The Geomancers' Access

Planes in Space, or the Translational Poetics of bpNichol & Steve McCaffery

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Résumé : Les procédés traductifs inter- et intralinguistiques ont joué un rôle de premier plan dans la poésie expérimentale des auteurs canadiens bpNichol et Steve McCaffery. La traduction-adaptation homophonique ainsi que des approches spatiales de la traduction ont notamment été au cœur du Toronto Research Group (TRG) qu'ils ont fondé en 1973. Ce chapitre se propose d'illustrer la place centrale que ces approches occupent dans le travail de ces poètes canadiens et dans le développement de leur esthétique littéraire. Notre présentation de leurs réflexions, conceptions et réalisations en matière d'écriture traductive se base sur les premiers rapports du TRG, qui ont été influencés par de nombreuses sources, dont la méthode de 'traduction totale' proposée par le poète américain Jerome Rothenberg. bpNichol et McCaffery y conçoivent la traduction comme un ensemble de systèmes ouverts ou fermés qui se déplacent en modifiant la position du traducteur face au texte. Plus tard, les deux poètes ont développé et illustré ces problématiques spatiales et sonores dans des œuvres telles que *Translating Translating Apollinaire* (1979), que nous présenterons également.

1 Nichol, McCaffery, and the Toronto Research Group

In 1970, bpNichol won the Canadian Governor General's Award for Poetry. Up to that point, his body of work consisted of a mix of prose, lyrical poetry, and concrete poetry. By the early 1970s, he was hard at work on what would become his best-known creation, *The Martyrology*, the first two volumes of which would appear in the spring of 1972. It was a long-form poetic sequence that he would continue writing until his untimely death in 1988, with posthumous volumes released into the early 1990s. However, Nichol did not work on *The Martyrology* in exclusivity over those years. He continued to explore new paths, including poetry, prose, television, recordings, performance, and early computer poetry.

One creative method that would continue to hold a position of preference in Nichol's work throughout this period was that of translation. Whether it was translation as creation or translation as a form of research, we can best conceive of it as translation as research into method: research into what writing is, and into how writing functions. Research was a never-ending process for Nichol, for whom there was "always the feeling there is more one should be learning—more limitations one should be pushing against & breaking down"[1]. In the spring of 1973, Nichol teamed up with Steve McCaffery to establish the Toronto Research Group (TRG). As McCaffery puts it in his introduction to *Rational Geomancy, The Kids of the Book-Machine*:

> Our sympathetic interests and common concern in writing (especially the felt need for an investigative stance and formal risk) helped establish the direction of our conversations. We both realized that we had been starved for critical response and discussion of poetics, theories and forms. [2]

For Nichol and McCaffery, this jointly-founded research pairing (alongside Nichol's new involvement in *Open Letter*, a Toronto-based journal published by Frank Davey) provided a new form for their inquiries and a new venue in which to publish their research. McCaffery would later describe their primary TRG interests as

> [t]he possibility of radically altering the textual role of the reader; of extending the creative, idiomatic basis of translation; of a poetry that would jettison the word in favour of more current cognitive codes; and of a material prose that would challenge the spatio-temporal determinates of linearity were all frequently discussed and provided the core interests of the subsequent research reports. [3]

The TRG published the findings of this team-of-two in *Open Letter* between the spring of 1973 and the fall of 1978. This was supplemented by "Reports" by nine other writers, also featured in *Open Letter* between 1973 and 1975, and the run was capped by two issues of *Open Letter* edited by the TRG: in the fall of 1979, they compiled a volume of writings in honor of R. Murray Schafer, and in the winter of '80-'81, they edited a collection entitled "Canadian "Pataphysics".

What interests us for the purposes of this chapter is specifically the role and conceptualization of Nichol's & McCaffery's use of translation, and particularly homophonic translation. While implications from this line of thinking appear throughout the *oeuvres* of both poets, our initial focus will be on the conceptions demonstrated in their early collaborative work: more specifically, the initial report of the Toronto Research Group, "Research Report 1: Translation". This first report was originally published in *Open Letter*, second series, no. 4 (spring 1973). We will also include for discussion a second, later addendum: "Translation Interim Report 2: some notes on jerome rothenberg & total translation", originally published in *Vort*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1975).

1. bpNichol, *Translating Translating Apollinaire: A Preliminary Report From a Book of Research*, Milwaukee, Membrane Press, 1979, introduction.

2. McCaffery, Steve & bpNichol, *Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book-Machine,* Vancouver, Talonbooks, 1992, p. 9.

3. *Ibid.*

These early reports, along with the rest of the TRG reports, have been republished in a volume edited by McCaffery, *Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book-Machine* (1992).

2 TRG: Research Report 1: Translation

In examining the initial report on translation, it must first be understood that for Nichol and McCaffery [4], the term 'translation' took on a more inclusive meaning than the one commonly accorded to the term. More specifically, it did not always imply interlinguistic translation, from one tongue to another, but was instead a broader term that included forms of intralinguistic translation: operations taking place within a single language or system of signs. For the TRG, this was a distinction between homolinguistic translation and heterolinguistic translation. [5] This differentiation allowed them to step away from the commonly perceived role of interlinguistic translation as being nothing more than a communication of content and linguistic value from one speech community to another. This distance from translation being exclusively about "verbal and notational equivalents" allowed for what they saw as the necessarily central position of the translator in the translative act, [6] thus opening up the act of translation to creative possibilities. The TRG explain:

> If we no longer consider translation as being necessarily an informational service—the one tongue's access to the other tongue—then it can become a creative endeavour in its own right. Moreover, it is no longer necessarily dependent on a heterolinguistic context. [7]

This distinction freed the TRG to explore new directions and alternative conceptions for the use of translation in their poetic work. While the same can in some ways be said for heterolinguistic translation, their exploration of homolinguistic translation became for the TRG a work of re-organization and re-configuration. Their background in the theorization of concrete and visual poetries allowed the TRG to view these processes as spatial in nature, and their interest in contemporary linguistics permitted them to recontextualize language, visualizing its processes along axes or planes of function. Thanks to this conception of the workings of language, these processes within the boundary of a single language system opened the door for

> translation [to] become 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. [8]

4. *Ibid.*, p. 10-11. In quoting McCaffery & Nichol from their *TRG* work, it is out of necessity quoting both as a single entity. As McCaffery explains in the introduction to *Rational Geomancy*, the writing process of the TRG reports involved one typing as the other dictated. However, the typist was also free to add his thoughts without speaking them during the transcription process, which led to a single, undifferentiated voice.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 27-28.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

McCaffery and Nichol were of course aware that they were not working in isolation. Their report draws on examples from a number of different poets to illustrate their understanding of these investigations. As for homophonic translation, for which they used different nomenclature, they readily allowed that this was a process that had been previously explored by others, going as far as to describe it as a method that had

> already reached its full flowering in the exceptional translations of Catullus by Louis and Celia Zukofsky, in the memorable *Mots d'Heures: Gousses Rhames* of Louis Van Rooten and in numerous poems by the Austrian sound poet Ernst Jandl. [9]

What is of greater interest to us, then, is how McCaffery and Nichol conceptualize the operation, and the particular form this conceptualization lends to their investigations. We will delve into their view on these operations further along, but first let us explore the secondary explanation offered in "Interim Report 2". Here, the TRG report on the methods of New York poet and translator Jerome Rothenberg, whose working method of "Total Translation" resonated with both of them and had considerable implications for their research.

3 TRG Interim Report 2: Jerome Rothenberg and "Total Translation"

A few years earlier, Rothenberg had published a "report" of his own in *Stony Brook*, No. 3-4 (Aug. 1969). This essay, entitled "Total Translation: An Experiment in the Presentation of American Indian Poetry", detailed his ongoing investigations into a method of 'total translation' that would allow him to effectively render the poem-songs of the Navajo & Seneca, a project he had begun working on in the summer of 1968. [10] For Rothenberg, the dilemma lay in developing a process that would account for all the various elements of these song-poems, and one that was representable in simultaneity. It involved both a heterolinguistic translation, effectuated with the assistance of members of the language community, and a variety of homolinguistic operations. These last involved the disposition on the page of multiple elements, including the results of the interlingual translation, as well as non-semantic vocables, oral variation, and a rhythmic music that was often more central than the semantic content itself. This approach was an attempt to

> respond to *all* the sounds [he was] made aware of, to let that awareness touch off responses or events in the English [...] to respond poem-for-

9. *Ibid.*, p. 40. On Zukofsky, Van Rooten and Jandl, see Abigal Lang's, Dirk Weissmann's, and Camille Bloomfield's chapters in this book.

10. Rothenberg, Jerome. *Pre-Faces & Other Writings*, New York, New Directions, 1981, p. 76. It is important to note at this juncture that Rothenberg's work was also informed by the work of others such as precursor Dell Hymes and contemporary Dennis Tedlock. It must also be mentioned that there was considerable criticism of this work, especially Rothenberg's anthology *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas* (1972), where critics such as Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko characterized Rothenberg's work as "appropriation" (cited in Clements, William M., *Native American Verbal Act: Texts and Contexts*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1996, p. 45.) However, for the purposes of this chapter, what concerns us is Rothenberg's "total translation" method and its relation to the research of McCaffery & Nichol rather than the source or cutural ends of his project.

> poem in the attempt to work out a "total" translation—not only of the words but of all sounds connected with the poem, including finally the music itself. [11]

In the example of the songs of ceremony he was working on at the time, he attempted to "translate the poems *onto the page*, as with 'concrete' and other types of minimal poetry" [12]. The TRG report offers the example of "The Animals", which Rothenberg describes as follows:

> The melody & structure of the first nine [songs of ceremony] are identical: very slow, a single line of words ending with a string of sounds, etc., the pattern identical until the last go-round, when the song ends with a grunting expulsion of breath into a weary "ugh" sound. I had to get all of that across: the bareness, the regularity, the deliberateness of the song, along with the basic meaning, repeated vocables, emphatic terminal sound, & (still following Johnny John's reminder to play around with it "if everything's all right") a little something of my own. The song whose repeated line is:
>
> The animals are coming by *heh eh heh* (or *heh eh-eh-eh heh*) can then become:

T	H E H E H H E H
h	
e	H E H E H H E H
The animals are coming by	H E H **U H** H E H
n	
i	H E H E H H E H
m	
a	H E H E H H E H
l	
s [13]	

Here, the title runs vertically so as to avoid its interference with the reading of the poem. The single line of semantic content, "The animals are coming by", which is the result of the heterolinguistic operation, is represented on the left. On the right, to be read simultaneously, is Rothenberg's translation of the rhythmic but non-semantic vocables, displayed in such a way as to portray their meter and their cyclical nature. Since the rhythmic chant is shared by several consecutive songs, the "grunting expulsion of breath" that ends each cycle is bolded at the center of the square, allowing it to end the initial cycle but also open the way for the next.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 83-84.

Each group of song-poems requires its own approach. In bringing across pieces with more semantic content than these examples, and especially examples that do not involve the same type of rhythmic vocable, Rothenberg resorts to homophonic translation, which he too attributes to Zukofsky:

> [In] two groups of "crow songs," one's a simple translation-for-meaning; the other ("in the manner of Zukofsky") puns off the Seneca sound:
>
> yehgagaweeyo (*lit. that pretty crow*) becomes "yond caw-crow's way out"
> &
> Hongyasswahyaenee (*lit. that* [*pig*]*-meat's for me*) becomes "Hog (yes!) swine you're mine"
>
> while trying at the same time to let something of the meaning come through. [14]

This process allows Rothenberg to bring across the 'feeling' of the Seneca word (for instance "crow" from "gaga" or "kaga"), but also to preserve its onomatopoeic origins (such as the word's imitation of the sound of the bird). [15]

Rothenberg would later include multi-track recording in his 'performance' of these song-poems, which allowed him the further benefit of accounting for variety in their performative delivery. For Rothenberg, then, 'total translation' was an attempt to assemble multiple systems into a single all-encompassing representation. Its potential lies in the sum of its constituent parts, and each observed linguistic phenomenon lends its support to the linguistic structure as a whole. He describes the overall process:

> Translation is carry-over. It is a means of delivery & of bringing to life. It begins with a forced change of language, but a change too that opens up the possibility of greater understanding. Everything in these song-poems is finally translatable: words, sounds, voice, melody, gesture, event, etc., in the reconstitution of a unity that would be shattered by approaching each element in isolation. A full & total experience begins it, which only a total translation can full bring across. [16]

It is clear from the TRG reports that Nichol and McCaffery are intrigued by Rothenberg's attempt at all-inclusive 'total translation'. And yet, it is apparent from their later work that while they respect this multi-dimensional system, it is the possible variation engendered by a varying focus on each element that fueled their own research. Rothenberg allows for this as well, in his manner of dealing with the variety of each song-poem. As he puts it, "[t]he variety of possible moves is obviously related to the variety—semantic & aural—of the cycle itself" [17]. He furthermore appends his description of 'total translation' by stating the he intends to continue "translat[ing] in part or in any other way [he] feels moved to; nor would [he] deny the value of handling words or music or events as separate phenomena" [18]. It is this very separation of phenomena that would exemplify Nichol and McCaffery's subsequent research into the creative uses of translation.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

4 A Spatial Conception of Translation

What is most interesting about the TRG's approach is that its conceptualization in some ways echoes the above-mentioned spatialization of form. Instead of a static consideration of language, they view it as a moving system of associated parts. Their inquiries into contemporary structuralist and post-structuralist theory [19] permit them to visualize the many facets of the language act as being interrelated, and often simultaneously in motion. The variation possible within such a conceptualization is key to the enormous potential of these processes.

To begin with, let us acknowledge the nomenclature McCaffery and Nichol apply to their research experimentation. First, they discuss the possibility of considering the results of these processes as being open or closed systems, both of which are possible in either hetero- or homolinguistic translations. To avoid the problematic of a process that "involves, of necessity, an inherent translation process from words *into* semiotic signs *back* into words", Nichol and McCaffery develop a form of poetry they refer to as "post-semiotic", which eliminates the necessary lexical conversion seen in other examples. [20] These open and closed systems of translation are defined as such by whether or not they point back towards the source text from which they are forged. The closed text is "self-defining, and does not require recourse to its primary text" [21]. Both open and closed translation systems, then, fulfill in different ways the posited centrality of the translator: the open system by making visible the act of translation, the closed system by removing the link between target and source texts and positioning translator as author. It is in this way that they "overcome the problem of translation": *via* the presentation of the *process* as part of the final product. [22]

On a more global level, Nichol and McCaffery engage with communication as a comprehensive entity with numerous simultaneously-moving parts. This is a geometrical conception of language which includes the various planes and axes of communication and transcription as if visualized in a multi-dimensional array. This paradigmatic approach expands upon formulations of communication such as that of Roman Jakobson by focusing on the simultaneity of the various functions, and by affecting the interplay of various language-functions by targeting (or freezing) one or more axes at a time. For an interrelated system in motion, the isolation or stabilization of one axis must have implications for the other factors with which it shares the system; for the TRG, this is the potential of these manipulative processes.

These various modulations allow for translation to become

> 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 [...] [23]

19. McCaffery & Nichol, *Rational Geomancy*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

These modifications, for the TRG, are akin to the work of the geomancer, as "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 [...]"[24]. This organization of space is visualized along the lines of planes (or axes): in their brief report, both optical and auditory planes are given as examples. Other planes would become apparent in subsequent projects. Thus, geomantic translation "involves the shift and reorganization of stable units, with development achieved through simultaneous spatial preservation and alteration"[25].

5 Homophonic Translation in the Toronto Research Group's System

With this overall conceptualization in mind, let us turn our attention back to homophonic translation. How does this particular process fit within the aforementioned understanding of the workings of language? In giving an example of homophonic translation, the TRG describe it as attempting "a linguistic unity within disunity by permuting the text along a static auditory axis"[26]. It is this freezing of the auditory axis that forces the shift and reorganization of other elements, including syntactic and semantic components. "The resultant 'translation'", they continue, "despite its radical semantic difference is nevertheless *audible* and thereby comprehensible as the original text". I include on the right the example given by the TRG, as "translated" by Steve McCaffery, and also provide the source text on the left:

Let not my love be called idolatry,	lay it hot mile of a beak all died hollowtree [/] normable
Nor my beloved as an idol show,	over dozen idol shoe[/]s
Since all alike my songs and praises be,	in seal-ale lick them ice-hung-sand-prize is be[/]t I won
To one, of one, still such, and ever so.	offer nest hill search on the verso [/]
Kind is my love today, tomorrow kind,	kine dies smile of it i'll hate more hawk
Still constant in a wondrous excellence;	and [/] steel constantine awe and drew sex sealing sea [/] the reef home
Therefore my verse, to constancy confined,	a voice took on stan sick in fount[/]ain
One thing expressing, leaves out difference.	i think ex-parisian liver suit or difference [/]

24. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
26. *Ibid.*

Fair, kind and true is all my argument;	fucking dandy tree soil maya gum and [/]
Fair, kind and true, varying to other words,	fucking dandy trove hairy into hot air
And in this change is my invention spent,	whore does[/]n't taint this she angers mayan vaunty on his punt [/]
Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords.	the rhythm as onion wishwonder our scoop of hordes [/] fucking hand it
Fair, kind and true have often lived alone,	rough of tunnel if dial won [/]
Which three, til now, never kept seat in one. [27]	watch threat heel and how in heave her cups hurting honey. [28]

Drawn from Shakespeare's Sonnet 105 ("Let not my love be called idolatry"), this is an example of homolinguistic translation, remaining in both instances within the single speech community. It is also an open system, as it refers directly back to the source text, which remains audible because of the fixing of the auditory axis. However, this example is open only to the extent that Shakespeare's sonnet is widely recognizable as a source text, because in the original report, the source text was not provided.

The TRG also provide a much shorter example of the same sort of geomantic translation, also fixed along the auditory axis, but this time a heterolinguistic operation, moving from Spanish to English:

Y en tibios aleros	eons to be o saleros [/]
Formaron sus nidos	form a run you need so [/]
Sus nidos formaron	you need so from air un[/]planned
Piando de amor	o a day of more [/] [29]

While this process leads to the generation of a new text with often unpredicted results, the research conducted by the TRG doesn't end with this spatial reconceptualization of homophonic translation. In fact, it is in the combination of several elements that they would find "the most satisfying results", and in particular by adding "serial development" to the geomantic translation model. Drawn from the work of Czech poets Josef Hiršal and Bohumila Grögerova, the so-called 'developer method' "places maxi-

27. Shakespeare, William, "Sonnet 105", *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones, London, The Arden Shakespeare, 1998, p. 321.

28. McCaffery & Nichol, *Rational Geomancy*, *op. cit.*, p. 39-40. The insertion of slashes [/] is my own, and marks the syntactic realignment of the line breaks caused by the frozen auditory axis.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 40. The inserted slashes are again my own. Steve McCaffery describes this piece as "a translation by Carl Lauppe of an anonymous poem posted in a public square in Saerlos, Mexico. I suggest that it is more accurately a translation of a verse from the song "Las golondrinas Yucatecas", by Ricardo Palmerín & Luis Rosado Vega.

mum emphasis on the *process* of translation" from which "the final translation emerges as the end-product of a process of shifting elements"[30].

The TRG demonstrates this additional step with a heterolinguistic geomantic translation of Mallarmé in three permutations:

Le Cantonnier[31]

Ces cailloux, tu les nivelles
Et c'est, comme troubadour,
Un cube aussi de cervelles
Qu'il me faut ouvrir par jour.

Mallarmé

say guy
are you to lay novels aside?
come troubadour
run
cube
acid
civilly kill my favourite page or

Steve McCaffery

Ces gaillards, y'ont ils les
nouvelles aux ails du couble?
Trou bas, adorant,
cou bas assis
si vil, qu'ils me favori
ta joue aurore

Yolande Courtwright

Say guy! (you artsy honkey)
lay new veils "oh"
(sigh)
do coo blood
rue boss
(adore uncle bob's asses)
CIVIL!
(kemo favorite?)
CHEW OR ROAR!!!!

bpNichol

This example eliminates any concern for maintaining the centrality of the translator—or in this case that of the three translators, as it highlights the process of translation

30. *Ibid.*, p. 39-41.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 40-42.

through its very form. As such, the process of permuted translation becomes one of shared exploration, each permutation sharing the stage alongside Mallarmé's original text, the sequential process of translation and creation shared with the reader. The TRG expand on this:

> The grouping in [this] example [...] is deliberate so as to create a composite field, an area of change and stasis, a creative departure from, yet retention of, a fixed point of unity. The number of translators is multiplied and the centrality of translation takes on a new aspect of community in its multiple presentation of a sensory field. Total information is the translative process itself giving centrality to both translator and original text with the primary creative act of both original writer and translator asserted. [32]

In their initial report on translation, McCaffery and Nichol expose their conception of geomantic translation and the spatial vision of language that informs it. As Nichol would demonstrate in his subsequent project, *Translating Translating Apollinaire*, this sequential process fixed along the auditory access was only one of the variety of separate phenomena that interested them in their research.

6 Further Exploration in *Translating Translating Apollinaire* (1979)

In May of 1975, bpNichol began an investigation that would later become *Translating Translating Apollinaire: A Preliminary Report*. By the time of its eventual publication (in unfinished form) in 1979, Nichol had elaborated 55 different investigations within this ongoing research into translation as a creative tool. While this project is not technically a TRG report in the sense that it is published under Nichol's name alone, it does openly situate itself as a collaborative effort, "with research notes by Hart Broudy, Dick Higgins, Steve McCaffery, Richard Truhlar & Karl Young, with additional results from Douglas Barbour, Cavan McCarthy & John Pepper" [33].

In providing background information on his source text in his introduction, Nichol also confirms his long-standing connection to translation:

> i recalled the first poem i had ever published—**Translating Apollinaire** in Bill Bissett's Blew Ointment magazine circa 1964 (i'd written the poem in summer 1963 during my first period in Toronto)—& decided to put that poem thru as many translation / transformation processes as i & other people could think of [...] The title of the original poem comes from the fact that i was, during its writing, translating Apollinaire & the line "soleil cou coupe" comes from his poem, Zone, the one i was working on. TTA 31 (unpublished here) includes elements from my 1963 translation. [34]

This demonstrates that even in the days of his earliest published work, translation was a regular activity and an inspiration to his process as a poet. The volume in

32. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
33. Nichol, *Translating Translating Apollinaire*, *op. cit.*, title page.
34. *Ibid.*, introduction.

question, begun over a decade after the source poem's composition, elaborated upon that same interest, and further expanded upon the research conducted by the TRG a few years earlier.

Unlike the initial TRG report on translation, *Translating Translating Apollinaire* (TTA) takes a 'show don't tell' stance, and reports its "discoveries made in terms of results arrived at"[35], which includes both finished products and excerpts from works-in-progress. Aside from the paratext, which takes the form of a one-page introduction by Nichol and a two-page table of contents with brief descriptions, the reader is left to his own devices. A number of systems were unfinished at the time of publication, and thus of the 55 methods Nichol had put into play, *Translating Translating Apollinaire* showcases results from 25 of them, some having been excluded because of excessive length and others due to their requiring familiarity with certain of Nichol's other projects.

Of the 25 results reported in *Translating Translating Apollinaire*, it is possible to break them down into certain 'types' of processes.

First there are the permutations, which are homolinguistic and involve rearrangements of the physical form of the piece along different guidelines: some take place at the level of the line or sentence, others at the level of the word, still others at the individual letter.

Next, there are the substitutions, which, not unlike the Lescurian S+7 procedure employed by the Oulipo, involve replacing certain elements with others from outside of the corpus: semantic and lexicographic replacements such as synonyms, antonyms, lexical definitions pulled from the dictionary, etc.

The spatial translations have some overlap with the permutations, but above all they work around the notion of changing the relationship of the reader with the visual text on the page through a method that relates to cartography on a conceptual level. "TTA 18: 10 views", for example, involves projecting the text into three dimensions and then reorganizing the letters on the page as if they were seen by someone walking around the poem: each solitary reader has as indications both the direction in which he walks, and the direction in which he is looking. For instance, "TTA 18: view 5" involves the reader "walking west along the southern boundary of the poem looking north", whereas View 10 is described as a "labyrinthine view beginning on the exterior of the poem & walking in"[36].

Further to this, there are examples based on reduction and editing, attempts at "memory translation", translation between systems (such as into musical notation or translations into visual and concrete forms), manipulations involving acrostics and other established systems, and of course, a "geomantic translation fixed along a static auditory axis", or "sound translation", which makes its appearance in "TTA 13".

We can consider this project in its entirety be an open system; Nichol has included for reference the source text, "TTA 4: original version". In some cases, however, the

35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*, table of contents.

system is simultaneously open and closed: open in that a trace of the original is still present by reference to TTA 4, but closed in that certain TTAs take as their source other TTAs in the collection, in one case, for example, by seeking a spatial comparison of results between the original and various combinations of seven other TTAs. This process allows Nichol to forge new results from spatial matches of punctuation marks, letters, words, lines and stanzas.

7 To the Letter: The Shape of Sound

What becomes clear in examining the various methods represented in *Translating Translating Apollinaire* is that there are several linguistic axes to which Nichol is inexorably drawn. As we can expect, having examined the TRG report, experimentation with the auditory axis is omnipresent in Nichol's work. This is not only evident here, but throughout his entire poetic body of work and in his career-long emphasis on performance (such as his live and recorded work with The Four Horsemen). However, what seems apparent in the make-up of the TTAs is a fascination that causes him to step away from more traditional linguistic theory: a strong interest in the letter itself.

Communicational linguistics often tends to go no further than the morpheme, the minimal and undividable unit of sense. In contrast to this, Nichol's experiments often take place on the level of the grapheme; he shows an innate fascination for these visual building blocks. For Nichol, the physical and graphical realm of visual writing inextricably ties the grapheme to the phoneme. Each letter is given its place: its shape, its relation to the other letters and space that surround it, and its sound in each given context. As with the Oulipo and the Lettrist movement in France, the letter is paid its due, although the primacy of the letter in Oulipian writing is often different: for them, it is less 'present' in many of their applications and manipulations. Less ostentatious and central on both auditory and visual planes: it is simply the smallest unit of potential manipulation.

This fascination with the letter would surface again and again in Nichol's work. For example, in "heaven & hell", he would dwell on the 'h':

> h h white h h
> the h the the the
> heaven height where the
> h h h
>
> hard when oh help
> h h h h h
> heat heaven hard
> h the
> when when when
> [. . .] [37]

37. bpNichol, *love: a book of remembrances,* Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974, unpaginated

It is as if Nichol is asking: "Why 'h' in both heaven and hell? Why 'aychh' and not 'heuh'? What does this letter do to those it rubs up against? Or to the empty space that surrounds it? See how it stretches the 'e' in w[h]ere? How do they differ when aspirated or silent? Why is 'h' such a long sound compared to 'oh'? And why this particular shape, with its long foreleg curved at the knee, its short torso and tiny crook of the neck?"

In an interview with Raoul Duguay in 1973, Nichol elaborates on his fascination with the letter. He indicates that he has returned to writing by hand instead of typing, which allows him to feel the connection between the letter and his body, and to feel the form and architecture of each letter. This changed the way he looked at writing and how he read it; he began to "look at words as if they were sentences"[38]. He elaborates:

> i find the alphabet the most mysterious system—because it's so amazing – why those 26 letters—what is there in them—it's like i'm looking for hidden content—they're like a doorway into another universe—& i want to go down into that doorway & i want to find where it leads [...] & you can get there thru the sound & thru the visual both – i think both things lead you there [...][39]

Seemingly open to the exploration of any axis of language and the effects of this on the rest of the system, Nichol demonstrates a preference for two axes within this conception that for him define poetry: sound and shape. In particular, shape often takes the form of the simplest tool of written communication, the letter. However, in focusing on these two planes, often in conjunction with one another, the processes of translation, both hetero- and homolinguistic, effect drastic change upon the many other planes in play.

Conceived of as "an open-ended, probably unpublishable in its entirety, piece", *Translating Translating Apollinaire* extends our insight into the conceptualization of translation as a creative tool first illustrated by Nichol and McCaffery in the Toronto Research Group's initial reports on translation. It affirms their view of language as a malleable system of interrelations, and reasserts the centrality of the translator in both open and closed systems. It again experiments with the auditory axis and the effects of its prominence on other components of the language system. In addition to this, it further demonstrates the prioritization of the letter as a minimal unit of fascination, inextricably binding grapheme and phoneme within an array of separate parts in perpetual motion.

8 Further Exploration: After the TRG and *Translating Translating Apollinaire*

Among their other explorations, experimentation of this sort would remain a constant in the later work of both Nichol and McCaffery, along with a visible fondness

38. bpNichol, *meanwhile: The Critical Writings of bpNichol*, ed. Roy Miki, Vancouver, Talonbooks, 2002, p. 122.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

for aural geomancy and a focus on the letter as minimal unit of sonorous and graphical production. A further example of Nichol's and McCaffery's work along similar lines can be seen in their contribution to the aptly-named *Six Fillious: Being B.P. Nichol's translation of Robert Filliou's* ***14 Chansons et 1 Charade*** *into English (+ Filliou's original text) + Steve McCaffery's translation of George Brecht's translation of Robert Filliou's* ***14 Chansons et 1 Charade*** *into English into English (+ Brecht's translation into English:* ***14 Songs and 1 Riddle****) + Dick Higgins' translation of Dieter Roth's translation of Robert Filliou's* ***14 Chansons et 1 Charade*** *into German into English (+ Roth's translation into German:* ***14 Chansons und 1 Ratsel****).*[40]

Like Zukofsky, Nichol would homophonically translate Catullus (for example, in *from Catullus poem XXVIII*: "Pisonis comites, cohors inanis / aptis sarcinulis et expiditis" becoming "Piss on his committees, cohorts in inanities, apt as sarcasm & as expeditious" in *zygal: a book of mysteries and translations*[41]). McCaffery too would continue with explorations of hetero- and homolinguistic translations, most notably in works such as *Every Way Oakly*[42] (a volume of homolinguistic translations of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*) and in his book of heterolinguistic translations of Basho, *The Basho Variations.*[43] While there are many more systems at play in the work of these two "Kids of the Book-Machine", these two privileged planes would repeatedly fly overhead throughout their literary journey.

40. Membrane Press, 1978.

41. bpNichol, *zygal: a book of mysteries and translations* [1985], collected in *a book of variations: love—zygal—art facts,* ed. Stephen Voyce, Toronto: Coach House Books, 2013, p. 190.

42. McCaffery, Steve, *Every Way Oakly*, Toronto, BookThug, 2008.

43. McCaffery, Steve, *The Basho Variations*, Toronto, BookThug, 2007.