

# DON'T FENCE ME IN

*Where to put bpNichol's "Three Western Tales"*

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To deconstruct the subject does not mean to deny its existence. There are subjects, 'operations' or effects of subjectivity.

This is an incontrovertible fact. To acknowledge this does not mean, however, that the subject is what it *says* it is.

*Jacques Derrida*<sup>1</sup>

**b**PNICHOL'S *Three Western Tales* is historiographic metafiction, multiple parody, word game and old-fashioned narrative. It simultaneously depends on and ridicules many conventional literary categories, from traditional biography to what is generally called postmodernism. But whom or what is indicated by "it"? On the answer to this question depends the acceptability of many statements about the text, most particularly any claim that, as text, it performs actions, whether textual, such as parody, or textual-political, such as constructing images of identity or interpellating particular reader positions.

To insist that this "it" is not singular, but a collection of "effects" of subjectivity, as suggested by Derrida, is to ignore much textual evidence: the *Tales*' location as a unit of a book called *Craft Dinner*, copyright bpNichol; the suggestion in the untitled passage which follows the dedication that the book itself possesses a voice; the inclusion of the tales under one heading; and the many repetitions and similarities between them. The *Tales*' jokes and parodies coexist with, rather than cancel out, the issues raised in its themes and wordplay: the relationships of speaking and writing, rumour and truth, of trustworthiness and history. Do these serious discussions depend on a singular locatable voice amid its multivocality, as does Derrida's assertion of the existence of "incontrovertible truth" between the assertion of grammatically plural "operations or effects of subjectivity" and of a singular subject which is not "what it *says* it is"?

The simplest answer is to say that “it” is fifteen pages of a book called *Craft Dinner, Stories and Texts 1966-1976*, published in 1978 by Aya Press, copyright bpNichol.<sup>2</sup> The first of the three tales, “The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid,” had appeared on its own in 1970 and was one of the books that earned Nichol the Governor General’s Award for poetry that year. So there is a fashionable generic confusion here: a book awarded a prize for poetry reappears in a collection called *Craft Dinner*, which is described in its dedication as “a bunch of proses.” Near the end of the book is a page headed “After Words” and ending with the printed words “bpNichol, Toronto, May 2, 1978,” which describes *Craft Dinner* as “the short prose pieces.”

If the *Tales* have no clear generic fence, at least they have a paper one. They have, like the book they inhabit, a title page and a dedication. Their subheading “1967-1976,” raises a temporal fence similar to that of *Craft Dinner*, which is sub-headed “1966-1976.” The three tales pretend to be a book, even though they share their cover and ISBN with several other pieces. They mark their difference — as book — from the other pieces in the book, which are merely pieces, by repeating the signs of a book, and, of course, by including three tales. Since a choice has to be made, *Three Western Tales* will henceforth be referred to in the singular, as “it” not “they.”

Michel Foucault, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*,<sup>3</sup> has described the way discursive formations, which are collections of “statements” (*énoncés*), as well as of larger units which he calls “associated fields,” can be defined in terms of their relations with other formations; the specificity is dependent on systems of differences. Saussure has shown how the meanings of smaller units of language, words, are along one axis, functions of their relations with each other, along another, of their differences from other words.<sup>4</sup> Another way to fence in *Three Western Tales* would be to call it an “associated field,” or a text, made up of statements whose relationships also function along two axes. The idea of *différance* tells us that these axes are infinite in length, offering limitless possibilities of substitution. Understanding is possible because the axes are closed off in conventional ways, such as publication in books, and enclosure between fore- and after-words. The relationships of the *Tales* and the larger book which physically encloses it can be played with in a way similar to Nichol’s play, in *The Martyrology*, with syllables and their arbitrary assembling into words. Foucault’s and Saussure’s proposals that linguistic units, whatever their size, are bounded by differences, not fences, have many demonstrated advantages over more traditional definitions. Nichol’s fifteen pages of divine silliness show that interstices and differences are just as movable as, and a lot more permeable than, pickets and barbed wire.

But while post-Saussurean theory, including the work of Foucault, weakens the basis of traditional, critical categories such as genre, or author as unifying or originating subject, critics seem to need to go on using them, at least heuristically, in

order to be able to do criticism at all. bp would notice that the word *différance* contains “fence.” M. M. Bakhtin, in “The Problem of Speech Genres,” an essay written in 1952-3, is quite happy to give authorial intention, unqualified by linguistics or Freud, equal place with generic conventions in the production of “utterances.” (Bakhtin’s utterances resemble Foucault’s statements in their independence of grammatical structure and their dependence on textual surroundings.) “The finalized wholeness of the utterance,” Bakhtin says, “. . . is determined by three aspects (or factors) that are inseparably linked in the organic whole of the utterance: 1. semantic exhaustiveness of the theme; 2. the speaker’s plan of speech will; 3. typical compositional and generic forms of finalization.”<sup>5</sup> Foucault too includes in the specification of what constitutes a statement that it be “a group of signs” to which “the position of the subject can be assigned,”<sup>6</sup> but disconnects this position from any authorial identity or plan. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, however, in its many undecidabilities, leaves a space for the idea of the occupant of the “subject position” as prior to the existence of the statement: “It is in this gap and the attempts to bridge it that Foucault can be spied resorting to categories which have been vehemently rejected in other parts of the text.”<sup>7</sup>

Recent discussion of texts sharing the attribute “authored by bpNichol” has most often concentrated on questions of voice, pronoun and subjectivity. This is the case in many of the essays appearing in *Tracing the Paths: Reading = Writing The Martyrology*, edited by Roy Miki.<sup>8</sup> Critics have discussed, for example, the multiplicity of possible references for the pronoun “i” and the juxtaposition of passages which propose the existence of a transcendent authority with passages which undermine the possibility of such authority. In Saussurean linguistics, language is a system of differences with no positive terms. In literary criticism, however deep one’s post-structuralist convictions, it is hard not to resort to the notion of a positive term, even while avoiding giving it a name, let’s say bpNichol. The *Tales* is a text which, like the *Martyrology*, illustrates the ways in which the existence of a positive term is simultaneously indefensible and indispensable.

Critics who get so solemn about Nichol’s work that they forget that it is funny risk the fate of billy in the first tale, who shot himself — and a lot of Freudians — from behind a grocery store: “god said billy why’d you do all those things & billy said god my dick was too short.” These tales are about billy the kid in particular and about kidding in general. It is best not to keep the face too straight when talking about the ways in which *Three Western Tales* plays around with its relationships with some related texts and with the relationships of the multiple subject positions within it, including those of “it” itself. To recognise the parodies in the text is both to deny its origin in the creative impulse of a unique subject and at the same time to maintain the generic and stylistic “unities” of conventional criticism. But when we say it is performing a parody, joking, kidding, is it possible to find a referent for this “it” without reerecting all the logocentric fences that have been knocked down

by, among others, bpNichol himself? Many critics, perhaps out of nostalgia for this positivism, have substituted the infinite and unknowable mental processes of readers. It will be shown later on in this essay why this solution is as challengeable as Bakhtin's notion of author/subject identity.

THE *Tales* LOOKS LIKE A BOOK within a book, one of whose three books has also been a book. (Stephen Scobie has a similar discussion of *Book 6* of *The Martyrology* in *Tracing the Paths*.<sup>9</sup>) Each of the *Tales* has its title and is divided into sections — numbered with subheads in the first; dated Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday in “The Long Weekend of Louis Riel”; merely numbered in “Two Heroes.” This proliferation of subdivisions can be seen as mocking the very notion of a bounded, autonomous text — or as doing the opposite.

As well as being graphically subdivided, the *Tales* is a collection of constantly changing subject positions. According to Bakhtin, it is this “change of speaking subjects” which “creates (the) clear-cut boundaries of the utterance. In his next paragraph, however, he finds that a novel “as secondary speech genre” is a “conventional playing out of speech communication and primary speech genres” (or utterances) in which “the speaking subject does not really change.”<sup>10</sup> For Foucault, on the other hand, a novel is a “set of statements” which do not presuppose “the same enunciating subject.”<sup>11</sup>

Tale one, “The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid,” mimics the form of traditional scholarly biographies. It has an introduction in which the putative author discusses sources and relations with other texts, followed by numbered chapters with no intrusion of the authorial “i,” starting with the words “billy was born” and ending with his death and a sort of epitaph: “everyone said, too bad his dick was so small, he was the true eventual kid.”

Benveniste has pointed out that the pronoun “I” is one of the marks that “refers to the act of individual discourse,” is “dependent only with respect to the instances of discourse in which they occur, that is, in dependence upon the I which is proclaimed in the discourse.”<sup>12</sup> This distinction is maintained by Foucault when he claims that the personalized subject of the introduction to a mathematical treatise is different from the subject of the impersonal scholarship that follows.<sup>13</sup> But in both cases the subject that changes is the subject of the *énoncé*, not of the enunciating act. While the subject of the *énoncé*, the proclaimed “I” in the unnumbered first section of “The True Eventual Story” pretends to coincide with the subject of its *énonciation*, in the following sections it varies from statement to statement. But the cynical, wise-cracking voice of the commentator often returns, prompting the question, should one read the numbered sections as a different level of narration, the enunciation of the enunciated, or as on the same level as the first section, the

product of the same enunciator? Just as there are not enough graphic distinctions of underlining and quotation marks to differentiate all the books and sections of books present in the *Tales* and *Craft Dinner*, there are not enough critical terms to distinguish clearly the multiplicity of subjects of acts of enunciation here.

The four sections of the “biography” travesty the stability of meanings suggested by the illusion that scholarship is reproducible, regardless of identity of scholar and historical situation, as well as that authenticity is guaranteed by multiple sources. Here is most of section 2, titled “HISTORY”:

history says that billy the kid was a coward. the true eventual story is that billy the kid is dead or he'd probably shoot history in the balls. history always stands back calling people cowards or failures.

legend says that billy the kid was a hero who liked to screw . . . legend always has a bigger dick than history & history has a bigger dick than billy had.

rumour has it that billy the kid never died. rumour is billy the kid. he never gets anywhere, being too short-lived.

There is another dig at totalizing historical generalizations: “the sheriff stood on the sidelines cheering. this is how law & order came to the old west.” The tale’s relationship with accepted accounts of Billy the Kid’s life, documented or legendary, is also one of travesty.

“The Long Weekend of Louis Riel” is similarly a calling-into-question through jokes of the delusions of academic historians, more widely held, one hopes, when these tales were being composed than nowadays. Any solemn thematizing of this tale, however, is to do exactly what the text is parodying when it mocks the fetishization of guilt by liberals more interested in the sacred cows they invent than in the historical figures who remain silent. Here the critic encounters one of those indeterminacies pointed out by Frank Davey.<sup>14</sup> Talking about *The Martyrology*, he refers to the “insertion into the text of passages which qualify or contradict uses of discourse elsewhere” but which “enable the assertion of ‘absolute’ truth through its unassertion.” The first two sections of “The Long Weekend of Louis Riel” juxtapose nonsensical chatter about Riel and Dumont with what can be accepted as “real” history: in the section headed “Friday” there are a lot of jokes about breakfast, then the words, “he never ate after four in the afternoon” come right next to “spent his time planning freedom the triumph of the Metis over the whiteman.” In “Saturday,” more jokes about bacon collide with the historical fact that the whites deliberately starved the Metis and Indians. The Sunday and Monday sections poke fun at liberal guilt-trip mythologizing of those we now make heroes of, Riel and Dumont, with the implication that there is, somewhere, a true story to be told. Can we take the undermining of this notion carried out by the first tale as applying to this one? Do the two tales make up a single statement? This question postulates a unifying authority but one which perversely says that records of starva-

tion and execution are of no account, founded on no authority. "The True Eventual Story" seems to say that if a rumour is repeated it will be accepted as true; but if we support our serious beliefs about past events by recurring documentary evidence, how do we tell reliable repetition from unreliable? Can we say that the enunciators of the first tale were only kidding while the unidentified though intrusive enunciator of the second is to be taken seriously sometimes and not at others?

In these first two tales we have met at least three enunciators: the "i" of the first paragraph, who seems to say that it is kidding, the unspoken "I" of the kidder who narrates the biography, and the serious joker of "The Long Weekend." They appear in separately labelled sections, but also under the inclusive title "Three Western Tales." What relationships do they have to each other and to the reliable scholarly enunciators of the historical/literary texts they evoke? Is there a single subject enclosing them in its enunciation, despite the different histories behind their production and in their stories?

"TWO HEROES" IS THE TITLE of the third tale, inviting the unfulfilled anticipation that in it billy the kid might encounter Louis Riel. Its connections to the first two are more suggested than specified. It looks different since it uses upper case letters in the conventional way, except that, in section 2, there is a lower case "i" narrator who may or may not be the same voice as the upper case one at the end. Just as the first tale parodied biography and the second diary form, the five pages of "Two Heroes" imitate the frame novel. It starts with two old men reminiscing in a garden and ends with them dying there. In between we have stories of their lives together. They go west to fight Riel and Dumont and to Africa to fight in the Boer War; there is an embedded story about Billy the Kid, which they may or may not have written, and a lot of digressions about their families and friends. More parodies emerge — of several narrative styles, of cultural clichés, of pop psychology, of strong silent heroes.

There is no consistent subject position, neither the anonymous editorializer of "The Long Weekend of Louis Riel" nor the personal and impersonal kidders from "The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid." The first section seems to be a description of the old men's death: the narrator says, "They have ceased speaking just as we appeared. They have finally reached an end to their conversation." No clue is given about who make up this "we" who heard nothing. In section 2 a lower-case "i" narrator talks of the old men's past behaviour with some of the same reservations as the opening speaker of the first tale: "but i did not know them then, never heard them, can only write of what i learned second hand." Again, there is no clue how to take this disclaimer: are we in the realm of kidding — of history shot in the

balls, of Riel shooting up breakfast — or of the serious, of comments on the self-serving mythologizing of Riel by whites? Are the two old men the “damn whitemen they’re sitting up in all-night diners staging a food blockade”?

This undecidability continues through the sections. The third section warns us not to make connections between the tales when it gives a more conventional account of the deaths of Riel and Dumont. While the story of the men’s imperialistic adventures is being told, the grammar is conventional with complete sentences and helpful commas. But when it switches to a potted history of Toronto, the narrator loses control, sentence fragments pile up and the referents of the repeated pronouns are unclear. In section 5, the narration moves to another level with the embedded story of a resurrected Billy the Kid and the Clockwork Man. The absence of the usual indicators, quotation marks for instance, makes it hard to know whether the narration stays on that level or moves back and forth, especially when the familiar self-questioning “I” seems to be present: “I don’t know. I read what I read. Most of it’s lies. And most of those liars say Billy the Kid died.” The first tale, with its odd sentence structure and cheeky enunciator, seems to have erupted into the third, though the upper-casing of the “I” here confuses the issue. The status of the embedded story is in doubt in other ways: the old men’s friends and relatives think they wrote it but we, its other readers, are given no evidence that they did and if we are still listening to the first narrator — of “Two Heroes” that is — how would he/she, who never heard them speak, recognize their style?

Section 6 is more straightforward although we do not know if the “I” who comments at the end is someone we have met before or yet another storyteller, that is the enunciator of just this chunk of the tales or of more than one section, perhaps all of them. In section 7, we go back to the story’s first level for some more Freudian parody apparently coming from the narrator of the first two sections. At least, it is someone who knows the family and seems free from the doubts of the “I” of the passage last quoted. The crazy story of Billy and the Clockwork man goes on with its parodies of macho-violent heroes; is the title an ironic reference to these two inarticulate bullies or to the imperialistic old men? In section 10 the narrating “I” recurs, the slangy sceptic who doesn’t know the end of Billy’s story:

If he went back home, he died a quiet old man. If he stayed in Africa he was never heard from again. He’s not a fit man to tell a story about. Just a stupid little creep who one time in his life experienced some deep emotion & killed anyone who reminded him of his pain.

Section 11 produces an articulate narrator who seems to go back to the “we” of section 1 by referring to “my cousins and me.” The presence of an overall controlling voice is paradoxically raised by the confession that the tale is falling apart: “I was never able, tho I listened often, to draw the whole thing together into any kind of story, any kind of plot, would make the sort of book I longed to write.” But

this voice has not been in charge all the time, and anyway, which book are we talking about — “Two Heroes” or *Three Western Tales*?

THE *Tales* THUS CREATES POSITIONS for a series of narrating subjects, existing only in the instances of discourse that constitute them, at the same time as it suggests connections and continuities between them, from section to section and from tale to tale. Much depends upon what we take as the unit of text. If we take the three tales’ coexistence under a title in a book to be more than accidental, we want to find in it a unifying enunciating voice, though such unity is immediately called into question by the proclaimed ten-year time of composition, let alone European theory from Freud onwards. If we find in the collection of short texts called *Craft Dinner* a yet more encompassing system of relations with the *Tales*, we have to deal with the strange untitled passage which follows the dedication page at the beginning of that book:

you turn the page & i am here that in itself is interesting to  
me at least it is interesting since my existence begins as you  
turn the pages and begin to read me i have no way of  
knowing your motives . . .

now we have  
begun we have begun again as we did before so many time  
each time you are different each time there is something  
about you that is different i am always the same . . .

i am because you  
read me i was when that person wrote me . . .

Here is a voice inside *Craft Dinner* but outside the *Tales* and itself split by its proclamation of the “i.” It — or they — draws attentions to the problems raised by Anthony Easthope when he says, in a passage which strangely echoes *Craft Dinner*, “I am placed as subject of the enunciation. But you, dear reader, wherever you are in my absence, when you read this . . . *you* take the position of subject of the enunciation because you produce the meaning.”<sup>15</sup> But that “you” is, of course, as much split, as much representative of an absence, as the “I.” These pages acknowledge the instability of the reader’s position — “each time there is something about you that is different” — while emphasizing the iterability, the reproducibility of the material text, of the “i” and the “you” that are, the instant they have been enunciated, beyond the control and reach of the enunciator.

The act of interpretation, this passage points out, is no more the unifying origin of a text than is the act of composition; but the reader’s inference that such an origin exists stems from the composition’s implication of an originator, reinforced by the text’s material unity, enclosed as it is by a copyright notice and an “Afterword”



and by a cover. It must then be the text in its material existence that speaks the “I” that claims to stay the same even while the reader is always different. Easthope’s book as a whole contradicts the passage I have quoted when it points out the codes — the ideological significance of iambic pentameter for example — that enable particular readings and which exist independently of single acts of either reading or writing. This opening passage of *Craft Dinner* points out the multiplicity of all linguistic meaning, dependent on both preexisting codes, for instance, the literary conventions that the *Tales* parody, and unique acts of writing and interpretation, when it says, now echoing Bakhtin, “i am because you read me, i was when that person wrote me.”

In following its own theoretical presuppositions as well as the processes of Nichol’s text, my argument has returned to where it started: it is hard to talk about a text without positing some singular “it”; the conventions of our critical practice allow us to do so even when the existence of a unifying speaking voice is problematized. Otherwise, what have I — and the various other critics who have written about *Three Western Tales* — been talking about all this time? But if the text is not bounded by the limits of a single act of enunciation, the only entity this “it” can be said to refer to is its material and formal existence, the ink and paper, the signifiers and their arrangement on some pages. Here, even this unity is problematized by both the publishing history and the printed form of the *Tales*.

But billy reappeared in another tale, although its ending is uncertain. The small issue of whether literary criticism has a definable object merges with the large political one of how texts are to be held responsible for their consequences; both, to a large extent, rest on whether we can assume, for the time being at least, that there is a stable subject position within a text. Foucault urges us to look for the differences and relations of statements, fields and formations; we are sure to find that fences are built — which may be what he is suggesting when he describes statements as subjected to “the conditions and limits” of a “field of stabilization.”<sup>16</sup>

There can be no supposition of any extratextual origin for this builder of fences round the enunciative position: it will be found only in the system of relations within and between texts, which includes the conventions within which it is criticized. Nor does it interfere with the process of Derridian *différance*. It does not function as a guarantor of meaning, merely as a device that would unify a text just enough to make it function as a unit. The postulation of such a subject-function, even for dialogic texts like the *Tales*, makes it possible for us to talk of them as performing acts like parody or kidding, or, for that matter, insulting, commanding or inciting to action. At the same time we have to remember the political dangers of such postulations, of how close they are to the reinstatement of the transcendent authoritative voice, whether of text or reader.

Perhaps we can regard *Three Western Tales* as, in Frank Davey’s words, “a work-

book, . . . a place where these things can be done 'without penalty',<sup>17</sup> which puts the *Tales* inside a playful fence of high seriousness.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1984), 125.
- <sup>2</sup> All citations are from this edition, which is not paginated.
- <sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).
- <sup>4</sup> While Foucault himself denies that the statement necessarily coincides with the units of language studied by linguistics, his terminology and the fact that he very seldom analyses signifying practices other than language justify the analogy with Saussure. See B. Brown and M. Cousins, "The Linguistic Fault: The Case of Foucault's Archaeology," *Economy and Society* 9:3 (August 1980), 251-78.
- <sup>5</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres." *Speech Genres and other Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1986), 76-77.
- <sup>6</sup> Foucault, 95.
- <sup>7</sup> Brown & Cousins, 268.
- <sup>8</sup> Roy Miki, ed., *Tracing the Paths: Reading = Writing The Martyrology* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1988).
- <sup>9</sup> Stephen Scobie, "On Dangerous Ground: Two Essays in Six Books," in Miki, ed., 260-77.
- <sup>10</sup> Bakhtin, 72-73.
- <sup>11</sup> Foucault, 102, 93.
- <sup>12</sup> Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Miami: Univ. of Miami Press, 1971), 220.
- <sup>13</sup> Foucault, 94.
- <sup>14</sup> Frank Davey, "Exegesis/Eggs a Jesus: *The Martyrology* as a Text in Crisis," *Reading Canadian Reading* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1988), 238.
- <sup>15</sup> Anthony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (London: Methuen, 1983), 43.
- <sup>16</sup> Foucault, 99.
- <sup>17</sup> Davey, 243.

