

INTERVIEW / bp NICHOL

This interview, some two hours in length, was held with great hilarity in the kitchen of Gladys Hindmarch's house on the afternoon of September 19, 1974, the day after bp's reading at Capilano College. Those present to this occasion, indicated by initials in the text, besides bp and Gladys, were Pierre Coupey, Dwight Gardiner, Brian Fisher, and Daphne Marlatt. The original transcript is unfortunately much too long to reprint in full, so what follows are essentially excerpts from the mainstream of conversation, edited by Daphne Marlatt and bp Nichol.

AN INTRODUCTION IN WHICH THE AUTHOR COVERS HIS TRACKS WITH SOME FANCY FOOTWORK

There seem to be a few views when it comes to the transcription & publishing of interviews with authors. One has it you should leave every burp & belch intact to preserve the actuality of the event. Another has it you should tidy the whole thing up to make good prose. Me i stand somewhere between the two. The facts are that belches, burps & laughs don't come across in print. "HA HA HA HA HA HA" reads quite strangely mostly because it lacks the intonation & the context of human contact that occasioned the laugh. Also there's little distinction made between the belly laugh & the chuckle. On the other hand why pretend that every writer speaks flawless prose. I don't. I use a tremendous amount of slang when i talk, tend to gesture with my hands a lot, & depend on facial expressions & intonation to

get my point across. Thus i can't pretend that i'm one of the masters of spoken english. On the other hand when i first read thru this interview i was appalled at the number of times i said "you know" & "sort of" & various other qualifiers & verbal shifts. I had to face the unpleasant truth that though i said what i believed i put a lot of padding around it almost as if i were saying "here's what i believe but on the other hand don't take me too seriously folks." Probably this is a kind of tribute (there i go again) to the respect i have for the writers i was talking with but it harks back to the timidity that made me (as i remark in the interview) hide out for a long time. Being a firm believer in learning from one's errors or sins of omission i decided to edit the majority of these qualifiers out of the printed interview but to acknowledge them in this introduction. I have left some of them in to retain the flavour of actual speech but there remains the fact that by doing so i have created a fictional conversation in as much as in this version i appear more definite than i sounded then. One could argue the earlier conversation was the greater fiction since i was holding back the full weight of my feelings but let's not go off in that direction.

The one other thing i feel compelled to mention is that the bulk of this interview/ conversation centres upon two as yet unpublished works. Hopefully this will not prove too great a hindrance to those wishing to participate in the general dialogue since the points made are valid even if i never publish the works in question.

bpNichol
Edmonton/February 21/1976

DM I want to ask you if it's true that prose is your one and only love.

bp It was at one time. I forget when I said that.

DM You said it actually in the Queen Street interview.

bp Yes, '72. Well when I started off writing, what I really wanted to write was novels and short stories. And as I said then, when I found Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* I thought, right, there's everything that I could conceive of doing at that point in time done. So, I still wanted to write, and I thought, well, I think I'll just start writing. So I stopped worrying about it and started working mostly on poetry.

DM Well what is it about prose that holds you?

bp Well right at the moment it's just that there's more and more I want to know about it. The way it feels for me right now is really exploring the form, you know? And the thing that interests me most as a writer is exploring modes of writing and trying to understand where the power is in them; how I personally can make it stronger or find out where the blocks are, if you like; what the things are that prevent it functioning the way it could. And prose just allows you much longer and much different kinds of structures than poetry tends to, you know. There's more possibility for playing around with characters and all those things. I think — this is purely personal — I've tended to use poetry as a medium of *self-expression*. And traditionally in prose you can write "fictions." So that's probably why I got interested in prose, writing about things other than self, you know (even though you're always writing about self anyways).

GH Well, it is really creating a new mode. Like when you say exploring the form, I immediately take the form as it is, somehow; I guess I didn't even see a book, so I'm seeing like a rectangle in the form. But your writing is not the least bit rectangular. It's much more like a circle. It keeps moving and shifting just slightly, shifts a groove like a record, then moves up another plane, shifts a groove, and you can drop on all planes at once sometimes. You just go down to the Hell or you just go *pssshhhh* up to the . . .

bp Well I've been really intrigued with two things: compressing as much as possible into a space so there's that quality, say, that music has, where you can just go back and back and there's always something new there. I've been interested in that type of compression which involves knowing a lot about surface and knowing a lot about what's below surface. So it means you have to know everything about the thing, from the cover through the pages, and how they work and what happens when it's on the page and what happens when it's not on the page. I mean there's just lots and lots to know. My experience has been that most writers don't, for instance, question the medium of the page or the book and say, okay, what effect does the fact that this thing is bound and functions this way, what effect does that have on what happens to the experience? Because my awareness is that that changes the experience over and over again, and it's never the same thing for me as it is for the person who's reading it (unless you're reading it out loud, unless it's a piece that can be read out loud to a person, that's the closest thing to a pure transmission).

DM Well you talked about not *writing Journal*, but having a sense of it as something you would record rather than print.

bp Yeah, that was my conception of it for years. But it just seems too long now to do that with. At that point there was just the first part which lasted about an hour, and I thought well, that was long enough that you could do that and the person would have to stay there and stay with it. I mean the advantage of tape is it's much harder to go back and forth. Like the reason I hate page numbers in books, basically, is because it gives you that whole reference thing. Which is okay if you want it, but it means the guy can say, oh crazy, I'll go back to page twelve and re-read that sentence. Which means that they can retreat from the process of what's happening to them, you know. I do that.

GH But sometimes that's really neat, like a classroom, when you can all define that same place. I had the sense with *Journal* that a person could read it, unlike a number of books, pick it up from the middle, read to the end, then return to the start at the beginning and move through. And well, it just works so incredibly on any number of levels that you're not missing by doing that. Whereas in most books, you do have to begin at the beginning. You're always beginning as you write. And you're always aware of the fact that you're ending too, in that present.

bp Yeah, that's true. The thing is, yeah, I mean, if that's what you want. Like if you want, shall we say, referentiality, then you leave page numbers in. But if you don't want it, if you want to be able to, in a way — it's kind of fascistic I guess — but if you want to be able to submerge the person in it, which was what I was trying to do with *Jesus Lunatick* and it's what I've been trying to do with *Journal*, it is a submersion process. The way I saw it was that it wasn't so much an issue of style, achieving a writing style, as being able to transcribe, if you like, or translate, states of consciousness. And to simply have that so that the reading experience would be the experience as much as you can get it of a state of consciousness.

DM Well the area that you're exploring all the time has to do with memory, even when it's a fictional memory as in *the martyrology*, of coming down from that cloud land up here, which was *then*, and like doing whatever you do here in this earth planet. But the referentiality is perhaps false, because the state of consciousness you're talking about is one where the memories keep coming up into the present and taking over.

bp That's right. Which isn't too groovy a situation, right.

DM Well it's certainly not linear. Like you can't say, I've left that behind on page twelve, because, you know, here it is page twenty-four and wow, they're just as present.

bp Well that's been my personal experience in life, that things erupt. Things erupt into the present — you know, that whole feeling of *déjà-vu*. *Déjà-vu* is essentially the experience of what

has happened before in the present, and as though it has never ceased happening and it's just going on like this, you know. Depressions often function that way. You get into a depression, you forget you ever had a good mood and you think, here we are again, this pit is very familiar. Actually, my image of depressions was always — very Protestant image — of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* where he's in the Slough of Despond. That's always the way I saw it. You get into a depression and it's just really mucky area. Anyways, that's what I was interested in, was somehow reflecting my awareness of how a consciousness functions. And the materials that come into it in terms of memory, of emotions, of all those things. And sometimes purely in terms of surface, because sometimes that's all you're aware of, is surface. There's nothing else happening but surface.

GH Having all that lack of character clutter, like your characters totally lack clutter — there's no geographical ground, locational ground — makes for a much clearer soul talk than the other Canadian writers now writing that I know. I frequently get that sense of, like it's talking from the soul of the characters, the talking from the soul of you. And I think that's one of the marvels of the way in which you're exploring.

bp Well the state that is happening essentially to, we can call him *the* character in *Journal*, is one in which external reality just gets subsumed into internal reality. And really all the incidents that happen, even when they start off as suddenly super-objective moments for me, like you'll meet someone or he'll do something, then it just gets consumed into the confusion, until finally he just has to shove all that aside and in a way just go back to his own beginning, which in that case is his relationship to his mother. And it's almost like he starts over at that point. He says, okay, here's everything I remember of what happened. You know, literally, he finds a grammar for memory in a sense. And then he can proceed from there.

- GH* It keeps tilting, and he *loses* that ground too. Like that thing of how he moves the memory — it comes up and then it just slips off the edge and it's gone.
- bp* All the early memories, yeah. Until he's actually talking to his mother that's what keeps happening to him. And then it's just a long string of very clear memories that all sort of circle around a couple of incidents and the way he felt. But it's like just incident after incident of him feeling this way in this relationship to that woman . . .
- GH* But it's still more than his mother though, isn't it?
- bp* Oh yeah.
- GH* When she's the mother even in the end she's also the woman who gave up the child who died, she's the sister who fucked her father . . .
- DM* Well she never does get outside him. That's why I keep balking at "character," because I can't think of it as character. It's simply a consciousness in which all these things orbit. And she never gets outside that container, she's always contained by it.
- bp* Right. It's entirely his view.
- DM* I keep hearing you translate time into space. And there's a kind of psychic geography that you're charting out in all this stuff. That's why the things return. It's not a time thing, it's a total transmutation into laying it on out, so that you can see it and see how things relate to each other.
- GH* Like a map that is one-dimensional, with all these layers just coming in to that one surface. Is that what you mean by surface?
- bp* There's about three meanings we're using it as. One is, say, where you're down in the depths and you come up to the surface — that's one sense. There's surface in the sense that this page with the ink on it is the surface of the book. And there's surface in the sense of everything that's compressed, like a lamination, into one thing. You know what I mean? But even then, below that surface is all the layers. There's a really super-early poem of mine, it's in *The Other Side of the Room* that went

something like: "A thin thing in all things/ A thin surface below the face of everything/ Every thin thing which delights us/ Lies below the surface of another thing." Which was really based on the visual pun which is a thing thing, as in "thing." It's been a lot of the obsession with visual poems, just to deal with the page as page and to really try and think about that. I quickly saw that I have a real writer's orientation to the page; I don't have a visual artist's orientation to the page. And that's why you can really separate out concrete poets who come at it from the graphic side and writers: the way they handle the page is radically different. So there's that sense of surface too: what effect does the surface have? Like the surface of the body is the interface between you and the air and everybody else you know. So surface is the filter too, through which osmosis, as it were, happens.

PC How does the structure of comic strips or comic books relate to what you've been saying about surface?

bp Beyond the fact that, without analyzing it, I surely enjoy them and they're total relaxation, the fact is it's the best wedding of the graphic and the narrative that we've got. Nobody's come up with a form as effective as the comic strip. Everything's there. What it's used for is not necessarily the ultimate extension of what it could be. But it's an incredible marriage of the two things. It's also a very collaborative art form. On the whole, it demands a collaboration between the artist and the writer.

GH You're now working on a collaboration with the other three of the Four Horsemen. Can you talk about the way in which you're exploring that possibility?

bp Well, I realized about eight months to a year ago that most of the writing I've been doing this last couple of years has been prose. And somewhere along there, we came up with the idea (the four of us) of doing a novel — I guess that was in the spring. So what we did (this is interesting in terms of what you were saying about the lack of landscape in *Journal*, which is very true) what we did there was we started from landscape. Each of us drew a map of a neighbourhood, either based on reality or a fictional neighbourhood (mine was roughly based

— everybody's was roughly based — on their childhood neighbourhoods) with an arrow saying "to city centre" on it. Then we drew in a whole area in between that we called the downtown part of the city, and we waited for that to be fleshed out. And each of us started writing out sections, quite independently of the others, but with the idea that the backgrounds were common, you see, and that we would have the characters encounter each other at different points within the city. It's really quite interesting. Raphael's character at this point just stays in his room and doesn't move. Paul's character ends up sort of being in all the down-and-out parts of the city, you know, haunting the bars and peep-shows and all that stuff. And Steve's character is quite nuts: this guy named Pope, who seems to be incarcerated in an insane asylum, St. Helen's Hospital, and who may have a double personality known as Dr. Duplicate the transvestite brain surgeon. And my character, who's Filoden, just sort of seems to be out driving all the time, roaming around the city and thinking a lot, heavily into thinking. And there's been a lot of encounters between Steve's character and my character and one encounter between Paul's character and my character.

DM So who was the first person to choose to actually do an encounter?

bp Steve and I.

DM And you set it up together?

bp How did we first encounter each other? Let me just think for a second here. Somehow we met in the hospital. Somehow my character — I don't remember at the moment — my character gets to the hospital and we end up having this visit which starts off with two rambling monologues. I would write a paragraph and Steve would write a paragraph, then I would write a paragraph.

DM In the same room?

bp Sitting beside each other in the same room. And there's this attempt to communicate but it's not happening. Then it's like suddenly they both click on this memory of this incident that

they were both involved in, you see. And at that point the possibility of communication opens up between them and so then there's much more meaningful dialogue. At which point Steve and I together created a new character who stepped outside the action of the novel and began to comment. And the guy's named Thomas Randall Garrett, very supercilious guy who was a teacher who had taught Filoden and Pope in high school. They were both members of the high school cartography club, you see, and Garrett's an expert on cartography. And then, subsequent to that, there was an occasion where Filoden meets Martin down by the docks. They go together up to the hospital. They meet Pope. More dialogue. And then what's happened recently is that Steve and I have begun to weave a mystery subplot (I'm not sure what's happening in our sections) which touches briefly on the other two guys. See, we're not trying to visualize what an end-product is, so it's a very difficult way to write because we're not sure where it's going. See in a way, in any sort of group activity, you form a group consciousness. So that the tricky thing in doing this prose thing is to develop a group consciousness around prose, because that's much harder to do than it is around poetry which doesn't have the same sort of content although it has content — you can more easily fall into it. When you get into prose, it's more like you're stepping on each other's toes. You're treading on the private preserves and the areas you've kept as private. And you say, okay, let's take a bigger risk, let's throw this area open too and see what happens. So we've all come out of our corners, the bells are ringing and we're seeing what happens.

GH Okay, when you meet, that's ego meeting, two egos, in some fiction . . .

bp You mean in the old Yogic sense.

GH Yeah, right. And then the group thing moves to . . . Like, the way you people do your sound things appears to be totally egoless, which is what is so amazing about seeing that group perform — the egolessness of it. But you're saying somehow in that writing it's much harder.

bp That's right, precisely because you're writing very strictly content. I mean, when you're writing your section, you're writing your content. So when you say, okay gang, come on in and you can change this content with me if you want to, you know; like, you can come into my sandbox and you can play with my toys. I mean, it sort of feels to me like it's really like that — it's at the stage of infancy. And it's easy with two people; it's easy to collaborate with two people, and Steve and I in fact collaborate very well. It's harder with three and it's a bitch with four. But we've got four years under our belts, we've got a basis for taking a risk and seeing where it goes.

GH How did you choose Filoden, the name?

bp Well it sort of sprang fullblown from my consciousness. Now if you want my feeling for where it's from — this is like an afterthought about it — there is a character called Philemon by a French comic strip artist named Fred — who's just an incredible character who keeps travelling out to the letter A in the Atlantic Ocean, you see, and sometimes he drops into the T. And there's a whole world out there on the letters in the Atlantic Ocean.

GH But at the time you weren't thinking of that. I'm interested in just that naming process.

bp It's a whole thing of just sitting there and feeling out the character and thinking, okay, what's his name? Blank space. Out of the space comes a name. It's like naming a child really.

DG Is it composed out of letters? I mean, you've been obsessed with H, et cetera; and like you talk about the A and the T, you know. Is that the way it takes its shape?

bp Well the name doesn't. This is like stepping back from the point where I've already named the character and realizing as I look

at my bookshelf, hey, Philemon sounds very close to Filoden by God! I bet this is what it's all about. Because in fact, he voyages out into the landscape, but the landscape is letters too, so it's like the double thing.

DM I copied down a couple of lines from the *martyrology* which I was interested in asking you about. And now even more, having heard you talk about this collaboration and the content thing. You say "we must return again to human voice and listen/ rip off the mask of words to free the sounds." And in the little thing you wrote as — I don't know if it was an introduction or a postscript, but it's a fold-in — you also talk about "a future music moves now to be written/ w g r & t . . ."

bp Well okay, the actual line comes out of the feeling that I had at that time which was that the importance of sound poetry was — for myself, say, and you can make an even wider application — was to free the emotional content of speech from ideation or from words, necessarily, and to just be able to let out the voice. And that once the voice had been let out, then the words would follow. I always go back to that Palongahoya legend, you know. Palongahoya's job was to open his mouth and to sing the praises of the creator. And that if he did that, then the vibratory axis of his body vibrated in tune with the vibratory axis of the cosmos and everything was in harmony, see? But that what people began to use . . . They got tricked by Raven and they began to use speech as a way of talking inside their teepees to each other. And this was a false use of it. Eventually he who creates everything comes down and bumps them all off for misuse of voice. And that's happened about four times according to the legend. So that's really what I was thinking of in that line, was just that necessity to not use words as a masking, which a lot of people do in conversations. Like you have a lot of different types of conversations. You have, say, the

make-out conversation. This is where two people are talking about something — I'm sure you've seen lots of these — but they're not really talking about anything other than their sort of, reconnoitering — when they're going to hit the sack and all that. That's one type of conversation. You have the same sort of thing in a business situation which is filled with all sorts of pleasantries and underneath this is this other rip-tide going on, you know. So it was also an awareness of those sort of uses of language and saying, okay, let's get rid of all of that and just let out the sound, you know, and see what's behind it.

GH And you've evolved a character in some sense now and let out the consciousness like you were doing in *Journal*. And it's going to be living out another side of that really.

bp Yeah. I mean this is the other thing in the collaboration, is like it's moving on to . . . Well you see, like in the work I do, which is working for Therafields as a theradramist and seeing people and talking with them about what's bothering them. And what you're doing in the situation is not imposing yourself on the person but basically being a catalyst: to ask questions they can't formulate, to put them in the situation where they're going to have to deal with the material themselves and where you help them as much as you can. It negates a certain type of writing. That is, if you're doing it all the time it negates the traditional psychological novel you know, in which you simply describe a character. It becomes very uninteresting to write that type of novel when you're sort of there, articulating it on a daily level in your life. So the problem for me, or the way I saw it was, okay I wanted to write novels — and I saw this about ten years ago — which reflected accurately the processes of the way the mind works. I keep going back to this, of how consciousness works. Like in *the martyrology*, I would bring in names very briefly, or characters very briefly or faces very briefly. Because it felt to me like that was the way you encountered people in real life, you know. You're walking down the street, you're feeling things all the time, you see somebody you meet very casually, you know their name. You might never meet them again, but for that moment, they're there, and that's all you know about them. Whang — they're gone. So I let all that stuff into the

poem, I let in a bunch of maudlin things because it felt to me that it was all part of the process of when you're moving through something. All those things actually collide with your consciousness, so I left them in. But it makes for a very strange poem.

DG It always seems to be a bringing-out, a calling-up, you know, in terms of memory or consciousness. Like, does it ever approach myth? That seems to be the other end of calling things up.

bp Well yeah — it's always seemed to me that there are real mysteries and then there are false mysteries. For instance, the reason I never got off on C. G. Jung was, in his language he is obsessed with mystery. He loves mystery, and that's kind of the level he wants to leave it at. This is what I always feel when I'm reading Jung: he loves mystery and he's more interested in rolling around in mystery than in explication, in trying to solve mystery. And getting beyond what is the false level of mystery and what are the real mysteries — this is always the issue that intrigues me.

I think there are real myths and then there's the process of mythification that goes on that's completely phony and completely artificial, which I'm not interested in. When the group, for instance, started, when the Four Horsemen started, the first thing we had to overcome was that everybody knew my name and nobody knew the rest of the group's name. Okay, so what you have is "bp Nichol and The Four Horsemen!" It sounds like I got this back-up group of Motown singers snapping their toes. So we worked very hard; literally we had to work at it consciously, we had to see the posters and say (you know, cause this was what they kept trying to do) and we'd say, no way — group, group, group, group, you know, think of it as a group. This was a very hard process. People don't want to think of writers as groups. They're fixed on writers as the single consciousness. Because for years that's the historical position of writers, even though it's not our antecedent, that's our position in the twentieth century. So there's a process of breaking down

that old myth. This is what I'm talking about, around the individual sort of superstardom and what that means. I even remember having a dream years ago about a gigantic robot mummy, you know, wrapped in cloths and stuff, that was pursuing me. And in the context of the dream at the time it came, it was very clearly audience; it was my sense of audience. I was sort of whipping through the back woods trying to keep ahead of audience, okay? It was just a paranoid dream but I realized what it meant at that time was that in this sort of context people are encountering you through readings or through your books and they're not encountering you as a real human being in your living situation. You try and bring as much of you as possible into it, but it's still different from the live human being. You're fighting a mythification process really; you're fighting the attempt to make you something you aren't. From time to time I get strange about it. From time to time it's not even an issue. It's been there. I don't know if that answers the question.

DG I remember you saying to me a long time ago about the fact that you couldn't take myth, so you were creating your own personal mythology which is the calling-up.

bp Oh yeah, right. Well I remember at the time feeling (I think I remember that conversation) that the Greek and Roman myths had no currency for me as a human being. I like them, but I learn them when I'm twenty-three, so they're not a living part of my existence particularly. The Gilgamesh epic always had more punch for me. I sort of encountered it on my own; it was really a part of my experience. The comic strip characters — I mean Dick Tracy was always a vastly more mythic figure for me than anybody else, you know, to this day. And you know, the haunting quality of Little Orphan Annie — things like this. These all had a much more powerful mythic content. And the saints! I mean, the saints essentially came out of that whole perception of when I was a kid and thought that the real people lived up in the clouds.

GH I heard that they were in a hole in the sky.

bp Well it was sort of like that. I looked up between the clouds. I always thought it was like the edges of a lake and that we were living at the bottom of the ocean and the real folks were up there. That's where we were going to go someday. Heaven. I always thought heaven was the clouds, that was the thing. Because that's the drawings you get; in the United Church you get a little Sunday school paper and everybody's walking around on clouds.

DM We've talked about naming, the importance of your character's name in the collaboration, and you talked about calling-up, and you talked about nouns the other day. But I'm still sort of stuck back with the question and I don't know how to ask it. It's something very naive like, how do you feel about verbs?

bp How do I feel about verbs. Well no, it's actually a really interesting question because, like in a sense say, in a novel like *Journal* or a novel like *For Jesus Lunatick*, nothing happens essentially; nothing happens in terms of external action or anything. Most of it happens in terms of internal action. *For Jesus Lunatick* is a real bummer because the character just gets into this thing and he never gets out of it really. He just rolls around inside of this madness of his and he bumps up against other people who seem equally mad from his point of view; and the whole thing ends with the thing of the river. So there's that sense of action. Now in terms of verbs, other than saying I like them — the thing that I tend to dislike intensely is adjectives. I dislike them because it always seemed to me the premise of an adjective is that the noun doesn't say enough. And I always think of nouns because it's sort of like a very strong sense of the objects that are there, you see; and then the actions will define themselves.

DG They carry their own action.

bp That's right. That, in a way, the verb is generated by the noun. What happens is generated by what is there in the noun.

GH I bet you that changes in the collaboration, though.

bp Oh, much different world, yeah. I don't know what'll happen there. We're talking of pre-collaboration.

DM Like I've always thought the difficulty of naming a character or naming anything was that in fact nouns do not exist in the world, that nouns are simply ways of designating ongoing processes. You know, you fix it, you freeze it for a moment with a name.

bp Well, there's that. But I mean if you take the really early Runic sense of language, that if you put the alphabet, if you put a mark on a thing — to name it was to call it forth — so that you're actually calling forth the spirit of the thing. So in that sense, the noun contains the action.

DG And you personify it.

bp That's right. Once you put the name on the thing, then you're calling up that deity, you know; like if you put the mark on the wood, you're calling forth the spirit that's in the wood. Then it speaks through the mark, see. So what I'm saying is that the noun has all the power if you line the nouns up right; if you line the nouns up inside the sentences right. If you make the syntax a vehicle which releases them as opposed to a vehicle which straightjackets them and lays them down flat.

DM The fact that Adam's task was to name the animals seems like some kind of outering process that goes along, a separation thing. If you can say that that's a buffalo, you know you're not a buffalo. *That's* the buffalo out there.

bp That's right. Yeah, yeah it does, it's a process of distances. It's always the way it seems to me, anyways. It's a way of not having your skin quite as porous.

DM Right. But then the naming, I mean the calling forth by name, is the reverse of that.

bp Uh, hold it. I think you left me at the last turn.

GH That's because of the way you're saying that's the way verbs are, that if the noun itself contains the energy then it's the reverse of the process that she's talking about; that once you identified buffalo then buffalo is there on the hill.

DG It simply is.

bp As a distancing — oh, I see what you're saying there. It doesn't have to be though. See there you get sort of a split between the way . . . END OF SIDE ONE.

bp . . . I think what I was saying there was that okay, you have sort of the traditional or let's say the last five hundred years of language in which, say, the noun is used for categorization and lists against an earlier usage of language. And that's what goes back to the Williams quote I was mentioning which is that if all the words are either dead or beautiful, then they're no more use to us as writers than a dead abstraction is to a philosopher. There's only two things you can do at that point which is: strip the language bare of beauty (which is more or less what he saw as his approach) or break the words up and start over again (which is what he saw as Joyce's approach). Now I disagree with that because Joyce was keenly interested in cryptography and was actually into concealing. He was into concealing; he was not into explication. Now that's where I felt Stein did that. Gertrude Stein has done that. Beckett has done it, much more than Joyce did. Proust — all of Proust's novels are about nouns. I mean that whole fantastic section in *Remembrance of Things Past* of place names, the place. He goes on and on naming things and evoking every memory he can remember around the name. My God, he's full, full, full. But it's an interesting approach to adjectives. It's really interesting reading Proust; it's the most slowed-down reading you can do on God's green earth — lying in the sun somewhere so that you can fall asleep at every fifth sentence, so slow. The thing is, he uses so many adjectives in a way he goes beyond that whole thing I was saying about adjectives because he's no longer trying to rush the process. He's in fact trying to evoke absolutely every goddamn nuance he can think of. It just goes page after page after page around one object.

GH Filling the scroll on the lamp. You can just see that lamp so clearly.

bp That's right. And that's what Francis Ponge has done. Have you ever read his book, *Soap*, in which he just takes soap and *everything* around soap, you know. Ponge is the clearest successor I can see to that thing in Proust.

DM Ponge also has that theory about the chord. That if you strike . . . He has this thing about language, the way language stands to an object. If you strike the right chord in the language, you'll hit the chord in the object. Everything has its own musical resonance, okay. And you can see it happening in like "The Carnation," where the words are coming up and you can't even see the connection until he checks it out in the dictionary. And he says Oh wow! yeah, you know, like that's where language is really carrying it, carrying that presence.

bp See, that's what Stein did too with the *Tender Buttons* sequence, you know. Like if she said vase, it was not a vase. It was a vase in language, it was all the words inside her at the moment of perceiving the object, and therefore they are connected with the object. Because those are all the words inside her when she sees that object.

DG Yeah. That reminds me of what Sapir says in *Language* about house: that house is not simply all of our individual experiences of house, but it is everybody's experiences put together to form a concept, you know, of what it is.

bp But it seems to me that my obsession in a sense (and I can see that as we're talking about this; I hadn't realized it before this moment) has been to take the noun (and I really think in some ways that some of my books are just about one thing, just one thing) to take the noun and to kind of bring it back to its base — like the thing in *stillwater* with just the single noun on the page — and precisely to let it regain its own resonances. Stein said that really nice thing about "a rose is a rose is a rose." She said that when she wrote that way, she thought she had written truly about the rose for the first time in hundreds of years in the English language. I think that in a way, it's a whole other thing which Steve and I came across in writing the TRG thing, the Toronto Research Group, which is Steve and I (another convenient name that allows us to operate). Our perception of

it was that twentieth century writing has gone through an unacknowledged present; that is, there is a whole tradition which we can call the avant-garde tradition, for lack of a better word, which is Stein, which is Dada, which is the Russian futurists like Klebnikov and so on — all these guys. There's a whole tradition that went through, which up until very recently, up until the last five or six years, was literally undocumented. I mean the stuff existed, but in private libraries all over the place; it was not accessible. Therefore, we were operating much like amnesiacs would. That is to say, we were operating out of a necessity to first of all regurgitate the history of twentieth century writing in order to get beyond it. Like when I look at a book like *ABC*, the Alephbeth book of mine — which I like, but it's an early piece, I mean it's even earlier than me. In a way, it belongs about the nineteen thirties; like it's ahead of what the futurists were doing, but it's behind what some other people were doing. But for me, it's an important book. If you're just thinking Canadian, then I haven't seen it done Canadian. And I certainly wasn't aware of those writers when I wrote it. But knowing what I know now, I know it's an early work; it pre-dates me. And it's because this material has not been present to our consciousness we've had to take all this material which is there and regurgitate it in order to get beyond it. Like we have to bring it up out of our collective memories.

DC Do you feel that you're restoring language to its original meaning or are you inventing a new use of language?

bp I don't really know. Sometimes in my revolutionary zeal I think, you know, that we're doing all these things. Well my sense of it is simply what Pierre was saying about research writers. I obviously have a belief in writing as a kind of process which can lead not only the writer but others into new perceptions. Raphael has said many times that we have a perfect time machine which is the human mind, and it's a question of

learning how to tap it. And I really believe that, because of déjà-vu experiences and so on. We usually exist in time warps and it's a question of finding the modes in writing which free up the armouring. The whole reason I got into concrete — I've said this many times, but I'm going to say it again — was that I thought I was being too arrogant, that I was sitting down and I was writing and I was coming to the situation obsessed that I had something to say *per se*: a very didactic purpose as opposed to simply giving myself up to the process of writing. And as a result, I was not learning anything from the language, you know. And the fact is, the language is there before me. I'm born into the language community. The language has a history of its own. I have things I can learn, if I sit down and let myself play with it — which is more or less the motivation behind getting into concrete, getting into sound. As well as having things to say that I couldn't simply put into those forms. Now, what strikes me about this whole thing of naming is that there are two ways of looking at it: you can look at the noun and at naming as a way of putting distance between yourself and the thing, or of treating it with respect, allowing its own existence, not simply consuming it as part of yourself — allowing it its own separate existence so that therefore there can be a real marriage between you and the object, person, whatever. That's the two ways of looking at nouns. It's the second that interests me.

GH Um hm, that's a release of spirit.

DM It's very hard, though, to get away from the implications of that Sapir quote of yours, Dwight: that every word carries with it this huge accretion of concepts about the thing, and that that is what's been called up, rather than the thing.

bp Well that's why, for instance, that's particularly why adjectives are so directive, you see. Adjectives say to you, okay, here's the accretion I want. That's why Proust goes beyond it. Proust brings in so many adjectives they're buried under a man-mountain of them, you know. And in the end, in a way, you just end up in the midst of every possible memory you could have of a name, you know. But what the concretists have done, in fact, in releasing the noun, in releasing it into the field of the page (and releasing the letters too, I mean if you want to go below that

into micro-syntax), is to allow them their own existence again; to allow them a chance to re-group and a chance in a way to shed all that extra fat and see what they're doing by themselves. And in fact when you just write the word "moon" on a page and look at it, you find a lot of that accretion drops away. You're up against the elemental word which means you're up against the elemental thing. Except a lot of people get . . . I don't know, it's not exciting to them for some reason. Like they want those signposts.

PC I'm struck by the tremendous variety of processes in composition that you utilize in order to discover new forms. It seems to me that your final interest is the *form* of the communication.

bp Well, I believe two things about forms. I believe that form follows function as Louis Sullivan says, or that form is nothing more than extension of content as Creeley said. But I also believe that form by itself says a lot about what the content is. So I believe both things are true, you see. It's like one of those chicken and the egg things that you don't bother separating.

PC In a sense you're investigating form as content in itself.

bp Right.

DG Do you know the quote from Gertrude Stein about composition? Ah . . . Robert Duncan quotes it in an essay that's in the first *Caterpillar*. But carrying the sense that "composition is." Simply *is*.

bp Right. She said that a lot; more or less that the reality of the situation was that the situation was. Like that quote that I use in *the martyrology*: "let me recite what history teaches/ history teaches." See Stein did not believe in the unconscious. She said she had no unconscious and she was constantly insisting on the absolute of the experience itself. Really, she was saying, this is all this thing is, is what it is.

DM Well she was the first great stresser of process. That favorite quote of George's — help me, I can't remember it.

GH "Composition is how we compose."

DM Right. "Composition is how we . . ." But there's a connection there in that talk about form, that little bit you just said, with the kind of identification that's occurring in your sense of naming as calling forth.

bp Well Chomsky makes that distinction between competence and performance in language. It's essentially the same distinction that Sapir made about the difference between the actual life of language and the study of linguistics. And I don't know if this relates or not, but I have found that my interest is in the actual life of language or in what Chomsky calls the performance, as opposed to necessarily in the competence of the linguistics area per se. That what happens inside the psyche, or that the human being's relationship to the materials he uses — which are language, which are the book and all those things — is I find the most important thing. That relationship of human being to material used.

DM Well in fact the language becomes the thought. There is no thought outside of it.

DG If there wasn't language there can be no thought, that's his statement.

bp I definitely have some ambiguities around this. I also believe that language is a tool but it's the tool of self-definition, and therefore it's the most important too. That's the one thing you can't name and separate yourself from, because you name it with its own name. I mean you're constantly naming it. You're constantly naming language — all the time maybe. And it's like a cloud in front of you.

GH I really believe, though, there's thought without language. I mean I disagree with that.

DG I don't.

DM I think there's *sensation* without language.

DG But there isn't thought.

bp You get into one of these really incredibly well-argued areas in which nobody's really reached the definitive conclusion of it yet. I don't know which I believe, actually, to tell you the truth.

DM Collingwood did a nice bit on that, on that whole thing about thought and language.

PC R. C. Collingwood. Where he says all history is the history of thought. And the other translation of what you said is that there is no history, except in language.

bp Right.

PC One thing I wanted to ask you, when you were talking about the process of repetition or insistence in *Journal*, as opposed to Gertrude Stein's use of insistence as a medium for intellection.

bp My awareness of it was that Stein only occasionally used it for emotional insistence. She was using it to just let the materials themselves, the materials of language, repeat themselves. Whereas my use of that thing of Stein was to allow the materials as emotional charges to insist themselves. And that was the distinction. And that's why I feel that *Journal* is radically different from what Stein was doing.

DM In fact you spoke of it as emotional syntax yesterday.

bp Right.

GH That's where I find you much more interesting than Stein.

DM Well it moves, it really moves one, in that emotional way that Stein doesn't. And in terms of any kinetics of language, that's where it is.

PC "Only emotion endures."

bp You'll be remembered for that one.

DG That's Ezra Pound.

bp Well Wittgenstein — here we are, chucking big names around — ah, Wittgenstein had the sense of language games, which is also a really nice way of looking at it. They're all just essentially different systems which say different things at different times, you know.

GH What, language does?

bp Yeah, language games. He means game in the sense of play and he just keeps proposing different systems. Suppose I mean this by this, what's the implication of that? You know — fifty pages — suppose I mean this by *this*, you know. Actually Wittgenstein is very funny to read.

DM That gets back to the noun thing again. Because what that's saying is that to be always at the edge — like writing letters at the edge — is always attempting to bring in more of what lies *outside* the system, which you can't get at except *through* the system, which is language.

bp Right. So really, writing by its nature, in my opinion, writing is always out on the frontier going out a bit further. I think it depends. I think there are writers who are like that. I think there are research writers and I think there are synthesizers and I think there are simply popular writers (I don't mean that in a bad sense). I mean there's the person who gets out there on the edge and gathers in the materials. There's another person who'll take that material and synthesize it and do incredible things with it, and there's the popularizer who'll take the same . . . eventually it filters right out into the mass market thing. Like, you know, stream of consciousness: you almost can't read a novel without stream of consciousness anymore. But on the other hand, that's a radically new development in popular literature in the last twenty years or so.

DM But by that time it's become a habit of thought rather than a new perception.

bp Yeah by that time, you're all ready to move on.

DG Somebody's got to be out there, you know.

bp Well the question Steve and I asked . . . See, we're doing this thing on narrative, right, in *Open Letter*, the TRG thing. And

one of the questions that we had to ask finally was, how much does what you're doing help or hinder the reader's ability to enter the process? Like how much does it force him up to surface in that sense he can't get into a rush, you know, into a sort of ongoing flow — and if it does that, do you want that effect. Like the problem with, for instance, some visual poems where the person is doing visual things but clearly wants . . . Well, this is one of the problems with the "Alphabet of Blood"; right Pierre?

PC Yeah.

bp This is a poem Pierre published in '64. It was really one of the first big visual poems in Canada, but he was very concerned with transmitting meaning. He'd done all these things, though, to the individual words which meant that you were continually brought up to the surface of the words, therefore you could not get into meaning. I'm sure that's the whole tension in you between the two arts.

PC That's right. It is, definitely.

bp So it's a question of how does each of these things I do help or hinder the process (as far as I'm conscious of) that I'm involved in. And I firmly believe that just as you can armour the body — like for instance, if you're living in a room which has a very low ceiling, you know, doing your Alfred Jarry number, so that you're always ducking like this, you're probably always going to walk around with your head slightly ducked forward. So I think the same thing happens in writing: that people armour in that sense, you know, without realizing it. A lot of aesthetics is purely and simply bias. And that's why a person can very passionately argue a particular aesthetic and you can't disagree with them because it's absolutely right for them. People could argue to me for writing rhyme in poetry. I mean classically rhyming sonnets, and I've read a few. Take Helen Adams. Why does everybody dig Helen Adams? Because it is absolutely true; it's true to the person. You can feel all this energy coming through these ballads. So it does reach a point where if you're doing this sort of research — what Steve and I see in our writing as research — obviously it all points towards some point of integration in the long run. Like when we're

talking, there's a feeling of circling in this interview, there's something which is circling. I sort of felt that about my solo writing for a number of years. I mean, there's a point here that I'm circling around. About every year I go through this thing: there's something here I'm circling around, how do I get beyond this door? What's on the other side of it?

PC Well it's what's happening in *Journal*. And part of what occurs is that the anxiety surfaces, that pain surfaces. And what comes to mind is the image from Blake of the human form divine as the ultimate objective. It seems to be a part of the regenerative thing that you're doing in terms of research and language. It also connects with what Norman O. Brown was saying in *Love's Body* about "remembering" (which is a figure that you use particularly in *Journal* and in other things), that process of memory is literally a process of re-mem-bering the human body. When you talk about parts of yourself, about that sudden memory you had in therapy about the bunny rabbit in your crib, right. And that loss of the bunny rabbit, which you felt was a loss of a part of yourself which you suddenly discovered wasn't, you know . . .

bp I was not the bunny rabbit.

PC Yes; was a re-mem-bering of yourself, it was bringing back to yourself something that you felt had been lost.

bp That's a nice word, isn't it? I hadn't thought of it that way before. I mean, you re-mem-ber yourself, grow the arm back, self generating a part of yourself.

PC And it's also implicit in this word "composition" as well. Com/position: putting it together. And that's what's implicit in syntax. When you talk about a passionate syntax or an emotional syntax, it is a putting-together of those nouns that are parts of the body. It's not a separative process, a distancing process of that thing being out there once it's named. And I don't even know if it's a calling-forth (I'm not sure of that), a calling forth of the spirit of the thing, because that in a way is a little bit metaphysical for me. But that it becomes . . .

bp Go with your absolute sense, Pierre.

PC . . . that it becomes an actual thing in terms of its placing.

bp Well, but when I say that I mean exactly what I was saying later: that you give the thing its own uniqueness, that it does exist, that you do not simply consume it. I mean, if we're going to use the old cliché . . .

GH You don't give it though. You let it.

bp You let it. Precisely. Yeah, you let it.

DM Well, you see it.

bp You see it, and you acknowledge that you are not it. It is it, you are you, and it is not you. You can be totally sympatico with it, but it is not you. You do not even give it its existence. Your seeing it gives you, in a sense, your existence. That is to say, because you are able to articulate a difference — and I've always thought that — that human beings articulate themselves as human beings by bumping up against other human beings . . .

DM Or the world.

bp That's right. To me, it's always seemed very particular to human beings — this is a wildly defensible position — but the fact that you meet another human being can really articulate that they are themselves, you are yourselves. That's a much tougher thing to do than with a tree, which is clearly not you.

DG Naming is an act of honouring, you know, the existence of something.

bp That's right. At its best, the noun — that's very good — is an act of honour. It's saying, I do not consume you . . .

GH I recognize you.

bp . . . I recognize you. That's right. So it's anti-consumption. You know, like that whole thing, even in a meal of the whole . . . Like this is the point. There's all sorts of reasons for conventions.

This whole thing of saying grace at a meal at its best is acknowledging the separateness of the food from you, and saying, okay, I'm going to consume you. You know; that I'm taking this thing into me, and it's like a thanking.

DG You are going to become me.

DM That's the first salmon ceremony on the west coast you know — even before breakfast, yeah. You have to recognize the gracious act of that being allowing you to consume it. And in fact, you honour it by throwing all the pieces, every single bone, back so that it will re-form and re-appear next year as a whole. But I'm still stuck with *time*, Barry! That noun! That recognition is a stasis of time. It assumes that that thing, or that you, exists as a recognizable you for a certain length of time and a recognizable I. But in fact, it's changing all the time.

GH It's not eternal at all though. It doesn't assume that. I mean it does in any one phrase; it assumes that. That he/she . . . I really love it that way; I think of it as both [*Here Gladys is referring to JOURNAL. — Ed.*] because it is consciousness and not sexual in that other sense. In any one phrase, he/she exists right there. But that isn't in time. Like in the next phrase they change. And the reader is making no thing of going, oh this is memory or this is that. Or at least I'm not, as a reader. And so, I don't have any sense of time in that book, none at all. And yet we've talked a lot about memory today. I don't see it as a book of memory. I mean, remembering is different, like that member appears, that red dress disappears again. But it doesn't have the shape; when I go back, to say okay, that is the woman who did something, whose child is dead or what. Because that/she/it/that dress appears several times in different ways, and it's not time. It's not locked in time.

bp I'm glad it works that way. That's what I was trying for.

PC One of the students commented on that last night. I think it was Jancis who mentioned that she didn't have that feeling of time — a passage — that it was a continual re-iterance, re-iteration of its presence. Is that what you mean?

DM Yeah, well that's the translation of time into space which Barry's always doing.

bp See, this thing you're saying about the noun . . . Like what I'm saying is I don't think that's an inherent quality of nouns. I think it's a use we've put them to. I don't think that putting a noun, like me saying Daphne does not fix you because Daphne . . .

DM Oh, but it does to me.

bp Ah, but I think that's our misuse of it because obviously, by its very nature, by your very nature, Daphne is a shifting concept.

DM Sure.

bp Okay? So the best use of nouns encompasses that. That's where for instance, when you free a noun of adjectives and just isolate it on the page, see, and put moon, it can be all phases of the moon; it can be all those things, freed of adjectives. That almost feels to me like a necessary step. You have to first take the noun free of adjectives, and just feel the noun, to reclaim it. And then it becomes simply that honouring; it is all those things. It doesn't have to be categorization. It gets used that way, but it doesn't have to be. There's no reason it has to be.

DM I finally put it together; like I finally realize that what you're doing when you take the word moon and put it on the page is you're transforming it into a verb. You're saying, moon is what it is by the act of mooning. It moons. And therefore, it's moon.

LAUGHTER

bp That's right. That a noun is a verb. That a noun is the verb to be. A noun is the verb to be. That really puts it. A noun is the verb to be.

DG I think a rose is a rose is a rose.

bp That's what's so great about that thing of Stein's. Stein says a noun is. She doesn't say a noun is a verb; she makes distinctions. But in the poem "A rose is a rose is a rose," that's the implication, right. That the noun, the noun of anything, the name of anything is the verb to be.

DM Yeah; that in fact if you insist on it enough, it starts to move.

DG bp Nichol is bp Nichol.

bp That's right. Isn't that interesting. That's really nice, now that I think of it. But also that whole thing of not . . . You know, okay; it comes out of my own oral biases perhaps, but that whole thing of not consuming the world. The whole superstar system, for instance, is a consumption of the artist: you pays your money and you gets your meal, like at concerts or restaurants really. It's to break with that whole consumption thing and say that language does not have to be a consumptive process. Let's use it both ways.

GH Listen, I just thought of a question I wanted to ask about that. At the point that you're fairly young, you tend to slip into what aesthetic is around you, or to be found out through accident, usually through some sort of thing that there's some friend or some writing that leads to one other thing. But like, how bound are people in some other sense by that aesthetic that they come up into or slip into? Like for me, it's been very hard to break out of in some sense, the whole Black Mountain . . . Like, okay, by admiring their aesthetic, their person, I made them heroes in a way that wasn't necessary. And I think every young writer is going to do that, in some sense. And so it's many other accumulations and layers that you're dealing with.

bp I'll tell you the way I handled it is I hid out.

GH Yeah, like Raphael and his room up on . . . looking out onto that thing. When you get to him, it's going to be very interesting.

bp That's it. I hid out, and Dave Phillips and I were each other's audiences, and we believed all sorts of things. And this left us free to roam and ramble. I don't know; I think this is probably personal experience, but I think it varies from writer to writer. But I am very thankful that I did that. I think the reason I did it was I was very afraid of being overwhelmed by somebody who had a much more clearly articulated aesthetic, and that it would be very easy to slip into. This is what enraged me with the later issues of *El Corno Emplumado*: you had all these guys using Creeley's breathline that were not Creeley, and as a

result, their language lacked an energy charge; it was just sheer boredom. And it was total misunderstanding of everything the man was about. I'm sure he must have interpreted it as an insult. And I say, how else could you see it?

GH Of course. And ultimately it means paranoia and pissed off at the same time.

bp That's right. You'd be totally justified. It wouldn't be paranoia, at that point. It would be justified rage.

DG It would be a parody of Robert Creeley.

GH Parodied and pissed off.

bp And it's all those sort of forms that not only dishonour the writer, they're a consuming of the writer again. A consuming of that writer, and they're an avoidance of an articulation of self. And so, I hid out. And then, when I started doing readings and stuff — Pierre and I were talking about this — there is a way in which I know that the concrete and the sound poetry allowed me to move untrammelled, because I knew the scene better than anybody else did, you see, in the country at that point. Therefore there was safety for me to keep on working.

GH Yeah — ground of your own.

bp That's right, that I had a ground of my own.

DM And it was pure in that way.

bp That's right. So this left me free to manoeuvre. This left me free to explore and to find out other things.

DG But you were also at one point, very disturbed that you were known as a concrete poet, you know, pretty well throughout the world. And you were concerned for, at that point, what you considered your straight poetry.

GH Well that's the consumption thing again.

bp That's the robot mummy.

GH That people make an assumption, and then Barry would in some sense have to deal with that assumption and be annoyed at that, and must be pleased cause in some areas . . .

bp There's definitely certain ambiguity.

GH And annoyed, and that's a causeless hell for the rest of his life.

bp I think the other reason for hiding out was an awareness in me that there was a part of me that would try and be pleasing to people. And if I got caught up in that bind, then I would never be able to write. So I had to — this is what I always mean when I say you gotta stay two jumps ahead of what people think you're at. That's only me. I've gotta stay two jumps ahead of where people think I'm at.

I don't think that's as true as it was back then. Back then it was like protective colouration. It was like doing the iguana number, you know, in poetry. And this allowed me to gain — how shall we put it — I think I had credibility. I mean that people respected the fact that I was seriously attempting something which has been true; that is what I've been doing. But it also left me a psychic space that I could manoeuvre in, where I was not swamped by other people's aesthetics.

You know I really do; I mean most of aesthetics is bias. It's saying, you know, this is the way I see the world. Which is fine; which is really fine. What gets hard is when it gets into dogma. This is the way I see the world, therefore this is the way everybody should see the fucking world.