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Special Collections

Robert Kroetsch

Biocritical Essay

by

Aritha van Herk

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Any attempt to bio-criticize Robert Kroetsch into position can only end in frustration. This writer distrusts coherent story, sees closure as a self-imposed death, mistrusts the author/himself⁽¹⁾ so much he over-glosses his own text. Not one of his works has managed to escape his own arm's length and after-the-fact commentary, but we must approach that commentary with doubt. There is no one metaphor, no one autobiographical detail, that can help us to fix this master of the art of deception, this trickster incarnate, this expert at the sleight of hand. Critical responses to his fiction and poetry range from outrage to awe; he has been praised as an innovator and damned as an overly intellectual adherent of the post-modernist school of thought. In a recently published conversation, his close friend Rudy Wiebe, responded to a deconstructionist remark with the exasperated words: "Bob, you're always horsing around with language!"⁽²⁾

In Kroetsch's writing, words do not mean what they usually mean; language goes beyond signification and contains its own possibilities: "The person who becomes a writer is a person who starts to notice the language itself instead of what it signifies."⁽³⁾ That concentration on the possibilities of language is perhaps the most telling aspect of Kroetsch's approach to literature, both fiction and poetry. He has shunned realistic fiction and analogous poetry; in an effort to de-fuse meaning, he has turned form and meaning upside down. His inversions emphasize a world that is not tragi-comic but comi-tragic. This game-playing makes it tempting to label him a trickster writer, but trickster is not enough. His writing goes far beyond the quirky and unexpected: it offers a mythopoeic vision that is partly parodic, partly metonymic, resulting in a generative unfolding rather than immobilizing surrender (*LV*, 96) to the givens of a particular story. It is ironic then, that although Kroetsch abjures mythic definition, he has come to enjoy a reputation as the penultimate mythologizer of the Canadian west. This results partly from his interest in the tall tale, especially the beer parlour tale, and partly from his unerring ear for the vernacular of the west, its particular voice. He was outraged when an editor from *Maclean's* removed some of the colloquial speech from one of his early stories (*LV*, 141). His belief in the validity of voice - non-literary, everyday voice - has contributed to his stature as spokesman. At the same time, he refuses "the coercion of a 'sane' speaking."⁽⁴⁾

In/sane then, Kroetsch nonetheless presents us with an authentic voice that bears the weight of speaking a place and people in much the same way that Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*⁽⁵⁾ bears the weight of Colombia, at the same time as his work seems to deny all verifiable fact. Try as Kroetsch does to escape the impositions of metaphor and plot, he is still tempted by narrative; Shirley Neuman reminds him that he is obsessed with story, that "every story demands another story" (*LV*, 182). Although these approaches may seem contradictory, they underline the rich reflexivity of this man's writing. What he provides is not fiction but evocation, not poetry but discontinuous narrative, the world turned upside down, language inverted, definition reversed. Despite the difficult tautology surrounding discussion of Kroetsch's writing, he is, like James Potter in Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*,⁽⁶⁾ freed from freedom by the very existence of the poetry and fiction he has produced. There is no way to gainsay the extant. Theorizing only underlines its presence.

Thus, to enter Robert Kroetsch, it might be best to proceed backwards, upside down, inverted, mirror the man and his work. He himself revels in reversals:

but secretly at night I turn signs around, I point
all travelers in the wrong direction;

....

and after another failure I stood, delicately, on my own
head, defying her to tell up from down;
(*The Sad Phoenician*, 71, 73)

But despite his insistence on the inconsistent, Kroetsch does not deny identification with his work. Instead, he refers to the writer as both archeologist and archeological site⁽⁷⁾ (see also *LV*, 207), the writer and his text as a series of buried layers that can only be disinterred in a reverse and fragmentary way. "I like the sense of fragment and what fragment does - the demands fragment makes on us for shaping, for telling, for imagining" (*LV*, 167). To try to fit Kroetsch's fragmented shards together would be a mistake. Certainly, to sort, label and chronologize him would be to rob his site (*LV*, 167-168) of its rich texture. The only procedure to follow is his own, on our knees, sifting the act itself:

It seems to me that the important distinction is the distinction between writing and literature. The minute we talk about literature, we run that risk of bric-a-brac and heirloom. Then what we have to do is a recovering - or foregrounding - of the notion of writing itself. So I have to balance off my sense of literature...against the fact that I am writing, the act itself. (*LV*, 3)

The poet/persona says it better in *The Sad Phoenician*:

the dreamer, himself:

lurching, leaping, flying; o to be mere gerund; no past,
no future: what do you do in life: I ing

"I ing" (*The Sad Phoenician*, 15), he says.

*auto/bio/graphing

Kroetsch believes in auto/ and bio/graphy. In "For Play and Entrance" he discusses the connection between the long poem and life, "the life-long poem,"⁽⁸⁾ the poet's work balanced against the poet's life. *Field Notes*, which appeared in 1981 and includes the earlier poems "Stone Hammer Poem," "The Ledger," "Seed Catalogue," and "The Sad Phoenician," is incorrectly labelled "The Collected Poetry of Robert Kroetsch." *Field Notes* is not collected but continuing, an exploration begun but unfinished. Indeed, Kroetsch goes so far as to say, in *Seed Catalogue*, "Readers are invited to compose further sections," as though they too can participate in the process of charting a life. Kroetsch does not hesitate to confess that *Field Notes* is a version of his life:

I suspect that's what's happening in *Field Notes*: that it really is, in some perverse way, an autobiographical poem, one in which I just cannot accept any of the conventions of autobiography....And yet that poem is primarily autobiographical.
(*LV*, 207-208)⁽⁹⁾

Let us sift, then, the components of *Field Notes*. It is interesting to note that *Badlands* was called *Field Notes* almost until publication and then abandoned because it seemed too indefinite a title for a novel. Instead, it migrated to the poetry, and as a format used by paleontologists and archeologists to keep track of their "findings," it is particularly appropriate to Kroetsch's personal dig. That *Field Notes* collects but refuses to be comprehensive or conclusive is inherent to the fragments it contains.

*retreating

Only "Stone Hammer Poem" is included in *Field Notes* from *The Stone Hammer Poems* (1960-1975). Kroetsch's exclusion of the other poems is odd, especially because the collection opens with the "Old Man Stories," twelve myths about the Blackfoot teacher and trickster retold, or as he says, "stolen." They precede the other poems beautifully, especially because they introduce the Proteus figure that is used later in *The Studhorse Man*. Curiously, they were, these Indian myths, first published by the University of Mysore in Mysore, India. "Old Man Stories" explore the doubleness of creation; Old Man is both trickster and tricked, the creator of a world and its victim. In their re-telling, Kroetsch employs both traditional poetic devices (like rhyming couplets) and the schismed enjambment of the prose line usurped by poetry. His revision provokes laughter at the high seriousness of myth. For example, in number 6, two women see Old Man out hunting. In order to avoid him, they play dead. He discovers them and puzzled, touches them, lifts off their clothes, but when his ubiquitous sexuality takes over, they flee. His mournful and comic cry after them speaks the ambiguity that every one of Kroetsch's male characters feels toward women: "'Come back,' Old Man cried after them. 'Be dead.'" (*The Stone Hammer Poems*, 11). Here is represented an active embodiment of the struggle between Eros and Thanatos, a motif that recurs throughout Kroetsch's work.

"Stone Hammer Poem," the prologue poem of *Field Notes*, is about an object that allows the poet/persona to recover history.⁽¹⁰⁾ The stone hammer, which began as a stone, became first, weapon, lost, then an obstruction, then an artifact, lost, returned to stone in a rockpile, found again, became a talisman for the poet's past, his father and grandfather. The stone/poem embodies the eternity of prairie. In the end it holds down paper, words on paper, the poet's poems:

Sometimes I write
my poems for that
stone hammer. (*The Stone Hammer Poems*, 59)

The hammer holds the flying pages down. The flying pages/birds: the sections of *Field Notes* are separated by a repeated design of six birds in flight. The poet keeps the past he is in flight from. Father and grandfather have made their appearance, and one German curse. Kroetsch has begun his own story.

Even more interesting are the omitted bio/graphs: "Elegy for Wong Toy," "F.P. Grove: The Finding," "Poem of Albert Johnson," and "Meditation on Tom Thomson." All of these poems use the interrupted line to break up the space of the page in a hesitation of discovery, all of the subjects are artist/liars fascinating to the poet/persona who is in this collection beginning the cautious biography that is the lie about himself.

*balancing

The Ledger (1975) reiterates that finding, the poet finding a past in a ledger, uncovering his own history, his ancestors. At the same time as he seeks to define "ledger," using the six meanings given by the O.E.D., the poet defines himself. He tries to balance the mysteries of search in the double columns of the poem, which act as notation/ elucidation for each other.

EVERYTHING I WRITE
I SAID, IS A SEARCH

To which the women in his life give their ironic reply:
FINDING

everything you write
my wife, my daughters, said
is a search for the dead

the book of final entry
in which a record is kept
(*The Ledger*, 3)

In *The Ledger*, Kroetsch dares to begin his own story, his private discovery of a private book of the dead, a text that will offer some guidance for the safe conduct of his soul through Hades, on his way to join those ancestors. We are introduced to them here, his great-grandfather who owned a watermill in Formosa, Bruce County, Ontario, his grandfather who left that relative prosperity (the trees were giving out) to head west in 1905 (the year Alberta was created, the same Alberta Kroetsch has created), with his father, Paul Kroetsch. "It was a fever, a rage, all of Bruce County wanted to go west, dreaming of land."⁽¹¹⁾ The ledger, record of the watermill "on the Teeswater River, / on the road between Formosa and/ Belmore," survives to predicate the poet's own death and life, record arrivals and departures. Reading the ledger, he "can't believe his eyes," he searches for balance, which comes only with

death: "PAID IN FULL." And once again, in the sketch of the thrice married and widowed great-grandmother, Theresia Tschirhart, the merging of death and love:

Men felt terror.
They proposed.

She, this ringtailed snorter, died in Alberta; "Heisler was so/new it didn't have a graveyard." Part of the balance is this:

Some people go to heaven.
Some people write poems.
Some people go west
to homestead.

And in the final balance, in the silent centre of the page, a gravestone.

REST IN PEACE.
You Must Marry the Terror.

Robert Paul Kroetsch has been married twice, but never, this monolingual man, in English, as if by resisting the language he resists the act itself, its implied commitment and subsequent demands. You Must Marry the Terror, but at all cost, avoid tonguing your own death. He writes to Leslie Hannon of *Maclean's*,

While visiting my father's farm in Alberta during Christmas, 1955, I froze my ears one evening, and in a moment of anger I charged off to Mexico. While in Mexico, warm but hungry, I met a girl I had known down East, and five hundred Spanish speaking officials later, we were married.[\(12\)](#)

On January 13, 1956, Robert Kroetsch married, in Mexico, in Spanish, Mary Jane Lewis, from North Carolina. They had two daughters, Laura Caroline (1964) and Margaret Ann (1966), the two wise daughters who occur in *Alibi* (as Jinn and Jan), in "Delphi: Commentary,"[\(13\)](#) and to whom Kroetsch sends his postcards from China (*Chinada*). Separated, 1974. Married Smaro Kamboureli, in Greece, in Greek, in 1982. He says in *The Crow Journals*, September 10, 1977, "A Fulbright student in the class, a young woman from Greece. Had to ask Bill Spanos how to pronounce her name..." (*The Crow Journals*, 79). Still married. Is the real terror language? It balances.

*gardening

From ledger to catalogue, both lists, enumerations, a search for the dead. *Seed Catalogue* (1977) continues *Field Notes*, continues those Kroetsches who went west to homestead. Searching for the garden, Eden. It introduces

the home place: N.E. 17-42-16W4th Meridian.
the home place: 1 1/2 miles west of Heisler, Alberta,
 on the correction line road
 and 3 miles south. (*Seed Catalogue*, 13)

The land that Paul Kroetsch, too young to file for a homestead (only seventeen), lied (legacy to his son) to get.[\(14\)](#) Married Hilda Weller of Spring Lake. Robert Paul, oldest and only son born there, June 26, 1927. Four sisters.

Seed Catalogue, once again document balanced against poetry,[\(15\)](#) voices the huge question, "How do you grow a poet?"

The hired man laughed: just
about planted the little bugger.

Cover him up and see what grows. (*Seed Catalogue*, 13) Kroetsch re-planting the Heisler homestead, Heisler, that half-baked town (no, village) in the middle of the parkland, Battle River country.

Once upon a time in the village of Heisler -
- Hey, wait a minute.
That's a story. (*Seed Catalogue*, 29)

The story of growing up. Home. "The choral questions of the poem":⁽¹⁶⁾ "How do you grow a prairie town?" "How do you grow a past/to live in" (*Seed Catalogue*, 23). Start with a catalogue. Order seeds. Plant prairie, fence it, hay it. The home place.

No trees
around the house.
Only the wind.
Only the January snow.
Only the summer sun.
The home place:
a terrible symmetry. (*Seed Catalogue*, 13)

The gardening mother, the father who cannot shoot the badger, Uncle Freddie who plants horse barns around Heisler. The gardener/poet. "The one place where I found a kind of open field was the garden because a garden is ambiguous on a farm" (*LV*, 21). The father/story-teller, tall, looming; "I certainly was both fleeing and being influenced by the father figure literally in my life as well as my writing" (*LV*, 22). The mother, Hilda Weller, died suddenly, Robert Kroetsch age thirteen, four younger sisters. "This is what happened - at my mother's wake" (*Seed Catalogue*, 15). He considers the death of his mother a central experience of loss and he relates that loss to language.

I remembered the death of my mother. I remembered the wake, the crowds of people arriving over muddy roads, the body in the coffin in my parents' bedroom. And I remembered the men who came to my father and tried to tell him of the sorrow they felt: and even at the age of 13 I saw the failure of language, the faltering connection between those spoken words and what it was I knew my father felt, what I felt....
(*The Crow Journals*, 16)

It was, he says, the sudden death of his mother that made him doubt reality, the loss of feminine assurance that made him forever hunger for a muse. *Seed Catalogue* is where he first articulates that loss and its attendant growth. "I think part of my move to autobiography was daring to say that my mother died when I was so young and I was very close to her: I think some of the female presence in my book is almost a parody of the absence which is really what the book [*Badlands*] is about..." (*LV*, 22). Grow, poet.

Bring me the radish seeds,
my mother whispered. (*Seed Catalogue*, 11)

The garden in *Seed Catalogue* is an Alberta Eden that is certainly lost through sin and death:

Adam and Eve got drowned -
Who was left? (*Seed Catalogue*, 47)

Still, this Eden is one that Kroetsch returns to again and again, in life and in writing. Alberta, the parkland, the Battle River: a longing for home and a longing for language the same.

*transforming

Transformation is a natural extension of growth. "How I Joined the Seal Herd," first published in *Seed Catalogue*, is included in *Field Notes*, and it acts almost as a transition poem. It is mentioned in *The Crow Journals*, September 12, 1975. "Went to the zoo. To look at seals. I'm working on a poem, something that struck me when I was driving through the Maritimes, researching the

background of Hazard Lepage" (*The Crow Journals*, 40). Again, the image of Proteus, the poet become "the lone bull seal,"

writing this poem with my life. (*Seed Catalogue*, 70)

*conjunctioning

The act of joining together, union: *The Sad Phoenician* (1979) and his loves. But unable to decide. And, but. An alphabetization of desire, both won and lost, 'and' and 'but' hurrying the litany along, the list, the catalogue of women and infamy, lost love affairs, the colloquial language of love bursting through the alphabet in one long monologous statement until the poet runs out of breath, is silenced completely into "The Silent Poet Sequence." The poet's attempt to be priest/lover having failed, he becomes fool. He craves immortality but he "eats his words." Freed from image, *The Sad Phoenician* is the ultimate continuing poem, a search (again). The poet effacing self, back to the alphabet, the purity of color, washed clean, all the affairs over. Language broken by love, a contemporary *Song of Solomon*. The poet transformed into poet through his conjunction with the muses. All lost.

*resisting

The poet's resistance continues in the added sections at the end of *Field Notes*. These poems go afield, the Phoenician poet, enemy of Earache the Red, is moving to Winnipeg, the west, after having been east, away. In "The Winnipeg Zoo," the transformed animals and birds are all held in place by the gun of the artist, here Audubon. Under the repeated calm of the refrain, "we must take care of our stories" (*Field Notes*, 117-119), the poem's narrative is completely destroyed, and all that remains is the artist, exhausted by his move to the frontier.

So that "Sketches of a Lemon" come as a sharp and biting contrast, almost totally sensual, visual, tactile, olfactory. This lemon treatise is more than a lesson in sense; "sketches" underscores the poet/painter connection, the still-life of lemon or what lemons are not. The lemon is compared, even though the simile yokes abstract with concrete: "I'd say, a lemon is shaped/exactly like an hour" (*Field Notes*, 126). But however concrete lemons might be, "This hour is shaped like/a lemon" (*Field Notes*, 127).

Finally, in "The Criminal Intensities of Love as Paradise," the poet has drifted so completely into word that he needs to gloss his own poem. This develops the earlier technique of *The Ledger*, but here there is no ultimate arrival at balance. Instead, a complete schism:

the concise right text glosses its left counterpart in the rational language of plot summary; it slides into metaphor only as the lovers themselves slide into dreams. This referential language tells us what the lovers 'do' but it says so little about what happens in the poem that it remains completely disjunctive from the text on the left.⁽¹⁷⁾

The narrative on the right underscores the poem's lack of narrative, a complete abandonment of the reader to language, nothing but language, poet and reader subsumed by language. They can only become lovers, because there is no other point of connection.

*continuing

Field Notes continues, another volume is expected at any time. "Delphi: Commentary" mocks the poet as oracle, speaking, speaking, lost in words, lost in his own poem. Having to explain himself, footnote himself, guide himself. Listening for a voice, it too reversed, the oracle (his father) asking the poet a question:

What are you doing here?
my father said.
Did I teach you nothing?⁽¹⁸⁾

Poet searching for oracle, poet becomes oracle: is struck dumb. As in the unpublished sequence of poems, "Advice to My Friends," which offer no solutions and seem to stem from a weight and fortune machine Kroetsch presumably dropped a penny for in 1968: "You will be called upon to give advice to a friend within a few days concerning a matter of mutual interest, and although your

answer will be disagreeable to your friend, he will eventually admit that you were correct."⁽¹⁹⁾ Cassandra's misfortune was that no one believed her; is the poet's fate the same?

Kroetsch's poetry has drifted so far into the realms of abstract language that language becomes an end in itself, separate from meaning. The poet and his life are still connected, certainly his autobiography continues, his life glossing his language. *Field Notes* progresses into the infinite future. The loss of pure meaning and the intertextual wanderings of Kroetsch's poetry can be traced to a simple enough cause: homesickness. The poet's wanderings in the labyrinth of words are symptomatic of the poet's wanderings. And the sickness that is evident throughout Kroetsch's fiction: the prose writer's lust for home.

*returning

If one book straddles Kroetsch's prose, it must be his travel book, *Alberta* (1968). Largely ignored, considered to be idiosyncratic, certainly unlike his other work in its straightforward descriptions, *Alberta* remains the core of Kroetsch's canon. Alberta is, he confesses, his magical kingdom, the centre of his imagination, a world he never left, a personal "Mile Zero." In a letter to his agent, he writes, "I have succumbed to the temptation to do a travel book."⁽²⁰⁾ Alberta required not a travelling away but a return to his childhood home. He had been away for years, a westerner wandering. In exile, he still circled around the idea of Alberta, a process he describes in "On Being an Alberta Writer,"⁽²¹⁾ one that he acts out in his exploration of the province of his birth, the province of his fiction. *Alberta* might be straightforward and unevocative as literature, but it is a strangely moving book, an oddly personal travel account that explores the magic kingdom Kroetsch explodes in his fiction and poetry. As literary document it has more to tell us about Kroetsch's writing than we imagine: it contains all his books because it contains their world.

His stubborn love for this place is unapologetic. In "The Plains of My Youth,"⁽²²⁾ he talks about "a willow fence post on the road north from the Heisler school where I've urinated and puked and chipped my teeth trying to open a bottle so many times I feel it's the axle-tree of the world." Later, in a letter to William Spanos (his co-editor of *Boundary 2*), he mentions that fencepost again as "my world center."⁽²³⁾ He certainly spent enough time escaping Alberta, looking for fiction beyond the plains of his youth, and he explores the difficulty of *place* in some detail. Perhaps that long search accounts for his late start. In a letter to Ken Mitchell, then editor of *Grain* (April 9, 1973), he says:

I went into the north country, spent years there expecting to write the true epic of the eternal Canadian search for the non-existent Northwest Passage, not to mention a satire on the American military - returned to a cheap room in Montreal and found myself writing a short story about some prairie farmers. The die had been cast long before I struck out on my quest. Thus I am left writing mock quest stories....I don't know. You've had good European experiences. I got there too late. I took a good look at the statues and wanted to go home and drown out some gophers.⁽²⁴⁾

The short story could have been "That Yellow Prairie Sky".⁽²⁵⁾ It is not a profoundly good short story, but it introduces the prairie as a character, the weather as a warring element, and the tension between men and women, all motifs that recur in later writing.

Alberta continues to be Kroetsch's magic kingdom, a multifaceted world of infinite possibility. "The prairies themselves are labyrinthine. They have been mapped like grids, all those roads, but you can get lost in them so easily" (*LV*, 80). Kroetsch's fiction is lost and rooted in Alberta, a landscape he invents by returning again and again. There is a homesickness within his characters that is prefigured in his first and unpublished novel, *Coulee Hill*.²⁶ That novel, his PhD dissertation for the University of Iowa in 1961, was originally called *When Sick for Home*, from Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale." The image of Ruth standing "in tears amid the alien corn" is a poignant one, and the hero of the novel, returned home a failure after attempting to become a priest (artist?) echoes that poignancy in his sad hunger. This manuscript contains scenes that appear later: the pig-sticking scene and the studhorse man's death in *The Studhorse Man*, the flapper pie that Johnnie Backstrom is so fond of, the mad wake in *Gone Indian*. And of course, the town of Coulee Hill itself. This early work shows that Kroetsch was not abashed about the particularities of locality; slop pails and cream cans are never explained or apologized for, and it contains a drunken grave-digging scene worthy of *Hamlet*. Indeed, that sense of the importance of locality is something that Kroetsch remains fierce about; in a 1974 letter to Ken Strange (editor of *Nebulla*), he says:

The notion that you can be universal without having a rock-hard sense of the

particular is a notion that has destroyed much Canadian writing, from Callaghan's novels to some of the Frye-inspired "myth" poetry....⁽²⁷⁾

Kroetsch's refusal to shy away from the particular is possibly the strongest indication of his homesickness, and repeated centering on homestead and "the home place" underline that. Writing *Alberta* seems to have been for Kroetsch a reaffirmation of all that he continues to long for: his magic kingdom, his lost world.⁽²⁸⁾

*escaping

But to return to a place you must first have escaped it, left.

However much Alberta figures as a centre, Robert Kroetsch spent years away, escape and education merged. As a child, he went to school in Heisler, as far as he could go, then took grade twelve in Red Deer because there was a dormitory where students could board. There, he found encouragement.

Mrs. Aylesworth. The fierce-eyed, redheaded teacher at Red Deer High School who told me I should become a writer. Again, today, I thought of her. My debt to a teacher.
(April 2, 1977, *The Crow Journals*, 67)

His grade twelve photo shows him serious and composed, confronting the camera's eye without flinching, whereas in an earlier, one-room school picture (1939-40), he is staring away, at something beyond the frame.⁽²⁹⁾ In 1945 he went to the University of Alberta in Edmonton. The war was over, and Kroetsch, just eighteen, found himself in the thick of returning veterans. They had something that a farm boy from Heisler did not: experience. F.M. Salter (who taught W.O. Mitchell and Rudy Wiebe) was teaching creative writing in the English Department then. Kroetsch talked his way into the course, went to one class, and dropped out. "It was full of veterans, and they knew all about life. I was still wet behind the ears. I panicked. I fled."⁽³⁰⁾ Still, he graduated in 1948 with a B.A. in English and Philosophy, and he claims that those same veterans taught him the joys of draught beer. He did, in 1947, hear Hugh MacLennan speak at the summer workshop in Banff, but that appears to have been his only early contact with creative writing.

After the University of Alberta, he decided to pursue his missing experience. He went north, to the Slave River, where he worked for the Yellowknife Transportation Company on the riverboats that transported goods up into the Northwest Territories. He worked as a labourer on the Fort Smith Portage for one year, and as a Purser on the boats for two years. That escape became *But We Are Exiles*, an escape he did not write until 1962, some twelve years later. His fierce pursuit of experience continued. In 1951 he went east, stopped in Winnipeg long enough to have appendicitis, ran a catering company warehouse in Churchill, and then spent three years as civilian director of Information and Education at the United States Air Force Base in Goose Bay, Labrador. Those years spent searching for an epic seem lost time, wiped clean. But advising veterans about returning to school worked its erosion, and in 1954-55 he went to Montreal, to McGill, where he began to take courses and tried to write. From there, he went to Middlebury College, Vermont, and did an M.A. (1956) in American literature. He attended the Breadloaf Writers' conferences in the summers of 54, 55, and 56, still cautious, working as a waiter to pay his way. He fell in love. He got married in Spanish. The Mexican marriage excursion (they thought they would live in Mexico and he would write) went broke, and in 1956 he and Jane went to the University of Iowa, where they lived for the next five years. In 1961 *When Sick for Home* earned him a PhD, and he was hired as an assistant professor at Harpur College, State University of New York at Binghamton.

Kroetsch had acquired experience; he was writing. In the summer of 1962 he returned to the Mackenzie River to research *But We Are Exiles*, eventually published in 1965. The title of this novel has always been misread. It insists, like the river at its heart, *But We ARE Exiles*, the verb overwhelming the notion of exile. The novel usurps Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* through the riverboat pilot, Peter Guy, "a white river bum with a river in his head to keep everything else out" (*But We Are Exiles*, 103). Guy is a character "running and searching," trying to forget, trying to escape. Chaos always follows. This novel is a version of the Narcissus story, the original doppelgänger, a man who merges with his rival, whose battle with himself is a falling in love. This is the story of a man meeting himself and wanting to run. It introduces some continuing preoccupations of Kroetsch's fiction: the masculine flight from women, the contention with chaos, the shaping river, the character who embraces death.⁽³¹⁾ Kroetsch says, "in *But We Are Exiles* I was still tempted by the idea of author as storyteller" (*LV*, 178), and the insistence of its telling certainly recalls "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and that other teller who refuses to let his listener go.⁽³²⁾ There is no escape; flight is itself a return. *We are*

exiles; the insistence is redundant. Experience becomes encumbrance; *But We Are Exiles* reveals its inexperience by its movement from north to south (although Hornyak and Peter Guy drive west together). The movement of all the other fiction is east and west. It is notable that this novel encompasses a world from Alberta's height of land to the Arctic ocean. The Columbia icefields drain into the Mackenzie River.

But We Are Exiles is certainly the most physical and least intellectual of Kroetsch's novels, although it does introduce his fascination with the absurd. He recalls an incident that is certainly used here:

Remembering absurdities. Like when Little Joe was killed on a barge at Norman Wells. Two of us going from the bow of the barge to the manhole where he was caught in flame. And I tried to speak and my mouth was full of chocolate cake I'd been eating when we heard the boom. The whoosh of flame. Joe's skin falling off as he kept on crawling up the ladder, his hair burnt off, his clothes gone, except for his belt and his boots and his jockey shorts. Joe dead and still climbing, talking. (*The Crow Journals*, 27)

Trying to speak, the failure of language, silence and death. Kroetsch in exile, at a Yank university, speaking the west.

*roaring

The Words of My Roaring (1966) begins the Out West triptych,⁽³³⁾ Kroetsch's version of the enduring kingdom. It introduces the places that mythologize this Alberta, Coulee Hill (Heisler) and Notikeewin - not named after the northern river but the Cree word for battle, the Battle River country of Kroetsch's childhood - (Camrose). It chronicles the sexuality and fundamentalism of Alberta in the dirty thirties and takes place over the ten days preceding the election of August 22, 1935 that swept the Social Credit party into power. Johnnie Backstrom, a raving, roaring, hungry man with huge appetites, six-four in his stocking feet, is an undertaker searching for indemnity (an alibi?), willing to sell his soul for political power. If Peter Guy flees chaos, Johnnie Backstrom flees order. "Sometimes it seems that chaos is the only order. The only real order" (*The Words of My Roaring*, 101). He takes refuge in his thundering proclamations; hoping to get elected, he promises the drought-stricken farmers rain. In his folly, he speaks himself into being,⁽³⁴⁾ is created by voice. This novel asserts the primacy of voice, the prairie vernacular that Kroetsch embraces more and more.

The faltering connection between language and life, the ultimate failure of language, is represented by Johnnie Backstrom's alter ego, the clown who is mangled and ripped by the bull. The injured clown, lying on the ground, tries to tell Backstrom something, but cannot.

Then he tried to say something. His mouth moved small inside the smile that was painted on his face. He kept trying to say something to me, a perfect stranger, but he couldn't make it. He tried to raise a hand and point but couldn't....
(*The Words of my Roaring*, 108)

Backstrom's subsequent speech to the crowd, when he implores them to "vote for the clown" is "a compensation for terror and absence."³⁵

The oracle, a prophet extracting blind hope out of blind despair, speaks. Applecart (obviously Aberhart) is a disembodied voice on the radio, a voice that Backstrom tries to shout down. Applecart is one big blabbering mouth, promising, promising, while he denounces the secular world. At the same time, in the midst of drought and depression, we are offered a vision of the garden, Backstrom's father/mentor, a doctor (giver of life), possessor of a lush (Eastern) garden, and a beautiful daughter whom Backstrom loves. Her role of Persephone completes his as an undertaker (keeper of the dead). Here Kroetsch is beginning to schism myth, to exploit a whole range of mythic stories without forcing their referential applicability. Backstrom's alignment with death is only one aspect of the novel's mythic texture. As Peter Thomas has pointed out, Kroetsch's fiction employs a "continual sense of metamorphosis as one mythic context gives way to another."³⁶ His fiction explodes myth, opens it outward.

I was much more tempted by the power, the allure, of an overriding mythology in *The Words of My Roaring* than I was in *The Studhorse Man*. The latter is much more involved in demythologizing, not developing a myth. (*LV*, 123)

The de-construction begins.

*whorsing around

The Studhorse Man's (1969) winning the Governor General's Award for fiction reiterated Kroetsch's position as an Alberta writer, despite his long absence. It brought him home, both to Canadians and to himself. After working at SUNY in Binghamton, New York since 1961, Kroetsch returned to Alberta in 1967 for a long sabbatical. It was then that he researched *Alberta* and *The Studhorse Man*, which he describes as a "mythologized, fictionalized response to going home."³⁷ Going home was important. Although he lived in the United States from 1955 to 1975, Kroetsch never indulged in the snobbish and enervated withdrawals of those who practice expatriotism as a stance. Indeed, expatriate is not a word or concept that he has ever associated himself with. He says instead:

I was living outside of Alberta (and outside of Canada) while writing most of my fiction and poetry. Perhaps for that reason I was constantly aware that we both, and at once, record and invent these new places called Alberta and Saskatchewan. That pattern of contraries, all the possibilities implied in record and invent, for me finds its focus in the model suggested by the phrase: a local pride.³⁸

His experience of Alberta in 1967-68 only reinforced his magical kingdom. Still, he tested that experience in the crucible of the outer world; from January to August of 1968, while he was writing *The Studhorse Man*, he and his family lived in Cuckfield, England near Brighton. As he recounts it now, it was a miserable experience: cold and rainy and uncomfortable. Upon his return, he wrote to Rudy Wiebe:

The experience in/of England was good. It freed me of a need I had; some damned fool desire simply to live there for a while. If I ever go back I'll go as an oldfashioned tourist. North America is where I work best. I need the sun on my neck, the occasional blizzard. Even so, London in memory becomes a beautiful dream. It is London I miss, not the beautiful Sussex countryside in which we lived. There are no sloughs in Sussex.³⁹

There are no sloughs in upstate New York either, remarked Rudy Wiebe.⁴⁰ Still, living there, he never lost sight of Alberta. The authenticity of the Out West triptych speaks clearly for the site he worked from, whatever his whereabouts or his writerly stance.

The Studhorse Man enacts Kroetsch's fascination with the quest myth. This is the novel that marks the beginning of his transition from an authentic fiction (influenced by W.O. Mitchell as mythologizer ⁴¹) to a trickster world. Hazard Lepage is trickster embodied, the studhorse man peddling lust and horseflesh at the same time, a Proteus figure caught on the wheel of an odyssey that is beyond his control. Kroetsch's explosion of myth in *The Studhorse Man* is almost overwhelming; the plethora and confusion of myth becomes a means of escape. "I think what it really comes down to is that we are entrapped in those mythic stories; we can surrender to them or we can tell our way out" (LV, 96). *The Studhorse Man* is mock quest, an escapade from the dictation of structure, even if it does exist as an intricate mythologizing of a lost rural occupation, one that Kroetsch is clearly homesick for. Wandering becomes a metaphor for longing.⁴² The studhorse man is of a breed that Kroetsch encounters in his palace of myth, the beer parlour,⁴³ and his life is in league with beer parlour stories, those tall tales beyond all telling.

Kroetsch admits that he was "very aware of the fertility figure and the trickster" (LV, 122). "I had tuned in on the figure of the trickster before I knew there was a trickster in Radin's sense. The trickster's a mythic figure that really speaks to me. Partly this is because a trickster breaks down systems. There is no logic to his behavior, or only an anti-logic" (LV, 99). Hazard is certainly the knight errant, homeless, tossed by the seas of misfortune. Unable to find a mare for his precious stallion, he nonetheless finds innumerable female companions for himself, women who refuse to take no for an answer. He is, so to speak, hoist on his own petard. His sexual profligacy is part of the horse/house, whore/house binary that Kroetsch flings to the wind in his 1978 essay, "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space."⁴⁴ Despite the parodic wedding at the centre of the novel, the quest here is that of the aroused male repeating himself endlessly, into oblivion. Against the muse, against history,⁴⁵ against all possible telling.

But *The Studhorse Man* is mostly a story about the act of telling a story. Demeter, the mad narrator (who sees everything reversed), in biographizing Hazard Lepage, is really exerting his control on story/myth by examining himself in terms of Hazard. His dislocated narrative becomes a deconstruction of the notion of hero: "Well, I suppose the biographer in *The Studhorse Man* slowly usurping the subject of his biography is unwillingly deconstructing the notion of a hero. He starts to see himself as the hero as he sits in the bathtub writing the book."⁴⁶ Demeter begins Kroetsch's own disjunctive narrative journey, he marks the transition between Kroetsch's awareness of story and its telling, the beginning of his own deconstructionist odyssey. He confesses,

I've come to much more interest in the act of telling the story and that's where you have to go back to first person quite often because you have to confront who is telling the story. And why? (*LV*, 174)

The writer who offers us a trickster narrator mythologizing a trickster hero peddling a trickster commodity ("the prick and its vagaries" (*LV*, 100)), has crossed over into a territory where he becomes completely unreliable, all systems disintegrate, as if the act of stealing a blank "Affadavit of Particulars in Support of Application for Marriage License", which Kroetsch did,⁴⁷ (once again, marriage and terror), was the breaking of a barrier. Kroetsch is finally whorsing around with not only language and story, but the unsuspecting victim/reader, who, like Demeter Proudfoot, "is going on an adventure by reading the book" (*LV*, 54). The trickster, "this irrational amoral impulse at work, is comparable to the writer..." (*LV*, 100). The reader is denied any straightforward answer, and the hero (an anagram of whore), is reduced to story, so that "the only possible heroic act becomes the telling of the story" (*LV*, 179). No wonder Rudy Wiebe accuses Kroetsch of whorsing around with language. With *The Studhorse Man*, Kroetsch steps off the precipice of fiction, of story, of plot, of language, and begins his incredible fall.

*flying/falling

In *Gone Indian* (1973), the mad professor, a "narrative interloper,"⁴⁸ falls out of his own pages. It is as if the ten years that Kroetsch had spent as an academic were sending him flying: this novel is about the inadequacy of academic truth. It is first of all an exorcism of Conrad, the writer kicking himself loose of influence (*Gone Indian*, 73), and then a sack of the academic cloister that edits everything into oblivion. Its original title, *Funeral Games*, refers to Book V of the Aeneid, where the funeral games for Anchises celebrated by Aeneas and his men serve as a societal passage rite marking the death of the Trojan order the turning toward the yet to be created Roman world. In a letter to Patricia Knox of New Press, Kroetsch says *Gone Indian* is

a novel about going west; not just my going, no the going of Columbus from the Old World in search of the New, the going of Tristan in search of a new lay for the old King, the going out of and into that produced Canada, Canadians, the change, the metamorphosis, ideally represented by and in the transubstantiation of the body and dreams of the English boy Archie Belaney (fatherless, and seeking a father) into the Great Canadian Indian, Grey Owl; Grey Owl himself, in turn, our father in turn, going west from New Brunswick, from Ontario, to the Saskatchewan bush.⁴⁹

In that sense, this is also a novel about the transformation of the novel, what happens to the old (academic) order when the postmodern writer attacks it.

Certainly, the Proteus theme is pushed even farther than in *The Studhorse Man*; all of the characters change. To accomplish this metamorphosis, Kroetsch uses the device of the Winter Games, a concept of carnival,⁵⁰ when every character is released into something he or she is not. Layers of disguise are here taken to their ultimate extreme: Jeremy Sadness, named after Jeremy Bentham, wants to be Grey Owl, the fake Indian Archie Belaney invented himself to be. His attempt to write a thesis (an exegesis of the world) is necessarily thwarted. He records fragments of experience into his tape recorder; those tapes are edited for Jill Sunderman by her lost father, Mark Madham, whose commentary on them is as much a speculation as Jeremy's attempt to record is. Madham becomes editor, censor; the professor as mortician of knowledge kills the original energy of the text (tapes) he is given, explains and justifies their life away. Jeremy is "a child of Manhattan" (*Gone Indian*, 5) who dreams of going west to the frontier; Madham is an Alberta boy who dreamed east and whose life as a professor at a Yank university is a retreat from the frontier. Jeremy's journey west for a job interview is an advance into frontier but he goes so far he falls off the edge of the world.

As writer/professor, Kroetsch falls out from between the pages of this novel. Madham's address is the same as Kroetsch's real address in Binghamton was (48 Lathrop Avenue); Madham insists on commenting upon his student/character's text ad nauseum. It is interesting to note that in the original manuscript⁵¹ Madham's comments appear as footnotes. Kroetsch confesses to a fascination with footnotes, yet he has also confessed that he has not the faintest idea of their proper form. In the published version, Madham's comments appear as interspersed sections - he layers Jeremy's account with his interpretation. He is supposed to explain everything, but he says, "I feel under no obligation to explain anything" (*Gone Indian*, 1), yet he insists on controlling (editing) Jeremy's tapes. He epitomizes professor/writer who confuses the reader, the poor reader left with the task of trying to decide what has happened to the character, the reader shouldering the writer's responsibility, *culpable* (*LV*, 175). Kroetsch uses carnival to excuse his lack of responsibility.

It is their extreme movement from this professorial stance into carnival that interested me. Sadness arrives in a carnival: he is both released and realized by that; he is completed by that, even by the loss of identity and the shift into a new identity by accident, by the mixing of life and death that takes place, the kind of phallic connection. So the carnivalization is what? It's happening to the characters and it's happening to the novel. It's double. (*LV*, 36-37)

Still, he confesses, "I almost feel I was unfair to the reader in *Gone Indian*" (*LV*, 176). Certainly, he refuses to offer any coherent thesis, any true story for the puzzled reader. The characters who fall into the night at the end of the novel are both reader and text, writer and language. "They do not even scream as they fall" (*Gone Indian*, 158), because "falling out of cosmologies is at least an illusion of freedom, of becoming a fragment again, of opening up possibilities. I suppose that the fall into language itself constitutes that openness because of the nature of language as opposed to the systems that have been made out of language" (*LV*, 25). But free as this fall is, it must eventually hit bottom.

*descending

The odyssey that has threaded its way through all of the novels reaches its culmination in *Badlands* (1975). It is possible to trace, in this journey down the Red Deer River, a correlation to Odysseus' journey to Hades, but that would be too simple; this journey is part of the absolute search for the dead that the poet in *The Ledger* is accused of. The characters descend through four layers of geological time until they hit the Mesozoic era, a return to man's own prehistoric source/past. They are graverobbers searching for the origins of existence and the fossilized dinosaur bones that they disinter become souls recovered from the realm of the dead. If the Odyssey is too direct a metaphor for this journey, the woman who tries to recover her dead husband by following the bone hunters to the place of the dead is an Indian inversion (a woman who seeks her dead lover) of the Orpheus myth. Thus, the men's journey becomes a grotesque descent into the underworld, their barge a comic ark saving the dead and the extinct. They are themselves saved, these men, by the woman, Anna Yellowbird, who follows them, who holds them together, who gives them a chance at life by making love to all of them. Men love their quests, their symbols, but this is a woman's story in the end, whatever its obsession with death.

The terse and impersonal notation of Dawe's fieldnotes is in direct opposition to the wildly sensual detail of the novel. Ironically, the fieldnotes, which are supposed to be scientific and factual, are faked; Web, not Dawe, does the work, takes on Dawe's mad lust for bones, although Dawe is himself a pre-historic figure, kyphotic, and his leg broken, encased in plaster. Because the men are so clearly linked with the dead, it is up to the women in the novel, Anna Yellowbird and Anna Dawe, to live (tell the story) in the end. The two women must come to terms with the men they have loved and outlived, they have a chance at deliverance from hell. The novel underlines the power of the matriarch, the woman as mistress of all, despite men's folly, men's obsessions. Here Kroetsch contributes to the fall of narrator and text by making Anna Dawe the "narrator and commentator."⁵² "She recurs among the numbered chapters as the ultimate voice of the numerous voices - yet, paradoxically, she is the one person who took no part in the action."⁵³ Her gloss of the fieldnotes and subsequent re-creation of her father's journey enact the intertextuality that Kroetsch believes fiction must have. Shirley Neuman says, "Anna in *Badlands* becomes one of the most heroic and courageous figures because she takes out her father's stunted fieldnotes, creates a story of a certain kind from them, and interprets it... comments on it even" (*LV*, 186). The women undercut the whole notion of male quest and male story:

In *Badlands* I was playing with the woman's first person narration and with the whole notion that a story speaks in what I call the male story. The knight out

(the night out!) questing or hunting.

The knight, leaving his love in the castle, going out to kill or be killed, and in the process generating desire. A story has its own energy which carries it along and I was letting this happen so that I got a double effect, a playing off between the story and the woman's narration, almost a discomfort for the reader who wonders where the story comes from. (*LV*, 170-171)

That *Badlands* succeeds in being a profoundly feminist work is a double irony, given Kroetsch's phallogocentric fictional world and his fascination with male quest stories. The flying/falling male has hit bedrock.

Perhaps his succumbing to the feminine principle was a result of his more and more frequent returns to Alberta, his anima. Although he uses Sternberg and Dawson's work on hunting dinosaurs,⁵⁴ Kroetsch made his own journey, with his cousins, down the Red Deer River, in 1972. He admits that he got the idea for *Badlands* while he was working on *Alberta*, that still centre, that seductive woman in his past. He returned and returned. From 1974 to 1977 he visited Fort San every summer as an instructor at the Saskatchewan Summer School of the Arts. In 1975-76 he spent a half year each as writer-in-residence at the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge. In 1976-77, he was writer-in-residence at the University of Manitoba. He returned to Binghamton for one year (1977-78), but moved finally, back to the west, and is now Professor of English at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. That his abandonment of the male quest and a subsequent shift in his fiction coincide with his return and a renewed life is an ultimate confession of his own metamorphosis.

*confessing

Although *The Crow Journals* (1980), spanning 1973 to 1978, did not appear until after *What the Crow Said*, they are an essential preamble to and commentary on Kroetsch's writing of that novel. *The Crow Journals* are also a confession/exploration of Kroetsch's separation from his old life, leaving his marriage, New York state, and Binghamton to return to the Canadian west. Thus they become a gloss, not only on a text and its creation, but on the life of the writer. The writer's confessions to his notebook are a comment on confession itself. Although it is possible to believe that *The Crow Journals* is the most self-indulgent of Kroetsch's books, it is also the ultimate intertextual act: a journal kept during the writing of a novel published after the novel as a comment on the act of creation, most certainly edited, perhaps exaggerated, for the benefit of the real text, *What the Crow Said*. They are both a litany of despair and a purging of the writer's lust for creation, fragmented and unreliable. They are chronological but the entries sometimes leap months. Here is Kroetsch, in transition, needing to be an outsider. And taken over:

I begin to understand that when I begin a novel I am the creator, I control, select, invent. At some point the created world assumes control of the creator. It uses the writer to get itself created, completed. Thus, currently, my loss of identity. I am the merest vehicle, the tool, of my novel's ambition.

....

I am lost, but that is all. I am only lost. From that, there is a possible finding.
(*The Crow Journals*, 69)

Tilting at windmills, attempting the impossible. A confession of despair and lust.

I remember one time, as a kid, trying to screw a large stone. A boulder left by the retreating glaciers, I suppose. I was walking across the fields east from our house to where the O'Connors lived at the time. Even then, alone, I knew I was attempting something strange, ridiculous, incomprehensible, necessary. Became aroused. Tried to screw the stone. (*The Crow Journals*, 25)

Web screwing a gopher hole in the middle of a tornado (*Badlands*, 204) seems comparatively sane.

But, if *The Crow Journals* is a journal of man's misfortunes, "the artist must survive the calamity" (*Badlands*, 124), and he does, he

gets around his past, makes the transition by remembering the future.

*remembering the future

To remember the future, you must let go, fall, and in *What the Crow Said* (1978), Kroetsch lets go of controlling structures (*LV*, 113). The reader is finally cast adrift. Big Indian is either/neither in Saskatchewan or Alberta, there is no cause and effect, time is disrupted, the seasons are confused, realism gives way to the wondrous and inexplicable. In short, all of the usual elements of fiction are outraged: plot, character, time, setting, style and voice. Nothing has meaning, meaning is foregone.

I think that novel is my own personal struggle with the temptation of meaning, and it's the reader's struggle too. Some readers were so compelled to impose on it a total explanation instead of allowing the...game to happen; I was just interested in temptation again, which is a very old narrative device, of course. But *What the Crow Said* is a new version of temptation. (*LV*, 15)

For the reader, this novel is an exercise in aroused and unconsummated desire. Its compelling nature lies in what remains untold: evocation rather than story. It refuses to provide a lexicon and grammar, although the reader is expected to read creatively rather than interpretively, to assist the story, to make it up (*LV*, 161). In order for the story to achieve any unity, the reader must conspire with the writer, must be willing to fly with the writer, remember what he never knew.

The novel opens with the collective narrative voice remembering the future: "People, years later, blamed everything on the bees" (*What the Crow Said*, 7), and goes on from there. Kroetsch admits, "I was playing with that sense of multitudes of voices that become one voice; it isn't quite a third person because there's always the temptation of possible narrators there, whether the typesetter or type itself..." (*LV*, 171). This gives the novel an oral, story-telling quality that supercedes the page. Kroetsch refuses the writer/narrator, he slips in the typesetter, the man who sets words, the character of Liebhaber, an alter ego or doppelgänger for the confused and hopeless novelist. It is possible that Liebhaber tells us more about Kroetsch's relation to the act of writing than all of Kroetsch's reflexive comments about writing do. Liebhaber is the typesetter/writer trying to make sense of a bizarre and disordered world, a world where men war against the sky and gamble each other's lives away, where they are killed and maimed by their own folly.

But this is not a nihilistic novel. In direct contrast to the men, the women offer comfort and nourishment, food and warmth and love, if only the men have the sense to take it. Most of them don't, but Liebhaber, reduced to silence, finally does. He recognizes the absurdity of the recited order of the alphabet and, instead of trying to structure reality with that alphabet, he gives up, accepts love and tenderness and death. "Liebhaber is happy. He cannot remember anything....Liebhaber is happy. After all, he is only dying" (*What the Crow Said*, 217-218). Earlier in the novel, confronted with death, he tries to compose a perfect novel, write his own story: "He would compose a novel one sentence long, a novel that anyone could memorize. *You in my arms*. Yes, that would do it" (*What the Crow Said*, 164). Thomas maintains that *What the Crow Said*, with its emphasis on shit and death, calls into question the dignity and aesthetic value of fiction.⁵⁵ He is wrong. If the perfect novel is "You in my arms," it is a novel of life, not a novel of excrement and terror. To overcome the terror you marry it, you love it. *What the Crow Said* goes beyond story and mythology to become its own myth, its own magic kingdom. It strikes a blow at the conventions of fiction, becomes more fiction than fiction itself.

*striking

If *What the Crow Said* is a silencing of writerly and readerly convention, *Alibi* (1983) is the novel where the writer takes refuge in ambiguity. Even text is no alibi anymore, the writer can no longer plead that he was elsewhere, he has nothing to do with the page, he is not guilty.⁵⁶ In this parody of a James Bond style spy story, Kroetsch forces us to check out fiction's alibi; is it really doing what it says it is? Was it really in the place it claimed to be? The writer takes refuge in his doppelgänger, the double becomes his alibi. William William Dorfendorf is emblematic of the ultimately reflexive text, an accusation that we cannot escape. As a collector's agent, poor Dorf is a victim of the greedy principle that wants to possess everything, all there is, to cram it all into a warehouse (the story?).

Finally, on his ultimate collector's assignment (the search for the source of life, water) - "Find me a spa, Dorf" (*Alibi*, 7) - Dorf

keeps track of his findings by keeping a journal. But rather than simply being presented with Dorf's journal, the reader is presented with an edited text, and given a guide to that edited text. The layers imposed on the original story muffle our ability to discern what really happens, leave clues to the essential questions that need to be asked about fiction. Karen Strike, the ubiquitous filmmaker, inserts headings to guide us through the body, but although we suspect it, we are not sure if she is the editor of Dorf's journal, which does not appear extant until the end of the novel.

The presentational method employed in *Alibi* inevitably forces us to suspect every narrator who appears in the book, so that we must ultimately wonder who is telling the story, and what his or her motives are. The text becomes an alibi concerning an act which has taken place - the destruction (the death) of Dorf's journal - and with it any semblance of narrative position or coherence. The mystery: what happened to the body that made it necessary to provide an alibi? Or is all fiction an alibi for a narrative murder the author provides whenever he writes a word?⁵⁷

The perverseness of this narrative structure peels back the onion-skinned layers of fiction, makes us intensely aware of voice and narration, of record and interpretation. Never trust a writer or his text. The reader plays a game where the rules are unhinged; there are no winners or answers. Kroetsch's text is "concerned with the death of conventional methods of storytelling."⁵⁸ Never forget: a story is a story. Never trust the writer, never trust Kroetsch. The doppelgänger of the man (the writer) can strike at any moment.

Still, *Alibi* ends with Dorf's journal in a pure form (Dorf writing), and with the story of two baby ospreys learning to fly. That they do stroke themselves out of falling into flying, that they do find the blue sky, can only be interpreted as a positive image both for the writer and for fiction. Fiction is not dead, it is only looking for another way to reveal the story, to fly.

Perhaps the most moving scene in the novel is the one where Karen Strike, by setting off all her cameras and lights at once, explodes Dorf's spa into darkness. In the dark, the searching, touching characters begin to call each other's names, to name each other into existence in the perfection of the dark. That moving litany includes the names of Kroetsch's friends, the novelist who earlier visited his own novel here comforting his characters for their existence. Naming his friends into fiction, naming fiction into life.

*naming/documenting/criticizing

Creation (1970) began that insanity of naming. This collaboration with James Bacque and Pierre Gravel is a poor sample of Kroetsch's early work, but it contains an interview with Margaret Laurence where he speaks his most famous, most often quoted and most surely damned line. Kroetsch says, "In a sense, we haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real" (*Creation*, 63). If *Alibi* is any indication of a future direction for his writing, Kroetsch is now trying not to deny but to undo that statement, evade identity and the real altogether.

But that comment surely invites us to make a comment on his comments. In *Labyrinths of Voice* (1982), Kroetsch, in conversation with Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, enters the labyrinth of his own canon of work, his own words. This is language backfiring on itself, text glossing text until writer and reader are irrevocably lost (or found). *Labyrinths of Voice* is a wonderful piece of criticism, perhaps the best piece of criticism ever to appear in Canada. But it is terrifying too. Kroetsch's willingness to talk about his work becomes itself an intertextual device that intrudes on the isolation of the text, impairs its integrity. Somebody's going to murder the writer. He talks too much.

His criticism too, collected in *Open Letter*, Spring 1983, offers an irresistible temptation. The critics are delighted: they criticize his criticism, re-read everything in light of his after-the-fact annunciations, tie themselves into knots with his language. He's given them permission by saying that the critics are telling the story of story. Still, the temptation is dangerous. Kroetsch himself warns the reader, over and over again: don't trust the author. He is seductive, he'll persuade you to step off the cliff with him, fall or fly. Kroetsch has an alibi (the text), but his critics don't, and their continued faith in his beautiful illusion of words can possibly save, can possibly destroy them.

There can be no doubt that Robert Kroetsch, critic, poet, novelist, forces his readers, his texts, himself, to cross boundaries. The fact

that he edited, with William Spanos, from 1972 to 1978, *Boundary 2*, a journal of postmodern literature, is a further warning. Editors sift, choose, reject; they exert control. While his correspondence with Spanos⁵⁹ laments the exhausting job of editing such a journal, there can be no doubt that he found the process exhilarating. He says, "modern literature closed the boundaries; what is needed is a breaking across these boundaries, a post-modern literature."⁶⁰ But he is also aware that post-modernism brings its own seduction: there is a danger in too narrow a definition, a danger in definition itself.

The ultimate boundary is, of course, language, and in "Postcards From China" (*Chinada: Memoirs of the Gang of Seven*, 1982), Kroetsch returns to the question of language and its meaning. At the outset of his trip to China, he meets a man in the Vancouver airport who is without language:

he was the son of a Japanese soldier stationed in Korea during the Second World War. His mother was Korean. He had not quite learned Japanese. He had not quite learned Korean. He had come to Canada and had not quite learned either English or French. (*Chinada*, 21-22)

Close to the end of the trip, he meets a man who has language but who does not believe that he has it:

In the garden around the pagoda I met a young man who has studied English for a few years but had never spoken to a person who speaks English and he spoke to me, he said, "I am studying photography," and when I answered him he was astonished, he couldn't believe that I really understood him, I responded to his comments, but every so often he would ask, "Do you really understand me?" as if I were only being polite, or pretending, and then he realized he was really speaking the language he had studied, and we embraced and had ourselves photographed, because he was studying photography. (*Chinada*, 28-29)

Both or either of those men might be Kroetsch's doppelgängers, existence tied together with language, lost or found.

Robert Kroetsch is our hero of language. And in the end, all definitions aside, there is only this writer and his work, *being*.

I'd like once more - or maybe even just once - to come sweeping down centre ice, take the goalie out with a beautiful fake, and score a winning goal. Failing that, I'd like to be admired by the girls for staying on a bronco at a rodeo. Failing both, I go on writing novels.⁶¹

WRITING.

Notes

1. Robert Kroetsch and John Marshall, "from The Remembrance Day Tapes," *Island*, 7 (1980), pp. 42-43.
2. Shirley Neuman, "Unearthing Language: An Interview with Rudy Wiebe and Robert Kroetsch," in *A Voice in the Land: Essays By and About Rudy Wiebe*, edited by W.J. Keith (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981), p. 236.
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