

“INNER TENSION/IN ATTENTION” STEVE McCAFFERY’S BOOK ART

Steve McCaffery’s poetic career had its inception in the northern England of the late sixties; his biggest influence was the concrete poetry/concrete art of Ian Hamilton Finlay. Emigrating to Canada in the early seventies, McCaffery worked both on sound-text poetry and on artist’s books, producing a series of remarkable illustrated books—*Ow’s Waif*, *Dr. Sadhu’s Muffins*, *Intimate Distortions*, *Knowledge Never Knew*—which combine word and image and, more important, treat the book as a composite whole, spacing, typography, arrangement, white space, letter size, etc. all working together to create a field of play. McCaffery doesn’t, in other words, write poems; he produces books. He is therefore all but impossible to anthologize and his work belongs more properly with artist’s books than with conventional poetry.

Marjorie Perloff’s most recent books are *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (1986), *Poetic License: Studies in Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (1989), and *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (1991). She edited *Postmodern Genres* (1989), which contains essays by some of the other contributors to the present volume as well as her own essay on John Cage’s *Roaratorio*. She is Sadie Dernham Patek Professor of Humanities at Stanford University.

It is wonderful how a handwriting which is illegible can be read, oh yes it can.
Gertrude Stein

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

Steve McCaffery¹

"The materiality of language," Steve McCaffery has suggested in a 1978 essay on the poet bill bissett, "is that aspect which remains resistant to an absolute subsumption into the ideality of meaning. . . . To see the letter not as a phoneme but as ink, and to further insist on that materiality, inevitably contests the status of language as a bearer of uncontaminated meaning(s)" (NI 105). Consider the following scenario, provided by Michael Coffey as an illustration of McCaffery's argument:

You drive into a parking garage. After taking a ticket, you see a red arrow pointing to the right. Or:

You drive into a parking garage. After taking a ticket, you read a sign that says, "Parking to the Right." Or:

You drive into a parking garage. After taking a ticket, an attendant nods over his shoulder and says, "There are spaces to the right."²

Coffey comments: "Each of these directional episodes 'means' the same thing: proceed to the right to park your car. In that all three messages convey the same meaning, the material differences in the composition are devalued, made irrelevant. Despite three entirely different modes of presentation (graphic, lexical/phonetic, oral/gestural), the idea from each converges at the same terminus and all else falls away" (OL 32-33).

Steve McCaffery's writing project has, from the first, foregrounded the "all else," what Georges Bataille has defined as the "excesses of energy" inherent in the economy of distribution and circulation (NI 201). In literary terms, "excess" is equivalent to the *paragram*, which McCaffery defines, following Julia Kristeva and Leon S. Roudiez, as a text whose "organization of words (and their denotations), grammar, and syntax is challenged by the infinite possibilities provided by letters or phonemes combining to form networks of signification not accessible through conventional reading habits." The paragram "is that aspect of language which *escapes* all discourse" (NI 63-64).

The foregrounding of the *paragram* is closely related to the conception of textuality as literally open-ended: McCaffery's own analogy is to the biotopological form known as the Klein worm: "a form which differs from

conventional geometric forms in its characteristic absence of both inner and outer surfaces. . . . Any part of the form can touch, contact, communicate with, flow with any other part" (NI 20). The Klein worm provides the model for a form "without 'walls,' with milieu and constellation replacing syntax. The letter—in its major and minor registrations—not the word forms the basic unit of organization" (NI 21).

If this defense of the paragrammatic, of what McCaffery calls "a first order experience of graphemes" (NI 19), is reminiscent of the manifestos of concrete poetry prominent in the fifties and sixties, the difference between a "post-concrete" poet like McCaffery and his mentors—the *Noigandres* group in Brazil, Ian Hamilton Finlay in England—is that McCaffery's unit has always been the page rather than the individual concrete poem, and, beyond the page, the book. In a fanciful Cratylian study, McCaffery (writing together with bp nichol) points out that the word *book* is etymologically connected with the name of the beech tree (OE, *bok*, *boce*, ON, *bok*) as well as the Gothic *bokos* (letter of the alphabet), whose plural form *boka* means writing or document. Book as beech leaf (an organic object), book as document: the double meaning, McCaffery and nichol suggest, denies the book the passive role we generally assign to it. Similarly, page comes from the Latin *pagina*, whose stem *pag-* is also that of *pingere*, to fasten, fix in, fix together. A page, the authors conclude, is not just a blank sheet, waiting for "meaningful" print to be affixed to it, but a kind of trellis upon which words and letters are fastened visually as well as semantically.³ Thus the "book of the writer" becomes the "book of the written" (KNK56).

"Artist's book" is not quite the right term for the resultant productions. Illustrations, for example, the reproductions of old engravings underlying the text in *In England Now that Spring* and the anatomical drawings of *Panopticon*, are sparse, and the innovative typography, used in the early works like *Ow's Waif*, gives way, in the recent *Black Debt*, to a long, continuous block of large type with justified left and right margins. Compared to, say, John Baldessari's and Barbara Kruger's artist's books, McCaffery's look amateurish and a shade drab. One would not expect to see them in art galleries or at "book art" exhibitions. "[An] essential distinction," writes Richard Kostelanetz, "separates imaginative books from conventional books.

In the latter, syntactically familiar sentences are set in rectangular blocks of uniform type (resembling soldiers in a parade), and these are then “designed” into pages that look like each other (and like pages we have previously seen). An imaginative book, by definition, attempts to realize something else with syntax, with format, with pages, with covers, with size, with shapes, with sequence, with structure, with binding—with any or all of these elements.”⁴

In this sense, McCaffery’s are certainly exemplars of book art, pages functioning as trellises upon which letrist and verbal experiments are hung, the whole giving a very different impression than does the individual page or print unit on a page.

McCaffery’s first book experiment or, more accurately, page experiment was called *Carnival, the first panel: 1967–70* and published by the Coach House Press in Toronto in 1973. The work was made by placing masks on each of sixteen standard 11" x 8 ½" pages, arranged in groups of four to make a square (or, strictly speaking, rectangle) measuring 44" x 36". The sixteen pages were then perforated and arranged in sequential book form, accompanied by the instructions, “In order to destroy this book please tear each page carefully along the perforation. The panel is assembled by laying out pages in a square of four.” The readerly dilemma thus created was that in order to take in the whole panel, the book has to be destroyed.

As for the mask technique itself, McCaffery has explained his procedures as follows:

Carnival was essentially a cartographic project; a repudiation of linearity in writing and the search for an alternative syntax in ‘mapping’ The panels grew directly through the agency of the typewriter and through the agency of marginal link-ups. . . . As a mask bled off a page I would devise another shape that picked up the bleed of the text at the margin. . . . The mask came about as a way to create a painterly shape by censoring the flow of typewritten line. It was a method of arriving at a collage effect without resort to the actual adhesion of different fragments to a support surface. . . . It’s important to remember that the mask excludes and deletes much of the written text. What results are deliberately induced fragments, parts of inscriptions whose terminations and commencements are not determined by a writing subject or a logical intention but by a material, random intervention (OL 72-73).

Since the writing in this “multi-panel language environment” was a “spontaneous emission into the space set up

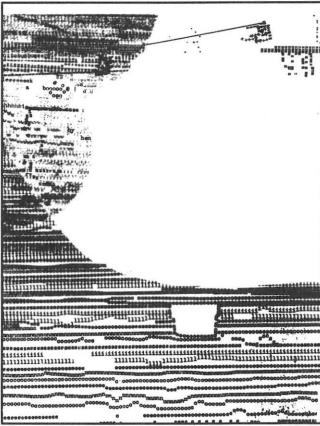


Figure 1

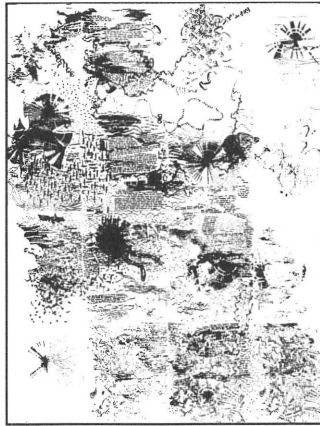


Figure 2

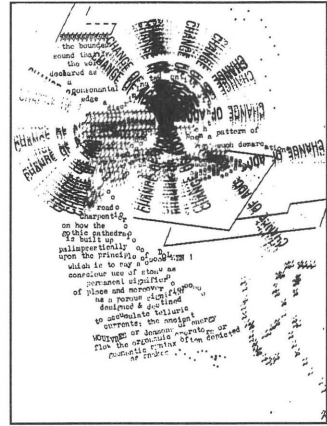


Figure 3

by the mask for writing," there are large areas of "non-semantic type, zones of repeated letters and letristic clusters that attempt a sort of abstract expressionism through the typewriter" (OL 72; see *figure 1*). Such coherent words and phrases as do appear in the panels were later repudiated by McCaffery as "incredibly naive I built the text around certain biblical allusions. Adam as the power of nomination; Babel as the source of polyglossia and so on. All of this I would now scrap" (OL 72).

Carnival, the second panel: 1971–75 (published in 1977) takes what McCaffery calls "a structure of strategic counter-communication" even further. Whereas the first panel was entirely typewriter generated, the second "places the typed mode in agonistic relation with other forms of scription: xerography, xerography within xerography . . . electrostasis, rubber-stamp, tissue texts, hand-lettering and stencil."⁵ The effect (see *figure 2*) is a distancing of language so as to foreground its "neglected qualities of immanence and non-reference," language as a "seen thing," as McCaffery puts it in the Introduction (C2). But although the sixteen-panel overview, as depicted here, allows for little comprehension of individual words or phrases, the individual panel-pages make various "reading paths" available. Thus the spokes of the wheel on the tenth page (see *figure 3*) are rubber-stamped "CHANGE OF ADDRESS" signs, underneath which we

find a complicated set of tissue texts and xerographies, the fragmented words referring to a text by Charpentier “on how the gothic cathedral is built up palimpsestically” to “geomantic syntax often depicted as snakes.” And indeed those “snakes” do appear as part of the graphic page design (see figure 2).

Carnival represents the first stage of McCafferyan language experimentation, the stage when the “death of the referent” as well as the fabled “death of the subject” were taken to be *de rigueur*. As the poet’s book art evolved, the drive toward non-referentiality began to give way to the recognition that the referent never wholly “dies,” even if the “trace structure” and “scriptive play” (Derrida’s terms) of poetic language complicate its determination (NI 148–49). The role of the speaking subject posed greater problems. In the book works of the mid-seventies, *Dr. Sadhu’s Muffins* and *Ow’s Waif*, McCaffery’s desires to “present language-material without the intrusion of my own consciousness” caused him to base his writing entirely on “supply texts chosen at random from whatever happened to be on or near my desk when i was working” (DSM). These “supply texts”—the Concise Oxford Dictionary, the works of Shakespeare, the *I Ching*, various newspapers, magazines and abandoned drafts of earlier poems—were subjected to “numerous chance and random techniques to assist me in word selection and partial syntactic structuring to a degree such as would keep me excluded from the content part of the compositions.” The reader will recognize this as a technique similar to Jackson Mac Low’s chance-generated poems and especially to John Cage’s “writings through” texts from the Bible to *Finnegans Wake*.

How does this “writing through” work in *Dr. Sadhu’s Muffins*? In the “Note on the Method of Composition,” from which I have been quoting, McCaffery explains:

as a poet i took responsibility for the page but not necessarily for everything that found its way onto the page. what i did was set up the sufficient conditions for an open field to form into which a word could find its own way settling in its own syntactic space. . . . having no responsibility whatsoever for the lexical material i found that i could concentrate exclusively on the invention of form—on the realignment of discrete semantic units into either open or closed fields of independent energy and image. . . .

But if *Carnival* subordinated the semantic to visual effects, *Dr. Sadhu’s Muffins* works the other way around. It looks, to begin with, like a perfectly normal book of poems.

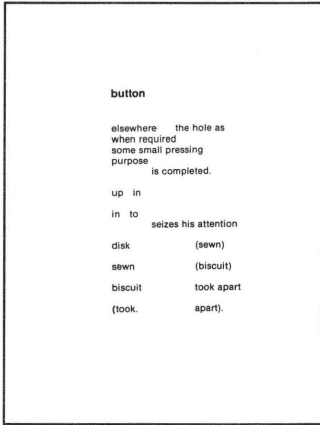


Figure 5



Figure 4

True, the endpapers feature witty collage-drawings with letters from “Steve” to “Tim” about matters of production concerning the very book we’re reading (*figure 4*), and each poetic sequence has a separate title page facing a page of abstract black and white graphics. But the texts themselves are printed conventionally enough. Take the section called “Anamorphoses,” which the Note describes as “attempts to ‘describe out of definition,’ to transform a comprehension into a perception, the known thing into the thing seen, by having a text generate itself out of the dictionary definition of its title.”⁶ The eighteenth anamorphosis is called “button” (*see figure 5*), immediately recalling Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, which provides McCaffery with the epigraph to the sequence, “Act so that there is no use in a centre.” But like any little imagist lyric, “button” is centered on its numbered page.

Here the nonparallel columns—“disks” is matched to “(sewn),” “sewn” to “(biscuit)” and so on—recall Dada rather than imagist lyrics; but the poem, however dependent it may be on its “supply texts,” is fairly straightforward, referring as it does to a “required” “hole,” to “some small pressing,” to a movement that goes “up in/ into,” and then to “sewn” and “took apart,” counterposed to the “disk”/“biscuit” rhyme. Stein’s own *Tender Buttons* are, to use McCaffery’s own vocabulary, more radically paramgrammatic.

Much more effective is the title prose poem, which uses a “core structure of 13 phrases selected at random from the Toronto Globe & Mail and repeated and permuted according to a predetermined chance programme.” Among these phrases, most of them marvelously rapid, are, “the virtues of middle age were the ones that marked the Fifties,” “That was a terrible day I could eat nothing. I

felt faint,” and “the foundations for the new world are being laid right now.” Dr. Sadhu makes his appearance in the sentence, “Let me put the matter allegorically, friends of Dr. Sadhu Singh Dhmi are invited to attend a lecture entitled ‘Between Two Worlds’” (DSM 12).

As for the muffins, these have nothing to do with Dr. Sadhu, except in McCaffery’s scheme of things; their actual entrance cue comes on the opening page in the phrase, “dropping him a scented note or a flower or a bran muffin baked with her own little hands.” Dr. Sadhu makes only three appearances in the poem that bears his name, but the “dropping . . . muffin” phrase appears six times, always in different contexts, and then begins to permutate, “dropping him a scented note” splitting off from the rest of the phrase and undergoing reshuffling, so that we read:

sick. tired. i am sick of the amount
 great trouble. the foundations for this new
 indeed. guilty. i’ll try to be another
 muffin. baked. scented note or flower
 fact for. the unseen cook

and the poem ends with the lines:

the cold scented with her own little hands
 a bran muffin baked with her

where the syntactic displacement of “own little hands” creates an entirely different meaning; the unnamed “she” is now baking in the oven along with the bran muffin. And if that can happen, why not attribute muffins to the evening’s lecturer on the topic “Between Two Worlds,” the eminent Dr. Sadhu Singh Dhmi?

The parodic word play of these “found texts” looks ahead to the profoundly satiric *Black Debt* of 1989. As book art, however, *Dr. Sadhu’s Muffins* is less interesting than another book of this period, *Ow’s Waiif*, which is McCaffery’s parodic tribute to Longfellow’s (as in Henry Wadsworth) *The Waiif*. Again, the poet’s stated aim is to create “a near to total separation of form from content, the entire ‘borrowing’ of content as a prepared word-supply (a ‘supply-text’) and a creative concentration on the invention of the poems’ forms as verbal fields free of presupposed or prerequisite rule structures of grammar and syntax.” The supply-text functions “as the total available language system for the poem.” This time, these texts include Newton’s *Optics*, 1705 edition, an Evelyn Waugh

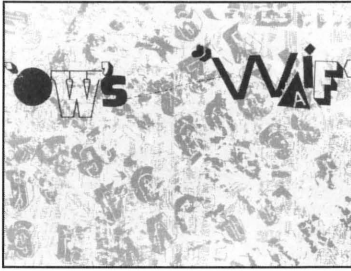


Figure 6



Figure 7

biography of Edmund Campion, Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush*, a trigonometry textbook, Jacques Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* and John Cage's *A Year from Monday*. There is also a set of poems called "Ten Portraits," whose supply-text is a transcribed interview with some New York prostitutes. As in *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins*, word choice, frequency and recurrence are produced by systematic chance operations, although there are instances of "careful conscious choice." The "operating analogy," in any case, is "cubism: the process of fragmentation and reconstitution of a known thing in a fresh form." Or, we might say, using McCaffery's own designation, anamorphosis.

Unlike *Carnival* and *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins*, *Ow's Waif* is something of a collaboration: the design and instant lettering collages were made for the Coach House Press by Roberta MacDonald. The miniature (6" x 4") book is beautifully produced and all of a piece, typographical design in primary colors being integrated with the printed texts. The title page foregrounds red letters and numbers, some in bold type, some transparent, against a "busy" yellow background: the title itself is rendered in black designs (see figure 6). The O is rendered as a black circular disk, a black sun or an apple with a stem-like shape (the dot of an i?, an apostrophe?), even as the first W is transparent and the A of "Waif" is an "empty" letter silhouetted against a black triangle. The black/white, full/empty contrast is then reversed in the book's centerfold (see figure 7): now it is the O that is merely outlined (and almost invisible) and the two giant-size bold W's, letters that here dwarf everything else, are identical. The type-faces of "Waif," furthermore, produce paragraphs in the form of "a" and "if." "What if?," the second page seems to ask. And the long dash, followed by what looks like a

colon, leaves the question open. What if what? Given the background pictographs—letters, numbers, houses, dollar signs, telephone shapes—the possibilities for narrative are intriguingly open.

The visual representation of the words, in any case, reinforces the paragrammatic play of the title: “Ow’s” seems to be Cockney dialect for “How’s,” in which case the phrase, spoken aloud, sounds like “How’s the wife?” “Ow’s” also suggests “Owl’s,” and since owls are solitary nocturnal creatures, the sense of “waif-hood” is made more prominent. And when we turn to the individual “poems,” we note that the layout of the titles (taken from the supply-texts) is often striking, calling attention to their own meanings, which are often intensified by, or in competition with, the individual texts.

Take the double-page spread for “E.A. Poe The Poetic Principle” (see figure 8). Here POE anticipates the first two syllables of POETIC, but at the same time, the title can be read as Ea’s THE POE PRINCIPLE, even as THE POET, printed in lighter dotted letters, is subordinated. And this is of course what Poe’s famous essay does: it applies the “Poe Principle” to all “poetry” and equates the two:

With inspired limit,
inculcation, not demands thy dispensable
but her we need
language

We word as poetical
perceive between incultation.

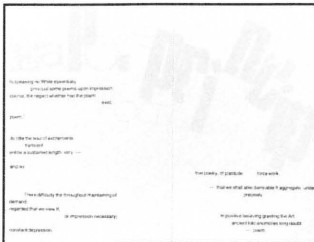


Figure 8

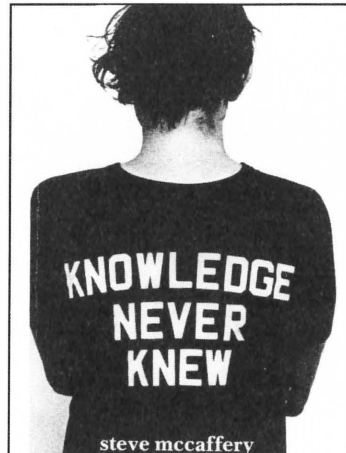


Figure 9

Poe's "Poetic Principle" is, of course, a famous instance of "poetical . . . inculcation." And McCaffery buries other puns and double entendres in his title designs: The textbook title *Elementary Trigonometry* contains, inside a "so-called 'perfect' figure"—the three-dimensional circle or O a second letter, N. That letter becomes, in turn, the first letter of NOM (NAME), but M also goes with E to spell ME and try is placed above the letter line by itself, a reminder that even elementary trigonometry takes a good deal of TRY[ing]"

a ladder is placed with its foot at a distance

Find Sin

find navigation

Find the height of window

all circles

hence

write down all ratios.

Here is the "first order system of graphemes," the "trace structure" or "cipheral play" McCaffery wants to produce. The titles are paragrammatic, the found texts themselves often providing clues as to how the titles should be read. Indeed, what the poet has done is to infuse even as dry a supply-text as *Elementary Trigonometry* with, if not his own personality, at least his own aura. One of McCaffery's recurrent themes, for instance, is the human inability to draw proper conclusions, to make correct syllogisms and analogies. So the "writing through" the elementary trigonometry book produces passages like the following:

man runs each minute

traverses yards two places

subtends centre hence

flywheel

clock is 20 minutes

hence navigation

all circles.

Dr. Sadhu's Muffins and *Ow's Waif* represent the "writing through" or "supply text" stage of McCaffery's book art, but by the later seventies, the poet was moving on to other experiments. *Knowledge Never Knew* (see figure 9), published in 1983 although composed some years earlier, turns to a different language game: the recharging of a time-honored genre, the aphorism, coupled with a rethinking

of Pound's famous definition of the epic as a "poem including history." In *Open Letter* (OL 76), McCaffery recalls the genesis of the book:

Knowledge Never Knew was written as a reaction to those awful collections of aphorisms such as Chazal's *Sens Plastique* (great title/terrible book) and Dahlberg's *Reasons of the Heart* (terrible title/terrible book) The aphorism is a defiant and extremely presumptuous form. It's intellectually cheeky. Its force derives not just from the classical brevity of its appearance (that would link it to the epigram) but also from the successful excision of the discursive elements that make it possible. It is thus an ideal model of parricide.

Whereas the "language of the critical essay is normally contextual and integrative, and of a cumulative, linked, propositional nature," the aphorism, inherently "brief" and "non-integrative," "calls attention to its own scenic disposition" (OL 77).

The aphorisms are placed at the bottom of each page; at the top (with a large expanse of white space in between), McCaffery has placed a series of dates, times of day, and pointless historical facts ostensibly relating to those dates, thus playing off the "audacity" of the aphorism against the "banality" of historical "fact." The dialogic of double bands is designed to make the reader ponder the very nature of facticity, both upper and lower bands providing what at first looks like "information." To put it another way: when "knowledge" is tested by placing it in the unexpected context of the aphorism, it moves from "knew" to "new."

The calendar (upper band) runs from January 1 to April 19, but the designated year shifts randomly from century to century and the historical tag often doesn't go with the time frame. On page 12, for example, we read:

january 7, 1259

Rev. Thomas Malmsbury leaps into a pool of burning gasoline

and on the facing page:

january 8, 1943

Knowledge declared to be a venal sin by the fourteen monks of Wearmouth:

Here the "encounters with history" are themselves absurd. But further, these "facts" are "penetrated" (McCaffery's own word) by the aphorisms in the bottom band (see figures 10 and 11). Here are the full pages 12 and 13:

On the "january 7 1259" page, "to write is to reach a surface through the holes named things" obliquely refers

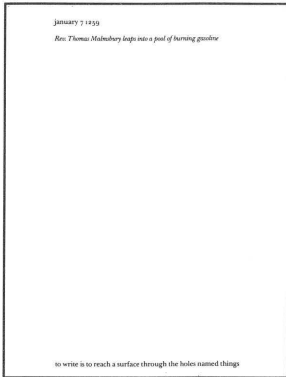


Figure 10

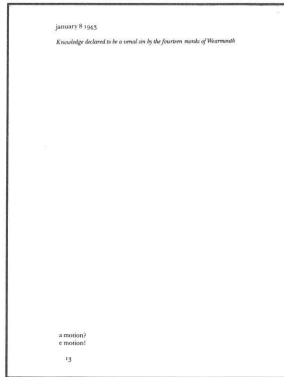


Figure 11

to the Rev. Thomas Malmsbury's leap into the burning gasoline pool. The writer reaches a "surface" denied the priest. And on the "January 8 1943" page, the declaration that knowledge is a venal sin can be understood, via the aphorism, as "a motion" that deals with "e motion."

Or again, a pointless piece of information like that on page 15:

January 10, 1344

Wichlaf, Bishop of Kingston, celebrates Easter at Croyland

may take on a new edge when juxtaposed to an aphorism like:

the dream of the written is always to be somewhere else

the irony here being that to write about "somewhere else," in this case Wichlaf's Easter Mass at Croyland," doesn't necessarily put the writing somewhere else at all.

A similar sleight of hand occurs on the "January 18 1392" page, where "*Hippocentaur found preserved in honey*" is juxtaposed to the phrase:

once upon a time
twice inside a space

the medieval tale not inappropriately designated by "once upon a time" actually recounting what is "twice inside a space," the first time being the time of preservation and the second the time when the Hippocentaur was found.

To avoid predictability, the steady recurrence of the A+B pattern, McCaffery introduces pages that have no upper "history" band at all. Page 31, for example, provides only the date, "January 31" (with no year), the aphorism reading:

grammar is skeletal
words are glandular

followed on the next page by “february 1 211 b.c.,” and again no “history” entry, the bottom band reading:

the essence of the sign is to be a margin emerging.

Here the pages enact what the words say: the “glandular” words are given full force by subordinating the “skeletal” grammar and placing a line of type at the bottom of a nearly blank page so that the “sign” can indeed “be a margin emerging.” The final entry in the book is for “5.42 A.M.,” no date or fact being given. What does the dawn hour signify? The aphorism reads:

never read
never write
always continue to learn.

The pun of “never wrong, never right” and the emphasis in the third line on continuity, on the projection forward in the direction of the empty page beyond, provide a nice form of anti-closure.

Knowledge Never Knew thus constitutes an important statement of aesthetic, an artist’s commonplace book where the briefest aphorisms force us to think through the question of how writing works. When, for example, the entry “march 18 1923/Frank Sinatra baptized” is “penetrated” by the lines:

to be rooted in anything
one must be rotated in something

the reader has an image of the infant Sinatra “rotated” in the baptismal font, the relation of “rootedness” to rotation thus making perfect sense. Nothing, the poet seems to be saying, is as irrelevant as you think it is. Watch those words you merely “read”! Or, as the “march 20” entry would have it,

to ground yourself in words always lean against your reading
and balance on the weight of what you don’t know.

Such “balancing” acts have characterized McCaffery’s more recent books, *Evoba*, *Panopticon*, and *The Black Debt*. Since I have written of the latter two elsewhere,⁷ I want to conclude here with a discussion of *Evoba: The Investigation Meditations 1976–78*, published in 1987. *Evoba* is “above” spelled backwards, and the book’s “Meditations” are on Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, which are quoted extensively. *Evoba* thus follows up the implications of

Knowledge Never Knew, which is written under the sign of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Whereas *Knowledge* plays on the Wittgensteinian proposition, *Evoba* takes up the more expansive language games of the investigations.

Let us begin with the source of the title *Evoba*, Wittgenstein's #160:

Suppose that a man who is under the influence of a certain drug is presented with a series of characters (which need not belong to any existing alphabet). He utters words corresponding to the number of characters, as if they were letters, and does so with all the outward signs, and with the sensations, of reading . . . In such a case some people would be inclined to say the man was reading those marks. Others, that he was not.—Suppose he has in this way read (or interpreted) a set of five marks as *A B O V E*—and now we show him the same marks in the reverse order and he reads *E V O B A*; and in further texts he always retains the same interpretation of the marks: here we should certainly be inclined to say he was making up an alphabet for himself ad hoc and then reading accordingly.⁸



Figure 12

In opting for the “reverse order,” McCaffery announces his aim to call our normal language habits into question, to produce an oppositional text. The frontispiece plays on Wittgenstein’s proposition #309 (“What is your aim in philosophy?—To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle,” PI 103e), declaring:

If the aim of philosophy is, as Wittgenstein claims, to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle, then the aim of poetry is to convince the bottle that there is no fly.

Which is to say that poetry is the discourse that removes words from their habitual contexts and reconfigures them both syntactically and paragrammatically.

The first step is to get rid of the Augustinian notion, called into question on the opening page of the *Philosophical Investigations*, that *verba rerum nomina sunt*, that “the individual words in language name objects” (PI 2e). The passage from Augustine’s *Confessions* (I. 8) cited by Wittgenstein is rendered by McCaffery as a page from a comic book (see figure 12). The first band, for example, plays on the caption *Cum ipsi (majories homines appellabant secundum eam vocem corpus ad aliquid movebant, videbam* (When they [my elders] named some object, and accordingly moved toward something, I saw this) by taking the

“mov[ing] toward something” quite literally as the cliché image of a passionate lovers’ kiss.

The opening comic strip is further juxtaposed to the photograph, which appears on the cover as well as on the recto and verso of front and back endpapers (see figure 13), of two men in hats, looking at books evidently taken from a floor-to-ceiling bookcase which is surrounded by rubble—a library, as it were, in the process of demolition or, at the very least, transit. Here, McCaffery seems to be saying, is what philosophical meditations look like. And throughout the text there are cartoon-drawing rebuses, witty diagrams like the “line”/“nile” crossing on page 23 (see figure 14) that are an integral part of the poetic composition. Indeed, layout is everywhere a part of the meaning. On facing pages (24–25), for example, we have the opening sentence of #162 (PI 65e):

You are reading when you *derive*
the reproduction from the original.

Wittgenstein now goes on to demonstrate that this definition could apply to someone who has been taught the Cyrillic alphabet and, not knowing what words are being spelled out, tries to pronounce every letter, one by one.



Figure 13

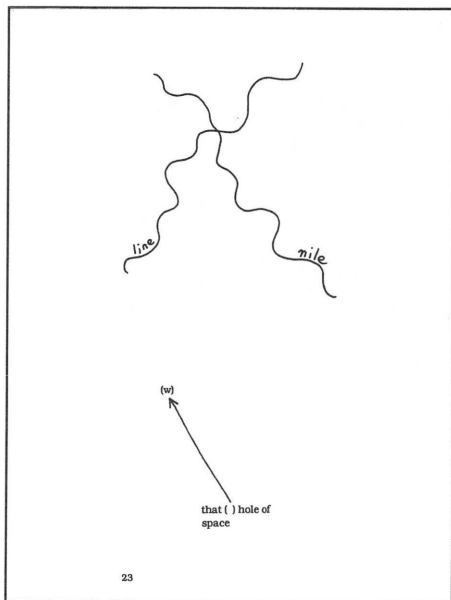


Figure 14

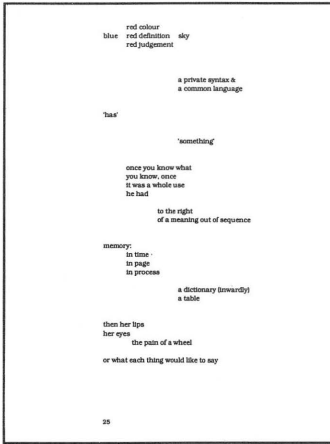


Figure 15

Strictly speaking, such a person is reading. But McCaffery's poetic version (the fly-bottle without the fly) carries the proposition much further (see figure 15). "Red" is by definition a "colour," but what do we know about it when we have so designated it? Can a "judgement" be "red"? Yes, in the sense that it is "read." Poetry draws on a "common language" but it is inevitably a "private syntax," McCaffery's own poem juxtaposing verbs without subjects, pronouns without antecedents, and the image of "her lips" and "her eyes," juxtaposed to "the pain of a wheel," that can refer to any number of narratives, especially when that pain is juxtaposed to "or what each thing would like to say," where the "or" follows no "either." Indeed, McCaffery's meditation on memory and time, a dictionary and a table, lips and eyes, red and blue, once and then, private syntax and common language, never makes clear what it is that "each thing would like to say."

Evoba culminates in a series of pages that bring McCaffery's intense scrutiny of language to an interesting verbal/visual conclusion. One page 98, a child's drawing of a cloud is suspended in space over a diagonal block E that looks rather like a doormat or grate. On the facing page (99), McCaffery reproduces the conclusion of Wittgenstein's #426: "In the actual use of expressions we make detours, we go by sideroads. We see the straight highway before us, but of course we cannot use it, because it is permanently closed (PI 127e). The book we have been reading has, in fact enacted this very insight and so, we read at bottom right, "The book exploded in his hand. Slowly, at first." As the book gets ready to disappear, the poet turns his attention to Wittgenstein's meditation

on the meaning of “pain” and “feeling,” especially Wittgenstein’s statement (#284): “And so, too, a corpse seems to us quite inaccessible to pain” (PI 98e). What, then, is it to be alive? The last page of the book looks like this (see figure 16):

Take the **I** (the individual self) out of **ALIVE** and what do you have? **AL VE**, perhaps the truncated **SALVE** of **SALVE REGINA**, with its reminder of the Mass. Or perhaps an anagram on **VALE (AVE ATQUE VALE—“Hail and Farewell”)**. Then again, the **I** is only a lowercase **i**, so maybe its removal, along with those little raindrop circles falling from the **AL VE** cloud, doesn’t damage **ALIVE** all that much. It would be pretty to think so except that near the bottom of the page on the right, we have the single word *dead*. Language, as Wittgenstein argues and as McCaffery knows full well, has its own power. Take the **i** out of **ALIVE**, and you have dead. Read sequentially, this is what the page “says.” But read spatially—and in McCaffery’s books we must always read spatially—what dominates is the oval containing **AL VE**, dropping its **i**’s. Poetry, the text tells us, needn’t focus on individual sensibility. When the “**i**” drops out, emphasis shifts from the author to the reader. As the first page of *Evoba* would have it:

*The water in this space
disappears
a reader enters.*

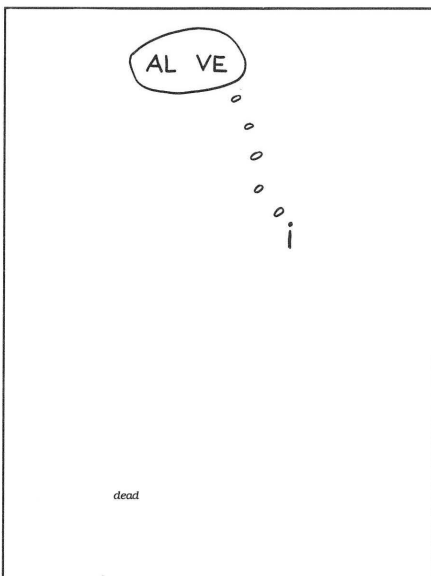


Figure 16

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Steve McCaffery. 1983. *Knowledge Never Knew*. Montreal: Vehicule Press, 24. Subsequently cited in the text as KNK.
- McCaffery's books and broadsides cited in this essay are listed chronologically, preceded by the acronyms I have used to designate them and followed by bibliographical information, derived from bp nichol, "The Annotated, Anecdoted, Beginnings of a Critical Checklist of the Published Works of Steve McCaffery," *Open Letter*, Sixth Series, No. 9 (Fall 1987): p. 67–92. This special Steve McCaffery issue is subsequently cited as OL.
- C *Carnival, the first panel: 1967–70* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1973), 18 sheets, offset, perforated.
- DSM *Dr. Sadhu's Muffins: a book of written readings* (Erin, Ontario: Press Porcépic, 1974), 142 pp., offset, printed endpapers.
- OW *Ow's Waif and other poems* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1975), 160 pp., offset, hardbound, printed endpapers.
- C2 *Carnival, the second panel: 1971–75* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1977), 22 sheets, offset, perforated.
- IEN *In England Now That Spring*, with bp nichol (Toronto: Aya Press, 1979), 128 pp., offset.
- PAN *Panopticon*, (Toronto: Blew Ointment Press, 1984), 160 pp., offset, perfect bound.
- NI *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973–1986*, (New York/Toronto: Roof Books/Nightwood Editions, 1986), 239 pp., offset, perfect bound.
- EV *Evoba. The Investigations Meditations 1976–78*, (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1987), 101 pp., offset, perfect bound.
- BD *The Black Debt*, (London, Ontario: Nightwood Editions, 1989), 202 pp., offset, perfect bound.
- ² Michael Coffey, "Grammarology & Economy," OL, 32.
- ³ See the OED and Steve McCaffery and bp nichol, "Manifesto as Interlude," *Open Letter*, 2d, series, no. 9 (Fall 1974): pp. 78–79. And for a good account of the TRG (Toronto Research Group), formed by McCaffery and nichol and their various manifestos on questions of language and etymology, see Caroline Barnard, *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec: From Concretism to Post-Modernism* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 1989), p. 56–67.
- ⁴ Richard Kostelanetz, "Book Art," in *Artist's Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, Joan Lyons, ed. (New York: Visual Studies Workshop, 1985), p. 29. The book is subsequently cited in the text as AB.
- ⁵ Introduction to C2, pages unnumbered. In *Open Letter*, McCaffery further explains that "Panel Two, thanks to the xerox disintegration sections, stages entropy . . . I've long felt that a large part of the history of writing has been the sociological impact of its materiality upon its agents and users" (OL 73).
- ⁶ Anamorphosis, according to the OED, means 1. "distorted projection or drawing of anything, so made that when viewed from a particular point, or by reflection from a suitable mirror, it appears regular and properly proportioned; a deformation," and 2. Bot. Such a degeneration or change in the habit of a plant from different conditions of growth as gives it the appearance of a different species or genus; abnormal transformation."
- ⁷ Marjorie Perloff, "'Voice Whislt Thither Flood': Steve McCaffery's *Panopticon* and *North of Intention*," *Poetic License: Essays in Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), p. 285–96; "Signs are Taken for Wonders: The Billboard Field as Poetic Space" (on *The Black Debt*), in *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
- ⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3d ed. trans. G.E. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 64e. Subsequently cited in the text as PI.