use of broadsheets, postcards, comics, doodles, large type, sketches, broken orthography, illustrations and prints.

17 Specifically, *Carnival* was displayed at the New Street Gallery, Edinburgh, in Bologna, Italy, and at A Space, Toronto.

18 By copying Pollock, McCaffery may be imitating Gertrude Stein, who attempted to translate cubist painterly techniques into verbal and literary form. By choosing to adapt cubism, however, Stein merely complicates rather than abandons representation (the cubist canvas still portrays a subject, albeit shattered and temporalized). In contrast, the early McCaffery resists this vestige of representation, and attempts to move beyond Stein and cubism by creating a poetry utterly cleansed of referential taint.

<sup>19</sup> See Eugen Gomringer, "From Line to Constellation" (*Concrete Poetry: A World View*. Ed., with an introduction, by Mary Ellen Solt. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1968. 67).

<sup>20</sup> *Moon: a post-semiotic sequence* (1974) and *Broken Mandala* (1974) are two rare examples of poems which McCaffery allows to stand with minimum explanation. The titles are the only instances of referential language.

<sup>21</sup> To McCaffery's credit, many of his essays deliberately complicate the essay form so the division between criticism and poetry is not always clear. In *North of Intention*, for example, essays like "Blood.Rust.Capital.Bloodstream," "(Immanent) (Critique)" or "Lyric's Larynx" convolute prose syntax, foster a semantic plurality, and even adopt verse form (a left-hand justification of margins).

<sup>22</sup> McCaffery's necessary attachment to reference is clearest in a short article, "Critical Responsibilities," a rebuttal to Bruce Serafin's review of *North of Intention*. Responding to Serafin's unfavourable account of his text, McCaffery argues that Serafin has failed to read his book on the propositional level, and has prevented "a genuine intellectual communication from taking place" (24). Insisting on correct readings, McCaffery demands Serafin recognize his authorial intention by acknowledging the book's ideological content (in this way, McCaffery opposes his own mandate to allow the reader to construct meaning). Moreover, McCaffery seems to insist that Serafin consume the content in the very reified, passive manner *North of Intention* opposes. McCaffery even defends his use of technical terminology because of its precision in delineating his ideas: "jargon

is a precise and instrumental use of proper terms and phrases *vital* to the efficient operations of a discrete community of users” (25). Here McCaffery energetically asserts the same denotative and syntactic clarity which he wishes to undo in his poetry. In “Nor the Fun Tension: Steve McCaffery and His Critical ‘Paradoxy,’” Christian Bök notes that “McCaffery questions monosemic referentiality in his criticism, but nevertheless he must resort to such monosemic referentiality in order to argue that Serafin has misread the text” (99).

<sup>23</sup> See Caroline Bayard’s *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec* and Brian Henderson’s “New Syntaxes in McCaffery and Nichol: Emptiness, Transformation, Serenity” for a discussion of bpNichol, concrete poetry and mysticism.

<sup>24</sup> See in particular McCaffery’s introduction to *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue*, where he describes Charlie Morrow and Jerome Rothenberg as developing their art “towards the Shamanic . . . Morrow directs his work towards audience participation and intimate settings. He has . . . experimented with breath chants, synchronized mass breathings (‘breathe-ins’), sound healing, and vision inducing chanting” (16).

<sup>25</sup> Later in his career, McCaffery recognizes sound poetry’s “theological contamination” where God functions “as a hidden presence” (“Sound Poetry” *LB* 90), but he believes that he can rid sound poetry of the divine infection through the tape recorder. Via mechanization, the sound poet extends his audio capacities beyond the limitations of the human body and voice. Editing provides



further opportunity to order the sound poem without usual constraints of time or space imposed upon speech.

In part, McCaffery is right; the tape recorder definitely does defuse some of the theological bricolage of sound poetry. Judeo-Christianity has long associated God with the spoken word. The dislocation of the voice through tape editing and distortion certainly complicates that equation, but taped sound poetry is not yet free of its latent spiritualism. When McCaffery describes “the transcendence of the limits of the human body” (“Sound Poetry” *LB* 90) afforded by the tape machine, he still operates in a system of transport and rapture. The tape machine becomes just another meditation tool which supposedly elevates human consciousness beyond its corporeal form. In this sense, taped sound poetry remains within a metaphysical tradition.

26 Terms like “energy” or “charge” lend McCaffery’s argument a questionable sense of scientific objectivity.

27 Because McCaffery attempts to return to a presymbolic and prelinguistic realm, his description of this state is frustratingly vague and typically evasive. At times, his description of the presymbolic resembles a kind of physiological and instinctual drive, equivalent to the Freudian conception of the id, unconscious or libido. Elsewhere it parallels the infant-like state of immediate and intuitive gratification, similar to Lacan’s conception of the child before the mirror stage. In yet other versions, the prelinguistic is conceived as a kind of non-localized force, power, intensity, flux, flow, discharge or energy. Obviously, McCaffery cannot be exact and definitive about

the presymbolic domain because it is outside language, and cannot be defined. At best, he can offer only inadequate approximations and tactical metaphors. His terms lack a theoretical precision, but we must remember that he wishes to manifest the presymbolic rather than intellectually comprehend it.

28 In *A Section from Carnival*, McCaffery presents a similar rationale for concrete poetry: “one thing i like to feel in these constructs is that i can bring the normally neglected mental & physical processes of composition to a concious [sic] concrete level” (n.p.). Moreover, the composition of *Carnival* follows a “spontaneous emission” (quoted in Nichol, “Checklist” 72) similar to sound poetry’s libidinal release.

29 In “Some Notes Re Sound Energy, and Performance,” McCaffery offers a possible response to Hartley’s charge of anarchy. McCaffery declares that sound poetry is “not an apoetics of anarchy but the return to a state that gives the freedom to construct pragmatically and spontaneously one’s own rule structures” (282). Thus sound poetry is not chaos, but enlightened self-interest, which grants the ability to change and control one’s own defining parameters. Sound poetry is thus not absolute freedom, but the freedom to choose one’s manner of constraint.

To my mind, McCaffery’s rejoinder does not adequately address the charge of anarchy. But then again, Hartley never satisfactorily explains why anarchy is undesirable.

30 Both the post-semiotic and the sound poem have a similar lack of denotative meaning, which demands an active engagement from the

audience. In this respect, they are an “utterly open code” (“Text-Sound, Energy and Performance” 73). In describing his poetic sequence *Transitions to the Beast*, McCaffery uses a similar rhetoric of production. Here he contends that his intent was “to attain a cool code (low definition)” (back cover). The terminology is Marshall McLuhan’s, who describes a cool medium as one in which “little [information] is given and . . . much has to be filled in by the listener” (*UM* 36). Post-semiotic poetry remains “cool” in the sense that it refuses to inform and communicate, but rather requires participation and deliberation on part of the receiver.

<sup>31</sup> In *Textual Politics and the Language Poets*, George Hartley similarly criticizes McCaffery for his glorification of graphic substance. However, Hartley’s assessment is misrepresentative because it is based only on McCaffery’s early poetry of linguistic materiality, as evidenced by Hartley’s description of McCaffery as a poet “whose work has been primarily performance and sound poetry” (xv). Hartley ignores not only McCaffery’s own self-criticism about materialist poetics, but also ignores most of his poetry which is not preoccupied with the graphic body.

<sup>32</sup> We can see in Heidegger’s vocabulary of “hope,” “humanity,” and “salvation” that he, like McCaffery, is not free of metaphysical contamination.

<sup>33</sup> McLuhan concedes that pictographic languages are “culturally richer forms of writing” (86) than phonetic symbols. Having a natural resemblance to their objects, pictographs precede the phonetic division of sight from sound, and so enjoy the full

sensibility lost in phonetic language. Moreover, they are individual, and encourage multiple connotations.

34 As demonstrated by his early computer poems, Nichol seems to be more open to electronic media than McCaffery.

35 McCaffery's resistance to the technologies of print culture is implicit in his materialistic poetry. Because I have already discussed these in Chapter One, I shall make the connections brief. Both concrete and sound poetry defy linearity in an attempt to alleviate print culture's fragmentation, alienation, and specialization. In a fairly obvious way, post-semiotic poetry responds to the mechanization of language via the phonetic system. It transforms the letter from an arbitrary visual-verbal sign into an individuated, connotation-rich ideogram that can better accommodate the holistic nature of human experience.

36 For clarity's sake, I consider only the conventional book. Many books defy the imposition of linearity; as McCaffery notes, "[t]he history of the book has always included the book's own contestation with itself" (*RG* 166).

37 See Rudolf Carnap, *Introduction to Semantics, and Formalization of Logic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, c1943).

38 *Evoba* (1987) is an explicit challenge to logical positivism, directed at Ludwig Wittgenstein. It insists upon that which Wittgenstein refuses to speak (contradictions, inconsistencies, paradoxes and opacities), and so reveals the potentially dangerous bias of Wittgenstein's work: its tendency to ostracize the different, the strange, the irregular.

39 Nichols made this comment in discussion of her paper at the Robin Blaser Conference "Recovery of the Public World," held in Vancouver, July, 1995.

40 A remarkable number of lines in "Lag" are close to paligrammatic perfection, but are off by a few letters, such as the statement "on to him Tom tomorrow seems towery" (27). In other places, the mirroring seems to transgress the comma, as in "still Attic salt, italics" (56). One wonders if imperfections and spillages are part of McCaffery's design, complications of the complications of the line.

41 If the unconscious works through parapraxis, metonymy and metaphor, association and substitution, juxtaposition, disjunction and overlay (as Freud and Lacan both argue), then "Lag" is not merely aberrant speech, but a kind of unconscious writing which reveals the paragrammatic and general economic operation of the mind. In its own words (itself a paligram), "palindromes and reversals as orders reveal mind's plan" ("Lag" 70).

42 See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations* (Ed., with an introduction, by Hannah Arendt. Trans. by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1969. 217-251).

43 Because Nichol and McCaffery explore alternatives to translative orthodoxy, they tend not to explicitly identify the theoreticians of traditional translation, but they may have in mind the likes of I. A. Richards, Eugene Nida, or even Noam Chomsky. Richards was primarily a literary critic rather than a translator, but developed a hermeneutic theory called "practical criticism" which subsequently

became the model for a generation of translators. Richards argued that a text has a unified, if multiple meaning (the author's intent) that can be successfully decoded and explicated by a competent, cultured reader. Correct interpretation/translation is bounded by a pre-existent message on one hand, and readerly proficiency on the other. See his work *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1929), as well as his one article explicitly devoted to translation, "Toward a Theory of Translation" in *Studies in Chinese Thought* (Ed. by Arthur F. Wright. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1967. 247-262).

Eugene Nida was a translator of the Bible, who believed in the inviolable message of God, the meaning of which remains constant, even when it is expressed through different signifiers in various cultures. For Nida, the meaning of God's word is a spiritual and universal constant which transcends specific cultural manifestations. The translator's task is to find the word or symbol which has the same cultural value as the original. When translating the Bible into Inuit culture, for example, Nida replaces "lamb" with "seal," because the seal is immediately familiar to the Inuit, and assumes the function the lamb did in ancient cultures: a source of sustenance. Nida's method reveals the inherently metaphysical and theological nature of conventional translation, the belief in a stable idea uncontaminated by textual play. This is perhaps why McCaffery claims "[t]he pathology of translation will always be its mythic support of an ultimate signified that acts as the source text's transported truth. Translation has been haunted by this

transcendental pressure of truth” (8x8 45). See Nida’s *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964) and “Principles of Translation as Exemplified by Bible Translating” in *On Translation* (Ed. by Reuben A. Brower. New York: Oxford UP, 1959. 11-31).

This transcendentalism persists in Noam Chomsky’s faith in “deep structures” and “universal grammar,” supposedly innate elements of the human psyche which order information into similar syntactic patterns across all societies. See Chomsky’s seminal early work *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague: Mouton, 1957).

44 Nichol and McCaffery’s account of translative history is somewhat reductive. Translators have long been grappling with issues of textual fidelity and infidelity, spirit and letter, sense and meaning, variously arguing for one side over the other. Although a translative tradition exists which privileges ideas, alternative traditions have always been available. McCaffery falsely restricts the tradition in order that he may explode it, and thus appear revolutionary.

45 In this regard, McCaffery’s translations can be seen as logical extensions of his material poetry: writing which manifests the phenomenology of language.

46 See Jiri Levy, “The Translation of Verbal Art” in *Semiotics of Art* (Ed. by Ladislav Matejka and Irvin R. Titunik. Cambridge: MIT P, 1976. 218-264), and “Translation as a Decision Process” in *To Honor Roman Jakobson* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967. 1171-82); Anton Popovic, *Dictionary for the Analysis of Literary Translation*

(Edmonton: Dept. of Comp. Lit., U of Alberta, 1976); James Holmes, *Translated!* (Ed. by Raymond van den Broeck. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988); James Holmes, Frans de Haan and Anton Popovic, eds., *The Nature of Translation: Essays on the Theory and Practice of Literary Translation* (The Hague: Mouton; Bratislava: Publishing House of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, 1970); James Holmes, José Lambert, and Raymond van den Broeck, eds., *Literature and Translation: New Perspectives in Literary Analysis* (Leuven: Acco, 1978); André Lefevere, *Translating Literature: Practice and Theory in a Comparative Literature Context* (New York: MLA, 1992); Itamar Even-Zohar and Gideon Toury, eds., *Theory of Translation and Intercultural Relations*, a special issue of *Poetics Today* 2.4 (Summer/Fall 1981): 1-239; Itamar Even-Zohar, "Polysystem Theory" in *Poetics Today* 1-2: 287-310; Gideon Toury, *In Search of a Theory of Translation* (Tel Aviv: Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, 1980). Jacques Derrida explicitly discusses translation in his articles "Living On: Borderlines" in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (Ed., with an introduction and notes by Peggy Kamuf. New York: Columbia UP, 1991. 254-268) and "Des Tours de Babel" in *A Derrida Reader* (243-255).

<sup>47</sup> The concepts are mostly McCaffery's, but occasionally I provide some of my own. I've omitted McCaffery's use of traditional translation, such as in the first stage of  $8 \times 8$ , where he tries to replicate exactly Michael Gay's intentions. McCaffery's opposition to traditional translation is not absolute; traditional translation remains one possibility among many.



48 McCaffery's method here is similar to André Lefevere's notion of phonemic translation, except that it does not always preserve the phoneme as a discrete and inviolable unit of utterance.

49 See Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (Ed. by T. S. Eliot. London, 1954. 25).

50 See Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation" in *On Translation* (Ed. by Reuben Brower. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1959. 232-239).

51 *Six Fillious* gravitates around the work of one man, Robert Filliou. His French-language poetic sequence *14 Chansons et 1 Charade* (1968) provides a source text, which in turn is translated five times, by five authors, into a total of three languages: George Brecht and bpNichol translate Filliou from French into English; Dieter Roth translates him into German while Dick Higgins translates Roth's text back into English; in turn, McCaffery manipulates Brecht's text to produce his own unique English language version. Combined, these six versions of Filliou's poetry comprise *Six Fillious*.

52 The aesthetics of Tristan Tzara and Kurt Schwitters are presented in Robert Motherwell, ed. *The Dada Painters and Poets* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1951); John Cage sets out his poetics in *Silence* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan UP, 1973); William S. Burroughs uses a cut-up technique in *The Ticket That Exploded* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967); Marcel Duchamp's techniques are analyzed in Arturo Schwarz, *Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Abrams, 1974).

53 See Roman Jakobson, "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles" in *Critical Theory Since Plato* (Ed. by Hazard Adams. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971. 1113-1116).

54 In "The Annotated, Anecdoted, Beginnings of a Critical Checklist of the Published Works of Steve McCaffery," bpNichol reveals that McCaffery's source for *Intimate Distortions* is not Sappho directly but Mary Barnard's English translations of the poet (75).

55 Brecht's text is not left unchanged; McCaffery leaves out some of Brecht's words.

56 See Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation" in *On Translation* (Ed. by Reuben Brower. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1959. 232-239).

57 Filliou's original text "14 chansons et 1 charade" is something of a burlesque of the Romantic tradition to begin with. McCaffery's satire is a burlesque of a burlesque.

58 M. M. Bakhtin suggests that dialogism is foreign to poetry and unique to the novel; see his *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Ed. by Michael Holquist. Trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981). McCaffery's collaborations and especially his translations clearly refute Bakhtin's claim and constitute a kind of poetic dialogism.

59 McCaffery's denial of responsibility is faulty for a number of reasons. He ignores that the translator chooses which texts -- Marquis de Sade or Teresa de Lauretis -- get translated, a choice which has ramifications as far as intentional meaning persists. Even if McCaffery's translations are radically divergent from their sources,

he must admit that the decision to pare, segment and resequence a text is an action which still demands accountability. Although the vocabulary may be another's, McCaffery is further answerable for the choice of formula, chance or design which informs the meaning of his text. In effect, the word pattern is solely his: and patterns are meaningful. Clearly, words do not find their "own way," as McCaffery asserts, but are motivated, directed and finalized through the translator himself.

60 In this chapter, when I use the word "women," I am referring to human beings, historical or fictional. In contrast, when I use the word "Woman," I refer to the concept of femininity.

61 See Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985).

62 McCaffery's passage is slightly more complex than I present. In a surrealist condensation, McCaffery amalgamates the experience of a microscopic slide with a woman's confrontation with language. The implication of this poetic alloy is clear: to exist in patriarchy as a woman is like being a laboratory sample under examination.

63 For a discussion of the importance narrative retains for women, see Teresa de Lauretis's *Alice Doesn't*.

64 See Marquis de Sade, *Justine* (New York: Lancer, 1964).

65 In McCaffery's writings, sex is just another discourse, a discourse of the body which grounds and justifies the performance of gender. Sex is not a body, but a language of the body which has been naturalized as self-evident truth.

66 In significant ways, journalism is a patriarchal discipline parallel to medicine and cinema. All three are optically-informed processes of representation, dependent upon the intrusive, therefore phallic eye. Like medicine (and to a lesser degree Disney-style cinema), journalism strives to be corrective, constantly examining the social body in order to expose and excise crime, injustice, excess and other cultural diseases.

67 Does this mean men and women are treated equally before this indiscriminate linguistic power? On the contrary: many discourses clearly favour one sex over the other. Women have been disadvantaged by systems of thought, representation and knowledge that selectively target, condition, appropriate and even brutalize their body. However, this process may selectively target men, too. "The Property: Comma" shows how men are the preferred subjects for legal and military discipline. In McCaffery's poetry, patriarchy is not a culturally universal force; it is but one linguistic contortion, a specific category of linguistic power/knowledge, the discourse specialized for training and subordinating female subjects. However, McCaffery's poetry finally argues that patriarchy must be contextualized within a delocalized linguistic power from which no subject -- male or female -- ever escapes.

68 Only the third-person singular pronouns are gendered in English, as if gender were both singular and objective. In comparison, the pronoun most intimately associated with our being, the first person pronoun "I," is strangely sexless. English thus constructs gender as additional rather than integral to our being.

69 See Eugen Gomringer, "Concrete Poetry" in *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Ed., with an introduction, by Mary Ellen Solt. Bloomington: Indiana up, 1968. 67-68), and also Max Bense's essay "Concrete Poetry" (Solt, 73).

70 We must be careful not to assume that the structure really is a "Victorian water tower" ("Piccu Carlu" 145). The photos in McCaffery's text show the composition of the tower to be concrete, a modern rather than Victorian construction material. Even the real is a deceit in a "pataphysical text.

71 Wursthagen-McCaffery describes Piccu Carlu as a reading culture which prohibited all writing. Piccu Carlu thus becomes analogous with "pataphysics itself: lacking any master text or authorial script, both directly interpret the material base of things. Stones, brooks, trees, mountains -- the environment itself -- become ur-text or primordial book, with an open significance. As Wursthagen-McCaffery declares, "man is destined to read and nature's 'function' to have already written" ("Piccu Carlu" 150).

72 The opposite effect is also present: the aesthetic force of the aphoristic band tends to decrease as each truism becomes vague, imprecise, and general to the point of uselessness. A good aphorism strives to use concrete detail, Pound's "natural symbol." Thus, *Knowledge Never Knew* documents a process of mutual contamination: abstraction must prostitute itself with concretion, and vice versa.

73 As I read "Lastworda," I began to pronounce the letters of each word as modern English began to slip. Comprehension of the text

was sustained in this manner, at least for a little while. I could audibly understand lines like “no funder dylygens” (209), that were unfamiliar to the eye. Reading thus became more visceral, as I was forced to engage the text at a physical level. In this respect, “Lastworda” is reminiscent of the “personal orthography” (“Bissett,” *NI* 99) of bill bissett, as well as the neologisms of *Finnegans Wake*.

Phonetic pronunciation, however, has limits. It does not help when the word is completely unknown to modern English [such as “scynscada” (214)] or when letters shift phonetic functions [as in “iealousie” (205)]. Luckily, McCaffery decided not use obsolete orthography, remaining instead within “the preserved invariance of a Times Roman font” (*TS* 214). Consequently phonetics remains helpful, but not absolutely so.

74 McCaffery himself draws a comparison between his language poetry and capitalism: “rather than being an effective critique of the language of advanced Capitalism, Language Writing would be its perfected simulacrum and far from problematizing dominant ideology would actually reflect it” (“Diminished Reference,” *NI* 25). Without referents, McCaffery’s poetry behaves in the a-local, disconnected manner of television.

75 According to Knowles, McCaffery ignores “national, as opposed to continental context. *North of Intention* simply assumes, as indicated by its simultaneous publication in New York and Toronto, that there is a North American poetry, that there is a poetry that springs solely from, and ‘refers’ only to language itself” (“Reviewing McCaffery Reviewing” 145).

76 Although McCaffery's terminology is modern, the equation between writing and death is an old obsession. It takes its most familiar form in the texts of Poe, Keats and Goethe, and so McCaffery's evocations of death and pain again link to Romanticism.

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## Appendix

Palindromes from “Lag”:

deer frisk sir freed (12); do not start at rats to nod (14); see few owe fees (15); gate man sees name garage man sees name tag (17); moors dine nip in Enid’s room (18); lepers repel (20); live not on evil (21); no lemons no melon (23); Novrad sides reversed is Darvon (24); detour routed (26); drawn on ward (27); top step’s pup’s pet spot (29); may a moody baby doom a yam (30); must sell at tallest sum (32); did Hannah say as Hannah did (34); no it can assess an action (35); too bad i hid a boot (37); draw pupil’s pup’s lip upward (38); tide net safe soon all in a manilla noose fastened it (40); too hot to hoot (41); pull up if i pull up (43); some men interpret nine memos (44); red root put up to order (46); deliver reviled (48); snug satraps eye Sparta’s guns (49); ten animals i slam in a net (51); slang is signals (52); six at part trap taxis (54); no word no bond row on (56); no it is opposition (57); a lob a rap parabola (59); peels swap paws sleep (60-61); o cita mora aromatico (62); avid as a diva (64); to rococo rot (65); slob my symbols (67); swash saws (69); God as a devil lived as a dog (70); gulp’s plug (72); rise caps space sir (73); loot slate metal plate metal stool (75); sums are not set as a test on Erasmus (77); I maim nine men in Miami (78); drab as a fool as aloof as a bard (80); sail on game magnolias (82); are we not drawn onward drawn onward to new era (83); name now one man (85); no it is open on one position (87); no it never propagates if i set a gap or prevention (88); won’t lovers revolt now (90); go flee fog (91-92)  
[technically not a palindrome, but it does read forward and

backwards]; no it is opposed art sees trade's opposition (93);  
 demanded Nemesis emended named (95); slap dab's bad pals (96);  
 doom royal panic i mimic in a play or mood (99); deliver desserts  
 stressed reviled (101); live dirt up a putrid evil (103); nurse's onset  
 abates noses run (104); oh who was it i saw oh who (106); step on no  
 pets (107); refasten gipsy's pig net safer (109); i roamed under it as a  
 tired nude Maori (111); red now on level no wonder (112); straw no  
 too stupid a fad i put soot on warts (114); sued ice do to decide us  
 (116); tense i snap pansies net (117).

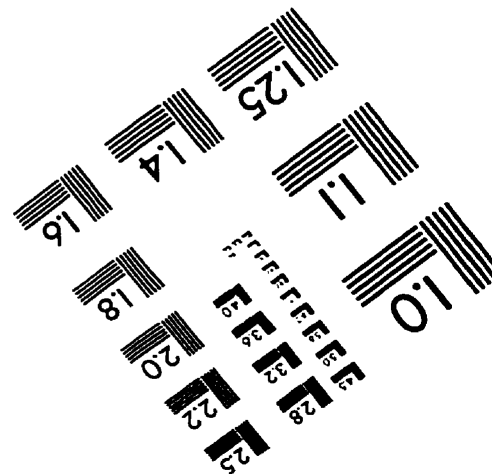
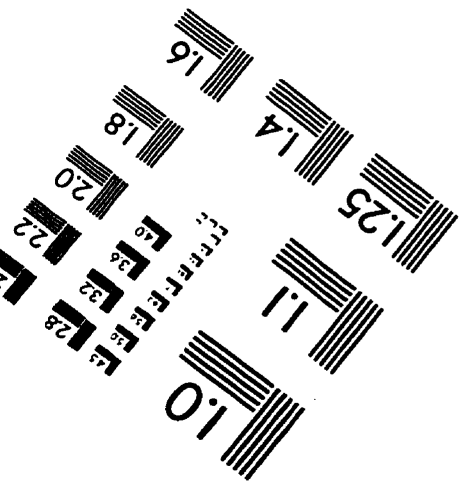
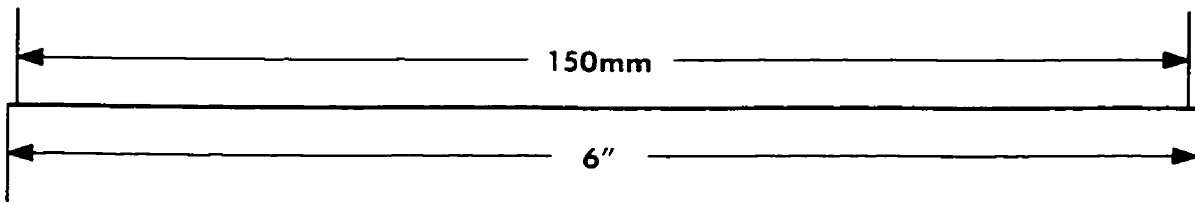
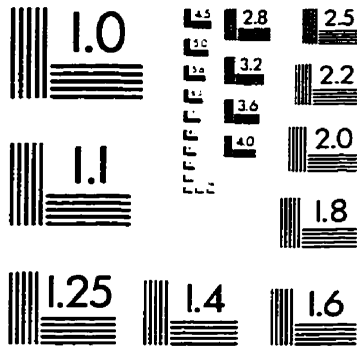
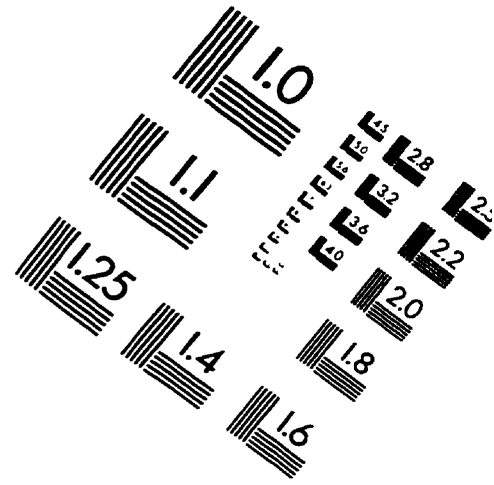
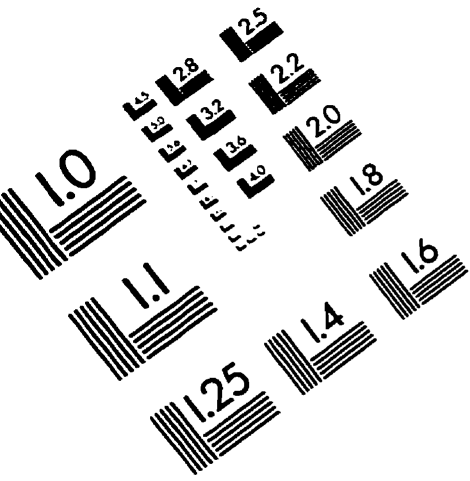
Paligrams from "Lag":

the setting sun sent huge tints (12); combination mob in action (13);  
 crinoline's inner coils (15); spheric ciphers (16); the alligator's lithe  
 lagartos (17); asseveration as one avers it (19-20); conservative not  
 vice versa (22); contemplations on mental topics (24); punishment  
 nine thumps (26); measured made sure (27); a steward draws tea  
 (28); ocean canoe (29); drone's tune undertones (31); stone deaf  
 tones fade (32); semaphore see arm hop (33); it named one  
 denominate (34); delegation's oiled agents (36); the man blinds  
 blandishment (37); declaration an oral edict (38); asperity yet i rasp  
 (39); this matrimony hits into my arm (41); the humanitarians hint  
 samaritan hue (42); delegation's oiled agents (43; cf. p 36); maple  
 sugar real spa gum (44); benedictions cited benison (46); so let's  
 pinch clothespins (47); staghound a dog hunts (48); the modist  
 methodist (51); trouble's blue sort (52); athletics lithe acts (53);  
 parental paternal (54); dolce far niente after indolence (56); nostalgia  
 lost again (57); grunts emit mutterings (58); stone deaf tones fade

(61) cf. (32); multiple sclerosis or cells tissue limp (62); no minutes on sun time (63-64); blank wet diets on regimen a long time between drinks (65); subtly but sly (65); a steaminess seen as a mist (66); is denoting a designation (69); palindromes and reversals as orders reveal mind's plan (70); a cent tip pittance (71); Ovid's voids (72); sin causes sauciness (74); hotel to use house to let (76); edict cited (78); Saint Elmo's fire is lit for seamen (79); burying the hatchet's butchering thy hates (80); rhinestones not shiners (82); animosity is no amity (83); omphalopsychites pipes holy stomach (84); kleptomaniacs task policeman (86); one ton hug not enough (87); the paradise saw lost was earth's ideal spot (88); the dentist dints teeth (90); the Morse Code's morsal here comes molar dots (91); brush cavern shrub carven (93); united in duet (95); the widow's mite was two white dimes (96); form spirited recipes from precise riptides (97); ten Egyptian cigarettes net gay petite cigars (98-99); star of Bethlehem halts before them (101); it's the countryside no city dusts it here (102); but feeling the earthquake's fleeing that queer tub shake (104); shit sensationalism is almost this insane (105); correspondents of the newspaper corps penned press notes of the war (106); accentuations i can cut as tone (107); lips angered slip enraged (109); bedroom's boredoms (110); noiseless lionesses (111); thus float shut aloft (113); ignis fatuus is it a fungus (114); versatility variety list (117); Washington crossing the Delaware a wet crew gain Hessian stronghold (118).



# IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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