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ROBERT KROETSCH'S OPEN FIELD:

A STUDY IN CANADIAN POSTMODERNISM

by

James R. Snyder

Department of English

Submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Graduate Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario
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ABSTRACT

Critics of Robert Kroetsch's fiction have praised his willingness to take risks employ new and difficult forms, but many of the same critics decried this openness and difficulty of form when it was carried to an extreme in his later novels. This thesis considers the development of Kroetsch's work from the perspective that his latest, most adventurous work is also his best and most typical. The focus of the thesis is Kroetsch's fiction, with relatively brief examinations of his poetic and critical works, chiefly in terms of how they pertain to the direction his fiction takes.

Kroetsch's main theme is the impossibility of fixing anything in the flow of reality. This theme takes many forms, most typically the problem of identity and the related problem of place: how does one know who and where one is when the nature of the individual and of the individual's personal geography shifts radically from instant to instant. Kroetsch's response to this continual shift is not to assert solidity of meaning against the flux of existence, but rather to posit only provisional answers to the questions of person and place, open always to adjust those answers to changing circumstances and perceptions.

The form of Kroetsch's novels increasingly partakes of the same challenging approach as he moves further from his modernist influences into the realm of the postmodern. By

virtue of numerous narrative strategies designed to stymie any reader's attempt to make coherent sense out of the novel Kroetsch all but forces his reader to recognize the provisional nature of knowledge and the falseness of any knowledge that aspires to completeness and solidity.

Kroetsch's radicalization of the form of the novel reaches a peak with What the Crow Said. With Alibi, he focuses on the radicalization of character. Throughout his varied career as novelist, poet, and critc, setting out on a new departure with virtually every project, Kroetsch is remarkably consistent, both in terms of theme and in striving always to remain open, flexible, and challenging.

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Chapter I:

Introduction

In the two book-length studies on Robert Kroetsch, both titled with his name, Robert Lecker and Peter Thomas approach Kroetsch in essentially the same manner. They define his aesthetic stance as maintaining a position on the borderline between polarized opposites, to use Lecker's characterization. Both authors celebrate Kroetsch's radicality, his refusal to announce meaning, to produce univalent, wholly comprehensible works. They enjoy the parodic playfulness of the novels. Up to a point.

Thomas notes that Kroetsch "both anticipates the responses of his readers and is tempted to betray them" ([1]), but, like Lecker, he reacts against Kroetsch when he does betray expectations. Kroetsch's career, as novelist, poet, essayist, has been one of increasing radicalization, a process that can be discerned most readily in his novels, the main focus of this thesis. Beginning with traditional, modernist fiction, Kroetsch moved increasingly into the realm of postmodern, in self-conscious refusal to present a fictional world that follows a coherent set of rules. Rather, he produces works which reflect reality as it is actually lived: in confusion, without anybody, even the author, fully knowing the rules. Again, much like many of

Kroetsch's readers, Thomas and Lecker applaud this shift from 1969, with the publication of Kroetsch's first 'postmodern' novel The Studhorse Man, through to to the publication of Badlands in 1975. When that was followed in 1978 by What the Crow Said, by all accounts Kroetsch's most adventurous and radical work, both critics labelled the novel a failure, a repudiation of the author's obligation to his readers. Offering what are in many ways reductive and limiting accounts of Kroetsch's work, both critics see the novel also as a repudiation of what Kroetsch had been attempting until that point. This novel is the point in his career at which Kroetsch went 'too far.'

This thesis takes the contrary view that What the Crow Said represents--or represented when it was published--the logical, perhaps inescapable, conclusion of the pattern of progression of Kroetsch's novels. The discontinuity of plot, the splitting of narrative voice, the radical ambiguity and irony, the blend of the 'realistic' and fantastic, and the refusal to offer even the possibility of coherent univalent reading that characterize Kroetsch's mature works reaches its apotheosis in Crow. Despite their ostensible enjoyment and acceptance of Kroetsch's postmodern ambiguity, much of the criticism of both Lecker and Thomas--and, again, I am using them as representative of much of the criticism of his work--is devoted to 'decoding' him, to solving the riddle posed by his texts. Both persist in

seeing Kroetsch in a modernist perspective: once the key to his use of symbols has been discovered, the meaning of the text will be revealed. As such, the absolute refusal of Crow to 'mean' anything, at least any one thing, distressed both. Instead, it should have elated them, signifying as it did that Kroetsch's success in achieving fully this new form of mimesis, this image of man searching, both pointlessly and necessarily, for meaning in a meaningless universe.

This thesis, then, concerns itself with Kroetsch's increasingly radical departure from the strictures of traditional realism, traced through his unpublished first novel, Coulee Hill, through But We Are Exiles, The Words of my Roaring, The Studhorse Man, Gone Indian, Badlands--the progression culminating in What the Crow Said--then it follows a new direction in Alibi. The first book is interesting especially as it acts as a sort of 'seedbed' for the later novels: many characters, symbols, and situations appearing here are employed again later in published works. The discussion of Alibi will serve a converse function: that novel recapitulates the earlier novels, demonstrating that Kroetsch's parodic scope includes his own work. It also provides a clear presentation of the pattern and form of the typical mature Kroetsch novel, and so will serve as a summation, the isolation of something of a Kroetsch 'master tale.' The Introduction will consider his critical sources and writings, but the main focus throughout will be on the

works themselves, not on abstracting a master critical theory; the thesis will approach Kroetsch's works with the effort to read what is on the page, rather than to re-shape them to fit a particular critical stance. In addition, the Introduction will briefly delineate the essential themes of Kroetsch's work and the basic pattern most of his novels follow. A separate chapter will consider the role of Kroetsch's poetry, in many ways a proving ground for new techniques and the vanguard of what is to come in his fiction. The poetry serves also as the clearest distillation of the dominant themes in his work.

One resource, not explored in either of the earlier studies of Kroetsch, is the Kroetsch Papers at the University of Calgary; consisting of annotated manuscripts, correspondence, and research material, they provide an invaluable insight into how Kroetsch works, what his emphasis was in approaching each project. That evidence, along with the evidence of his own work--poetry, fiction and criticism--indicate that not only was Kroestch working toward a novel like Crow, but also he was deliberately and avowedly progressing toward that goal. This is evidenced even by his marginal emendations on his manuscripts of novels. In addition to this archival resource, extensive use has been made of Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch. An extended series of interviews on wide-ranging subjects, it contains Kroetsch's comments on

virtually all of his works--even Alibi, then only in embryonic form--and so is useful as a parallel commentary.

*

Robert Kroetsch is very consciously a postmodernist author. He writes out of the postmodernist sensibility, and he writes about postmodernism as it appears in his own work as well as that of others. As Linda Hutcheon remarks, "it is probably redundant to call Robert Kroetsch a postmodernist; he is Mr. Canadian Postmodern" (160). To approach Kroetsch's work, then, it is necessary first to consider his understanding of postmodernism, which for Kroetsch is tied up with poststructuralism. His use of poststructuralist theory is much like his use of the disparate elements that make up his fiction, poetry, and criticism. As he does with the tall tales of Alberta, classical mythology, theology, the realistic novel, and traditional forms of fiction and verse, Kroetsch appropriates from critical theory only what suits his work, sometimes even deliberately misreading a text to emphasize one aspect of it. As Barbara Godard notes in "Other Fictions: Robert Kroetsch's Criticism," Canadian poststructuralist theory and practice differ from their European parent by being a "methodology rather than an ideology" (10). Kroetsch begins with poststructuralist critical theory, then, but not to articulate a theory or ideology of his own, even in his critical writings. Rather,

he writes fiction, poetry, and criticism out of a perspective, shared with post-structuralists, that language, like other forms of ordering existence into stable, comprehensible form, is false inasmuch as it pretends to that stability. His work is predicated upon the poststructuralist insistence that meaning in language is derived not from the correspondence of word and object, of the signifier and the signified, but by virtue of the signifier's difference from other signifiers in a complex and never-ending chain of signification. That is, no word simply <u>means</u> in isolation, but does so only by virtue of its usage, context, and relationship to other words. Kroetsch's use of contradicting narrators in a single text, his impenetrable irony and ambiguity, his refusal to allow for a final answer to the puzzle of his text, and his use of parody as the governing structural device in most of his later works all derive from the assumptions about language and meaning he shares with poststructuralist critics. Terry Eagleton's description of poststructuralism sounds very much like a description of the reader's reaction to a typical Kroetsch work:

> Since the meaning of a sign is a matter of what the sign is <u>not</u>, its meaning is always in some sense absent from it too. Meaning, if you like, is scattered or dispersed along the whole chain of signifiers: it cannot be easily nailed down, it is

> never fully present in any one sign alone, but is rather a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together. Reading a text is more like tracing this process of constant flickering than it is like counting the beads on a necklace. (128)

In general, then, I will be exploring Kroetsch's work on its own terms, not in light of the critical theory of those he has adapted. He is a postmodernist author; he does not belong to a 'school' of post-structuralism, nor does he follow exclusively any theoretical ideology. He acknowledges that the Moderns still exert an influence on him, and that the pull of traditional mimesis still attracts him, despite his awareness of its seductive and falsifying nature: "To lose the tradition is fatal but to surrender to it is fatal" (Labyrinths 4). He believes that "Life or art is an attempt to discover the rules as you go along" (Labyrinths 74), and he is unusually willing to accept changes in the rules, or arbitrarily to change the rules to make the game more interesting. He typically finds himself between theories, on the border between opposing ideologies, partaking of both. For instance, when faced with an opposition between traditional mimesis and the post-structuralist belief that words serve as mere game-pieces, he positions himself so that he can employ both the game and the picture element of language:

> The whole realistic movement was based on the notion of language as picture. In our time there's been this tremendous move to language as game--in John Barth for example. Typically I would suggest that the fascinating place is betweeen the two.
>
> (Brown, "Interview" 16)

Jean-Francois Lyotard's description of postmodernism and the postmodern artist is especially applicable to Kroetsch in terms of his openness to the demands of his material:

> The postmodern would be that which . . . puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and

> the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what _will have been done_. (81)

Like Lyotard's ideal postmodern artist, Kroetsch bases his critical thinking on the demands of the story: "It's the story, its treatment, the narrative itself, that's the model, not an outside conception" (_Labyrinths_ 30). Kroetsch notes, though, that he is not the ideal postmodernist, in that he still struggles with the remnants of a modernist slant. As he stated in 1981, "I think there's still a lot of Modernism in my own work, my sense of naming, for example, which comes out of a very modernist tradition . . . " (_Labyrinths_ 206). It is typical of Kroetsch's dichotomous nature that just as he is occupied in the decentering and deconstructing of Modernist falsehoods and misdirections, he is battling but not denying the "temptation of meaning [which] is upon us all the time" (_Labyrinths_ 14).

For the purposes of this thesis, I will define post-modernism by its relation to modernism--not in terms of chronological development, but as a reaction to modernist principles. George Bowering makes the distinction that "the 'post-' in post-modern does not make reference to a sharply demarcated time" ("The Three-Sided Room" 24), and points out that postmodernism is not a "corrective" to Modernism but a vigorous new form replacing a tired, outworn one.

Postmodernism "tries to offer ways of seeing the real, while the older ways . . . have grown tired through over-use, or even suspect because of low energy imitation" (24). It is impractical to attempt to define post-modernism by its characteristic techniques because, as has often been noted, the techniques of modernist writing and post-modernist writing differ mostly in degree and emphasis, not in kind. Instead, it is the postmodernist attitude or principles that differentiates it most effectively from modernism.

Although typically regarded by their contemporaries as cynics, non-believers, and despoilers of tradition, the moderns were, in the main, believers in a great tradition from which they felt mankind had strayed. This belief is most obvious in the poetry of Pound, Eliot, and Stevens. Pound especially seems devoted to an ideal of returning mankind to some pre-existent cultural golden age. Much contemporary critical work on the moderns focusses on a growing body of evidence that the most influential of the moderns were resolute occultists; they shared a belief in an invisible, mystical universe which lent greater significance to the visible universe. The occultist leanings, the belief in the possibility of communicating with the world of spirits, are a part of the belief in the discernibility of a proper path and of the artist's ability to lead man back to it. For my purposes, the most important aspect of this belief is the tacit understanding that there is a proper

path, that there is an order to the universe that is discernible, though distorted and hidden by the corruption of man. Belief in the possibility of the perfect expression of the reality of the universe strikes me as being central to modernism and antithetical to post-modernism. I define modernism by its attitude that there is a reality and that it can be expressed, albeit only in the 'masterpiece' which is often alluded to but never completed. By contrast, postmodernism can be defined by the attitude that there is no true, univalent reality to be expressed, and that the writer necessarily accepts that all he can express, and even then haltingly, is his perception of what is there, without trying to put a glaze of meaning or the appearance of God-like authority over the events and perceptions. Linda Hutcheon makes a similar distinction, asserting that the "continuity between the modernist and the postmodernist is a very real one" (1), but that what distinguishes them is whether they seek to find or impose order when faced with the chaos of existence or instead strive to display the chaos that rests below the surface of apparent order. Discussing The Double Hook and The Diviners, Hutcheon contends that both "reveal more a modernist search for order in the face of moral and social chaos than a postmodern urge to trouble, to question, to make problematic and provisional any such desire for order or truth through the powers of the human imagination" (2).

There is one further distinction, and one more generalization, to be made before turning to Kroetsch. Although postmodernists have in common the acceptance of the absence of univalent meaning and of the impossibility of perfect expression, there are two basic responses possible in reaction to the absence, despair or joy. Despair, often masked by cynicism and bravado, is the typical reaction of most of the American postmodernists who rose to prominence in the Nineteen-Sixties and Seventies. Writers like Barth, Brautigan, Gass, Hawkes, and Barthelme attacked the traditional conventions of realistic fiction with such virulence and cynicism that they sometimes seemed mean-spirited. It is possible, as Stanley Fogel has suggested in A Tale of Two Countries, that the American post-modernists were more negative, cynical, and virulently anti-traditionalist simply because there was a more firmly established tradition against which they had to react in America than there was in Canada. Also, as with most previous literary movements, Canada lagged behind the States by about a decade in establishing a postmodernist writing, so most of the extreme, ground-breaking experimentalism had already been undertaken. Canadian postmodernists did not need to veer to extremes when they began writing. Or, as Kroetsch himself has suggested, Canada had no period of high Modernism, and so again had less to react against ("Modernism was the product of a high urban civilization and

we just didn't have any" (Labyrinths 111)). Linda Hutcheon, reacting to Fogel's assertions, suggests that since "Canada has never really been in synch with the US in terms of cultural history," Canadian and American critics mean two different things when they employ "the generic label of 'postmodernism'" (3). For whatever reason, though, postmodernism in Canada has a gentler feel to it, as if the authors' reaction to the absence of discernible meaning and to the much vaunted death of the author was that it opened up a whole vista of possibilities rather than simply exposing the folly of the search for meaning: where nothing is, anything can happen. So Kroetsch is one of a group of writers who view the foundationless post-modern world not as a wasteland of exhausted possibilities and values, but as a forum for invention and delight. George Bowering's comments on postmodernists in general are especially pertinent to Canadian authors in particular: "postmodernists live in a second stage of twentieth-century irony, and are interested in some kind of reconstruction beyond despair" ("Sheila Watson, Trickster" 9).

Kroetsch--as always, bridging the two poles of an apparent duality--is involved in both American and Canadian post-modern thought. He attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop, completed his first, unpublished novel as his PhD thesis at the University of Iowa, and taught for seventeen years at SUNY at Binghampton. While at Binghampton,

Kroetsch co-founded, with the American theorist William V. Spanos, boundary 2: A Journal of Postmodern Literature, of which he remains an associate editor. As he makes clear in his critical writings, though, a part of him was always with Canada while he was in the States. Walter Pache notes that "Kroetsch's immersion in contemporary American fiction and narrative theory only prepared the ground for the transformation of this influence into his own oeuvre" (67). In addition to exposing Kroetsch to the more fully formulated American post-modern movement and allowing him to establish a forum on postmodernism unlike any that existed in Canada, his tenure in America gave Kroetsch the opportunity to develop more fully and more sharply what is perhaps the most distinctly characteristic quality of his writing, the constant sense of ironic distance: he is distanced from Canada by his employment in America, and distanced from America by his Canadian sensibility.

Typically, wherever two aspects of a concept are addressed in his fiction--the male and female sides of humanity, for instance--Kroetsch seems equally distanced from both, never valorizing one over the other consistently. This sense was perhaps first instilled on the boyhood farm in Heisler where he felt ill-suited to participate fully in the male sphere of activities but was also barred from participating fully in the female sphere of activities: he was involved in both but not fully immersed in either. The

typical pattern of a Kroetsch work is that of paired opposites in flux; his characters typically both fear and desire whatever object or emotion tempts them. The irony engenders a constant tension, a tension which threatens to drive mad most of the characters, as well, perhaps, as Kroetsch himself: "I sometimes think I have a sense of irony that threatens to destroy me" (Brown, "Interview" 7). His ability to form a distanced perspective without removing himself from the tension-inducing situation entirely, an ability shared by most of his characters, is what allows Kroetsch to subvert traditional forms of fiction without removing himself from the tradition, and to allow many innovations into form without abandoning form.

The heightened sense of irony, the persistence of the double vision it engenders, is a necessary aspect of Kroetsch's comic view of art and life. It is a vision that encompasses all possibilities and is ultimately hopeful, for it sees the ridiculous alongside the sublime, the foolish alongside the serious, and the hope alongside hopelessness. Kroetsch says in "Contemporary Standards In The Canadian Novel" that "I would like to have been Thomas Hardy but can't resist the comic vision" (42). Kroetsch's comic vision is no less serious for its lack of high tragedy, though. In his card-game model of life and art, there are rules and there is chance, the wild card or the luck of the draw (<u>Labyrinths</u> 64-65). For Kroetsch the comic vision

encompasses and emphasizes the chance aspect of life and art: "For me a comic vision is one that recognizes the importance of chance and absurdity" (Brown, "Interview" 8).

In the structure of his novels, Kroetsch is similarly always working on the two levels of rules and chance, partaking of the conventions of narrative tradition and undermining them. He establishes a thematic pattern in which systems are set up only to be brought down and replaced; this pattern of continuous cutting down and building up is the central pattern in Kroetsch, both thematically and structurally. Its primary aspect, as noted, is its ironic stance: any assertion of meaning is accompanied by denial, the erecting of any structure presupposes the structure's collapse, and tradition is accepted only with an awareness of the folly of accepting tradition. Kroetsch, relating his writing again to a game of chance, to the presence of wild cards, says, "One builds into a system something that breaks the system" (Labyrinths 65). Further, in the same discussion, he insists that the system's being prey to internal disruption and possible anarchy is a necessary part of the work of art:

> This must be one of the functions of art: to put us into situations where we apprehend the rules only up to a point. This is where art . . . again becomes mimetic. We are all in games where we can't quite perceive the rules. (Labyrinths 68)

Art is mimetic--an accurate representation of life--when it displays the breaking down of systems, the impossibility of knowing all the rules, and the absurdity and chance of everyday existence. The impending collapse of the engendered structure is what brings art to life: "You stay alive by moving around on those edges where you risk meaninglessness all the time" (Labyrinths 130). But the point is to stay at the edge without crossing over into anarchy; if one system collapses, it will be replaced by another equally faulty system, which will collapse in turn; the vacuum created by a collapse is always filled.

Robert Lecker, in his book on Kroetsch, identifies this irony, this ability to avoid becoming centered in any system, as part of Kroetsch's "borderline" mentality (34); Kroetsch remains on the borderline instead of committing himself to either side. Lecker's approach stresses that the tension of the dialectics which pervade Kroetsch's work is deliberately left unresolved, that the two poles of the dialectic are allowed to co-exist. I think the characterization of Kroetsch as "borderline" is accurate enough, but that Lecker's analysis of the irony of Kroetsch's stance is too static. As Kroetsch says, "I don't want equilibrium or stasis. . . . I'm not interested in equilibrium so much as in a continuing play that is going on, or a continuing dance" (Labyrinths 126). Kroetsch and his characters typically bounce back and forth between

poles, between belief and cynicism, between tradition and innovation, between mimesis and language-as-game, rather than remaining perfectly centered between them, or waiting for the two extremes, as Lecker suggests, to "unite and undergo a metamorphosis" (6). The point is that they do not unite, that the two extremes remain in opposition, and the tension between them is always in flux. As an author, Kroetsch feels the same double pull, the same tension between the pre-existing system that threatens to envelop the creator and the wordless anarchy out of which the new system can spring. "The paradox and the terror is always that: the need to invent out of the already invented. Get too close to the already invented and you are a mere imitation . . . . Get too far from the already invented and you have fallen from your precarious perch on the Tower of Babel" (Kroetsch, "Contemporary Standards In The Canadian Novel" 42).

Kroetsch's central concern is, I feel, the need to disunify our beliefs, our culture, our way of thinking. "I think that one of the dangers in our own time is not the tower of Babel, but making everything into one . . . " (Labyrinths 118); his desire to show the multiplicity behind the "one" pervades all of his writings. He seeks not to destroy meaning, but to demonstrate its multiplicity and plurality. The focal point of this concern is typically language. Language in Kroetsch is not a perfectly

expressive medium of communication and expression. Neither is it a non-expressive, meaningless set of conventions. And because it inhabits a nebulous state between these two positions, language is a source of confusion, destruction, and entrapment. Time and again in Kroetsch's works we see instances of the failure of language and of the seductive, entrapping nature of language. Many of Kroetsch's characters desire at times to abandon language altogether, while some of them, often the same ones, seek to control language, to fix it to definite meanings. And others blindly trust language and its power to create. Kroetsch contends that it is typically Canadian to be caught between opposites (see Enright 25; Cameron 49; and Kroetsch, "The Canadian Writer" 11), to be swayed at different times by the promise of language and by the temptation of silence. The many dichotomies in the novels--earth and sky, land and water, civilization and wilderness, order and chaos, man and woman, stasis and change, freedom and domesticity, drunkenness and sobriety, among many others--all parallel the central dichotomy of speech and silence.

Kroetsch is responding to a long-standing awareness of the difficulties of language: "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" (Journals 16). Kroetsch indicates he had at one time believed in language as a signifier of something

outside itself, but "came to see what language signified was language" (Labyrinths 142). This concern with the failure of language leads to Kroetsch's interest in "foregrounding the language itself" (Hancock 38), both making language the subject of the works and using language in creating the works so that it draws attention to itself. The foregrounding of language reaches its peak with What The Crow Said in 1978, but it is present, albeit often in an embryonic form, in all of his previous works.

Kroetsch has noted in "On Being An Alberta Writer" that "the connection between name and named--the importance and the failure of that connection--is one of my obsessions" (71). His concern has shifted over time, though: "At one time I considered it the task of the Canadian writer . . . to be the namer. I now suspect that on the contrary, it is his task to un-name" ("Unhiding The Hidden" 17). Kroetsch has hypothesised that the "process of naming can be a process of defusing. Language: a retreat from the demonized" (Journals 17). It is the duty of the writer to un-name, to tear down the wall of language that separates man from "the demonized," the chaotic, random, uncontrolled and uncontrollable aspects of existence. In this regard, the writer must act as the trickster-figure, a character identified by Kroetsch as "the force that gets you out of the rational frame" (Cameron 50).

In an article on Sheila Watson, George Bowering

examines the figure of the trickster, using sources familiar to Kroetsch and pointing out characteristics which make the figure's attractiveness to Kroetsch understandable. The trickster is a figure out of native Indian mythologies; known by different names--including Old Man in Kroetsch's own "Old Man" poems--he did not create the world, but he does have shaping powers. He is, in Bowering's paraphrase of Gary Snyder, much like an author in having limited creative powers: he can shape the world but can only work with what is there. Leslie Monkman, again paraphrased by Bowering, notes especially the "contraries in the figure's nature, his aspects of giver and negator, creator and destroyer, duper and duped" (Bowering, "Sheila Watson" 102). In addition to the paired opposites associated with the trickster, Kroetsch is very attracted to the trickster's vulnerability to being duped. Snyder points out that "Coyote is stupid, bad, indecent, and tricky" (104) and that "It is Coyote's failure, his idiocy, that makes him a puzzle to white folk" (104). Coyote, the manifestation of the trickster in Sheila Watson's novel and in certain Indian myths, puzzles "white folk" because he differs so greatly from the God of Western civilization, the omniscient, omnipotent, irreproachable deity. Kroetsch's adoption of the trickster as a sort of muse is perhaps a refusal to follow the logocentric deity of realism and modernism, preferring instead a being of lesser power, but one whose

characteristics and abilities more closely fit the needs and abilities of the postmodern author, one who cannot pretend to moral or artistic certainty.

Kroetsch defines the Trickster as

> energy independent of moral structure and moral interpretation. He's very subversive, very carnivalesque. Furthermore, the trickster is often tricked. . . . I suppose there is a kind of sexual origin in the figure of the trickster--the prick and all its vagaries--but at the same time this instills a sense of the absurdity of all sexuality. (Labyrinths 100)

The most common manifestation of the trickster in Kroetsch is "the trickster as penis" ("A Conversation With Margaret Laurence" 57). In most cases it is the sex urge, the "old hunger to connect" (Alibi 23), that leads a man out of himself and into the coyote self. But since "the whole process of creation and the life-force are represented most explicitly in the sex urge" (Brown, "Interview" 11), the trickster would seem not to lead man away from the desire to create, but towards it. And the desire to create leads, almost necessarily, to both language and domesticity.

The very force that leads one out of the cages of language and domesticity also leads one directly back to those cages. Language, like virtually everything else in Kroetsch's fictional worlds, is dichotomous. Language can

itself play the trickster (Journals 25), can be the force that allows us to escape its own traps. One way of escaping the trap of a history is to retell the story. Kroetsch differentiates between acts of language--the speaking--and the traps which are built with language--the spoken: "the fall into language itself constitutes . . . openness because of the nature of language as opposed to the systems that have been made out of language" (Labyrinths 25). Similarly: "Once we lost our belief in the verbal structures that announce belief . . . we came back to language itself" (Labyrinths 143). And finally: "When the language fails-- then we hear the language. Then we begin the poem" ("Canada is a Poem" 34). Kroetsch clearly has more faith in language as an active force than many of his deconstructive contemporaries; it is possible to name so long as the process of naming is continuing and endlessly flexible. There is a cyclical relationship between the speaking and the spoken: the spoken must be destroyed and dismantled so that the speaking can emerge from its failure. Men must, as Kroetsch says of new Canadian writers, "uncreate themselves into existence" ("Unhiding The Hidden" 21) by tearing down inherited belief and verbal structures to create new ones, the failure of which will issue in still newer ones, and so on.

Typically, in Kroetsch's work, language is bad-- entrapping, stultifying, deadening--when it is the spoken,

when it is a closed book, an old name or history. Language is good when it is the speaking, breaking the silence, when it is an active process rather than a static history. Despite the implicit labelling of these aspects of language as good and bad, Kroetsch is not lobbying for the casting out of the spoken, because both aspects are necessary: the speaking is predicated upon the spoken. Kroetsch is not calling for the chaos of the abandonment of language, but rather for the perpetual recasting of language: if the world is to be organized with words, it must be forever created anew, with new words and new names to describe it.

The motivation for the characters in Kroetsch's novels to continue this cyclical process is the fear of death, just as it is the fear of silence that prompts speech. Speech becomes a means of staving off death, of resisting entombment in silence. There are many characters who desire at times to give in to silence, to die, so that the struggle can end, but typically they find the means of renewing themselves and continuing the process. Kroetsch has cited Foucault's statement that "every language erects itself vertically against death" ("Exploding the Porcupine" 58). The motif of erections standing in defiance of the horizontal plane appears often in Kroetsch's work. The attractiveness of the image to Kroetsch can be explained in part by his being a Prairie writer, since anything erected vertically on the Prairie is something of an anomoly and a

challenge to Nature, an assertion of life against mortality. A section from Seed Catalogue makes this connection clear:

> How do you grow a prairie town?
> The gopher was the model.
> Stand up straight:
> telephone poles
> grain elevators
> church steeple.
> Vanish, suddenly: the
> gopher was the model. (53)

The hyperbolic image of a prairie town as a sudden erection on the horizontal landscape which might disappear as quickly as it arose parallels the central motif of language as an erection against death--against the silence, the flat, empty prairie, the endless snow--which must be continually erected, torn down, and erected again. The notion of penis as trickster and the nearly obssessive sexuality of some of Kroetsch's characters are also related to the motif of an erection against death. The sex act, an act of creation, is for Kroetsch the clearest expression of the resistance to death, of the will to be alive. Nonetheless, in most cases, the builder of the erection encounters death or near-death because of his endeavour. The sex act in particular is often seen as leading to a death. The implications of the theme of rebirth become clearer: by dying, one allows the structure of language that had been erected against death to

collapse, thus making possible a new, presumably more flexible, local, and vital structure.

In much of his work, especially The Studhorse Man and What The Crow Said, Kroetsch's act of un-naming involves casting off borrowed and foreign names to find local, particular, and native ones for his own geography. In his non-fiction work Alberta, Kroetsch says, "the process of naming is hardly begun in Alberta . . . [those unnamed things] await the kind of naming that is the poetic act" (83). Kroetsch says elsewhere that "we haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real" ("A Conversation With Margaret Laurence" 63), and a large measure of Kroetsch's impulse to write originates in the desire to tell his story, to make his geography real. In closing Alberta he says, "the pieces missing from the puzzle that is Alberta are an invitation to a journey of discovery" (222), and his novels take us on just that sort of journey.

Myth, especially the myth of origins, is of great interest to Kroetsch as an erection of language, and it is through myth, both borrowed and invented, that Kroetsch uncreates his world into existence. What he says about myth can be applied to structures of language in general: "myth is very frightening because it is entrapping. It is very powerful, but one way out is to retell it" (Labyrinths 96). To keep language active and open is continually to recast

and retell the myths and other structures of belief which make up and are made up of language. As Kroetsch puts it, "I want the dance between myth and reality to go on" (Labyrinths 122). The temptation of silence and of death is not simply the desire to escape, to shed mortal concerns, but is the desire to start again, to uncreate oneself into a new existence. Kroetsch has noted this desire as a trend in Canadian writing: "Again and again in Canadian writing, there is destruction by fire, death by drowning. The physical literally goes back to elemental water and air. Men vanish into blizzards, under snow. Existence and doubt. We return to the condition preceding creation" ("The Canadian Writer" 14). And out of the elemental void comes new life. Those characters who die are dying into new life; those characters who are tempted toward silence are silenced into new speech. The "possibility of silence, finally, is only a provocation into speech" ("The Exploding Porcupine" 58). Kroetsch, expanding on his statement that "a card game is a model for life. . . . There are absolute rules and there is chance" (Labyrinths 64-65), an image of the place between order and chaos he sees us inhabiting, points out that What The Crow Said in particular is about, among many other things, "the dream of origins" (Enright 29):

> . . . we're playing a game and we can't find the rules. . . . We know enough rules to be in the game but we don't know enough to really play the

> game. . . . I thin'' that's what every character in the novel is doing. Some of them are desperately trying to make sense of those absurd acts . . . . Liebhaber shooting the bees into the skies . . . if he could somehow return things to a primal myth of fertilization, and let them start over. (Labyrinths 163)

The desire to make sense out of an absurd world is one impetus to start again, to begin fresh, but another strong impetus is invisibility. In "The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition" Kroetsch compares the search for identity in the literatures of the two countries: "In America they ask: who am I? . . . Canadians do not ask who they are. They ask, rather, if they are" (13). He sees Canadians as inhabiting a borderland between the noisy technocracy of America and the silent wilderness of the North. The choice seems to be between falling into the silence and invisibility of the North or being swallowed up by American Manifest Destiny. "We live with the exquisite fear that we are invisible men. And yet we are reluctant to venture out of the silence and into the noise; out of the snow; into the technocracy. For in our very invisibility lies our chance for survival" (15). Kroetsch responds to this invisibility personally, noting as a youth the invisibility of the prairies in the fiction he was reading. "I responded to those discoveries of absence, to that

invisibility, its silence, by knowing that I had to make up a story. Our story" ("On Being An Alberta Writer" 72).

The danger of disappearing into the silence was obviated in his youth only by the oral tradition of storytelling. Speaking of life on the prairies, Kroetsch says, "our endless talk is the ultimate poem of the prairies. . . . the oral tradition is the means of survival" ("The Moment of the Discovery" 30). The oral tradition is the speaking, the only defence against the spoken, the existing literature in which prairie dwellers have, or had, no existence. Speaking of what he gained when he discovered Marquez's One Hundred Years Of Solitude, from which he borrowed the opening phrase for What The Crow Said, Kroetsch says, "I had available to me all that people said years later, the whole fabric of gossip and story" (Labyrinths 169). And sitting in a bar listening to the men talk is to hear them "swapping stories in a way that once again makes me realize where the method of What The Crow Said really comes from" (Journals 83). The technique of Crow, and the orientation of Kroetsch's work in general, has its roots in the speaking, not the spoken, and every care is taken to keep the language local, yet open and active, and so indeterminate. Donna Bennett has noted of Kroetsch that "the writer must learn to embrace his own context, to keep his own voice, and to accept that today's solution may not be the final word. . . . Such a writer must allow the layers

of identity--of name--to fall away from him and in their place he is left with an ambiguity that supplies no final line, no lasting answer" (126). With his later novels, with the whole of his published poetry, Kroetsch has achieved this indeterminacy. By presenting the failure of language, Kroetsch makes clear the possibility of fresh language, of a new expression of reality which does not pretend to possess a unitary meaning.

Chapter II:

Kroetsch's Poetry

Early in his writing career, Kroetsch learned that there was, at least, an economic distinction between poetry and fiction:

> I wrote my first poem when I was 32. I was a graduate student in Iowa, preparing to take my comps. I had stopped writing verse when I was 20, because at that age I sold a story, and the sale of the story made me realize that poets are god's fools, and there is no god. ("Taking the Risk" 67)

Shortly after composing the poem in question (possibly "Letter to a Friend's Wife," his first published poem), Kroetsch wrote his first novel (the unpublished Coulee Hill), and graduated into a full-time academic position. Although he had been writing prior to this period and had been aware at an early age that writing was his avocation, it was at this point that everything began to come together for Kroetsch. It is instructive that his careers as poet, novelist, and critic have roughly coincident beginnings, since the three have remained intertwined throughout his career, each discipline informing and shaping the others in provocative and unexpected ways.

Kroestch's poetry shares much in common with his fiction in its theoretical underpinnings. There is the same desire to "tell our story," to name into existence the invisible world of the Canadian prairie. And the impulse to undermine and subvert the conventions of traditional form is even stronger in his poetry since "in poetry conventions are almost rules . . because the relevant poetics have been articulated so long and so well" (Labyrinths 51). The very rigidity of the conventional form heightens Kroetsch's playfulness, his flouting of reader expectation. Rather than resisting the influence of past poetic masters and masterpieces, Kroetsch uses the fullness of those influences and the conventions of subject and form to subvert convention, to startle perception into fresh vision. "I really take pleasure in that sense of influence. . . . One of the reasons I moved to poetry, in my middle years, was that the poem . . . allowed for intertextuality. . . . . And I wasn't finding a way in fiction to get that intertextuality" (Labyrinths 24-25).

Most of the same themes that figure prominently in his fiction are also addressed in the poems: the dream of transformation, the search for identity, the dualistic nature of humankind, language and the world, the desire for the death or silence that frees one from the spoken, the liberating force of creativity and sexuality, the role of the trickster figure in leading one out of the learned self

into the liberated and flexible coyote self. As Kroetsch's poetry develops and becomes more sophisticated, more complex, and more his own, unlike the derivative early poetry, most of these concerns, though still present, become subsumed to the single overriding theme of the search for identity, particularly the search of artist and individual for his place in the world. In many of the later pieces there is little or nothing to separate the personality, activities, and thoughts of the characters from those of the author. Kroetsch, like many authors, appears to regard fiction as a mediating, distancing form, while poetry is more direct and personal. Speaking to Russell Brown in 1970, still early in his poetic career, Kroetsch contrasts his poetry with his fiction: "I have taken the risk . . . of looking at my own immediate experience rather than shaping it into fiction" (4).

In the ensuing years Kroetsch moved from a poetic stance in which the author's life and past served as the subject and suggested the form of the poem but in which the author's life is not the sole focus, as in The Ledger or Seed Catalogue, to one in which personal experiences are treated very directly and the central--and sometimes only--character and voice in the poem belong to the author. The form of the poems is often suggested not by traditional poetic form, but by a document, a prosaic statement often in a rigid form. In part because of this source, as well as

Kroetsch's desire to push the conventions of poetry to achieve a degree of flexibility and expressiveness, the poetry tends to mix poetic language with prose material, some of which takes on the rhythm of poetry not from the words themselves but from being placed on the page as if it were lines of verse. Kroetsch pushes to the forefront the question of how prose really differs from poetry, of where or whether a boundary can be drawn between them. Is it poetry simply because it looks like poetry? Can it still be poetry if it has prose in it? He speaks of being struck while in China by "the balance they often capture on a page between the picture and calligraphy" (Labyrinths 126). The placement of material on the page becomes more significant in Kroetsch's poetry as it matures. The arrangement of different columns, or of diferent typefaces, different languages, different source materials, is used to suggest a kind of precarious balance between contesting, contrasting voices. In the same conversation on China, Kroetsch uses the characteristic landscaped garden to contrast the kind of static balance the Canadian pysche seems to desire with a more fluid, lively kind of symmetry he associates with his Oriental experiences:

> The landscaped Canadian garden is often a very static thing as opposed to what I've experienced, say, in Japan and China. The notions of containment, of domestication, even the

> versions of symmetry in a Canadian landscape
> garden encourage the impression of stasis. (125)

Although most of his poems take on the appearance of a kind of symmetry, it is an increasingly ragged symmetry, again one in which the elements are always in contest, never quite fitting, never quite falling into synch, never achieving the stasis of perfect balance. There is also a balancing of voices going on, a layering of different types of voice, different styles of address, sometimes in opposing columns of type, but sometimes less obviously intermixed.

One of the most common forms of voice is that of the "bar-room bullshitter," colloquial, active energetic, often juxtaposed to an authoritative voice or used to explode an established form or pattern. In Seed Catalogue, for instance, that voice is used to establish the foundation of the local, particular history of place. Near the end of Section 5, the question of how you grow a past to live in is followed by a long list of absences, primarily the absence from the Prairies of those things present in the official cultural history of Western Civilization:

> the absence of both Sartre and Heidegger
> the absence of pyramids
> the absence of lions. . .
> the absence of the Parthenon, not to mention the
> Cathedrale de Chartres . . . . (54)

The list of absences prompts the question, "How do you grow

a prairie town?" and the answer asserts a presence instead of an absence, and takes on the local voice while it celebrates it:

> Rebuild the hotel when it burns down. Bigger.
> Fill it full of a lot of A-1 Hard Northern Bullshitters.
> --You ever hear the one about the woman who buried her husband with his ass sticking out of the ground so that every time she happened to walk by she could give it a swift kick?
> --Yeh, I heard it. (55)

Even within the individual entries in the list of absences, the colloquial, vivid, often crude local voice intrudes:

> the absence of the Seine, the Rhine, the Danube, the Tiber and the Thames. Shit, the Battle River ran dry one fall. The Strauss boy could piss across it. He could piss higher on a barn wall than any of us. He could piss clean over the principal's new
> car. (54)

The juxtaposition of the achievements of the Old World--Strauss's Blue Danube Waltz is suggested obliquely--with that of the New World--the younger Strauss's equally far-reaching celebration of a differently colored stream--evokes

the tension the poet feels in his endeavor to express the new, unexpressed territory in the language of the old world.

"The Criminal Intensities of Love As Paradise" offers a different version of the tension of different voices, one that becomes more the norm with the later poetry. Rather than an opposition of the relatively elegant, poetic, careful voice of the Old World and the crude, active, and anarchic voice of the New, there are two voices which do not oppose each other but exist together, each presenting a view of the same scene. In this poem, the "poetic" voice of the left column is almost surrealistic, careless of syntax and clarity, striving for an expressiveness of imagery and sound, while the "sensible" voice of the right column acts as a literalist gloss on it. The sense in this poem is that of the two hemispheres of the brain working together to present a fuller sense of the scene than either could provide alone; In the later poems the juxtaposition and intermixing of voices is not so much a matter of asserting the active voice of the local against the voice of history or convention but rather a simple distrust of a single voice telling the story, no matter how simple the story may be. Any number of different perspectives may be necessary to begin to see even a simple object clearly, as "Sketches of a Lemon" suggests.

Just as he moves in his fiction from dual narrators, who tend to represent opposing sides of the various

dichotomies at work in the text, to a more pluralistic, less easily located narrative voice, so in his poetry Kroetsch moves from a series of poems that adopt a dualistic structure, one voice speaking against another, to poems with numerous voices, some of which cannot be securely located, or poems which have a single voice, sometimes speaking to and against itself or an absent second voice. The poems with a single voice, the poet's, predominate as the subject of the poems become more directly and unashamedly the search for self. "Delphi: Commentary" is the most extreme and most effective instance of the complex layering and interpolation of voices that suggest the breakdown of continuity and order and the fragmentation of identity and perception.

In discussing the contemporary long poem, the form Kroetsch chooses for most of his mature poetry, M. Travis Lane suggests one of the four basic forms of long non-narrative poems can be best described as "The journal of the itinerant mind . . . [which] does not suppose the connectedness of all things. But it does insist upon the partial continuities of the thinking mind, the identity that, in the act of thinking, defines itself" (149). Virtually all of Kroetsch's late poetry takes this form, the chronicling of a mind encountering almost chance thoughts, happenings, emotions, and perceptions and trying to make sense of them, even in the face of the increasingly obvious nonsensical nature of the world it inhabits. There is in

many of the poems a very strong sense of disassociation of the poet from his surroundings, even from the other characters who are dear to him, heightening the sense of the poet as a lone journeyer even while accompanied by others. The emotional distance is often paralleled by spatial distance, as in the poems which are a series of love letters to an absent beloved. Many of these poems take one of two corresponding forms: the journal of the poet's travels or letters from the poet to the beloved on her travels, a journal of an empathetic journey. Ann Munton, drawing a connection between authors of contemporary long poems and the authors of early exploration literature, sees the long poem as an ideal form--or lack of form--for developing a type of poem that not only chronicles a journey of exploration but becomes one, the journal _as_ journey:

> Writing as a form of exploration and the exchange of the outer wilderness for the inner terrain are concepts that are crucial to Canadian poetry. Most notably, Frank Davey charts the significance of the explorer to the "Western Canadian Literary imagination" in his perceptive essay, arguing the flexibility of both model and later form: "The model that emerges from these works is of an explorer or artist . . . who works not with design or premeditation but in response to what is encountered." (94)

In both the earlier poems in which he responds to a pre-existent document and the later poems in which he responds to a journey into foreign territory the poet proceeds, or at least appears to proceed, without premeditation, without an ordering overview, seeking rather to assemble the fragments as they present themselves or electing not to order them at all. The long poem, with its openness of form, its form that announces itself only in the process of the poem, is ideally suited to the explorations Kroetsch wants to pursue. Elsewhere in the volume of Open Letter devoted to the proceedings of the "Long Liners Conference," Russell Brown argues that the form is also ideally suited to Kroetsch's desire to write a story of place, to realize the Prairie flatness and expanse as well as the fluidity and irreverence of the oral tradition, the folk sayings and barroom talk, that served as the Prairie's only literature when he was a child. One of the chief concerns in approaching the long poem is the question of narrative: can the loose form be sustained without a traditional narrative? Kroetsch has noted that "I attempt to structure ["The Stone Hammer Poem"] in time, and in a landscape, but without explicit narrative" (Brown, "Interview" 3), but Brown contends that as Kroetsch narrowed his focus to his desire to represent the Prairie experience the question of whether that could be achieved without narrative became more problematic. Brown cites the crucial

passage near the close of Part 6 of Seed Catalogue wherein the words of Rudy Wiebe respond to the recurring question, "How to write about the prairies?":

> . . . "You must lay great black steel lines
> of fiction, break up that space with huge design and
> like the fiction of the Russian Steppes, build a giant
> artifact. No song can do that . . .

Brown moves to the rejoinders to this claim in Part 7 to conclude that the nature of the response is not simply, as the first section of Part 7 suggests, that poetry "does have a special power; 'song' can do things the novel cannot" but that "the Western poet must learn to respond truly to the world in which he finds himself; he must accept his nature (both internal and external) . . . " (Brown, "Place of Place" 264). It is easy to see how adopting a form that will allow the poet to explore his outer terrain without the need to impose the grand design of fiction upon it, altering it, could lead naturally to using that same form to more directly explore his inner terrain in the same accepting manner.

In "For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem," Kroetsch describes the long poem as a way of escaping the need for endings, for closure and fixity, to concentrate instead on beginnings, on the dream of origin, the search for a sense of place and for personal identity: "Poets, like lovers, were driven back to the moment of

creation; the question, then: not how to end, but how to begin. Not the quest for ending, but the dwelling at and in the beginning itself" (91). He further characterizes the long poem as a means of approximating the raggedness, uncertainty, and unpredictibility of reality as we experience it, while acknowledging that most of us do not percieve our own lives, our own realities, as fragments but gather them up into some form of unity:

> The problem for the writer of the contemporary long poem is to honour our disbelief in belief--that is, to recognize and explore our distrust of system, of grid, of monisms, of cosmologies perhaps, certainly of inherited story--and at the same time write a long work that has some kind of (under erasure) unity. And yet the long poem, by its very length, allows the exploration of the failure of system and grid. The poem of that failure is a long poem. (92)
>
> . . .
>
> Perhaps we tell a blurred story because the story is blurred. (103)

In the long poem, the poem of process, Kroetsch found also that he could avoid closure virtually altogether, avoid having the active speaking turn into the static spoken, "not the having written, but the <u>writing</u>. The poem as long as a life" ("The Continuing Poem" 81). In "The Continuing Poem"

Kroetsch details how individual poems came to be linked together, not in a continuous whole, but in a series of interlocking, overlapping, contrasting, and sometimes conflicting episodes. Just as the voices within the individual poems often contest with each other, the voice of each poem speaks to and against the voices of the poems which precede and follow it, making each poem more than it was by itself and creating a larger work, Field Notes:

> I don't know when I began my continuing poem. It was years ago when my Aunt Mary O'Connor . . . handed me the ledger that had been kept by her father . . . . I finished the poem, their poem of the ledger, and called it The Ledger. But their poem demanded mine of me. . . . I stumbled upon an old seed catalogue. I wrote the poem called "Seed Catalogue." The two poems spoke to each other. They changed each other. I saw what was happening. We must always go back to the shore. I wrote "How I Joined the Seal Herd." But the new poem created a new silence. . . . (81)

I have said that as the poem continued to grow, Kroetsch's interest in presenting the "local," the particulars of his time and space, became more and more an interest in presenting the more directly personal locality. The poems become less concerned with where the poet was grown and more concerned with the poet in that place,

especially as later poems are often set in foreign locales. It is as if the early poems establish a context, a setting, for the identity of the poet, and then the later poems take him out of that context to see what if any intrinsic identity he possesses--does he have an identity outside of his native setting? As the poems become more directly personal and contain incidents from Kroetsch's own life, also recounted elsewhere in interviews and journals, the question of what is poetry and what is prose, or journal, intensifies. What, for instance, is _The Crow Journals_? As Douglas Barbour says in his introduction, Kroetsch's journal-keeping is neither comprehensive nor careful:

> . . . these 'journal entries' are somewhat haphazard, the product not of a deliberate & disciplined attempt to record his own life but rather of a catch-as-catch-can process, written only when he remembered to, or, perhaps more importantly, _felt the need to say_ something about events & situations in his life. (5-6)

The emotional immediacy of the entries renders the journal much like his poetry, and while the language of the entries is not often obviously poetic, it is normally not much more prosaic than, for instance, most of the language in the similarly structured _Letters to Salonika_. And that later poem is just as directly and obviously a journal of the personal experiences and emotions, and even details some

part of the author's progress on a later novel, Alibi. Kroetsch has said that he ceased to keep a journal after publishing The Crow Journals--"Even that was becoming too coherent for me and I had to resist it" (Labyrinths 207)--but more recent poems are, if anything, more comprehensive and careful records of journeys of exploration than The Crow Journals. In the Journals there is much the same mix of anecdote, personal commentary, dry fact, flights of fancy, philosophical insights, and self-conscious commentary on the keeping of the journal that appears in the poems.

In two consecutive entries from February 27 and 28, 1974, Kroetsch celebrates the daring of William Carlos Williams against the lack of heart he finds in Olson, "lacking a way to let in the variety, the plainness, the extravagance. But Williams is there all the time: taking the risks. Moving from poetry to prose to poetry" (15). And then, "Against a humanism that coerces," he celebrates "Those Vancouver poets who dare everything" (15). Although his preface to this volume and his comments about it since its publication do not indicate that he had intended it as such, once the fragments of the record of the journey of exploration that resulted in What the Crow Said were gathered and published, they cohered into a form very similar to the form employed for much of the poetry that followed it. The willingness to dare everything, to let everything in, manifested itself not just in the novel he

was writing at the time, but in the poetry he would write after that time.

The relationship of Kroetsch's poetry to his novels, then, seems often to be that of a proving-ground, a forum for trying new forms, to find ways out of dilemmas and find solutions to technical problems. In 1981, three years after the publication of What the Crow Said, Kroetsch speaks of why he had turned to the writing of poetry in recent years:

> . . . I was uncertain, over the past two years, about how to get intertextuality into fiction because fiction has such a demanding set of conventions. It's curious that I solved the probelm earlier and then lost my solution. In the last couple of weeks, I have recovered a sense of how to get intertextuality into the novel again. . . . . One way has been for me to dare to move away from the conventions of fiction toward autobiography. (Labyrinths 25)

As mentioned above, the focus of the poems Kroetsch was writing during this period was increasingly autobiographical, leading, it seems, to the breakthrough in his approach to the next novel, Alibi. Similarly, the writing of Gone Indian, a novel about escaping the inherited voice and identity to find authentic local identity, was coincident with or preceded by the writing of several poems on the same theme, including "Meditation on Tom Thompson,"

"F.P. Grove: the Finding," and "Poem of Albert Johnson." The use of a native Indian as the model for returning to a natural state to discover authentic identity is also echoed in the poems of this period, including the "Old Man Stories" and "Dogteam Race in Manitoba," the latter of which is a verse version of the same scene from the novel.

Kroetsch, as noted above, sees fiction as a mediation of experience, entailing an elaborate construction into which it is difficult to inject subverting elements, while poetry is _relatively_ unmediated, direct, and open to the intertextuality Kroetsch seeks to infuse into all of his works. His fiction raises the question of what poetry is in relation to the novels, and a related question is whether one can draw a clear distinction between some of Kroetsch's critical pieces and his poetry. Section 8 of "For Play and Entrance," for instance, has little about its form, content, or style to allow it to be distinguished from the poetry if it were taken out of context:

> fishing(for)(play)
>
> 1975: Don McKay, _Long Sault_.
>
> 1975: Fred Wah, _Pictograms from the Interior of B.C._
>
> McKay: elegy (eulogy?) as a place to begin. The town and the rapids, submerged by the building of

> the St. Lawrence Seaway. The drowned city. As for Williams before McKay, as for Dante before Williams: the descent beckons.
>
> The
>
> poet: gone fishing.
>
> Death as deferral only, as another grammar of delay. The poem itself, surfacing. The poem of place, the thing lost. Things fall into place in the poem. . . . (96)

Although the content of the piece is clearly criticism, this is true also of much of Kroetsch's later poetry, which is at least as much about itself and its own composition as it is about anything external to it. A similar portion of Section 8 from a poem, "The Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof," is just as clearly and directly concerned with literary composition:

> Notation, in Field Notes, Barry, is the reader in the text. The narrator, always, fears, his/her own tyranny. The notation in the poem occasions the dialogic response that is the reader's articulation of his/her presence (the ecstatic now of recognition? the longer, if not always enduring, experience of transformational vision?).
>
> "Silence,
>
> please."

Bugles. (124)

Of course, most of Kroetsch's criticism is recognizable as such, just as much of his poetry retains poetic form even when delving into the kind of critical statement cited above. Nevertheless, there is an obvious and deliberate blurring of distinctions, a willingness, or a willfulness, on Kroetsch's part to let his poetry be overtaken by the concerns of literary criticism, to let his criticism take on the form and spatial arrangement of much of his poetry, and to let the auto-biographical tendency of his poetry and criticism begin to infiltrate his fiction as well. He labels his most recent work, Excerpts from the Real World, to further blur the distinction between prose and poetry, a "prose poem," even though the form is no different and the language hardly more prosaic than that in previous poems in the second volume of Field Notes, Advice To My Friends. Kroetsch, it seems, is ever more capable of erasing boundaries between forms. His most recent novel is a return to the first person voice, autobiographical content, and journal form of much of his poetry.

In sum, Kroetsch seems to find it possible to subvert the more rigid and clearly articulated conventions of poetry to achieve increasingly radical results, while the demanding conventions of fiction do not allow him to do so as readily. Hence, as becomes more clear with the later poetry and novels, the techniques and approaches forged in writing the

poems are in turn employed for the fiction. This chapter will focus on the poems that employ versions of narrative that display the same or similar techniques used in the later novels of assembling--or forcing the reader to assemble--the narrative from the reports of conflicting voices and incidents which are connected metonymically, not metaphorically.

*

> To make a start
> out of particulars
> and make them general, rolling
> up the sum, by deficient means--
> Sniffing the trees,
> just another dog
> among a lot of dogs. What
> else is there? And to do?
> The rest have run out. . . . (1-9)

Much of Kroetsch's poetry follows the model suggested by the "Preface" of Williams' Paterson, cited above. The poems begin with particulars, with fragments--fragments of perception, of artifact, of document, of narrative, of tract, of autobiography --which are then allowed to accumulate, to accrete until they show themselves to have gathered form. In the early poems, Kroetsch often adopts a rigid skeletal form onto which the fragments accrete, like

the form of the ledger or entries chosen from a seed catalogue, but these beginnings do not result in a rigid, fixed form. Kroetsch's poems of this type operate by undermining the seeming rigidity of form, displaying how dubious and vulnerable the systems by which we order our lives are, and often displaying how necessary they are, as well. This is not to say that the poems are loosely or randomly structured, since the opposite is true, but that the structure he erects is played with, mocked, subverted, argued against, and otherwise undercut so that the rigidity of the underlying structure is forced to give way to the fluidity and flexibility of what Kroetsch does to it.

Kroetsch calls upon the reader to do some of the ordering of the fragments, which, although the poems are carefully structured, sometimes take on the appearance of anarchy and chance. In the first Turnstone Press edition of Seed Catalogue, there is an opening note that tells the reader it is a part of Field Notes and humourously invites "Readers . . . to compose further sections" ([vi]). While none of the poem is literally composed by readers, Kroetsch's note alerts the readers that they will in effect be doing much of the composing of any of his poems. Kroetsch has said often that he likes to work his readers, to involve them in the process of coaxing meaning out of words. Even when an ordering structure presents itself, the different elements of the poem, although tightly structured,

do not cohere into a single, easily comprehensible meaning. Too many of the elements are dichotomous, never meaning just one thing, and even the poet cannot make sense of what he has pieced together, the poems often being more about the process of searching for meaning than about what has been discovered in that search.

Something else that Kroetsch may have adopted from Williams is the technique of yoking several different views or perspectives of a single object, event, or emotion without attempting to coerce them into a unitary view; they are allowed to stand seperately. The poems could be labelled with a phrase of Kroetsch's, "The dance of the possibilities of perception" (Kenyon 14). This dance is not unordered or random, though; in fact the poet has the habit of correcting himself, always trying to get to a more precise image. Kroetsch's simultaneous concern with precision of meaning and with avoidance of "the temptation of meaning" leads Kroetsch increasingly to avoid metaphor and turn to metonymy for description. Since all that metonymy asserts, according to Kroetsch's conception of the term, is that two elements have an accidental, not essential, relationship, it does not insist, as he feels metaphor tends to, on "stable, definite structures" (Labyrinths 93). In describing or naming something by its contiguity to another thing, metonymy allows for an endless stream of namings: "one just moves on and around, and there

are further namings and renamings. I trust that process. I trust the <u>discreteness</u> of those naming acts" (93). "The temptation to read metaphorically," Kroetsch contends, "is a temptation of meaning" (<u>Labyrinths</u> 15). So while metaphor locks elements of a relationship into a web of association, metonymy allows for free and continuous renaming, for new perspectives. This metonymic naming is most obviously displayed in "Sketches of a Lemon," in which the viewer of a lemon seeks a way to describe it, gives up on metaphoric namings as inadequate, and describes it instead by providing details of the lemon's use, elements of contiguity and sequentiality, which evoke the lemon and the viewer's individual experience of it.

<u>Sketches of a Lemon</u> is on one level a serious send-up of the early William Carlos Williams imagist exercise in arriving at a precise but expressive image of an object by presenting 'views' of that object. When the theoretical, logical, analogical, and metaphoric attempts to define the lemon fail, what puts the poet on the "right" track is metonymy, the process of linking by contiguity. There is a salmon baking in the oven for one hour with lemon on it:

> If someone asked me,
> how is a lemon shaped?
>
> (the salmon
> (the oven

(the lemon

I'd say, a lemon is shaped

exactly like an hour. (Section 9 1.17)

"Stone Hammer Poem" also clearly employs this technique. More often, instead of concerning itself with naming an individual object, Kroetsch's metonymic approach is employed to communicate the sense of an experience, a complex of emotions, many of which cannot be pinned down or isolated, and which are too changeable and fluid to lend themselves easily to metaphor. The move from metaphoric to metonymic association manifests itself mostly in structural terms in the novels. Kroetsch offers the reader several perspectives of the experience the book recounts without linking them in a metaphoric web of meaning--or at least not one which we are allowed to trust--but placing them together as if in an accidental relationship. They are linked not by some association of apparent likeness, a likeness which is often shown to be false and outdated in Kroetsch's work, but by an association of place or sequence.

In "Delphi: Commentary," for instance, the speaker-traveller's journals are yoked with descriptions of the same place by Pausanias. The traveller is looking for connections between the experience of Pausanias and his own, but links that are based in firm, concrete detail. Instead of the many ancient Greek figures with whom he could choose

to find a connection he chooses, "Pausanias, the ordinary traveller" (99), and so looks for similarities not in imagined emotional states but in ordinary, firmly established details:

> What did he eat, along the way? What drinks did he stop for? Did he meet old ladies who spoke to strangers or husbands dead in the wars? What was the road like, without buses? Were the washrooms clean? Did fathers travel with their daughters, and weep in the night for love? (99)

By avoiding the temptation of a metaphoric association, Kroetsch contends, the temptation of meaning can be avoided as well, the temptation to read poems as voyages of discovery rather than the voyages of ceaseless exploration they usually are.

With The Ledger I begin to look at the poems in more detail, examining how the theories, techniques, and attitudes outlined above manifest themselves. The Ledger follows the lead of "Stone Hammer Poem" by beginning with an artifact, in this case the original nineteenth-century

ledger of the Kroetsch family sawmill in Carrick Township, Ontario. Kroetsch says that he is "always looking for sub-literary texts that tell us how to be literary" (Hancock, "Interview" 40). Kroetsch speaks often, perhaps introducing a corollary to the "temptation of meaning," of "the temptation of stasis, which I see everywhere in Canadian life" (Labyrinths 124). Writing about The Ledger, Don McKay asks,

> Could there be a form less open than a ledger, locked into balanced debits and credits? Robert Kroetsch begins . . . Field Notes within strict columns, straight as concession lines, schedules, newspapers, bank-books, milled boards. . . . What's a big-voiced writer like Kroetsch . . . doing dressed up in this business suit? (147)

The question is a legitimate one: why is Kroetsch, a poet fighting against the temptation of stasis and interested in the play of possibilities afforded by a state of flux, working in such a rigid, precise form? Kroetsch often employs a rigid form, then uses the agents of desire and chance to subvert that rigidity and discover life just below the surface. Kroetsch is not a poet of anarchy or of stasis, but of balance, a continually shifting balance; like Blake, he knows that life and art emerge from the continual fire of contraries, that the paired opposites must remain in play, never completely balanced and so falling into stasis,

but never so out of balance that one overpowers the other. McKay continues on The Ledger: "Coyote in the poet always fights against the equilibrium. . . . [But] the poem keeps its balance. . . doesn't force us to follow Coyote through the form back to the formless bush" (150). In correspondence with David Antin (published by Antin in boundary 2) regarding Antin's "what am i doing here?" Kroetsch makes clear that he feels that Antin, like others, is taking postmodern poetry down a dead-end street. In objecting to Antin's "talking poem" Kroetsch says that the poem finally becomes content only, without form. Despite Kroetsch's continuing concern with voice and with retaining the oral quality of language in his own poetry, the voice cannot stand alone but must be balanced with form. He writes to Antin that "I personally believe in a necessary tension between form and the Dionysian" (599), and says that Antin's poem is "not a solution to but an avoidance of the problem of form. In art I look for the tension of opposing forces: the form itself, the energy within the form, that threatens to bust the form apart, kick it to pieces" (626). So the more rigid and prescribed the form, the more effective this tension of opposing forces can be. In the novels, this exploding of a rigid form most often takes the form of parody, whether of a well established conventional form--academic criticism in Gone Indian, autobiography in Alibi, biography and historical writing in The Studhorse

Man--or of a particular author--Conrad in But We Are Exiles, Faulkner in Badlands, a strong element of Nabokov in Gone Indian.

As mentioned above, the form of the ledger is a temptation to stasis, but its rigidity of form is punctured by the chance, absurd elements of life. Kroetsch pushes this approach further by providing O.E.D. definitions of ledger (which serve to break the poem into sections) which are then exploded by Kroetsch's punning and facetious intermingling of them. The various definitions intermingle and refer not just to the original ledger book but to the human experiences the entries in it suggest. The poem layers fragments, allowing them to produce meaning as they accumulate and inter-relate.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this poem is how to read it visually and spatially. The poem is, for the most part, broken into two columns, and the temptation of meaning is often present: does one read items on the left as debits and those on the right as credits, does one read across the border between columns, or down the columns, or read the columns as parallel commentaries, and does one read those elements which do run across the border as being especially significant? All of these approaches are appropriate at different points in the poem, but none persists throughout. Kroetsch keeps the reader working, and question: ¬, in the poem by keeping the very structure of

its seemingly rigid form in flux.

In its original published forms, first by Applegarth Follies and then by Brick Books, the poem incorporates even the external form of a ledger, and begins with pages from the original ledger book and maps of Carrick township where the sawmill was located. In its collected form the poem lacks this documentary material, but retains a strong sense of artifact nonetheless. I refer to the collected edition here mostly for the convenience of its pagination, but always with an awareness of how the original published form's appearance contributes to the poem's power. One telling difference between the three versions is that while the typesetting is roughly the same throughout, although with different typefaces, the final lines, "REST IN PEACE/You Must Marry the Terror," stand alone at the top of a page in the Brick Books edition, visually suggesting a tombstone, while in its other forms the lines are moved to the end of the previous page.

The poem opens with a reference to the artifact, followed by the first definition, then a pun looking forward to a later definition, then a ledger entry followed by the parenthetical comment, "it doesn't balance" (23), which becomes a refrain of sorts. The inability to balance the ledger, to contain the absurdities of life (including the surprise at finding that it does balance on occasion) in a rigid form gives rise to the basic theme, the tension

between life as we live it and the systems by which we attempt to order it, but it would take at least a chapter to indicate the wealth of ways in which this theme is made manifest. The primary joy of the poem lies in its serious playfulness, in the daring, ingenious and provocative interweaving of types of language, of meaning, of perception. One becomes lost in the poem--as in one of Kroetsch's favorite images, the labyrinth--and one does not so much find one's way out as emerge, having travelled along one or more of the various narrative paths in the poem. There is the narrative of the ledger-book itself--"the ledger survived/because it was neither/human nor useful"--the narrative of those who kept the ledger, particularly Theresia Tschirhart, whose three marriages are suggested by a single entry, "in a/c Theresia Kroetsch Messner Hauck" (38), the narrative of the germination of the poem, the narrative of the pioneer experience that the entries in the ledger point to, and the anecdotal narratives suggested by individual entries or by the nature of the definitions of ledger, such as the fourth definition, "the nether millstone," which brings forth the story of Joe Hauck's arm getting caught in the water wheel. "EVERYTHING I WRITE/I SAID, IS A SEARCH/(is debit, is credit)," the speaker-poet says after introducing the ledger, and the layering of narratives suggests the searching quality of the poem; the various narrative threads through the poem sometimes seem

only marginally or accidentally connected.

The poem introduces the notion of accident--some pages of the ledger are missing by accident, some remain by accident (24)--the absurdity of chance refusing to let things remain ordered, in stasis. As in the "Stone Hammer Poem," the history of the artifact becomes commingled with the history of the poet, who is on "a search for the dead" (25). To which statement is appended a pun on the definition of ledger, "<u>the book of final entry</u>" (25). The second definition, involving columns to support scaffolding, begins a section focussing on the credits and debits of the price of civilization in the separation from nature. For a space, the entries are neatly paired:

> To raise a barn;
>
> cut down a forest.
>
> To raise oats and hay;
>
> burn the soil. (26)

In this section one element is placed on the border between columns, not just running across it. It becomes, in effect, a third column, bridging the other two. "Shaping the trees /into ledgers./Raising the barn" (27) refers directly to the second definition of ledger, but by accretion it refers also to the first: the trees may also be turned into paper and shaped into ledger-books, and raising the barn (and, by association, civilizing the wilderness) depends as much on one type of ledger as the other. The process results in the

forests being destroyed to produce both types of ledgers in the interests of civilization, but it results also in the artifact, which makes possible the poem. It is not unequivocally a debit or a credit, not a judgement but an acceptance. The two main columns enumerate negative and positive aspects ("That they might sit down/a forest/had fallen"), but the voice of the middle column seems merely to report,not to judge. Over the course of the poem, the entries in the middle column present a kind of narrative overview, containing the essence of the story while the particulars of it are played out on either side.

> remaining. . . .
>
> FINDING. . . .
>
> Shaping the trees
>
> into ledgers.
>
> Raising the barn. . . .
>
> (I'll be damned. It balances.) . . .
>
> in love . . . .
>
> to
>
> chopping
>
> 8
>
> bags
>
> .40 . . . .
>
> _zum andenken von_
>
> _LORENZ KROETSCH_
>
> _gestroben den_

13th Feb 1860

alt 38 Jahre . . . .

Requiescat in Pace . . . .

the ledger itself

survives . . . .

the ledger stone

the nether stone

either would do

the lasting trick

the stone singing

song on the stone . . . .

REST IN PEACE

You Must Marry the Terror

The slight variance in typesetting of the different editions of the poem complicates this representation slightly because in the collected version of the poem the entry concerning chopping 8 bags for forty cents is not in the center column, and in the Brick Books version of the poem, the final two lines are not clearly in the center of the page, so the above is a conflation of the three versions. Nevertheless, even without one or the other of those entries, the basic narrative of the poem does reveal itself in the third column: the settlers arriving, exploring and finding the chaos, shaping it, imposing civilization on it, asserting a balance, finding hope in love, but finding finally only death; the speaker finding that only the ledger, in its

various manifestations, survives, and that no matter how one may try to shape the chaos, to mask the terror, it must be confronted. This is also the course of the exploration of the poet, searching for identity both as an individual and as a writer through the writing of the poem, the rendering of the ledger into The Ledger. What he comes to is the image of the two unmoving stones--the ledger stone and nether stone--which are continually ground against by turning stones, the nether stone grinding against the mill stone and the ledger stone against the rock below the soil of the turning earth. But the result is a song, "the stone singing/song on the stone." The remnants of lives represented by the various ledgers provide the means to write the poem, to sing the song of those lives. Only the ledger survives; only the song, The Ledger, survives, but in it some measure of an answer to mortality is found.

The third section of the poem proceeds from the definition of a ledger as "a resident" to evoke several characters, incidents and statistics from the history associated with the ledger-book. The dry book-history is filled out and enlivened by the living history, the imagined, unrecorded portion of the story. So while Catherine Schneider's place of birth is listed in the books as the Atlantic Ocean, the poet is free to claim it is "Atlantis: the kingdom dreamed" (31). Another of the elements bridging the border between columns, "in love"

(31), is the active principle infusing life into the history of the characters, balancing the story of the death by hanging of a man who killed a rival in love and the story of a child born in an atmosphere of hope for what the New World promises. Each story, by gaining an emotional subtext, ceases to be simply the historical fact of the first man hanged and the first baby born.

The fifth definition of ledger, "a large flat stone, esp. one laid over a tomb" (37), is associated with Kroetsch's Great-Grandmother, Theresia Tschirhart: "Married three Bavarians./Buried three Bavarians. it balances" (37). She is rigid, defining, goes to church more often than is necessary, and lives a life laced with the rigidity associated with the ledger-book. In "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space," Kroetsch indicates how his perception of the relationship between male and female in Prairie fiction affects his view of art, how it is reflected in his poems and novels:

> We conceive of external space as male, internal space as female. More precisely, the penis: external, expandable, expendable; the vagina: internal, eternal. . . . External space is the silence that needs to speak, or that needs to be spoken. It is male. The having spoken is the book. It is female. It is closed. (47)

Kroetsch's description of the dichotomy is not prescriptive

but descriptive; he is not indicating what he believes the state of male/female relationships are but rather how we tend to perceive them. Regardless, this conception of the active male avoiding death and the static, entrapping female is an important aspect of Kroetsch's work, even when it is being undercut. In this poem, she is the terror, the domesticity that the males fear because it places them on the road to death. She is also desired. "What did most men/feel in her presence? Terror./What did they do about it? Proposed" (37). Just as it is necessary to see the confusion, the original forest, so "You MUST/marry the terror" (39), accept the fact of mortality. Almost all of the narratives, even the briefest ones, end in death, and the ledger itself is all that survives, all that remains of the characters. The poet's wife and daughters say, "everything you write/ . . . is a search for the dead" (25), and the poem is in part a journal of his joined attraction to and fear of death.

The final definition, "a book that lies permanently in some place" (41), brings together connotations of several of the earlier ones: the book of final entry, the slab over a grave, a resident, the solidity of the ledger-columns and of the unmoving nether mill-stone, and the original ledger-book, most of the definitions having taken on aspects of mortality. The meanings intermingle and fuse throughout the process of the poem, giving body to an identity for the

ledger, an identity tricked out of language. Another pun on the definition reinforces the theme of the falseness of the rigid schematizing by its line break: "The book that lies/permanently" (41). The ledger is all that remains from the period recreated, and it does not give the whole story; its twin columns of dry facts belie the life behind the facts. It requires the poetic act, the enlivening imagination, to supplement the lies with possible truths. The definition of ledger-columns used to support scaffolding may be applied to the poem itself: the ledger-book and the definitions have provided the basic structure and support for the poem (41), but what is built upon that structure is the fleshing out of the bare scaffolding into story.

The last section concludes with a list of those who are marked "PAID IN FULL" (43) in the book of final entry; the right-hand column indicates the activities associated with them through the various forms of ledger throughout the poem. All of those activities have ended, the people have earned their final entry by dying, and only the ledger survives. The concluding lines suggest possible responses to the final entry, the closing of the ledger:

Some people go to heaven.	Cut to the rock
Some people write poems.	the rock rose up.
Some people go west	Tombstones are hard
to homestead	to kill

and then, bridging the border,

REST IN PEACE

You Must Marry the Terror

I think the suggestion in this closing passage is that whatever the responses to or evasions of death, the closed book--whether it be going West, writing poetry, or going to heaven--the fact of mortality is inescapable and the final two lines point to necessity of marrying the terror, of coming to terms with the forces of chaos and death. The process of going to the new world and cutting down the chaos of the forest to build a civilization can be an attempted evasion of death, a pretence that the world so created will last forever. The juxtaposing of the Edenic image of the "Atlantis" the newborn child inhabits with the image of the man hanged for murder underscores the impossibility of escaping death. The "ledgering instinct" (McKay 151) allows one to schematize the world so that the illusion of balance and control is possible, but even Theresia Tschirhart shows that the final balancing of the ledger book is out of her control. She dies when she goes to sit down and misses the chair, and she is buried in Spring Lake, Alberta, contrary to her wish to be buried in Bruce County, Ontario. "Tombstones are hard to kill," and it is not simply his own mortality that the poet has to come to terms with, but the lives and deaths of his ancestors. As Don McKay points out, the form of the poem is "a way for the poet to enter, pay homage to and fight free from the enclosing past" (152). By

coming to terms with the deaths of the past, by giving imaginative life to the people of his past in the poem, he frees himself from them. Once Kroetsch wrote this poem, the poem of his ancestors, he felt free to write his "Portrait of the Artist" poem.

Seed Catalogue is the poem of Kroetsch's genesis, the poem of the ground, the germinating soil from which he sprang, and in it he raises many of the questions raised also by his novels. It is concerned with establishing a local, authentic identity by unearthing one's past. The autobiographic impulse Kroetsch displays here is snared by several of his characters: Demeter Proudfoot, William and Anna Dawe, Prof. Madham and Jeremy Sadness, Liebhaber, Dorf, and others. The search for identity by writing down the story, by articulating the past, is central to much of Kroetsch's work and is most clearly manifested in this poem. The evasions and undercutting of traditional form and inherited, authoritative voices in the poem also mirror the structure of the novels written around the time of the poem's composition. Gone Indian and Badlands in particular involve offspring, literal or figurative, seeking to find their own voices and identity, weighing the search against the oppressive inherited voice and imposed identity of their parents. In Seed Catalogue, identity is specifically regional, and the interaction of the parent and offspring in the two novels also involves an Eastern versus Western

Canada dichotomy.

Like The Ledger Seed Catalogue begins with an artifact, an actual seed catalogue, and uses that skeletal form as a scaffolding on which fragments can be assembled. Robert Lecker refers to it as "a compendium of stories . . . . a collection of conceptions" (137), and while not all of the parts of the poem can be called "stories," virtually everything in it concerns seeds and germination of some kind. If The Ledger is about coming to terms with mortality and the ties of the past, finding the song, the threnody, in the midst of death, then Seed Catalogue is about birth and a song of personal identity. It is searching for an identity, as well as a way to write, but the search, the exploration, takes place not in the past of the poet's ancestors but in his own past. The poem is an exploration of the physical and mental regional setting in which he was born and raised. This search involves an exploration not just of the Canadian Prairies in general, and of the farm near Heisler, Alberta, in particular, but of Kroetsch's personal, interior landscape as well.

Although some sections of the poem do begin with a definition or other aspect of the documentary material, this poem does not depend on the shape of the artifact for its form to as great an extent as does The Ledger. Instead, it is like a seed catalogue in that it quotes from the catalogue descriptions of a number of different types of

seeds, along with growing tips. The recurring question, "How do you grow a . . . ?"--variously completed with gardener, lover, prairie town, garden, and, most often, poet--becomes as much an ordering device as the documentary material. The unspoken questions the poem asks include "Who am I?" "How did I get to be this person?" "What conditions precipitated this development?" and, especially, "How do I write, given the particulars of who I am and where I come from?" The poem is about a search for personal identity, an attempt to give a reality and fullness to Krotsch's home, to give himself a sense of place. Or, perhaps more properly, to give validation to a sense of self which has been subsumed by the existing story, the official history, which had excluded marginalized prairie people. He writes of this need in general in "On Being an Alberta Writer": "I responded to those discoveries of absence, to that invisibility, by knowing I had to make up a story. Our story" (70).

There is, as Peter Thomas details in his book, a stronger than usual emphasis on the male-female dichotomy in this poem, and much of it revolves around the relationship of the boy and his mother, a relationship which in turn revolves around the garden. In Labyrinths of Voice Kroetsch indicates the importance of the garden to his development in terms of its place in the division of the world into male and female spheres:

> . . . I couldn't do a lot of the male work in buildings--but I could work out of doors. . . . But I couldn't work in the house either because that was the sphere of female activity. . . . And the one place where I found a kind of open field was the garden because a garden is ambiguous on a farm. It involves women's work but often the men help. (21)

Much of the poem concerns the tension between the two spheres, the son sometimes resisting the female sphere out of a need to be male, at least in the eyes of the hired hands, and sometimes finding comfort in that sphere, especially when he fails in the eyes of the hired hands.

Kroetsch writes that the discovery of the seed catalogue "brought together for me the oral tradition and the myth of origins" ("On Being An Alberta Writer" 76), and it is clearly his own origins that most occupy Kroetsch here. The oral tradition comes through clearly in all of the personal sections of the poem. In the following section from the opening of the poem, for instance, the words are chosen and couched just as they would be spoken:

> This is what happened:
> we were harrowing the garden.
> You've got to understand this:
> I was sitting on the horse.
> The horse was standing still.

I fell off. (47)

The manner in which events follow this incident displays how much of the poem works. His mother rescues him from the laughter of the hired man by asking, "Bring me my radish seeds" (48), the beginning of a paralleling of the growth of the poet with the entries from the catalogue and the many other aspects of seeds, planting, and growth present in the poem. The hired man takes the notion of growing poets literally and suggests they "Cover him up and see what grows" (48). The fragments cluster together as the poem progresses, and layers of memory form, intermingling. So by the close of the first section there is a passage which brings together the disparate elements of the oral form and diction of the description of falling off the horse, the 'planting' of a person, the horse standing still, and the mother's comforting words:

> This is what happened--at my mother's wake. This is a fact--the World Series was in progress. The Cincinnati Reds were playing the Detroit Tigers. It was raining. The road to the graveyard was barely passable. The horse was standing still. Bring me the radish seeds, my mother whispered. (49)

At the death of his mother the different layers of memory and of present events become one as he considers his relationship to her, asking the question, "How do you grow a

gardener?" (49). The poem becomes a chronicle of these intermingled memories and perceptions of the present and of the poet's attempts to sort them out, to derive some clear sense, working from memory, of who he is and where he came from.

There is also a distinction between memories of a personal nature and memories of objects and ideas from the outer world, and a sense sometimes of tension between the two. The poem begins with an item from the catalogue, a description of "Copenhagen Market Cabbage." This item and the notion of the seed catalogue in itself bring several associations to mind: the anticipation of spring, the concept of planting for later growth, of the boyhood seeds resulting in the adult poem, the concept introduced earlier of the garden as Kroetsch's border-land between the worlds of men and women, and the world of wonders and marvels, foreign and domestic, that the catalogue introduces into the prairie farmhouse. The tone and diction of the description of Copenhagen Market Cabbage indicates the interest and excitement intended to be generated by the catalogue and its wares. This general expression of excitement is undercut by the local, particular experience of spring. The removal of the storm windows signals not so much the arrival of spring as the end of another long, hard winter: "Then it was spring, Or, no:/then winter was ending" (47). Similarly, the almost ecstatic testimonial to the seed company

regarding the cabbage and sweet corn is followed and undercut by a personal recollection: "Did you wash your ears?/You could grow cabbages/in those ears" (47). The documentary elements bring out and fuse with the remembered, personal elements. Robert Lecker, in "Robert Kroetsch's Poetry," recognizes this pattern, noting that "Memory is seen as an act of creation. . . the focussed rebirth of a sense of place which time has made uncertain" (72). The problem of perception stems more from being unable to arrive at a sense of place while you inhabit that place than from any uncertainty due to the passage of time, but the poem is an evocation of place, of Kroetsch's own history. The second question, "_But how do you grow a lover?_" (51), leads to an anecdote in which the boy and Germaine are told by the priest that they'll go to hell if they keep on "playing dirty" (51). A flood of memories linking religious instruction and sex follow. When the priest tells them to stop playing dirty, "he had named it he had named/our world out of existence" (52). This is the childhood fall _into_ the taught self, the replacing of intuition and imagination with rules and catechisms. A childhood game is introduced as well:

> Adam and Eve and Pinch-Me
> went down to the river to swim--
> Adam and Eve got drownded. (52).

There is a sense here of the tension of the persoral world

of the child being encroached upon by intrusions from outside it, and a partly serious linking of the Fall of Adam and Eve with the end of childish innocence.

In the fourth section the arrival of the catalogue recalls the arrival of Mary Hauck, of whom, like the characters in The Ledger, little is known but her birth and death dates: "Everything/in between: lost. Everything: an absence" (53). The tension between the known, the world for which the story has already been told, and the poet's invisible, unspoken world leads the poet to begin to explore the absences, since there is as yet no presence, and these absences awaken invention. The response to "How do you grow a past?" is literally a list of absences, twenty-one phrases beginning, "the absence of," and ending with some item indicative of the past of cultures prior to and outside of Canada: Heraclitus, Aeneas, lions, Lord Nelson, pyramids among them. The poet manages to slip in a few unexpected incidences of presence (Riel, the girl at the Palliser Hotel, the Strauss boy pissing across the Battle River), but for the most part, his past can only be described by its absences. These absences are balanced, though, by the second response to how do you build a prairie town: "Rebuild the hotel when it burns down. Bigger. Fill it/full of a lot of A-1 Hard Northern Bullshitters" (55). An example of the bar talk follows; the local, active language is needed to articulate a sense of place which could only be lacunal in

the old language.

Section 6 considers the question of how to grow a poet in a similar light, and the intial response is halting, despairing: "you have/no memory then/no meditation/no song (shit/we're up against it)" (56). Then, though, there is an incident of local colour, followed by "Once upon a time in the village of Heisler" and the surprised recognition, "Hey, wait a minute./That's a story" (57). Most of Section 6 is an examination of aspects of Prairie life, and of the poet's particular experience, those which hampered and those which helped him to become a poet, but there are more hindrances than help. Section 7 continues the examination of this question, set in the much more recent past, beginning with an item on Brome Grass, the most notable feature of which is that it "<u>Flourishes under absolute neglect</u>" (60), a necessary virtue for a Prairie poet. His experience with Al Purdy, shouting poems at the paying customers in a bar, affirms a sense of what poetry can do--annoy people--against Rudy Wiebe's insistence on the need for fiction to contain the Prairies. The last part of the section, headed by Jim Baque's contention, "You've got to deliver the pain to some woman, don't you" (62), suggests a connection between the tension the poet feels between male and female spheres, the ambiguous feeling he has toward his mother, with the need for poetry, to tell the story. Still trying to excuse his inability to live up to the hired hand's idea of maleness,

he relates, in a more grandiose manner, the story of falling off a horse standing still.

With that, he returns again to the past of his childhood, relating the deaths of ancestors and the urgent necessity of remembering, of making a connection, "The danger of merely living" (64). With the final section, the initial question of how you grow a gardener becomes "How/do you grow a garden?" (66). The slash suggests that the question is not just how but whether you grow a garden. The answer is in three parts. The first is an appreciation of the poet's mother. The second is a letter to the publishers of the seed catalogue about the virtues of Brome Grass, which not only flourishes under neglect but provides comfort and a bed for the Prairie traveller. The final response recalls a passage from the opening section of the poem:

> No trees
> around the house.
> Only the wind.
> Only the January snow.
> Only the summer sun.
> The home place:
> a terrible symmetry (49)

The passage is repeated here without the final two lines, again suggesting a reconciling, or at least an accepting, of the dualities of the home place, which thus loses its terror.

The closing words are "Adam and Eve got drownded--/Who was left?" (67), from the game associated with youthful desire. I suggested earlier that the efforts of the priest to dam up this youthful desire, thereby naming the world of innocence out of existence, is in effect the end of childhood, the beginning of the tension between what is already named and what remains invisible for not having been named. So the final question can be rephrased, "After all of this has taken place, after these experiences have left their mark on me, who is left; who is the person thus created?" The poem is left open, finally, by ending in a question. The answer to "Who was left?" is, literally, "Pinch-Me" (introduced in Section 3), but another possible answer is "the poet," the complex resulting from the varied aspects of the poem coming together, their different and often disjunctive qualities conspiring to produce an identity truer than any name. Hence, the name is left unspoken at the close.

I move forward to Letters to Salonika now--and then to Delphi: Commentary and "The Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof"--because it illustrates the shift in Kroetsch's work, both in poetry and fiction, a movement towards increasing complexity, sophistication, and uncompromising quality of the mature work. It is, it seems, a series of letters to the poet's absent lover. The twenty-eight letters are labelled by what one assumes is the date of composition, between May 27 and

June 28. The directly autobiographical nature of the material, the possibility that this poem has a separate, prior existence as a series of actual letters, expands the answer to the question of what is poetry. The entries themselves do not differ that greatly from much of Kroetsch's other material, except in the much greater use of prose segments with very little actual verse, but its form brings home what Kroetsch has been doing all along: enlarging the possibilities for poetry, calling into question the nature of poetic grammar, diction and structure, and assailing the conventions that dictate that nature. Smaro Kamboureli, the woman to whom the letters are addressed, wrote _in the second person_, which covers roughly the same time-frame, from December 21, 1980, to July 8, 1982, and is also a chronicle of the temporary separation. Kamboureli's book is in the form of a journal, though, and focuses less on the absence of her beloved, the focus of Kroetsch's poem, than on the search for a personal identity and a sense of place, of belonging, in both Greece and Canada.

Shirley Neuman has contrasted Kroetsch's early poetry with much of what appears in _Advice to my Friends_, the second volume of _Field Notes_, noting both that Kroetsch's structural and thematic binarisms become less rigorously adhered to, allowing for more fluidity, and that "[i]n some later poems, Kroetsch will refuse to make 'present' what is

'absent' in the poem" ("Figuring the Reader" 187,182). In this poem the poet's anguish at absence is not answered by a corresponding presence, except inasmuch as the absence is such. The poem is about the lover and her absence, her silence ("June 4"). He complains that "your absence that fills this apartment fills my mind" ("May 27), and her absence also necessitates that the poet "find an answer in the absence of the answer" ("June 5"). His anguish is "the despair of the poet on meeting/reality" ("June 19"); the fluid binary oppositions present in Kroetsch's earlier poetry cannot be called upon for their comforting balance in this situation.

As with many of the earlier poems, this poem is structured around a central fact; previously this fact had been an artifact of some kind--the alphabet (in The Sad Phoenician), the seed catalogue, the ledger--but here the central fact is her absence. Her absence sponsors a wealth of other absences by association and coincidence. It forces him to work through his own emptiness ("May 28"), the absence of meaning in books ("May 29"), the "absence of color" ("May 30"), absence of pleasure ("June 1"), absences from his childhood ("June 16, again"), and even the absence of his own voice ("June 17"). Overlapping this catalogue of absences is the attempt to come to terms with "the continuites of change" ("June 7") and the persistence of desire. Desire is the one inescapable presence; even "to

desire an end to desire/is to desire" ("June 22"). He begins to shore up fragments against his ruin, invoking Malcolm Lowry's joyful failures, taking solace in small pleasures, and reaching a state of acceptance: "I have aspired to all forms of folly; now/I am being wise" ("June 24"). Of course, this wisdom is somewhat fragile, derailed when she mistakes the date of his birthday, and his wise acceptance of desire, failure, and absence is intermittent, punctuated by his bemoaning her absence once again. "June 25" is a watershed entry; the poet no longer sees an antithetical opposition, but an identity, between desire and absence. "Love is an absence of middles" and the two extremes of love are linked, the object of his desire becoming an absence, the absence becoming the object of his desire:

> . . . the burn
>
> of your desire
> an acid, etching
> the mind blank
>
> drain my eyes
> to the darkness of
> your pubic hair . . .
>
> I want

no words, tonight . . .

the mind, broken

of words

into desire.

The final entry comprises only three items. The first two are statements of the uneasy truce he has reached with desire and the erotics of love and form, the transformation of absence into presence, presence into absence through the agent of desire: "By meaning we mean something that means/but, in the process, means its opposite" and "We write books to avoid/writing books" ("June 28"). The final lines are an attempt to bridge some of the gaps, to fill in some of the absences between them. By presenting her with the final three lines of Ezra Pound's translation of Li T'ai Po's "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter," retranslated into Greek, he bridges gaps of geography (she in Greece, he on the way to China), language (his native language English, hers Greek), and physical separation (simply mailing the letter, as well as the content of the lines, which speak of a return, a reuniting).

In _Delphi_: _Commentary_, Kroetsch's interest in poetic marginalia which functions as commentary, as doubling, is wonderfully realized. Shirley Neuman has concisely delineated the primary levels of doubling and so of commentary:

> Sir James Frazer's translation of and commentary on Pausanias' Description Of Greece[,] is explicitly incorporated in the poem by extensive quotation. . . . But Pausanias' Description is already doubly an intertext in Sir James Frazer. . . . he adds to Pausanias all the prior and subsequent Greek literature and document and all the travel and archeological literature that bears on Delphi. . . . [Further] the narrative of the poet's day in Delphi is interspered with fragments from and discussion of the 'abandoned' or 'unwritten' "The Eggplant Poems." . . . In yet another doubling, the two sets of (inter)text and commentary--Pausanias and Frazer on one hand, "The Eggplant Poems" and the journey of the poet and his daughters on the other--become intertext of Delphi: the site/the poem. ("Figuring the Reader" 186-187)

As Neuman also notes, the structure of two columns with two language codes developed for earlier poems is not flexible or eloquent enough to embrace the multiple levels of discourse, doubling, and commentary, so Kroetsch adopts a more fluid approach. The sections from different sources are laid out on the page so that they are sometimes parallel, sometimes sequential, but most often there is the sense either of one section penetrating another or of one

section almost enveloping the other. The fragments from "The Eggplant Poems" are signalled by a colon and three spaces preceding them; the material from Frazer, and so Pausanias, is italicized; while the main text, the relating of the poet's visit to Delphi, is unitalicized, mostly in blocks of prose. To give one brief example:

:   silence   is a form of periphrasis

We stopped for coffee. The bus stopped. We filed out, all of us, out of the bus, through the categories of trade, T-shirt, postcards, cups and saucers with pictures on them of Mt. Parnassus.

. . . .

Pausanias, the ordinary traveler, of whom Sir James Frazer said: *Without him the ruins of Greece*

would for the most part be

a labyrinth without a clue, a riddle without an answer.

What did he eat, along the way? What drinks did he stop for? Did he meet old ladies who spoke to

strangers

of husbands dead in the

wars?

What was the road like, without buses? Were the washrooms clean? Did fathers travel with their daughters, and weep in the night for love? (99)

The poet searches in the periphrastic silence of Frazer's account of Pausanias for a connection, for a way in, for a shared identity that will allow him to share also the Delphic experience. The poet connects his uncompleted poem with a lost Greek poem, Homer's Margites, saying that since he can speak about the poem but not produce it, it does not differ from a Greek poem which has been lost but for which references exist. He provides a commentary on his poem, which provides a commentary on the main text-poem, which comments on Frazer, who writes a commentary on Pausanias, who comments upon the Delphic site the poet is visiting; the levels of discourse become so thick and entangled (the sequence of commentary does not necessarily occur in the order cited here) that even the poet gets lost in the labyrinth: "What was it I said I said? I said to Laura" (104). Continuing his search for connection, for a way to meld his life with poetry, history, religion, he comes at last to the place of the oracle. He does not get to ask a question, he explains, because the voice of his father asked first, "What are you doing here? . . . Did I teach you nothing?" (111). "It was the guidebook/lost" (111), a returning to ground, to point of origin. The journey becomes a journey back not simply into Greece's past, or Pausanias's past, but into the poet's. He is surprised to hear his father's voice in place of the oracle's when he is about to ask a question of it. Expecting the elevated

diction associated with oracular pronouncements, he hears instead his father's "farmer's patient voice" directly and plainly asking, "What are you doing here?/ . . . Did I teach you nothing?" (111). These words have the impact of a divination to the poet, though, and as soon as he hears it, he returns to his daughters and prepares to leave for home, to return to the local. As often in Kroetsch's poems, and elsewhere, one discovers what is important in the home-place only by moving away from it.

"The Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof" continues in the vein suggested by the previous poems in the volume. It is the story of another journey, and it is a poem of doubling and redoubling, commentary upon commentary. Perhaps the most significant aspect of doubling in this poem is the doubling of the reader into a presence in the poem; the reader exists as always outside the text, but the reader also exists now within the text. In response to bp Nichol's query about "what is notation/. . . (in Field Notes)" (117), the poet replies,

> Notation, in Field Notes, Barry, is the reader in the text. The narrator, always, fears his/her own tyranny. The notation in the poem occasions the dialogic response that is the reader's articulation of his/her presence. . . . (124)

As in Alibi, in which Dorf, the collector's agent, grows to resemble both an author and a reader, the double of the

reader in the text becomes the double of the poet too. Alone and confused in Germany, the home of his ancestors but not himself, he is without a guide until a man, unasked, supplies him with necessary information. He realizes later that the man is his double; there are differences between them, but the differences are so slight that they reinforce rather than negate the resemblance: "he was slightly younger than I, but only slightly, a matter of a year of two. he was shorter, but only a little. his beard was more carefully trimmed than mine, the frames of his glasses were of a light-colored plastic, the sort I should be wearing instead of metal" (121). A stranger in a strange land with no guide except a version of himself and/or the figure of the reader (it is unclear how closely one can identify the poet's double with the reader's), the poet has become marginalized himself and so becomes more aware of what happens in the margins: "[what happens/in the margin/is what happens]" (119). He is marginalized to the extent that when the poem becomes unbalanced, with one voice predominating, he worries, "(where the hell did/that margin get to)" (122). The poem becomes, like the previous one, a set of intermeshed commentaries, but this poem is also an explicit commentary on commentary, on the need for a poem to act against itself, to subvert itself into speaking:

> Notation is the double of the poem. Or: we are the poem and cannot hear except by indirection. .

> . . The notation announces the poem to the poem.
> Perhaps every poem is a poem lost . . . and can
> only find itself in the
>
> broken
>
> (the remaining)
>
> lines (125)

The process of the poem, of its reading, of its writing, is "out and/in and/out and/in and/out and/in and. . ." (127), an avoidance of the tyranny of the narrator by not allowing him to speak uninterrupted, unaccountably. Finally, "the notation/keeps it moving" (127).

As I will begin demonstrating in the next chapter, Robert Kroetsch's novels deal with virtually all of the same concerns as his poetry, although he tends to be more distanced from the subject matter in the fiction. As was mentioned earlier, Kroetsch differentiates between the fiction, which mediates a distance between his experience and his art, and poetry, which effects relatively little mediation in his view. There is in the novels and the poetry the same interest in the possibilities and limits of perception and of acts of communication, the use of conventions to undercut convention, the same fascination with origin, the image of the North as unconquerable frontier, the death or disappearance followed (sometimes) by rebirth, the focus on desire and the fear of domesticity,

the foregrounding of the oral model, the silence that speaks, and many more related concerns. As well, the schematics of the binary oppositions or of the relationship of the primary and marginal text(s) are not so explicitly outlined as in the poetry, but they are always at work. And there is in the novels, even those in which there are not two different narrators, at least two voices speaking, usually at odds with each other. And quite often, as in the poems, one of these voices derives from an artifact of some kind. In the novels, though, the use of autobiography is mostly in terms of its form, not content; while Kroetsch's life may serve as a source for characters and incidents in his fiction, a first person narrator in his fiction could not be mistaken for the autobiographical Kroetsch, who is closely approximated by the speaker in many of the poems. What The Crow Said stands as the same type of watershed for the novels as Delphi: Commentary is for the poetry: the texts and intertexts, the layering of voices, interweave fluidly and provocatively, representing a high-water mark in Kroetsch's fiction as Delphi is in his poetry. But, again as with the poetry, Kroetsch's novels begin with fairly traditional emulations of earlier models.

Chapter III:

Beginnings: The Early Fiction

Robert Kroetsch's first three novels--the unpublished *Coulee Hill*, *But We Are Exiles*, *The Words of my Roaring*--do not strike the reader as the work of a postmodernist author. His fiction, much like his poetry, begins by following modernist models in a fairly conventional way and works toward increasingly open and challenging forms. Despite the relative lack of formal innovation in these early novels, though, the thematic interests of the later novels are already present, as are many of the character-types and situations. *Coulee Hill* is the most traditional, with its third person narration, almost entirely straightforward. It does not yet encompass Kroetsch's comic vision. The hero is not, like later ones, continually being undercut and his actions mocked and diminished in their importance. There are idiosyncracies in the narrative stance, but for the most part, *Coulee Hill* is a traditional narrative, albeit employing much of the same thematic material as later novels, the same linking of life and death, the use of paired opposites, and the rather conventional use of myth. *But We Are Exiles* is also fairly standard in terms of narration, but with many temporal shifts to provide some complexity and irony. The novel also contains the first instance of what becomes typical in Kroetsch novels: paired

central characters, one larger than life and the other all but afraid of life. Although the former, Michael Hornyak, plays a relatively small role in the action and does not take part in the narration, the narration is still doubled by Hornyak's unspoken but understood repudiation of Peter Guy's narration. The action in the novel, a quest for identity, is treated at least somewhat mockingly, communicated in part by the unsupportable mythic weight given the journey by the narration. In Words of My Roaring, the use of myth is unmistakeably parodic; Kroetsch sets up a fairly elaborate pattern of often blatant allusions to classical mythology, but following the pattern does not lead the reader to any answer or understanding, except perhaps of the unreliability of such patterns. In terms of narrative technique, too, Words is a clear step towards the later novels. The move to first person narration results in a clearly unreliable, self-involved and self-deluding narrator. The narration is split only in that the narrator is split: John Judas Backstrom is both the larger than life devourer and the guilt and doubt-ridden worrier. This novel is also the first that could be called comic, a claim based partly on the main character's extravagance of spirit and indulgence of appetites, on the parodic use of myth, and on the mixing of the absurd and the grotesque with the realistic narration of most of the novel. As the title might suggest, the vagaries of language are foregrounded to

a greater extent in Words than in the first two novels, another reason to consider it the first of Kroetsch's fully realized novels.

Kroetsch's first two novels, Coulee Hill (originally titled When Sick For Home) and But We Are Exiles, are of interest not because they display prominently openness of form or any other salient feature of Kroetsch's later fiction, but mostly because they show the embryonic form that Kroetsch will later develop into his own, which for the purposes of this thesis culminates in What The Crow Said. Both books employ traditional story types; the first is patterned on the return of the prodigal son and the second on the river journey which is a spiritual journey into the wilderness of the soul. Similarly, both of these efforts employ in fairly straightforward ways conventional mythological allusions and borrowings: Lazarus, the Prodigal Son, Narcissus, Odysseus, and numerous myths of destruction and re-creation appear. It will not be until The Words Of My Roaring, and, more significantly, The Studhorse Man, that Kroetsch ceases simply to employ traditional mythology in rendering a vision of the West; in the later books he begins to invent a mythology of the West, calling upon pre-existent models, but subverting them to such a degree that they become almost unrecognizable. And when, with Badlands, Kroetsch employs a version of the myth of Orpheus returning from the Underworld, he uses Native Indian versions of the

Orphic myth, not the Classical model. Kroetsch's concern with localizing myth, with creating a mythos of the West instead of simply transplanting Classical models to a Western locale, is central to Gone Indian as well. And in What The Crow Said, the pastiche of myth and legend, both traditional and invented, becomes so intermixed and varied that it rises above its borrowings to become an invention of singular purity: nothing means anything; it just is. Or, perhaps, everything means, everything has significance, but cannot be ordered into a pattern of unitary meaning. The openness and fluidity that comes to characterize Kroetsch's fiction reaches its height here. Kroetsch seems to realize that he has reached a peak and, with Alibi, searches for something different rather than seeking to go further.

*

In "Death is a Happy Ending: A Dialogue in 13 Parts," Kroetsch notes that "[o]ne is struck, in reading Canadian fiction of the first half of the twentieth century, by the degree to which tradition writes the novel, form creates the author" (206). Kroetsch's ambition to break the form, to abandon or subvert the model, is an attempt to let the story and the story-teller and the reader regain their position as shapers of the tale, a symbiotic relationship abandoned when literature moved from its origins as oral discourse to the printed page, the reader forced by novelistic tradition into

a passive role. Kroetsch notes, "I started with the modernist notion, derived from Joyce, that the artist is behind the scenes, paring his fingernails or whatever, and I moved more and more away from that toward the posture announced by Kristeva" (Labyrinths 6-7). The Kristeva quotation to which he refers appears in "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," her study of Bakhtin (who is also a strong influence on Kroetsch). It concerns

> . . . the "literary word" as an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character), and the contemporary or earlier cultural context. . . . Any text . . . is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of **intertextuality** replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read at least double. (Desire In Language 65-66)

Kristeva's notion of intertextuality, of intermingled sources and voices, many of them outside of the author's control, in constant interpenetration, allows Kroetsch the freedom to create novels which do not form a complete and polished whole but which are rather the grouping of voices, texts, and incidents which, as Kroetsch has said of Crow, almost make up a novel. But it also allows him to

participate in the novelistic tradition without feeling the need to cut himself off from it completely, to write in cultural isolation. The acknowledgement that every text is "a mosaic of quotations" whether the author wishes it or not removes much of the anxiety of influence, allowing the author to use the tradition, rather than be used by it. "To lose the tradition is fatal but to surrender to it is fatal" (Labyrinths 4), and with the help of Kristeva and Bakhtin the desire to lose the tradition and the fear of being subsumed by it are replaced by an awareness of and an acceptance of its often imperceptible influence.

Similarly, Kroetsch admires the oral model of narrative that he grew up with primarily because it is flexible and responsive to the reactions and interjections of the listener as well as the inventiveness and individual nature of the teller. He works toward creating that kind of responsiveness in his later fiction by keeping it open and ambiguous, all but forcing the reader to participate in the making of the tale. His common use of dual narrators is another aspect of his desire to keep the fiction open and responsive; there is no single narrative voice in any except his earliest works. The necessary doubling and redoubling of the reading of poetic language to which Kristeva refers is manifested also in this use of double and multiple voices and perspectives: there is no single unitary view or perspective.

In "Death Is A Happy Ending," Kroetsch also speaks at length about the process that both fictional characters and the novelist must pass through, the "necessary act of decreation" (207). In speaking of Sheila Watson's The Double Hook Kroetsch indicates the bases for his own fictive approach. In the following passage "Sheila Watson" may be replaced with "Robert Kroetsch":

> For novelists like John Barth and William Gass and Robert Coover, the connection between word and world is gone. . . . Fiction becomes fiction. For Sheila Watson, the situation is more blatantly ambiguous. A happpier desperation pertains. She as author--like her characters--possibly her readers--is both trapped in and saved by language. . . . Her characters are trapped in language that is rooted in the oral tradition, a language that tends always toward the formulaic. Yet that same language enables them to get things said. Right at the edge of parody, the language becomes serious, becomes vehicle. (210-211)

Kroetsch's characters too are "both trapped in and saved by language," saved typically by the realization that while language often seems to be all we have, language is also often enough. It can communicate in the the midst of its ambiguities, contradictions, and other failures, often because of those very failures. Kroetsch also introduces

John Hawkes' famous statement that the true enemies of the novel are plot, character, setting, and theme, and that all that remains is a "totality of vision or structure" (207), to explain both how he perceives his own fiction and how he proposes to combat the

> current threat to the literary text: the critic as theologian who cannot permit deviation from the right reading. The critic who cannot allow that the work of art acts out just this--the play of possible meanings; the text not as artifact but as enabling act. Not meaning, but the possibility of meanings. (208)

The role of the trickster figure in Watson's work brings out Kroetsch's perception of his own role as postmodern artist:

> the artist him/her self:
> in the long run, given the choice of
> being God or Coyote, will, most
> mornings, choose to be Coyote:
> He lets in the irrational with the
> rational, the pre-moral with the moral.
> . . . He is the charlatan-healer . . .
> the low-down Buddha-bellied fiddler
> midwife (him/her) rather than Joyce's
> high priest of art. Sometimes he is
> hogging the show instead of paring his
> fingernails. Like all tricksters. . .

> he runs the risk of being tricked.
>
> (209)

For Watson's reader, and Kroetsch's, it is necessary to "unlearn the concepts of character. Of motivation. Of plot and ending. . . . He has entered a world where possibilities not only co-exist but contradict" (210). The writer now presents the reader not with a finished product, a complete fictional world polished to perfection, but with a realm of possibilities in which the reader has a certain amount of play in the choice of story paths and character motivation, as well as a certain amount of guidance from the author. This model of the novel takes into account also Kroetsch's keen interest in game theory and game-playing, but postmodern games and novels do not feature winners or losers, do not offer right and wrong answers, but rather a continual interplay of author and reader, a continuing dance of possibilities. In _Errata_, George Bowering writes about

> . . . the idea of reading as _decriture_. That is to say, the writer laid down those sentences, those lines, and now the reader picks them up from their surface. . . . If writing strip-mines the referential world, and reading undoes writing, then there is the possibility . . . that reading will be a reconstituting of the world, undoing of the undoer. If writing can be deconstruction, let us say, and all reading is by nature

> deconstruction of the text, then reading is reconstruction, or perhaps at least renovation. (63)

Kroetsch's writing anticipates, even demands, the role of the reader in "reconstituting the world," presenting an admittedly and necessarily imperfect representation of the world that is rendered 'whole' only by the reader's re-ordering of it. The vision of the world the reader receives from the book is half perceived and half created by each reader, and so differs for each reader, possibly at each reading, and differs from that of the author.

One final, and crucial, aspect of Kroetsch's work that is drawn out by his discussion of Watson's work is his obsession with the dualities that plague and shape Canadian existence. His characters, and his readers, continually feel the double pull of dichotomies that cannot be resolved, the only possible resolution being the denial or acceptance of the dichotomies' existence. In Gone Indian, for example, Professor Madham survives by studiously denying the existence of one half of the complex of related dichotomies that pulls at him, while Jeremy Sadness survives, in a far happier version of survival, by embracing the whole of the dichotomy, by ceasing to strive to resolve it.

> The double hook. The total ambiguity that is so essentially Canadian: be it in terms of two solitudes, the bush

> garden, Jungian opposites, or the raw and cooked binary structures of Levi-Strauss. Behind the multiplying theories of Canadian literature is always the pattern of equally matched opposites.
>
> Coyote : God
>
> Self : Community
>
> Energy : Stasis
>
> The balance, whatever the specifics, is always so equal that one wonders how paradigm can possibly issue into story. (215)

As indicated earlier, I discuss the first two novels here not because they present a paradigm of Kroetsch's desire to create a novel that is a free-flowing stream of often contradictory possiblities in which traditional realistic notions of plot, character, setting, theme, motivation, and narrative stance are set aside to make possible a freer play of imagination and invention, but because they are simply the first steps on the journey that will lead him to that achievement. Kroetsch's years later attempt to recall _Coulee Hill_, his thesis novel indicates both how similar it is thematically to his later works and how distanced it is formally:

> As I remember there's a boy who was supposed to go into a seminary and didn't go. I _think_ that's

> what it's about. It interests me now that he was supposed to perform an act which he couldn't perform and then has to deal with the consequences of not performing that act which sounds very Conradian, I must say. . . Lord Jim. I can't remember, but I'm almost certain it was in the third person. The boy wasn't a hero--the impossibility of being a hero was already there--but the treatment of him is quite "straight" . . . he's not treated comically, no, not at all. (Labyrinths 179)

Luckily, since Kroetsch's memory cannot be relied upon, the typescript of the novel, as well as the rest of Kroetsch's collected papers, is available at the Special Collections Library at the University of Calgary. Although the lack of comic treatment of the hero is a crucial difference, many of the thematic and structural elements are familiar. The absent or dead father-figure and the son's necessary split with that figure, the impossibility of heroism, the failure to perform the expected act, the return home, are all features of most of the later novels. Similarly, the first novel contains the same strong presence of myth, of ritual and carnival, that become so crucial in later works. And the central pattern of the necessary act of decreation, of dying into life, is central to this novel too. The linking of love and death and the related fear of

domesticity both make their first appearance here.

Coulee Hill begins with a funeral and ends with a wedding, but aspects and repetitions of the pattern of dying into life abound. And as the oxymoronic title suggests (a coulee is a valley), the novel is structured around a series of paired opposites: every hope is matched with a paralysing fear, every opportunity is deflated by impossible conditions, and every joy has its attendant sorrow. The basic plot involves the central character, Martin Lockner, a failed seminary student, who returns home for his uncle's funeral and to put old ghosts to rest. The upcoming nuptials are between his cousin, Jeff Lang, and Kay, the girl he left behind. He and Kay get together again long enough for her to become pregnant by him, after which she puts their future together in Martin's hands. A typical Kroetsch hero even at this early stage, Martin is paralyzed and does nothing. (A paradigmatic moment for a Kroetsch hero, typically trapped by the equal balance of paired opposites: torn by the choice between life and death, between love and freedom, frozen by indecision, Martin unexpectedly finds himself at the edge of an open grave: "He saw he should leap but hesitated; he pitched forward. The earth seemed to open beneath him" (13).) Jeff has a future to offer Kay, as well as security for the rest of the family, having a contract with the Detroit Red Wings, so Martin resists declaring his intentions. He is offered the

job of minding the farm while Jeff is away for the season, and Kay makes clear that she and Martin could still be together in this way, but he rejects the offer. As the wedding party continues and various couples couple in parked automobiles, Martin drives out of town in a car disguised as the bridal car. Although the wedding no longer serves as the traditional happy ending, there is a fairly clear resolution to the story, and one is left with the impression that Martin will now be able to begin a new life elsewhere, the past life which had haunted him having been put to rest.

One of the pleasures of reading unpublished manuscripts is in noting the pre-existence of characters or incidents that turn up in later, published works. The Lang family name, the perpetually grieving grandmother, the need to saw off Uncle Jake's frozen arms to bury him, Kay's "Breasts like hives of bees" (97), the schmier game, the confusion of weddings and funerals, and the grave-yard tales of gravediggers in Coulee Hill all find a home again in What The Crow Said, while the undertaker is clearly a precursor of John Backstrom; Louie Cormier, the "studhorse man" (7) who dreams of "someday breeding the perfect stallion" (31) and whose face is crushed by the hoof of his blue stallion (230) has an obvious later incarnation in The Studhorse Man, as does the pig-butchering scene and Marin's driving off in the wedding car as a ruse. More important, though, is the way in which the novel's thematic development remains

central to Kroetsch's novels as their form becomes more sophisticated and ambiguous. Again, most prominent among these thematic concerns is the use of myth and ritual.

The novel opens the day before Ash wednesday and closes the day after Easter Sunday. Everything that occurs in between is set to or set into action by some form of, often carnivalesque, ritual: the passing of the bottle by the grave-diggers, the funeral, the wedding, the square dance, the shower, the pig-butchering, a schmier game, the post-wedding dance. A second motif which gains even greater prominence in the later works is the questioning of the nature of identity and existence. Martin draws a face in the snow and the wind wipes it away, Louie has his face erased by the stallion's hooves, and Uncle Jake's body disappears completely in the fire that strikes the family home before he can be buried. The open, mocking grave and the body's disappearance casts existence itself into doubt and leads Martin to avoid mirrors. Nothing is firm and constant, least of all one's own identity and existence. Previous to this last event, Martin had been defending himself against Kay's jibes about his piety by declaring that "something has got to matter. Don't you see--*something*, Catherine. Somewhere. Somehow" (105). The desperate, already doubting belief that there is discernible meaning is clung to tenaciously even in the face of incredible and contradictory events. In leaving again and

rejecting the life the town offers him, Martin rejects the mode of thought and social strictures that will not allow him to be a part of the magic the studhorse man shows him, the "mystery and beauty and also . . . the terror of things like spring and lust" (31), but would instead lock him into a hypocritical and self-destructive relationship with Kay. The scene in which the first experiments with sex of Martin and Kay are described mirrors exactly the scene in Seed Catalogue in which the priest names the delightful mystery of sex out of existence by pinning a label on it (56-57). It is this insistence on pinning things down, on fixing them, and the hypocrisy inadequate labels entail, that Martin ultimately rejects. When he and Kay are alone together, they come back to ground, to elemental chaos, "clinging to each other in the chaos of snow and valley and sky" (160). Martin feels himself enough again to look into a mirror. But just as he and Kay are about to have sex, Father Schwartz visits. Louie's death and Kay's loveless wedding eradicate the last of Martin's illusions and he leaves the town and its hypocrisy and repression behind.

As a narrative, Coulee Hill is mostly very traditional. The basic tale and the pig-butchering scene in particular could have come straight out of The Mountain and the Valley. The novel is narrated in the third person, as Kroetsch accurately recalls, and the authorial voice is non-intrusive and blankly authoritative for the most part. There are

brief hints of the experimentation to come, however. At the beginning of Part Three, Kroetsch recounts the same scene twice, with slightly different perspectives, an early indication of his awareness of the need for a counter to the authority of the univocal narrative, but this is not sustained. It is at the end of the novel that Kroetsch's narrative is at its strongest and most open. Several levels of action are taking place at once--the post-wedding square dance, the undertaker's attempts to lure young women into the hall with him, the activities of those in and around the hall, the conversation Martin has with Kay and Jeff, and Martin's interior reactions--and Kroetsch presents them simultaneously, allowing the edges to blur, using the ritualistic words of the square dance caller as the central hub, and letting the other elements swirl about them in increasingly dreamlike fashion. The scene dissolves into Martin's memories, confusion and guilt, an interior monologue in which he makes his decision to leave:

> I don't know why but I couldn't say let's go when I knew she'd go when I knew if we didn't go she'd ask me to stay. She wants it all. All all all is hardly enough. And the time by the graveyard fence when she took off her pants and that smooth body not tufted with mystery or darkness or shame but naked to all my invented reluctance and did you find out she said about the damnation and lies

> and more lies and playing cards with the devil was the only truth in the lot In Loving Memory of a Dear Husband and bending down and seeing the hoof . . . the tail. Who is the stranger? The twin-tailed coat. The faint smell of brimstone somewhere. The horns, by God. (208-209)

After this brief, horrifying glimpse of the death domesticity represents, Martin flees and finds the frozen ground melting as he leaves, indicating the rightness of his decision, his choice of life over death, freedom over joyless domesticity. For the final page, the narrative returns to the placid, blank authorial voice, but the previous ten pages give more of an indication of what Kroetsch can and will achieve than do the 190 pages which precede them. A telling instance that perhaps best illustrates the gap between this fledgling effort and Kroetsch's later works, though, is the discussion Martin and Kay have about how magical and other-worldly the studhorse man seemed to them. By the time of the writing of _The Studhorse Man_ Kroetsch is able to show the magic, rather than have another character tell the reader about it, although by then the magic that the studhorse man is said to possess infuses the whole of the book as a subverting comic context.

But We Are Exiles, published in 1965 and based in part on Kroetsch's own tenure on the barge-boats on the Mackenzie

River, is a more assured work than Coulee Hill, but it is still highly derivative. Tradition is still shaping the novelist, the inherited form is still shaping the story. As has often been noted, the novel is essentially a Conradian journey toward self-knowledge with a healthy measure of The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner and Jack London added in. As Peter Guy, whose everyman name suggests his role as a cipher, a blank, pilots a barge up the Mackenzie River, he is confronted by the past he came to the North to escape, both in the form of memories and the presence of Michael Hornyak, Peter's mentor/nemesis, and Kettle Fraser, Peter's beloved and Hornyak's wife. The novel begins with a brief scene from near the temporal end of the story in which Hornyak's body is retrieved from the river, but it quickly shifts to the recent past, beginning with Hornyak's arrival and fatal accident, and moves sequentially from there, except for flashbacks to the more distant past. Peter embodies one aspect of the typical Kroetsch character: he is hesitant, unfinished, unwilling or unable to act, fearful of issuing into speech. He characterizes his love of Kettle as innocent; she is stolen from him by the brash, prolific, corrupt, and frankly sexual Hornyak. The drifting Peter had been picked up and given direction by Hornyak, but was then betrayed by him, thus setting up one of the novel's several estranged parent/offspring pairs--the relationship between them often seems more that of father and son than that of

friends. Actual parents seem to have little or no connection with their offspring. Primarily because of his inability to take action, Peter has missed his Mother's funeral and has not been able to communicate with his father for a year and a half. Kettle's father's only desire when he sees his daughter after years of separation is for her rapid departure. And Hornyak has no discernible family ties; in six years of marriage Kettle learns nothing of where he is from or anything about his ancestry.

As with all the novels, there is in But We Are Exiles a strong sense of "the terrors of human relationships" (19), the avoidance of which is here linked directly to the flight to the North. Kroetsch has written on the imaginative and symbolic nature of the North, saying that the Canadian writer is caught between

> a huge technocracy, a world of power. . . . [and a] will to silence. . . . summed up by the north. The north is not a typical American frontier, a natural world to be conquered and exploited. Rather. . . it remains a true wilderness, a continuing presence. We don't want to conquer it. Sometimes we want it to conquer us. ("The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition" 11).

Further in the same article Kroetsch speaks of the typically Canadian "fear that we are invisible men. And yet we are

reluctant to venture out of the silence and into the noise; out of the snow; into the technocracy. For in our very invisiblity lies our chance for survival" (15). Peter is avowedly in the north to escape relationships. On the river "a man is defined free from the terrors of human relationships. A man's function is so clear that each is simply called chief, skipper, second, pilot. . . . No confusion about who is to do what and who did what. . . . An order maintained as precariously as that maintained by the hands on the wheel. The chaos held in check" (19). Hornyak's arrival introduces doubt about who is to do what and who has done what. Peter has allowed Hornyak, carrying an unshielded lamp, to inspect a hold containing explosive gases. Hornyak is killed, and the boat's crew gathers to discuss who must bear responsibility for the death. The captain asks for "the simple facts. The bare unvarnished facts" (4), but Peter's contention that "Nobody killed him" (11)--recalling Odysseus's tricking the Cyclops into claiming that "no man" blinded him--takes on a Conradian ambiguity since Peter is himself virtually a "nobody," a blank. The steering hand that had kept chaos in check has been loosed from the wheel and nothing is certain any longer. And even in bringing about Hornyak's accident, Guy does not act, but merely says nothing when Hornyak picks an unshielded lamp for himself.

Gordon Fraser, Kettle's father, also adds an unsettling

note. Like Peter, he is drawn to the north for its purity of silence, its freedom from the terror of domesticity, but he has also experienced the consequences of remaining cocooned in that silence too long: he tells Peter, "A man is free here. You ever hear the word? He is so free that nothing else in the world is ever as good again. Never. But it's a screwing jail, this place. I <u>can't</u> leave" (46). The "precarious order" of Peter's life on the river is given new meaning by Hornyak's vital presence. Hornyak is a man of action who is certain of things, a man who makes things happen. When he arrives at the boat, six years after they had parted over Kettle, he defines the essential difference between Peter and himself:

> Guy, you don't know your own mind. . . . Sometimes I envy you. My trouble is I know my own mind. And that's a terrible thing. . . . I know what I want. You see that, Guy? I know till I ache from my balls to breakfast. I know till I want to wring one shout from that jesusly silent throat of yours. (9)

Previously, Peter had believed that his running had been "running away--from land, from people, from the confusion . . ." (19), but he is forced to see now that it had been "Running and searching. That was it. He was searching too: even as he fled. Always looking for something" (21).

In their car journey through the Canadian Prairies six

years before, Guy and Hornyak had been on a mock quest for the waters of life in which they could be reborn (142), a motif that Kroetsch picks up again in <u>Alibi</u>. When they meet with Kettle and find a stream running from a sulphur spring they are chased out by a caretaker before they can immerse themselves totally. He tells them that there is a toll for use of the stream. Hornyak responds, "You can't pay. . . . Not to be reborn" (144). All three are saddened by the failure to find redemption without a price, and Peter later returns to the hotel room to find Kettle's door unlocked; when he looks in, the mirror shows him the reflection of Kettle and Hornyak in bed together. As with Martin Lockner in the previous novel, Guy cannot see his own reflection in the mirror: "he was caught. He fled and he fled and was caught there, trapped, in that long mahogany frame. He fled and went on searching and could not see himself" (145). Peter remembers all this as he drifts in a barge in the midst of a blinding blizzard with his albatross, Hornyak's corpse, in a compartment. He remembers hesitating and then not entering the room, seeing only the reflection of what happened. He determines, in a cold-induced delirium, that his earlier mistake in the hotel can now be rectified by breaking through the locked door to the compartment to confront his past, his indecision, and his guilt. He hears "the Voice," presumably Kettle's, calling him back, warning him not to enter. Like the offer Kay makes to Martin at the

end of Coulee Hill, Kettle has told Peter they can be together, although she will still be Mrs. Hornyak, but he will have to forget the past and the promise it held. The door to the compartment and the the door to the hotel room Hornyak and Kettle had used become fused in Peter's mind: "This time he had to look" (145). The presence of Hornyak's body forces Peter to confront the spectre of death, the impossibility of a union with Kettle, and his own guilt, but his reacting with hilarity surprises him and endows him with the "strength born of his heard laughter" (145) to push the body overboard. The novel ends with Guy drifting completely alone, the door to the compartment in which he has taken Hornyak's place slamming shut and open with the wind, creating a pattern of alternating light and dark: "as the huge door opened he saw the grey light of the blizzard, saw the glare and the snow and heard the plunge of wind and water, and as it closed he was slammed back into darkness again, the silence again, and the soft delirium of his impassioned motion" (145). Although the pattern of the character's freeing himself from the past by confronting it is not so clear as in Coulee Hill, the descent into chaos, the confrontation of the past and the father-figure, free him for a potentially hopeful future. That Guy is at last capable of "impassioned motion" indicates that he has broken free of his past and his inability to act and to believe.

But We Are Exiles is a clear step forward from Coulee

Hill. Although it is in many respects a fairly conventional realist novel, albeit with a fairly fluid temporality, the traditional representation and the faith in it are intentionally undercut by the mythic weight attached to the only half-mocking search for the river of life and for identity, to the larger than life Hornyak, and to the symbols of the river and the north. The reader is also often reminded of the unrealistically restraining confines of conventional characterization when the characters themselves are not able to escape those confines. When Peter confronts Kettle after the accident, for instance, he is unable to think of her as Kettle Fraser, as the person he knew, or even as the person she is now; all he "could think of was the word widow" (12). Peter continually comes to the limits of words, of the capacity of words to communicate, to define, to encompass experience. After his loss of Kettle to Hornyak, Guy begins a message to her, but after it spreads out over thirteen postcards, he accepts the futility of it. He consistently fails in his intent to send messages, especially written messages. Part of the attraction of the river, along with the clearly defined and limited roles on board, is the logging of experience in the logbook and the charting of the river-world on the maps; he is seduced for a time by the belief that he can restrict and so contain his world, keep his experience so limited that it will not test the limits of words. But the weather and the

river and his own emotional storm, as well as the statements of Hornyak and Gordon Fraser, conspire to roust him from his self-imposed exile.

Although <u>But We Are Exiles</u> has no double narrative voice, there is a doubling of narrative in that every action or inaction of Guy's is in reaction to or against Hornyak; the two are split aspects of the typical Kroetsch protagonist: Hornyak the creative, active, penis-as-trickster figure; Guy the hesitant, blank, and insular figure. When Hornyak's body is being fished out of the water Guy looks at the face and sees his own face impressed on the blankness of Hornyak's scorched features. His lack of identity, of self, is linked to his narcissistic desire to order and limit the world in his own image. Earlier, he had appropriated Hornyak's identity and quest for his own, causing Kettle, who had only just met Hornyak, to wonder if Peter instead of Mike was the stranger (143), and he continues to insulate himself from life by narrowing his focus until it includes only himself. In the "self : community" dichotomy Kroetsch posits, Guy is the extreme of the self, the self existing in such perfect isolation that it ceases to have any identity, cut off entirely from community. This narcissistic isolation is disrupted by Hornyak's arrival and death which act as a stimulus for Peter to recover his identity, to rejoin the community, to accept responsibility and to cease being "Nobody."

The power of the voice is a part of this re-emergence--it is in the sound of his own laughter that he finds the strength to rid himself of the burden of Hornyak--and there is at the close of the novel the potential that Guy will come out of the blizzard with a new and vital and unique voice, that he will, as many of Kroetsch's characters finally do, communicate in spite of the impossibility of communication, use language despite the necessary failure of language, language and communication being the links of the community Guy has abandoned. When Peter speaks mockingly of the impossibility of joining Kettle in her new world because he is permanently stuck in the old world, she begs him to "Break the mirror for me. Break it, break it please, smash it, Peter" (124). Kroetsch employs the mirror as a symbol of the prison of the past and the self in which Peter has locked himself; the image of Hornyak and Kettle in the hotel-room mirror continues to haunt Peter and he must figuratively break that mirror just as another crew member, Arnafson, had literally smashed the mirror on the boat to rid himself of a spectre from his past (118). Breaking the mirror represents escaping the confines of the narcissistic self, which would allow him to join Kettle and take on Hornyak's generative role. The revelation of Hornyak's sterility suggests that only Guy can reestablish fertility, make even a provisional whole of the fragments of the waste land they inhabit, and only if he claims his identity and

assumes the responsibility of his role as part of community. As is often the case with the later novels, too, this novel ends with the central character's having moved from a paralysing state of imbalance and restrictive silence and introversion, through a chaotic, elemental maelstrom from which he emerges reborn. The character ceases to embody one side of the dichotomy--both extremes of self and community, Peter and Hornyak, having proved to be infertile, non-creative--but embodies instead the creative tension of the dichotomy as a whole. On the barge at the close of the novel Peter literally takes Hornyak's place, and the two characters meld into one. The novel does resist closure--Kroetsch leaves the fate of Peter, even the question of whether he survives the storm, entirely open--but the final image of the reborn Peter able to break free of Hornyak and issue into speech, even if it is no more than his maddened laughter as he pushes Hornyak's body overboard raises the possibility at least that he has found a balance, that like Martin at the close of Coulee Hill he has loosed himself from the ghosts of the past and from the prison of the self.

As Robert Lecker has argued in his book on Kroetsch, and as is true to a certain extent of Coulee Hill as well, But We Are Exiles is not merely the conventional first novel that Kroetsch had to write before embarking on new and startling literary endeavours. Rather it is a first step on the path which will take him through much of the same

territory he will traverse in his later novels. His use of myth, of a double narrative voice, of paired opposites, and of the love for and distrust of language is not yet as prominent and as radical as it will be, but this novel clearly points the way to what is to come.

Subsequent chapters will examine the realization of what these ea: novels portend. The remainder of this chapter, though, concerns itself with the first step into new territory. The Words of My Roaring is the first book in what Kroetsch refers to as the Out-West trilogy, or "triptych," a term he employs in an interview with Russell Brown (2). Along with The Studhorse Man and Gone Indian it forms not a chronological trilogy but a trio of narratives connected after the model of the John Hawkes statement cited above, linked by a totality of vision and structure, rather than sequentiality or common characters (although some characters and settings do recur). The first novel is set in the depression, the second at the close of World War Two, and the last in contemporary times. The vision that inspired the three is Kroetsch's desire to generate a mythos of the Canadian West. Kroetsch has said that "literature is myth-making as well as myth-using. We have to find a way to be myth-making" (Labyrinths 134), and it is with this novel that he begins the transition from the one to the other. He sees the myth-generating activity as typically Western Canadian: in delineating the mythos of the West he is

mirroring not just the characters and physical landscape of the West but the psychological readiness of Westerners to see themselves and their land in a mythic context. Responding to an interviewer's statement that "Central Canada speaks out of its sense of history but Western Canada speaks prophetically out of its sense of myth," Kroetsch says,

> The Canadian establishment has created, and is creating, our history. . . . Even the kind of religious activities in the West are symptomatic of a longing for a mythic resolution rather than a historical resolution. Social Credit with its quasi-religious basis was prophetic and did try to speak mythically. Curiously, even today with a fundamental reversal of economic power, the West refuses to see itself in the dominant position. . . . I don't think the West wants to move into a historical role. Myth is more exciting. . . . Leaders in the West have been prophetic and think in terms of hidden significance, of the mythic structures that underlie the moment.
>
> (Labyrinths 135)

John Judas Backstrom, the center of The Words of My Roaring, is a large figure in every sense. He is physically large, with an expansive spirit, excessive desire, and a joy of living that is matched only by his need to confront

death. The despair he wrestles with is as black as the joy that he feels is radiantly white. When he falls in love, he feels he could stop time, and when he finds he cannot, he suspects the validity of existence itself. He is not a man of small measures. He is given to periods of muteness, of inarticulate rage, confusion, desire, sorrow, pain. But when he does find a focus, an outlet for the pain, he does not so much speak as roar, adopting a biblical cadence for his speeches. As befitting his ambition, Backstrom is challenging the local establishment, the incumbent, Dr. Duncan Murdoch, in the upcoming election. Unable to respond to the wily jibes of his opponent, Backstrom instead offers the drought-stricken farmers rain. Regretting his prophecy as he speaks the words, Backstrom promises the voters rain before election day, and spends the next thirteen days electioneering, vacillating between a messianic belief in himself and a self-consuming doubt and self-contempt, settling somewhere between the two most of the time.

With Backstrom Kroetsch switches to first person narration for the first time, cutting Backstrom off from omniscience, necessarily rendering him unreliable. Perhaps not coincidentally, this is also the first of the novels in which the material is treated comically, in which the absurd, chance, and parodic elements of the material are given fuller play. It is also far more openly and consistently subversive of novelistic convention, more

daring than the earlier books. Kroetsch will signal a mythic context for characters, for example, by naming the object of Backstrom's extramarital affection Helen Persephone and specifically and directly identifying the garden of Helen Persephone with Eden. It is not a failure of imagination or subtlety that allows for such directness but an opening up of authorial and narrative roles so that the reader is let in on some of the jokes, some of the games. There are elements of game-playing involved in reading any novel, and Kroetsch is responding to an awareness of that aspect by foregrounding it. The game is no longer whether the reader can spot the classical allusions, since they are handed to him, but whether the connection the allusion suggests can be taken seriously, and for how long, and to what extent. By being opened up, the game becomes deeper and more complex, and, in Kroetsch's hands, funnier.

Speaking generally of how he rejected several approaches to the use of myth in literature before finding an approach appropriate to him, Kroetsch says the only avenues open to a writer are to be highly ironic or be parodic (Labyrinths 134). Reading Frazer's The Golden Bough early on in his career, Kroetsch was fascinated by the story-telling aspect of the myths recounted there, but consciously resisted using the book as a handbook to dip into as occasion warranted, just as he resisted "Freud's

reading of myth, or at least the kind of literary use made of Freud" (Labyrinths 89), as well as "Eliot's attempt to reassert myth, or the significance of myth. So early in my writing career I was pretty close to parody. I started off working at the parody level which is where you want to tell a story but you can't believe that there is only one assertable meaning in that story. You're left taking parody very seriously" (Labyrinths 89). This is the position that author, protagonist, and other characters adopt in The Words of My Roaring, and ultimately the reader must adopt it too. Prophecies are uttered and events of mythic importance occur, but initially even the prophet doubts his own words; by the close of the book, after passing through periods of absolute faith in his words, the prophet once again disbelieves them, but is now convinced at least of the importance, of the necessity, of uttering them.

As was observed in the Introduction, it is not the repeating of myth or story that is vital but the recasting of the story or myth by a new teller for a new culture, a new audience. In this way myth is prevented from becoming history: "myth is very frightening because it is entrapping. It is very powerful, but one way out is to retell it" (Labyrinths 96). Kroetsch notes his enjoyment of Ovid in this regard: "Ovid . . . is much more inclined to let the myths be, to let them do their own thing, than the highly interpretive psychoanalytic schools. . . . We have been

trained to coerce the material, and it's very hard not to do so" (Labyrinths 113). He makes a similar distinction between Modernist and Postmodernist attitudes toward myth: "the Modernist was tempted by the cohesive dimension of mythology while the Postmodernist is more tempted by those momentary insights that spring up here and there" (Labyrinths 112). Rather than a harmonized, cohesive and so, Kroetsch would say, coercive mythological basis to the novel one finds instead bits and pieces of myth, both new and old, some of which seem to adhere to the traditional interpretation of the mythic material, and some of which are used in an entirely parodic, inverting context. What is subverted most consistently in the parodic use of mythology is the existence of a final story, of a mythic union that would bring forth issue that would render further myth unnecessary. As I pointed out in the Introduction to this thesis, as a postmodernist, Kroetsch resists the Modernist belief in underlying pattern, in the possibility of finding a cohesive, consistent pattern into which the ragged fragments of life will fit. In his work, prophecies are made, and prophecied events come to pass, but they do not bring with them a final solution and so an end to prophecy. Mythologically charged unions do take place in mythic gardens of plenty, without resulting in mythic progeny. Despite the mythological import of much of what happens, very little actually changes. The hoped-for completion of

the pattern suggested by the mythical allusions does not materialize, but the life-affirming and hope-renewing practice of speaking mythically and prophesying is undiminished.

One of the central concerns of the novel is with the shamanistic power of the Voice, the power to tell things into existence. Backstrom tries to make clear that when he proclaimed that it would rain before election day he did not say that he would make it rain, only that it would rain (47), but just as the fiction makes us real, so the foretelling of the event gives it a solidity, a truth. It has been noted in connection with this novel that "Plausibility of event . . . is one of the conventions of realism that Kroetsch is moving away from" (Surette 10), and in the fictive world of the book it appears entirely possible for things to take place simply because a character says they will, or for the characters' actions to follow a pattern taken from classical mythology. But just as central to the book as the power of voice is the failure of that power, the parodic undercutting of the voice's assertions. Both in terms of the mythic patterns borrowed from classical models and the local Prairie mythology, the book is a series of assertions and denials, of patterns begun but left tantalizingly incomplete. Peter Thomas notes that "Any attempt to insist upon a single referential narrative, such as the Pluto-Demeter-Persephone archetype, must be forced.

It is more instructive to see his writings as inhabiting a symbolic field dominated by the paradoxical union of Eros and Thanatos. . ." (Robert Kroetsch 42). While it certainly is instructive to see the union of Eros and Thanatos in the background, since it is with this book that the inescapable connection Kroetsch draws between sex and death (because to create is to risk, or invite, destruction) is first featured prominently, it is not valid to suggest that the various mythic patterns remain incomplete because they are but parts of a larger mythic pattern; rather it is because, like any structures of words, they are incapable of containing the fullness and flux of reality, of human experience and emotion. By trying to force the novel into a pattern that is completed, Thomas appears to resist the possibility of a satisfying novel which does not complete the patterns it initiates. Kroetsch's subversive initiating and dropping or inverting or otherwise metamorphosing patterns is increasingly prominent in his novels up to What The Crow Said, the novel Thomas and other critics dismiss or attack as nearly incomprehensible. Both Thomas and Robert Lecker, in his book Robert Kroetsch, see the resolution of The Words of My Roaring as a victory of sorts of the Western mythic voice over Eastern history. Lecker writes, "If the book ends in ambivalence, if it trails off into ellipsis, it is because the end takes us back to the beginning of a story informed by the notion that 'chaos is the only order'" (46),

but the novel ends in ambivalence because its ending is ambivalent.

In interviews Kroetsch has made clear that he does not intend his novels to be pinned down to a unitary interpretation, and this novel does not demand such an interpretation of the reader. It is, I think, made clear that once Backstrom takes the place of the incumbent, Old Doc Murdoch, once he usurps his father-figure, he will become Murdoch and will necessarily cease to be an agent of chaos. And it is also made clear that Backstrom himself distrusts the power of the voice, of the mythos, and that the reader is encouraged to do so also. The novel is a series of set-ups and disappointments; whenever a mythic pattern is established which is to lead to regeneration and the voicing of the truth, it ends instead in death and confusion. There is no possibility of a single mythic view triumphing over the historical view because once the myth is spoken and accepted as fact, it becomes a form of history. Once the rain falls, it is regarded as a concrete truth that Backstrom brought the rain, just as the limiting vision Backstrom has of Murdoch concretizes into the truth, although Backstrom becomes aware of its falseness as they ride back together from Gunn's farm. As is the case throughout Kroetsch's work, the story must be continually re-told; the speaking becomes the spoken, and new speaking must issue forth again. Backstrom is uncomfortable at being

reminded of his prophecy because it has taken on the rigidity of a promise. Once out of his mouth, it is no longer his, no longer a part of the flux of experience, but is instead as graven in stone. Backstrom, like the novel, is continually torn by the old dualities, the confusion of "beginnings and endings" (7, 125, 184), by the conflict between the safety of silence and the need to speak. He is, as he says of the other, more timid, characters, "Afraid of the pain, afraid of the cure" (23), the cure being either the ultimate silence of death or the challenging of death by speaking out. He is possessed of a larger ego and so is slightly more willing than the other characters to be convinced of any one position, to take one side of the duality and assert its primacy. But whatever position he assumes, however convinced he is of its rightness at the moment, the moment always passes and he is left in doubt again.

John Judas Backstrom's very name suggests the divided nature of his personality. The name is likely a nod to Gabriel Oak in Hardy's Far From The Madding Crowd, whose "features adhered throughout their form so exactly to the middle line between the beauty of St. John and the ugliness of Judas Iscariot" (55); as was noted earlier, Kroetsch says he would like to be Hardy, and in crafting Backstrom and the novel he may be echoing Hardy's use of paired opposites to describe characters and events in his novel. Backstrom is,

as Kenneth W. Graham has suggested, "both John and Judas, the one who loves and the one who betrays" (180). Graham also points out the tension between self and community that manifests itself in Backstrom, who tries to "stay an uninvolved picaro, but becomes the focus of communities' hopes" (179). But again, the transformation is not complete, the metamorphosis never ends; Backstrom continues to vacillate between the extremes of self and community, between silence and speech, between life and death, between history and myth, throughout the novel, and I see no basis for proposing that the vacillation ends when the novel does.

Men are all, like Backstrom, "victims of a story that tells us to be heroes" (Labyrinths 179); to escape that story, Kroetsch says, one "can tell stories which either make us heroes or apologize for our failure. I think Backstrom's doing both. . . " (179). He moves from believing he can be a hero, the messiah for his community, to retreating into selfishness to escape the pressure and unmeetable expectations of heroism, from believing that the words of his roaring can save them and knowing that they cannot. He identifies himself to the reader in terms of silence: "Silence is my business. I deal in silence; and its prologue, sorrow" (23). His role as the town's only real undertaker opposes him to Doc Murdoch, who is responsible for bringing most of the townspeople into the world. The points of opposition between Murdoch and

Backstrom are drawn so firmly that they add to the illusion of resolution at the end of the novel. Murdoch is wealthy, from the East, respected, sober, a life-giver, endlessly patient and helpful, powerful, eloquent, and learned; Backstrom is poor, Western, an admitted and well-known hellion and drinker, dependent upon death for his living, impatient and often selfish, powerless, awkward with words, and relatively ignorant. Throughout the book and at its close we witness not the victory of Backstrom's crude but ultimately powerful and vital virtues over the established but lifeless qualities of Murdoch, but rather Backstrom's growing realization of how false and restrictive the imagined opposition is. He has had the image of Doc as unbeatable, powerful, tireless, privileged, disapproving, and opposed to him; in the carriage ride they share from the Gunn's farm after the death of the baby there (an image of the union of birth and death, the transposing of roles), Backstrom discovers that Doc is, or can be, beatable, weak, tired, and very much in Backstrom's corner. Murdoch realizes first him that the rain had come too late to ensure a bumper crop. Backstrom's surprise at that and his discovery that Doc did not have a priveleged youth in the East throws his opposition of himself and Murdoch into confusion and drains his now assured election victory of virtually all of its symbolic or mythic weight. As he repeats, "I had nothing to do with the rain" (192); the

victory no longer holds the greater metaphoric meaning of the victory of the prophetic voice of the West over the history of the East. It becomes a matter of merest chance. And, to reiterate Kroetsch's conception of the comic vision, it is that vision which gives full due to the role of chance and absurdity in our lives. The Words of My Roaring, then, is Kroetsch's first truly comic novel.

Backstrom often complains of being speechless, of words failing him, and especially of being unable to speak when he needs to. He is unable to speak in response to Murdoch's jibes at the town meeting at the beginning of the novel until he is inspired into prophecy by his inarticulateness. The death of his friend, Jonah Bledd, and the ache of his conscience over it, compel him to talk, but he cannot; later, he realizes how futile the talking would have been anyway: "I knew it wouldn't matter a good goddamn if I answered questions all night" (74). Finally, the need to talk grows in him--"A compulsion to talk was storming inside me" (75)--not for the most part because he believes it will do any general good, but because it will do him good: "I had found a way to let the pain out. . . . Words were in me, knocking to be let out. Pain was in me, and I let out the pain" (86). He grows dissatisfied with the prophetic voice of Applecart, the leader of his political party, yelling at the voice on the radio, "for the love of bloody Christ, don't just talk! Do something for a change" (93).

Nevertheless, after he punches and so silences the radio, Backstrom still believes in the possibility of his own voice, in the possibility of defining and communicating the "truth." He determines, heroically, to "Get up and tell everybody, speak out, stand up straight like a man and shout, tell the goddam truth for a change. For five minutes tell the goddam truth" (97). Backstrom heads for the rodeo to do that.

In both "Carnival and Violence: A Meditation" and Alberta, Kroetsch identifies the role of rituals in the spirit of carnival in Western Canada. In the former he quotes Bakhtin in saying "the carnival celebrated liberation from the prevailing truth and from established order" (111) and goes on to say that in rural Western Canada "a trace of carnival . . . was vital and alive. We measured time by wedding dances and sports days and rodeos" (120); in the latter he writes of the Stampede as "a ritual release from middle-class bondage" (78) and notes that during Edmonton's Klondike Days the pinnacle is achieved in "that precious and ultimate moment when the Klondiker . . . puts on his costume . . . . In putting on a costume we abandon our old identities. . . . We are freed, liberated" (143). At the rodeo, Backstrom watches as the costumed rodeo clown is gored by the bull; he reaches the clown first, and the clown "kept trying to say something to me, a perfect stranger, but he couldn't make it" (108). Kenneth Graham notes that

"Johhny is forever meeting himself in other forms" (181), and clearly Backstrom meets himself in the clown, entertaining the crowds with his challenge of death, his mute cry at the moment of death. The revelatory meeting, along with the carnival atmosphere, gives Backstrom the voice to speak: "All my pain came out of me right there, and I spoke to a lot of people. . . . I didn't so much speak as roar" (108). His speech begins with a fairly close imitation of the style of Aberhart, the Social Credit leader in Alberta during the Depression on whom Applecart is modelled, and he wins over the crowd and convinces himself with his oratory. After his speech he is overwhelmed with hospitality and free food and drink, but the most characteristic moment comes when it is all over: "And let me tell you the saddest part--in the end it was the same story once again" (114)--nothing has changed. Backstrom finds the same lack of final answers in the end of his chief other solace, drinking: "I took one mammoth swallow and as usual found nothing in the glass but its bottom" (120). Despite the watershed speech at the rodeo, words still fail him, and he notes that he could never be a doctor like Murdoch because "I couldn't have given a name to what I knew" (150). He resolves that "There are two things a man should never open: his fly, his mouth" (191), making explicit the connection between the two acts. He remains caught up in "the contradiction that is man; the mind that wrestles with

bleak despair, the spirit that soars" (31). His spirit may soar into the realm of prophecy and lend him a voice, but the bleak despair the mind wrestles with returns as he falls silent again. The carnival atmosphere and the prophetic mode it engenders cannot be sustained.

The novel is structured around the rituals of the town. Beginning with the town meeting that opens it, the book passes through an auction, a stampede, a fair, Jonah's funeral, the dance and following square dance, a ritual of rebirth with Helen in the garden, memories of Backstrom's marriage ceremony, the birth and death of a child, the final town meeting. Each ceremony we witness is fraught with possibility and hope; each ends in some way in failure. Making love with Helen in the explicitly Edenic garden, a transplanted and isolated piece of the East, Backstrom feels as though "nothing at all mattered; nothing" (136), and the ritualistic dipping into the pool in the garden makes him feel he has found solace at last. But, "out there in the garden with Helen, I wanted to reach up and stop the old world from spinning. I simply wanted to stop time right there and say, 'Helen, I regret to say the sun will not come up this morning.' But it always did" (157). Also, in terms of the borrowed and blatant mythological basis, if Backstrom ("The undertaker. The taker under himself" (142), Pluto to Murdoch's Demeter--a confusion of gender that occurs in _The Studhorse Man_) takes Helen Persephone out of the garden,

achieving the regeneration he hopes for, he condemns Murdoch to a desolate winter: "She is all I have left. At least remember that much, Johnnie" (203). Pluto's return of Persephone from the underworld also signals the arrival of spring and fertility, which comes to the Prairies in the form of the prophecied rain. At the auction, Backstrom makes great headway with the crowd, but his meeting with another double, the foolish and unwashed prophet, leads him to bid a disastrously high price for a car. His own wedding dance was held up by his drunkenness, then started without him until he was carried in by six men--the confusion of beginnings and endings, the linking of love and death, once again made apparent. With Jonah's funeral, Backstrom might find the resolution and solace he had sought on the shore of the pond where he first mourned the death, but the empty coffin instead raises more doubts: "Existence itself had earned suspicion" (139).

Despite the constant reversals and setbacks, though, Backstrom's ego and extravagant mortality ("I've got more mortality than other people" (161)) allow him to go on hoping and dreaming. Contemplating his chosen profession and the alluring effect it has on women, he meditates on the nature of desire and its relationship to death. He remembers a youthful disagreement with Jonah. Arguing about how best to avoid a "futile demonstration of desire" (143) while in church, Jonah had said that praying helps: "Pray be

damned, I said, let it rage, let it roar. Let it send the buttons flying" (143). And still, in full maturity, "Life is short, my body cried. So live, it said. Live, live. Rage, roar" (144). His desire, he feels, cannot and should not be contained, cannot be dismissed with a few prayers. Backstrom is too large a personage for the established verities, and so sometimes feels that the wrath of god is directly upon him, as in the scene in church and during his hangover. But he also sometimes feels that he is large enough to be a hero, a messiah. After earning unexpected praise and support from his wife, Backstrom muses, "One man could redeem the whole country; not twenty, not ten, but one" (180), and he believes at times that he is that one good man.

The Words of My Roaring is a celebration of the contradiction that is man, the mind that wrestles with despair and the spirit that soars, and Backstrom and the human condition remain as much in a contradictory state at the close of the book as at its opening. The new guard has replaced the old, but lest this beginning be confused with an ending, it is clear that nothing has changed, that Backstrom is on the same path that Murdoch had trod before him. Backstrom is thirty-three as he begins his new life, the same age Murdoch was when he left medical school and headed East, and of course, the age Christ was when he was crucified. Backstrom will be sacrificing his self for the

community just as Murdoch had. On the way back from the Gunn's Doc notes that the rain will ensure a crop but not a bumper crop, "just enough to hope on. . . . That's the main thing" (199). Admitting the truth of what Murdoch says, he can't help but think, "What a dismal view of existence . . . " (199), still clinging to the heroic impulse that the knowledge his assured election victory first brings him. There is enough to hope, enough to allow the spirit once in a while to soar in spite of, or even because of, the bleak despair with which the mind must wrestle.

Chapter IV:

The Studhorse Man: Inventing the West

The Studhorse Man, published in 1970, marks sharply Kroetsch's departure from traditional realism: his abandonment of the strictures of realism, the demands of probability, the tyranny of unitary vision. It is with this book that the focus of the novel becomes at least as much the problematic narration as the story itself, and in which it is all but impossible to know what "really" happens. It is a clear step away from the narrative model of his early works towards the even more open and challenging forms he will employ later. In part to explain his radicalization of form with this novel, Kroetsch notes that "when I was in England writing The Studhorse Man, I was having my first encounter with South American fiction" (Labyrinths 177), an encounter that had a profound effect on his thinking and writing. In spite of the many points of difference, he found a common ground between Spanish-American and Canadian writers: "Like the Spanish-American writers . . . we recognize that we can be freed into our lives only by terrible and repeated acts of perception. We are envious of the huge, ragged, contradictory visions of Borges or Marquez or Fuentes or Llosa or Cortazar" ("Beyond Nationalism" 84). The Studhorse Man is the novel with which Kroetsch moves into the realm explored by the Spanish-American writers,

creating a "huge, ragged, contradictory vision" in his effort, imaginatively, and so truthfully (the fiction makes it real), to render the Canadian West. In "The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues," Kroetsch writes of the task of the Canadian writer, "The mapping. The naming. The unlearning so that we might learn: the <u>un</u>named country. How to see the vision, how to imagine the real" (30), unlearning by breaking free of what Kroetsch sees as the restrictive and limiting falsehoods of history and realistic fiction. Freeing both the author and the reader about what history tells us is true and what the conventions of realism allow the author to write makes it possible to present the unnamed, undiscovered country, that part of existence which does not enter into the history books and the part of the story that does not get told in the traditional novel. It is necessary, Kroetsch realizes, to discard the limited stories allowed by history and realism only to replace them with new, different versions, which also will be unable to present the full story, an impossible task. The difference between the official histories Kroestch objects to and the imaginative postmodern fiction he opposes to them is not veracity, but self-awareness: his fiction, like all fiction, consists of lies, but Kroetsch is aware of its lies, revels in them, while realistic fiction and, in a different way, history denies falsification, sweeps the issue under the carpet. Kroetsch does not dislike history as a concept--he

has even written a book, <u>Alberta</u>, that is in part a history --but is bothered by the 'official' history, what is identified in <u>The Studhorse Man</u> and elsewhere as Eastern history. The official history leaves too much out, too many people out; Western Canadians, women, Indians, all become marginalized or even invisible in that version of the story. As Kroetsch has said and written often, he wishes to write the fiction that will make these invisible people real, that will give body to their experience.

There is in <u>The Studhorse Man</u> a conflict between the rigidity and falsifying unitariness of the biography being prepared by Demeter Proudfoot and the open, accepting, imaginative but indirectly rendered story-telling of Hazard Lepage; Demeter seeks to transform Hazard's experience into history, but the experience refuses to be captured time and again. Since Demeter narrates the novel, we know only what he tells us of Hazard, but it is readily apparent that despite--or because of--Demeter's precise, scholarly approach and insistence on the 'truth,' his attempts to render Hazard's story more palatable, polite, and rational than it was are more falsifying than any of the incredible tales we get from Hazard through Demeter. Kroetsch has written often of what he, with others, refers to as an archaeological, rather than an historical, approach to recreating experience. This distinction will be dealt with more fully in the discussion of <u>Badlands</u>, but of primary

importance is what Kroetsch sees as the open, violent nature of literary archaeology, which destroys and resists any illusion of continuity or unitary vision. Of course, actual physical archaeology is typically employed in much the same manner as the official histories: the discovered evidence is pieced together into a whole, the pieces of the puzzle are fitted together, sometimes falsely or incompletely. To Kroetsch, though, literary archaeology can be directly opposed to the historical approach, and what he sees as the violence inherent in the archaeological process prevents the kinds of falsehood he associates with history. "Archaeology, of necessity, involves violence--the uncovering of past lives. That uncovering . . . involves as well the acceptance of the discontinuity of form. The continuity asserted by history is beyond, lies beyond, the truth of fiction" ("The Exploding Porcupine" 60). It is "an archaeology that challenges the authenticity of history by saying there can be no joined story, only abrupt guesswork, juxtaposition, flashes of insight" ("For Play and Entrance" 93). Kroetsch says in his interview with Russell Brown that he was interested in capturing the process of this archaeological discovery, this uncovering, unlearning of known possibilities and learning of new possibilities. In Canada, he says, "You're literally discovering your landscape, literally discovering your myth--like the narrator in The Studhorse Man, seeing the possibilities in

the studhorse man, Hazard Lepage" (7). Further, in "A Conversation with Margaret Laurence," Kroetsch indicates that his departure from traditional novelistic techniques is a move away from realism but not from reality. As a Western Canadian he feels he is "involved in making a new literature out of a new experience. As I explore that experience, trying to make both inward and outward connections, I see new possibilities for the story-teller. In the process I have become somewhat impatient with certain traditional kinds of realism, because I think there is a more profound kind available to us" (53). The traditional realism cannot recreate the new experience, which instead demands a new form as open and flexible as the nature of the new experience, the uncovering of a new landscape. The new landscape is the old landscape still, but with the surface stripped off so that it can be seen as if for the first time. The difference is akin to the need of European writers to find a new language to describe a literally new landscape when they first tried to write of North America, but the landscape in Kroetsch's work is new in being reclaimed from the margins of the history texts in a language and a form rooted in the local particulars of place.

As with the previous novels, despite the move into non-realistic, clearly postmodern fiction, Kroetsch does not abandon or pretend to be able to ignore literary tradition

in writing The Studhorse Man. Instead, he both uses the literary tradition and subverts it, again asserting that parody is the dominant mode of serious Twentieth Century fiction. "I'm both using conventions and subverting them: you have to hear the double thing" (Labyrinths 176). The "double thing" allows Kroetsch to remain connected with tradition, to remain understandable, while operating outside the tradition, undercutting it to demonstrate its inadequacies.

Most of the standard aspects of Kroetsch's novels are present again in The Studhorse Man, but many are more clearly defined, more apparent. The use of myth, of course, is central to the book, and Kroetsch again adopts traditional mythical models, primarily Homer's Odyssey, and makes them his own, reinventing the myth in reinventing the West. What serves as a frontier landscape, the action taking place on the edge of civilization, at the edge of order and reason, is consistent with the choice of World War Two Alberta as the setting. Kroetsch exaggerates the wildness and uncivilized state of the actual setting. This Alberta is a frontier not so much in being unsettled or backward or wild but in terms of being on the border between the civilized and the natural, the domesticated and the wild. Much of the wildness in the setting is the wildness that Hazard Lepage brings to it. A related aspect of the conflict of civilization and wilderness on the frontier is

the conflict between male and female, as manifested by the house : horse dichotomy enunciated by Kroetsch in "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space." "To be on a horse is to move. . . . To be in a house is to be fixed. . . . Horse is masculine. House is feminine" (49). The male, although he desires to enter the house, fears it also, fears the fixity, and has "defined himself out of all entering" (55), has a vision of self as questing male that will not allow him to enter without abandoning himself entirely. "The love of woman that has traditionally shaped the novel . . . is violently rivalled by a fear of woman as the figure who contains the space, who speaks the silence" (49). Hazard, having left his own ill-kept stable of a house to begin his quest, resists various temptations offered by several women with differing degrees of success, and whenever he does succumb to temptation and enters a house, there is an accompanying sense of abandonment of self. The women take charge of him, and his quest is deflected or forgotten, especially at Marie Eshpeter's ranch, where Hazard's abandonment of his quest leads Demeter to assume it for him. Woman is always, like everything else in Kroetsch, double, always the attractive, enticing siren and the controlling, terrible mother.

One reason the dichotomies which characterize Kroetsch's work are more clearly defined than ever in this novel is that he planned and worked toward achieving that

definition. It is apparent from the preliminary notes for the novel that Kroetsch put a great deal of preparation into shaping the novel, both structurally and thematically, as a series of dualities. Working fairly loosely from the model of the _Odyssey_, he structures a series of parallel events and characters, using the wedding Hazard and Utter attend as the centerpiece, the point at which Hazard begins his journey home. For instance, he maps out Hazard's quest in terms of the men and the women he meets as he sets out on his quest and then as he returns home:

women he meets

1. Circe/man into beast [P. Cockburn]
2. old nun [Home for Incurables]
3. mother--unthinking maternal impulse widow [Mrs. Lank]

Wedding (two children--original sin, expulsion)

1. Calypso/Eve [Marie Eshpeter]
2. Housekeeper--Magdalene (lust and religion) [Mrs. Laporte]
3. Tilly Martha? [Martha Proudfoot]

"Men He Meets":

1. The Buyer [Tad Proudfoot]

6. The furnace man [Home for Incurables]

9. windbag [Utter]

Wedding--persecuter in nightmare [Tad Proudfoot]

11. hunters [wolf hunt]

13. priest [Father Lockner]

16. --suitors [men joking about Martha in bar]

(27.10.1)

There is also a list of the dualities Poseidon embodies:

horse's body is perfect

paradoxes he is trying to resolve in his perfect horse

spirit + obedience

form + freedom

paradoxes of art

determinism + freedom

creation + destruction

combining absolute idealism and the absolute animal--or trying to.

(27.10.1)

These dualities manifest themselves throughout the book in a manner that has been carefully mapped out, chapter by chapter and incident by incident. In spite of the careful planning made evident by these notes, though, Kroetsch was equally careful in avoiding a too carefully planned, too inflexibly stru tured, novel. Throughout the preliminary notes, plans, and initial manuscript drafts, there are two underlined reminders to himself that Kroetsch interjects often. The first is "The Voice" (27.10.1), a reminder to listen for the authentic tone and tenor of the material, to

listen past the details and the elaborate planning and historical models and factual research for the essence of the story _as_ story. Kroetsch tells Margaret Laurence about the composition of this novel that "I fall back on paradox again--you've got to be absolutely self-concious, self-aware; and yet you are absolutely at the mercy of the muse" ("Conversation with Margaret Laurence" 58); beyond the planning and structuring the story has a voice that must be heeded. In particular, it is a reminder that much of the story is rooted in the bar talk, the oral element of the novel, the living voices that are opposed to Demeter's attempt to render what is said into proper, grammatical, refined language. The second note to himself is similar in intent. "_Let go_ !!!!" (27.10.1) is encouragement to push the material further, to test the limits of the novel and create a ctional world beyond the precepts of probability. There is a brief note concerning the scene in which the Indian emerges from the water with Poseidon's progenitor that suggests the nature of the "more profound" kind of realism Kroetsch strives to achieve; he writes that he has no objection to something being as if in a dream so long it is like a _real_ dream (27.10.1).

The story is a dual one. On the primary level, it presents the quest of Hazard Lepage, the studhorse man, to find a mare for his blue stallion, Poseidon, so that the breed can be propagated. The frame narrative, though, at

least as important, is the tale of the narrator, Demeter Proudfoot, who tells the tale from a bathtub in the insane asylum to which he has been confined. Once again, there are two narrative presences. There is Demeter's first person explication of Hazard's life, rife with interpretation and arbitrary selection of events, and there is the suggested, implied narrative of what Demeter leaves out, implied by the events he interprets, by the details he cannot explain or provide, and by the occasional glimpse of what Hazard appears to have actually said, contrasting with Demeter's refinement of his remarks. Demeter continually provides information he could not possibly have, such as the content of Hazard's inner thoughts, all supposedly gleaned in afternoon chats at the Eshpeter ranch. The reader is continually reminded of Demeter's unreliability, of the impossibility of his knowing what he contends he knows, and of the falseness of the account's pretense to completeness. Kroetsch wants his readers to be aware of the sort of game they are playing, wants them to know that as an author he is necessarily making choices about what parts of the story are included and how the story will be told, as Demeter does, although Demeter tries to deny the impossibility of finding the single 'truth' about Hazard and his quest.

In the fictional world of the novel, a piece of raw experience, Hazard's travels, is transformed into a meaningful quest replete with symbolic resonance and

metaphorical weight by the author's selection of information, the narrator's interpretation of that information, and the reader's participation in further interpretation. The reader both observes and partakes in interpretive acts, and the problematical interpretations of Demeter remind the reader how potentially biased, relativistic, and uncertain the act of interpreting is. Kroetsch makes clear time and again that we have no way of knowing what happened, of knowing whether any reported incident actually occurred, and no way of knowing whether the interpretation of that incident, actual or not, is an appropriate one. The degree to which the reader is at the mercy of the author, and by the same token, the degree to which the reader's interpretive powers determine the significance of the novel, is central to its narrative strategies. We are able, for instance, to decide that one of Demeter's reports is flawed, but we cannot correct it for ourselves without a further, equally tenuous, act of interpretation. And often, we have even less information to interpret since Demeter does not pass along very much raw data. He notes early on that

> While a biographer must naturally record, he must also, of necessity, be interpretive upon occasion. I have in my possession, for instance, notes on Hazard's dreams. . . . Yet those notes are without significance until we probe them for

invisible meanings. (18)

For all his pretense to objectivity, Demeter has a bias. Most of what we know of the 'real' story is inadvertently or dismissively introduced by Demeter, and our interpretation of the material is colored, and rendered even more necessary, by an awareness of his unreliability.

The emphasis on Demeter's unreliability as a narrator and on the necessity for the reader to interpret what he claims is true and accurate foregrounds the active intepretive role of the reader. The acts of interpretation made in discerning meaning and order in any text are often taken for granted and may be almost unconscious in reading a text that conforms to traditional expectations of the realist novel, but in a novel that violates or parodies those traditions the intepretive acts are brought to light. None of the incidents in the book have any fixed symbolic or metaphoric meaning but are actions intended to achieve a particular aim: that Hazard sells bones means only that he needs money to buy a mare to propagate the species until the intepretive powers of the narrator and the reader read significance and irony into the action--we read meaning into it, we do not find it there. The novel stresses the pervasiveness of this need for interpretation against the backdrop of Hazard's obsessive (we are told) fear of history, of that coercive, restricting account of experience. Although it is his "poetry and philosophy" (9),

Hazard is maddened by the histories of the horses contained in the General Stud Book because the unchanging, unfailingly brief histories of the life and death of the horses remind him of the inevitability and possible ultimate failure of his own quest, given the difference between the situation in his time and the situation when the Stud Book was collected, before "screwing [went]. . . out of style" (11). (That is, Demeter indicates that Hazard hates the histories, and that is my interpretation of his interpretation). In these brief geneological entries, birth always leads to death; there is no possibility for Hazard's dreamed-of immortality; he can read his own mortality in the horses' and see the impossibility of severing the dualities of life and death, creation and destruction. He reacts to the form of the entries recording the birth of a foal out of a particular "dam" by cursing, "god damn the damned" (10). He desires to free himself from the unvarying cycle of birth and death: "He denied the past" (10). With those words Demeter sets up the opposition between Hazard, the active, flexible evader of history, and Demeter, the still and stiff recorder of history: "and there I sat, pencil in hand, notebook on my lap, already devoting my life to the making of his present into history" (10).

This central duality, of course, mirrors the dilemma of Kroetsch as author. Does an author solidify experience into truth, as Demeter believes he should? Or does he fabricate

his own vision out of experience, no matter what the experience, by channeling everything he sees through the mirror of self, as Demeter does? Or does he free up truth by allowing it an open field to play in, by creating numerous stories, numerous, endless truths, fathering a family of truths, as Hazard (perhaps) and Poseidon father offspring? It would seem that Kroetsch aims for the last goal, aware of both of the first named tendencies, acknowledging and allowing for them.

The novel begins with what becomes increasingly the central paradox of Kroetsch's work, the closeness, interchangeability, almost identity, of life and death, creation and destruction. Hazard's quest is in the name of life and creation--he seeks a mare to propagate Poseidon's species--but his search begins in the place of death. He digs a six-foot hole in a pile of sun-bleached bones which can be sold for the wherewithal to purchase a mare. The very goal of his quest, the mare, also signals this paradox. The mare is necessary to ensure the continuance of Poseidon's species, and the necessity of preserving that particular strain of existence comes to represent the procreative, creative urge itself. Early on, Hazard bemoans the state of the world: "Whoever thought. . . that screwing would go out of style? But it did, it is" (11); the very urge to commit the procreative act, a biological verity, is in question. But while Poseidon's potency and the search

for a mare represent the hope for a continuance of this necessary function, the search for the mare also takes on a punning parallel aspect. Hazard has been warned to beware of water, that the sea will be his death: "La mer sera votre meurtriere" (12). The mare which promises Hazard's redemption and the mer which promises his death are both the object of his quest. He searches for life and for death; he cannot search for life without courting death, cannot assert creation without inviting destruction. As with the many paired opposites in operation in this novel, one aspect is never allowed to assert primacy, one element is never allowed to exist in isolation without the presence of its contrary.

In the bone fight that follows Tad Proudfoot's insulting of Hazard, Hazard's inability to control Poseidon, who comes to represent Hazard's own procreative, sexual urge, mirrors Hazard's control of that urge. In the midst of the ensuing chaos, Poseidon lunges at a mare: "Hazard was carried along, still trying to control, still trying to guide" (17). Throughout the novel, although he makes periodic attempts of differing intensity to rein in his urges, for the most part Hazard is simply carried along. In the midst of the pile of bones in which he lapses into unconsciousness, Hazard perceives in the bones the flesh (in a scene presumably echoic of Eliot's "Whispers of Immortality": "Webster was much possessed by death/And saw

the skull beneath the skin;/And breastless creatures under ground/Leaned backward with a lipless grin" (1-4). Hazard "was embracing the bones, gently, blindly embracing the hard bones, reaming the flesh, embracing already a dreamed woman, the soft breasts of Martha. . . " (17). Martha Proudfoot is the Penelope from whom Hazard is straying in his Odyssey, as opposed to Marie Eshpeter's Calypso. She is also, as the Biblical precedent suggests, at least in part the long-suffering, domestic influence, as opposed to Marie (Mary) Eshpeter's overflowing and unquestioning love. In his notes Kroetsch identifies Martha as "English-Canada personified. The simplicity + the complexity," and Marie as "witch/poltergeist/Calypso/Eve . . . . promise of immortality, of wealth" (27.10.1). Martha is the other goal of his divided quest, since it is partly to gain enough money to marry her that Hazard is journeying, but it takes very little in the way of circumstance or opportunity to lead him further from that goal. The twin objects of his quest are incompatible; the attaining of one would be the loss of the other. As he embraces the "dreamed woman," he dreams also the message he sends to Martha, explaining why he isn't embracing her: "CANNOT GET AWAY AM IN COFFIN VERY SORRY REGARDS HAZARD" (19).

The search for la mer and the mare are always coincident, very nearly the same thing. As explicated earlier, the fear of domesticity is also a fear of death,

the death of the male self, so Hazard avoids that death by delaying his return home. But he faces instead the death of the failure to engage in the community, to take his place in the continuance of the whole. The journey itself takes on this simultaneously dual nature of moving towards death and life, and of avoiding death and life, simultaneously. Kroetsch's opposition of house and horse dictates that the house is still, stultifying, enclosing, while the horse is active, free, and quintessentially male. Nevertheless, to travel, to set forth from the house, is to move toward death--the first step of the journey presupposes the last. Hazard, who lives in an abandoned mansion--he escapes even the domesticating burden of ownership--is so far from being domesticated that he keeps seven beds so that he can change beds instead of sheets. His horses share the house with him; the horse : house opposition is seemingly in balance, both coexisting. Hazard "felt secure in his old house; it was the road he feared--travel" (11). He fears travel in part because of his predicted demise but also because it upsets the balance he has achieved. Stasis is another temptation to Hazard, one in which he indulges on Marie Eshpeter's ranch, for example, but the sexual impulse pulls him out of static conditions, frees him from the inertia that holds him.

The sexual, creative urge, like the quest, is divided along the lines of the horse : house dichotomy as well: the

relatively free, untethered man as stud or the social man as husband and father. Each part of the quest brings Hazard toward a kind of death; each also represents the opportunity to create life, and the wish to depart from each into a life of stasis is both strong and impossible. Even Hazard's full name, in what Kroetsch maintains is a happy accident, suggests both sides of the horse : house, male : female, chaos : order, self : community, English : French dichotomies. Hazard suggests the random, often senseless, chaotic and potentially fatal action of the masculine world; Lepage, as in Lepage's glue, suggests instead the solidity, the cohesive binding of community, of domesticity, of the female world.

Poseidon, the manifestation of Hazard's desire to develop the perfect horse, is also a manifestation of Hazard's own duality, the warring contraries that battle for his attention both within and without. As was pointed out earlier, in his notes for the novel Kroetsch indicates that Hazard is trying to resolve a series of paradoxes by creating his perfect stallion. The oppositions of spirit and obedience, form and freedom, determinism and freedom, creation and destruction are combined in the overriding paradox: "combining absolute idealism and the absolute animal--or trying to" (27.10.1). Hazard is a "character obsessed with the realization that wisdom comes after the height of power is past. . . . rotten before we are ripe"

(27.10.1), and his journey consists of vacillations between a peaceful acceptance of the futility of his quest and the fervent belief in the urgency and validity of it.

In a statement similar to his comments on the nature of the North in the Canadian imagination, Kroetsch identifies the image of journey as vacillation as typically Canadian and linked to genealogy as a form of narrative. "Genealogy is a primary form of narrative. Begat begat begat" ("Beyond Nationalism" 83). Kroetsch notes the many Canadian novels that have centered on a quest for origin, but points out that "The nature of the genealogical patterns, when tested by journey and quest, becomes more and more elaborate, more nearly a maze. . . . There is no single source; rather, a multiplying of possibilities" (83).

> Canadian writing takes place between the vastness of (closed) cosmologies and the fragments found in the (open) field of the archaeological site. It is a literature of dangerous middles. It is a literature that, compulsively seeking its own story. . . . comes compulsively to a genealogy that refuses origin, to a genealogy that speaks instead, and anxiously, and with a generous reticence, the nightmare and welcome dream of Babel. (89)

Hazard's quest for the perfect horse is the search for the single origin, the desire for a closed system, a linear

genealogy, a resolution of contraries. But the quest is often interrupted by those interludes in which the nightmare chaos of Babel becomes instead the comforting dream, the release from constricting cosmologies, freedom from the need for the quest. As Kroetsch points out, The Studhorse Man is "a re-examination of the very notion of the quest story. We realize most of us aren't on quests; male literature said we were on quests" (Labyrinths 34).

Most of the main story elements as well as the central oppositions that propel the story are established in the first few pages. We learn quickly that Hazard dislikes travel, in part because he fears the sea, because of a gypsy's prophecy, and that he is obliged to travel because of Poseidon. Two things bear observing at this point, the identification of water with imagination and the significance of the horse's name. A note on the manuscript reinforces an identification made previously by Kroetsch and many others: "water=imagination" (27.10.1). Hazard's attraction to and fear of water concerns itself by extension with the fluidity, flexibility, freedom of the imagination and the potentially fatal chaos they promote. Again the central dilemma in Kroetsch is that to choose freedom, to enter the waters of the imagination, is to court imprisonment, just as the urge to create leads inexorably to destruction. By the same token, though, to avoid those waters is to face imprisonment in silence. Hazard enters

the water to help rescue Poseidon's progenitor, and what is his reward? He acquires Poseidon, who represents (among many things) the creative, sexual urge. In effect, his creative impulses are freed up, but the end of this opening is a closing. He finds himself tied to Poseidon, feeling his obligation to the animal like chains. Which brings us to the second point mentioned above.

The naming of the horse, as well as the Homeric shape Kroetsch has Demeter impose on the narrative, are designed to call up The Odyssey and its quest as an ironic counterpoint to Hazard's. In the epic poem, Poseidon is the figure who maliciously prevents Odysseus from returning home, keeping him instead imprisoned on Poseidon's domain, the sea. Hazard is similarly constrained by his Poseidon, the blue stallion also a creature of the sea. He is obliged to journey to find mates for Poseidon, but also for himself. He refers to both his stallion and his penis as "old Blue." Hazard is a slave also to his own sexual desire, stopping on his journey at various islands, pockets of domesticity, where against his better judgement he remains until events or frustration drive him forth again. The end of the journey, as with that of Odysseus, is the domesticity, the resumption of responsibility, the union he both fears and desires with Martha Proudfoot. The various and opposing aspects of Poseidon and Hazard's avoidance and pursuit of the end to which Poseidon is taking him are manifested also

in the nicknames Hazard has for the stallion (or at least, that Demeter tells us Hazard has): "He variously snortened the true name to Posse or Poesy or Pussy" (11). The entrapping aspect of the first, the genteel suggestion of literary creativity in the second, and the crude suggestion of sexuality in the third all suggest Hazard's split view of the creative, imaginative impulse.

That Demeter distinguishes between these variations and the "true name" is an indication of his precision as a biographer; he is careful to observe the niceties of the craft, sometimes preserving a more pristine picture for posterity than the subject ever presented in real life. Quoting Hazard's description of a prairie wind as being full of "mares and spring," Demeter's artistic conscience will not let that pass:

> Already I find myself straying from mere facts. I distort. I must control a certain penchant for gentleness and beauty. Hazard did not say "mares and spring." We were chatting together on the ranch here finally I caught up with him and he said in his crude way, "That raw bitch of a wind was full of crocuses and snatch." (12)

So the opposition of Demeter and Hazard, of the rigid historian and the elusive, uncooperative subject he seeks to entrap, is also set up early in the book. Their relationship mirrors in a way the tension demonstrated in

Poseidon between the ideal and the animal. Demeter seeks to create an ideal, a representation that mythologizes Hazard, transforms him into a heroic figure, while Hazard remains his crude, often animalistic self. Jonathan Swift's famous emendation of the idea that man is a rational animal--he is instead an animal capable of reason--describes Hazard well, while Demeter is a man so possessed of rationality that he goes mad with it.

The story begins with its focus on the beginnings of Hazard's quest and on the need for that quest, the desire to build the perfect stallion. In the confusion following the bone war, Hazard is trapped in a boxcar full of bones which he believes is heading to Coulee Hill, both the home of Martha Proudfoot and "the end of the railway line" (20). He is driven into silence and delirium by his fear of enclosure and his proximity to the bones (although Demeter tells us his first reaction is to burrow deeper into the bones). After Demeter tells of Martha's refusal to marry Hazard until he gives up his quest, Hazard's dream sets up the oppositions of male and female, of the speaking and the spoken, of story and history.

> "I am breeding the perfect horse," Hazard said to a heard voice.
>
> "It already exists," the voice replied.
>
> . . . He tried to argue, to damn the past into the oblivion he felt it so richly deserved.

"It exists," the voice replied, feminine and insistent. He began to argue all the more, lying on his bed of bones. He pleaded; then he found he was crying, crying mutely in the darkness. . . . (20)

He declares that he will give in, will take the job offered by Martha's uncle and give up the quest, if he is allowed to survive this trauma, but typically, "in the midst of his surrender he experienced a temporary fit of rebellion" (21). The vacillations that plague him lead him in his dream state to send the mental telegram to Martha. As with many Kroetsch characters, the act of sending a message of words is an extraordinarily painful, frustrating task. At first, resting in a mound of dried bones while a chaotic blizzard blows outside, Hazard can think of only one word to send: "STOP." "He can explain," he feels briefly, but when his hand returns to the imagined telegraph key, "the key tapped his hand" (23). The message consists of the word "STOP" repeated sixty-four times.

Even after he is released from the prison of bones and his delirium, Hazard's dream-state is barely interrupted. The elemental chaos of the blizzard is exacerbated by the loosing of the horses Hazard had sought to steal for his stallion into downtown Edmonton, as well as the "rash of indecencies" (29) brought on by the inclement weather and the inebriated state of much of the population; "further

chaos" (29) is occasioned by the onset of darkness. These various elements conspire to bring about a spirit of carnival. Predictably, Demeter is mystified by the citizens' reactions to this disruption of their normal routine: "One is tempted to question the sanity of these people. . . . The expected reaction of irritation and panic had given way to a mood of jollity and, one must confess, abandon" (28). When Poseidon gets away from Hazard and attacks a bronze statue of a stallion in front of the legislative buildings, the confrontation of the horse and his "bronze replication" (29) becomes a paradigm of the struggle between story and history, speaking and spoken, horse and house, art and life. "Two strong males contending for one mare could not have been locked into a more desperate equilibrium" (30). Most of the witnesses to this struggle, "a group of legislators and a number of women" (29), agreed with the man who "announced the bronze horse superior: 'The artist has done it. In bronze. Forever'" (30).

> One lady alone was so reckless as to defend the mortal blue stallion against his critics. She praised loudly the fullness of Poseidon's natural endowment, pointing out that the artist, in casting his bronze model somewhat larger than life, had in fact erred in making its parts ridiculously small. (30)

This lady is the aptly if painfully named Cockburn. The name itself constitutes a dispute between the biographer and his source, the subject. Hazard identifies her, we are told, as a wealthy married woman named either Coburne or Cochrane. Demeter, though, assures us that his research indicates that her name is P. Cockburn and that she is single and an artist: "She made a specialty of life-sized wax figures, and had made for the museum a number of life-size models of illustrious Albertans" (31). Demeter notes Hazard was about to "betray the intent of his quest" (30-31) by allowing himself to be bedded by her, although the drive he follows is the same one that fuels the quest Demeter imagines for him: "Hazard was a man of inordinate lust" (31), a trait of which Demeter is disapproving.

Cockburn is associated implicitly here and explicitly in Kroetsch's notes with Circe of the Odyssey, the sorceress whose enchantment of men into beasts was undone by her attraction to Odysseus. In Cockburn's bed, Hazard is surrounded by historical figures transformed into wax statues, and his potency is affected by his own role in an historical struggle, the memory of the life he took during the war:

> the shaping hand of the artist came now to assure his failing courage. And he dared to wrestle. . . . But in the end and finally, that which he wrestled most was the image of himself for which

> the hands of P. would seek to take measure. He would not be seduced, he was resolved, into that immortality. (34-35)

Just as Odysseus beds Circe but resists the pleasant but stultifying immortality she offers him, Hazard will not be transformed into a wax figure of himself to achieve the immortality he sometimes craves.

Again typically, Demeter is dismayed by Hazard's refusal to be pinned down:

> What a shame. We who assemble fragments long for a whole image of the vanished past. We seekers after truth, what do we find? A fingerprint on the corner of a page. A worn step at a turn in the stairway. A square of faded paint on the faded wall. Someone was here, we know. But who? When? (34)

Demeter begins now to display a tendency to shape his interpretations of both Hazard and his own stories to effect an identification between the two. He begins to succumb to the danger potentially present in every act of biography, for the biographer to become his subject, or at least the image of the subject he constructs. His jealousy of Hazard, specifically of his affair with Martha Proudfoot, compounds his unreliability as a narrator and biographer. He seeks to live Hazard's life actually, not just vicariously. Sorting the many index cards with notations on Hazard, Demeter

refers to one about Hazard's lustful ways, but speaks instead about "my abandon" (39). He tells us about Martha's quandary over Hazard's continuing avoidance of her domestic charms, but in Demeter's eyes the problem is that "she was terrified that she was in love, not with her remembered fiance, but with me . . . . and to shore up her crumbling old love . . . she must speak of nothing but it" (35). Demeter reminds the reader that he is interpreting when he pieces together Hazard's tale ("I have arranged the next three cards to suggest an order that was not necessarily present in Hazard's rambling conversation" (40)) but does not see himself doing so with his own tale.

Hazard finds a tempting pocket of domesticity at the Home for Incurables run by the The Sisters of Temperance. It possesses the ease, comfort, and company he lacks on his quest. One of the inmates, Torbay, yet another member of the Proudfoot family, pleads with Hazard, offers him money, not to take him away--"I goddammed well want to live forever too" (56)-- in an exchange that suggests that to remain there inviolate is to achieve immortality. The ongoing card game (Kroetsch often employs the game as a metaphor for both life and the activity of the artist--a set of rules are in operation, but the role of chance is nevertheless crucial) becomes a representation of his stay there. In this game, Hazard cannot do other than win. He complains about his inability to lose even a hand: "this isn't a game at all. I

haven't got a chance" (48), and when he is asked why he wishes to win, and why he continues his quest, he can reply only "Boredom . . . . I'm human too, you know" (54). The drive to create, to risk losing, battles with the desire for security, to live forever and never lose. Hazard begins to argue with his creative, sexual urge, which urges him to leave this sanctuary: "Hazard slapped the book shut. 'No. Not ever again. Never . . . . No! You four-legged cock! No!'" (58). The scene is a mirror image of his dream telegraph to Martha, and ends with his calling for a cessation. Before he was pleading with Martha to somehow put an end to the call of her domesticity, of wedded, grounded bliss; now he seeks to put an end instead to his rootless, unhoused, solitary ways:

> He was the man from whom each farm must have its visits; yet he must travel alone, work alone, suffer alone, laugh alone, bitch alone, bleed alone, piss alone, sing alone, dream alone . . . . (58)

It is "a preposterous fate, to be at the mercy of something so rash, so reckless and fickle, so willful, unpredictable, stubborn--and so without morality" (60). It is, nevertheless, the fate he chooses, flinging himself from "the arms of sane comfort, even a kind of luxury, into the whoreson workaday world" (60). He looses all ties on him, and is "able, for four days, to pretend his gypsy existence

was, in itself, sufficient. On the fourth day, however, he found what surely he had been seeking all the time; he found a mare in heat" (61). We are told that a procedure known as "teazing" requires that a mare in heat be used to entice a stallion into mounting another mare not of his first choosing, in this case a virgin, a process which is suggestive of Hazard's wanderings and indiscretions prior to his intended marriage to Martha (63).

Demeter also interrupts the story of the mare to interpolate his own experience with Martha five years earlier. He had gone to the lake with her; she had gone in the water alone. His aversion to water ("I was never extremely fond of water" (65)) suggests also his aversion to the figurative waters of the chaos of imagination, sexuality, creativity and chance. When she emerged again she had stripped off her suit. Demeter, in the bushes seeking berries, responds sexually for what appears to be the first, and perhaps only, time:

> There in the gum-scented shadows my own body, itself scented warm, responded rudely to hers. . . . my hand responded to my hard longing. You must have heard the little joke about how one might go crazy; but in the shelter of the growing darkness, all my senses sane and alive, there, caught in the fury of my own fist, I gave unwittingly a soft groan at my savage pleasure--or was it pain? (65)

Demeter's claim to a moment of lucidity in his sexual fever is especially noteworthy coming from a man who is "by profession quite out of [his] mind" (61). Demeter bemoans his misnaming (his mother thought Demeter was a masculine name) but he is misnamed in a deeper sense as well. The Demeter of myth is the Goddess of Earth's fruitfulness; in terms of his fruitfulness, Demeter would have been better named Onan. He cannot respond directly to the nude, dripping woman in front of him, even in words: "My very wanting had choked me into silence" (65).

Demeter returns briefly to the story of the mare, who "both fought and welcomed that which she most desired, the huge and penetrating rage of the stallion's passion to possess" (67), before turning to the tale of Hazard's first acquiring Poseidon's nameless ancestor, a tale which mirrors Demeter's own recent non-experience with water, his refusal to enter the water either literally or figuratively. Hazard, who "practically grew up in the water" (68), had aided a Cree Indian in rescuing the colt from Wildfire Lake. The Cree tells him, "I saved your colt" (69) and walks away; Hazard follows him, but finds only a wooden cross in the ground in a clearing. On top of the cross is a pail containing matches, tea leaves, and a packet of sugar. "Without thinking, Hazard went back to the colt" (70); he is forced to retreat from rationality and depend instead upon intuition and imagination. The Indian's promise that he

will demand nothing for saving the colt for Hazard is rendered moot by the demands that ownership of the horse places upon Hazard: "twenty-four years of wandering, of leading a stallion from farm to farm" (70). He moves into the deserted mansion, raises the colt, and discovers his obligation to it extends to its succeeding generations, as well.

In this quest Hazard is threatened by a surfeit of water because of the stallion. He appears before the magistrate, Mr. Flood, for both breaking a prohibition against the presence of horses on the beach and for angering the owner of a mare with which Poseidon had coupled. What follows is a farcical scene demonstrating the latent illogicality, the disorder of the world of law and order, a seemingly rational world brought to near-chaos by chance and human caprice. The magistrate, unable to find the appropriate statute to read out against Hazard, "put a middle finger to a passage seemingly at random and read in a very loud and authoritative voice" (74) an entirely unrelated one. In the process of giving testimony, the arresting constable comments on Poseidon's endowment, although it was an Indian who witnessed and reported the mounting of the mare. "Thus truth passes into legend" (74) is Demeter's ironic and presumably self-aware comment on this. The charge was proffered because an aged Indian hidden in the woods, clearly a double of the Indian

trickster figure who burdened Hazard with Posiedon, was so impressed by Poseidon's penis that he rushed to compliment the unaware and upset owner of the mare on his choice of stud. Hazard is sentenced to another period of enforced domesticity, three days on a farm helping a poor indigent widow, whose husband died at sea (84).

Not surprisingly, Hazard finds at the farm of Mrs. Lank both a haven and a prison, both an outlet for and a reining in of his creative drive. Mrs. Lank is, like P. Cockburn, associated with the figure of Circe. Her ability to turn Hazard into a beast is demonstrated by his growing identification with the swine he is hired to slaughter. Demeter sees this identification in Hazard's reluctance to kill the swine, and notes, "In all the violent yokings of Greek wisdom, in all its peculiar combinations of the parts of different animals, I have found no reference to a creature half horse, half hog" (81). Hazard becomes increasingly identified with the horse as well as the swine. On the farm with the widow he becomes the stud, "obsessed with the notion that she must be got pregnant" (82). His failure, his inability to kill the swine because of his identification with it, has also the result that he has to find some means to distract the widow from insisting that the task be done. The widow, it turns out, is distracted easily enough, but not without strenuous effort on Hazard's part. In his notes Kroetsch identifies Lank as "mother --

unthinking maternal impulse" (27.10.1), and as a servant to this impulse she drives Hazard to attempt to impregnate her time and again, until he is so sore he cannot conceive of doing so again. Her quest for a child, a son, becomes his own for the time, though, and, as he says, "I did my best" (83).

Earlier, Demeter has drawn a comparison between Hazard and himself to explain how Hazard got into this predicament:

> Romance will somehow find a way into our lives. Surely Hazard and I were alike in strenuously resisting that distortion of facts by which men delude themselves. Mine is a conservative temperament. Hazard was perhaps less disciplined than I; as a result his sympathies, if not always his passions, were wont to corrupt his joy in simple things. (79)

Demeter, ridiculously, complains of the flights of fancy and imagination which take Hazard on occasion, but is forced to admit that Hazard's imagination takes on a double aspect in this situation: it both imprisons him and frees him from his task. Hazard fears he will be unable to answer Mrs. Lank's continuing call, so he imagines himself with the beautiful and desired Martha: "Hazard, whose imagination had stopped him from killing that fat sow, found also a means to stimulate his faltering need. The imagination plays strange tricks" (82).

At this point in the narrative, as Demeter seeks to place Hazard's travels in the context of his own position ("travelling from Mrs. Lank's . . . Hazard must inevitably have driven along the road that is visible from my window" (85)), we are treated to a clearer look at our narrator. Situated in a private sanitorium for the insane (which recalls the Home for Incurables), Demeter is the stationary counterpoint to Hazard's journeying. His perspective is determined by his perpetual residence in the bathtub he favours.

> By a fortunate combination of light and reflection, I am able to see out of my window without leaving my bathtub. A mirror is so placed above my sink that I have been able to sit for hours, attempting to imagine what in fact did happen (allowing for the reversal of the image) exactly where I imagine it. It is then _time_ I must reconstruct, not space. Further, I am able to see far distant; it is what is nearest that I cannot always make out from my high window. (85)

The image of Demeter's observing the world through a mirror from a great height is an evocative one. It recalls, for instance, the Eighteenth Century practise of admiring beautiful or sublime landscapes not with the naked eye, but reflected in a Claude Glass, a mirror shaped as a picture frame: the landscape cannot be apprehended except as a

representation of it, the experience must be framed, transformed into art, before it can be appreciated. This use of art to separate the viewer from the real thing, from the experience itself, is manifested also in the other echo this image produces, that of the title character in Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott." The Lady, of course, lives in a high tower on a silent island, watching the world go by her window. She weaves a picture of this life as it is reflected in a mirror positioned by a window, until she is moved into leaving her shadow-world by the song and sight of Lancelot. She turns from the mirror and goes to the window to look directly upon Camelot, at which the mirror cracks, and a fatal curse is enacted. The image of the artist as one who exists in a world of shadows, necessarily removed and distant from experience, is one Demeter could embrace. As long as he does not seek to look directly upon the wondrous world outside his window, he can remain secure in his version of reality, in the comforting shadows of insanity. He is, like the other Incurables, safe from life and so from death, the only final cure.

Demeter considers himself free from the lusts, desires, flights of fancy and imagination, and other disorders that would affect the precision and acuity of his judgement as a recorder of Hazard's life. He had once suggested to his subject that Hazard was stretching a point. "You tell it," Hazard said, "if you know better" (122). Demeter accepts

Hazard's curse as advice, and becomes a double for Hazard in telling Hazard's story as it <u>should</u> <u>have</u> happened, a more refined, relatively passionless, bloodless version. Aptly, just as we now know enough about Demeter to begin to appreciate to what degree he is an unreliable narrator, we are introduced to another double of Hazard, a cruder, more fiercely impassioned, and much freer and even less personally reliable and responsible version. Eugene Utter's very name suggests the <u>act</u> of speaking, the active principle in the male. If Demeter can be characterized as inhabiting a high tower, then Utter is as close to the ground as you can get. He is a trickster figure, the penis as trickster once again. His most distinguishing physical characteristic, along with an abundance of thick, flowing hair, is the absence of two fingers on his right hand. Kroetsch often employs the device of providing men who are in some way incomplete, less than whole, with a physical emblem of that lack (most notably in <u>What The Crow Said</u> and <u>Alibi</u>). Utter, by his own proclamation, is "free from the tyranny of love" (97); he possesses the freedom of spirit and body Hazard longs for, the complete autonomy of selfishness. Utter is completely disregardful of the demands of or obligations to the community, and is so absorbed in himself that he almost exists only in his talk--if he were to stop talking there would be nothing there. Meeting him, Hazard is spurred on to greater heights of

recklessness: "Hazard knew that his arbitrary and high-handed rule was being challenged, his era might draw to a close" (88). The image of potential usurpation recalls the relationship of Dawe and Web in Badlands, and Peter Thomas links Utter to Web, and to individual actions of other characters, through his desire for "dispossession":

> Dispossession is a persistent feature of Kroetsch's writing. Though properly seen as an apocalyptic response to the structures of history . . . it is also motivated by that yearning for 'purity' of which Peter Guy spoke, a burning off or washing free of all human obligation. (Kroetsch 57)

Thomas's description of it makes Utter sound almost noble in his striving for purity and freedom, but Utter, like Web, is without nobility or any fine virtue or emotion; his freedom from the tyranny of love is a loosing of all ties, a surrender to the opposing tyranny of aloneness. Utter lives the "gypsy existence" Hazard abandoned after four days as unsupportable. Utter is connected to the Sons of Freedom sect through his Doukhobor lover, but he empties the activities of that politically motivated sect of any significance by employing them not only recklessly but with absolutely no purpose, and even against his own interest. His burning of the schoolhouse and naked parading "parody the Sons of Freedom while rejecting their spiritual

justification" (56). As the exponent of "an extreme form of the denial of history amounting to a rejection of all human 'structures'" (56), Utter is Demeter's opposite, his shaking free of any logic or structure opposed to Demeter's clinging to the wreckage of his logical and structured world in assembling the narrative; he is the active speaking to Demeter's static spoken. Both Utter and Demeter become Hazard in the end, Demeter taking over Hazard's life by turning it into legend, into his narrative, Utter taking over Hazard's life as the studhorse man, making a fortune with Hazard's stallion, and as Martha's mate.

Challenged by Utter, Hazard's egotism is roused, and he seeks to meet the challenge by behaving at least as recklessly as Utter. "It was one of the peculiarities of this Utter fellow that he inspired others to excess" (87); "Hazard, who ordinarily drank moderately, drank to excess" (89), leading to the flurry of drunken horse-trading that ends with Hazard losing Poseidon for twenty dollars. In addition, as Utter takes over Hazard's life, Hazard, in the washroom of the hotel bar, finds himself slumping into unconsciousness in the only available space, the bathtub, when he is startled by the sight of his own face in the mirror above the tub. If Demeter, not to mention Utter, is becoming Hazard, is Hazard necessarily becoming Demeter? Just previous to this scene, Utter had spoken of having been in Coulee Hill, where he saw Demeter, presumably, seeking to

take Hazard's place in Martha's affections. What is curious is that Demeter, who is described very unflatteringly and threatened with bodily harm in this exchange, does not emend, sweeten, or reply to it in his role as narrator; his voice is conspicuously silent.

As Utter and Hazard make their way toward the wedding of Catherine Melnyk and Tiberius Torbay Proudfoot, Utter leads Hazard into another flirtation with death by water. On Easter Sunday they reach the Cree River to find the bridge is washed out. As they cross and move deeper into the water, Hazard is struck by a dead pig floating by, reminiscent of his earlier identification with Mrs. Lank's swine, and he recalls the prophecy of his death by water. Utter informs him that the visible portion of his body, his forehead, is turning blue, echoing the sight of the blue horse emerging from Wildfire Lake. They are rescued from this predicament not by each other, but by a character who truly is free from love--the gelding drawing the cart. It is when they emerge from the water and begin to dry off that Utter makes his claim of freedom, and tells Hazard, "You are still not quite out of bondage. . . . We need only some last little motion of the spirit to complete our journey" (97). Although the particulars may vary, and Hazard sees Utter's action as digression from and interference in his own journey, the quests of the two men are really the same one. Utter seeks to create in Hazard what he has created in

himself and what Hazard hopes to create through Poseidon: the perfect stallion, free from the tyranny of love, the demands of community, the need for further issue. Hazard's desire for the perfect stallion is, of course, the desire for the final book, the final answer, which, once spoken, ends the need for all further questions. Utter represents what Hazard could be if unhampered by vacillations, untempted by domesticity.

The narrative firmness, as if in response to the chaotic, elemental fluidity of the events, breaks down as Utter seeks freedom for Hazard and himself. Demeter is unable to account for what transpires, is unable to connect events in a causal web, or even to invent a probable scenario:

> I have some bad news, my patient reader. The bald truth is, I have not foggiest notion how the two men got out of their fix. The school was old and tinder-dry; in a few minutes it burned to the ground. The night was cold. Hazard refused to explain what happened next. I begged him in the interest of logic, of continuity, in the need to instruct and direct future generations, to give me a clue. (99)

Someh , though, they manage to arrive at the wedding, wearing suits Demeter backhandedly suggests were removed from the local funeral parlor, and Demeter first views

Hazard. Although Demeter sees a similarity in the shape of the noses, the two have little else in common. Demeter's own identity is so weak, he is so lacking in the intense egotism that drives Utter and Hazard, that his sense of self is in danger of disappearing altogether:

> It has often struck me that in the act of naming we distinguish ourselves from the other unfortunate animals with whom we share this planet. They seem under no obligation to deny the fact that we are all, so to speak, one--that each of us is, possibily, everyone else. (122)

It is the arbitrary act of naming, of ordering, or setting things in proper relation to each other that allows for distinct identity--one person being separated from another not by any essential difference--and Demeter has already told of his distress at his own misnaming.

Like Girl, the gelding Poseidon was traded for, Demeter is a man with a feminine name and lacking the means for--and for the most part, seemingly the desire for--sexual expression. His failure to take advantage of the opportunity presented by Veronica, the girl with whom he drives the groom's car from the wedding celebration, is juxtaposed with the image of Hazard's inability to choose between marriage and being alone. In the nightmare he recounts to Demeter, in which Tad Proudfoot is selling a mare to Hazard,

> the ultimate horror came at having, while on the back of the galloping horse, to leap through a ring of fire. The flaming circle blazed before his eyes like a hole in the darkness, waiting to swallow him down. He could neither leap at the bright circle nor jump off the back of the mare. (113)

The image of being unable to leap or remove himself from the need to leap, like Martin Lockner at the foot of the open grave in Coulee Hill, is an apt one. Hazard can no more give himself up to marriage, domesticity, community, no more agree to the pact Tad proposes, than he can break with them altogether as Utter counsels.

Hazard's passivity at the Eshpeter Ranch after having been wounded leads Demeter to become more earnest in taking over Hazard's identity. Despairing both at Hazard's complacency and the supernatural events that plague him at the Eshpeter ranch, Demeter now cites what he sees as the central dilemma of existence:

> The very process of recurrence is what enables us to learn, to improve, to correct past errors, to understand the present, to guide the generations that are to come. Yet it is precisely this same characteristic that makes life unendurable. Men of more experience than I have lamented at the repetitious nature of the ultimate

> creative act itself. It is only by a mastery of the process of repetition . . . that we can learn to endure; yet we can only master the process by a lifetime of repetition. Many, I suspect, are tempted to despair. But I have sought other solutions and, I might add, with no little success. The path that would lead to madness is surely the highroad to art. (127-128)

Demeter's solution, one which tempts Hazard at times, is to step outside the cycle of repetition, to exist in an ivory tower of artistic distance. Demeter deals with life by seeking to contain it in a manageable structure, to turn it into a story with a beginning, middle, and end instead of an endless process of repetition. But in telling the story, time and again he finds life is not easily reducible: "Once again I find myself in a corner. Art would find a way out; life is not so obliging" (142).

Hazard, meanwhile, has all but abandoned his quest because the need for it appears to have been removed: Marie has promised him her young mares the following spring, and in Marie's bedroom, Hazard's identification with Poseidon--and so his indulgence of his sexual appetite--is almost complete as he mounts her like a horse and "whinnies" (133). This idyll is interrupted by Hazard's awakening to the reality of the situation. Poseidon is being primed by Marie to provide semen for artificial insemination, screwing

having gone out of style. Hazard moves to intercede when Poseidon resists her attempt to get him to mount the dummy mare, but a crack of Marie's "blacksnake" whip renders the horse mild and submissive, and Hazard flees. Having been completely taken over by the sex urge, outside the context of community, Hazard now appears to seek the marriage that would place him within the community. Demeter and Old Lady Eshpeter, who in the present of the narration live in the same Institution, disagree over why Hazard ran to seek out a priest. Whether he means to marry Marie, as Old Lady Eshpeter contends, or to marry Martha, as Demeter suggests is possible, or for some other unknown reason, is left unresolved. Instead of locating the priest, though, Hazard finds himself in bed with Mrs. Laporte, where he appears to die while fire consumes the house. In the ice room of the Coulee Hill beer parlor, Martha views the body, and "what she could ignore in life, Martha could not ignore in death" (152). Her hands find their way to "old Blue" and miraculously revive it, and so Hazard. "Martha was champion against our promised end" (153), Demeter crows, because she prevents the "fatal intercourse" with death. She mounts Hazard and cries out, "Old Blue" (155). This cry reminds Demeter only of Poseidon, who still languishes in the grasp of Marie Eshpeter: "My journey had begun. Hazard had failed" (155). Hazard failed for Demeter in that by marrying Martha he would abandon his quest, cease to exist only to

serve his stallion, his sexual urges. But Martha is the "champion against our promised end" not simply because she revives Hazard, but because she provides him with a version of immortality within the realm of domesticity and the community: producing offspring.

Demeter now thinks of himself as D. Proudfoot, Studhorse Man. He barricades himself in Hazard's mansion with Poseidon, and is also taking Hazard's place with Martha, who is a virtual prisoner in the house with him. As Demeter is about to completely supplant Hazard by having sex with Martha, he is disturbed by a half-human, half-animal cry. Hazard, who had breached the fortress, is on the floor, his face crushed into an unrecognizable pulp. As with Hornyak in <u>But We Are Exiles</u>, the loss of Hazard's identity is complete with the erasing of his face. Poseidon threatens Hazard's still-living body, and Martha gives Demeter the shotgun he had used to ward off unwelcome visitors and demands that he shoot the horse. Demeter visualizes Poseidon's death, the "great penis shrank back into the body of the dying horse" (171), and he cannot fire. Before Demeter can decide, the horse kills Hazard, in so doing creating a paradigmatic image: "Hazard Lepage flew upward through the air as if he were a spirit rising to the sky; but his body came back down to earth, under the sickening crunch of the stallion's hoofs" (172). The image recalls Backstrom's bleak definition of "the contradiction

that is man; the mind that wrestles with bleak despair, the spirit which soars" (Words 31). From Demeter's warped perspective, the spirit in man may draw him upwards, lead him toward ideal states of being, but the body of man, his sexual drive, will always bring him back to earth again, and will lead him inevitably to death, crushed finally by his sexual, creative urges.

The final chapter is a neat summing up, a tying together of loose threads, as befits a narrator who contends that a "biographer is a person afflicted with sanity" (152), although it is by now clear that Demeter has not even a nodding acquaintance with sanity. Ironically, the Lepage stallions are suddenly in demand to impregnate mares--and the price has risen from three to thirteen dollars--because pregnant mare's urine is an ingredient necessary to the female contraceptive pill. His prepotency is employed as a means to circumvent that of men, to prevent pregnancies from taking place, a prospect that elates Demeter: "Scurrilous, stinking man would soon be able, in the sterility of his own lust, to screw himself into oblivion, to erase himself from the face of God's creation" (174). Martha gives birth to a girl, conceived in the icehouse, Demeter tells us, who is named Demeter Lepage--the identies are further conjoined--and Demeter Proudfoot ends by dedicating the volume to her as "a kind of fatherly advice" (175).

The awful, malignant sterility of Demeter's conclusion

is contradicted by the existence of Demeter Lepage and what she represents. It is not only Demeter who sees the repetition of existence as a dilemma, who is troubled by the ceaseless and often seemingly meaningless and futile process of living. Most of the main characters in the book, as in most of Kroetsch's others, are searching for immortality by seeking to step outside or to control the process of repetition that leads to death. The inmates at the Home for Incurables, Demeter's madness as the road to art, the wax dummies of Cockburn, the bronze stallion, Martha's long-standing virginity, the creation of a contraceptive pill, and Hazard's obsession with his breed of stallions are representative of the many strategies employed to circumvent the natural pattern of life and death, creation and destruction--to evade life and so death. But Demeter, as at the wedding feast, measures his own meager appetite for life against the voracious appetite of Hazard. Demeter is unable on some level to live fully and so is envious and resentful of those who can. Hazard, like William Dawe in Badlands and Liebhaber in Crow, despite his appetite for life, fails to recognize that the process of repetition, the "repetitious nature of the ultimate creative act itself" (127), provides a surer form of immortality than the various evasions of mortality in the novel. Hazard loses his identity completely, loses his self, the loss he feared most, but not to Utter or Demeter Proudfoot, because D. Lepage represents

> 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 new identity 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. (36-37)

The importance of transformation, the shedding of the old skin of the learned self so that one can step into a new, truer, more complete self, is raised by this passage, but the notion that the novel itself is carnivalized is central also. In fact, the two aspects are integrally connected. In writing the novel, Kroetsch says he was tuning into "the kind of self-creation that goes on orally . . . . I'm fascinated by the content where we are literally in a new world telling ourselves about it, making each other up, inventing each other in this new world" (<u>Labyrinths</u> 39). Although it ends up in print, edited by Madham, Jeremy's story is ostensibly captured on a cassette tape recorder he carries with him: ostensibly he sends the completed tapes to Madham. In <u>Labyrinths of Voice</u> Shirley Neuman suggests that in <u>The Studhorse Man</u> "Demeter Proudfoot has an astonishing amount of knowledge for the few afternoons he spent on the Eshpeter Ranch (its source)" (170), and the amount of material to which Madham appears to have access is equally

> about the reunion, I also feel uneasy about the split. (Labyrinths 173)

The ending of the novel recalls But We Are Exiles in many of its particulars: two figures coming together to form one in the midst of an elemental chaos, one of the characters left a faceless husk while the other achieves a kind of completeness. In one aspect of that completeness, though, it is closer to The Words of My Roaring: the fiction makes us real. Even if the story is not true, even if the prophecies come true only in ironic ways, and even if the reporting cannot be trusted, it is finally the telling of the story that has a healing effect, that possesses the potential for a spiritual wholeness, albeit a temporary one that can be maintained by a continual telling and re-telling. So "through telling the story [Demeter] puts himself together" (Labyrinths 173). But while Demeter can take hope from the wholeness of his narrative and the prospect that man will "screw himself into oblivion," the reader, and presumably Kroetsch, finds solace in what shows through the cracks in the narrative, the possibility of immortality through the creation not of a static piece of art but of a living human being. The presence of D. Lepage at the end of the novel is an affirmation in the face of Demeter's negativity and nihilism, an affirmation of hope that man's spirit will continue to soar despite or even because of the body's demands. It is an acceptance of the

ceaseless repetition of existence, not a resolution of it. Again, as Backstrom insists, the admixture of life and death, domesticity and freedom, self and community, creation and destruction, and all the other disorderly combinations that disturb Demeter are a necessary part of the contradiction that is man.

With The Studhorse Man, the dichotomous universe Kroetsch posits in his novels--in which creation and destruction, life and death, immortality and mortality are inextricably yoked--is matched not only by characters who embody the different aspects of these dichotomies, but also by a narrative form which partakes of the same ambiguity, uncertainty, and instability that plagues the characters. And this novel suggests a double narration, even if one narrative stream is formulated by what the other leaves out or interprets, and in the later novels, both the problematic narration and the splitting of the narrative voice become increasingly central. The emphasis on the role of desire--both to connect and to break free, and its connection with the forging of identity, also becomes central from this novel onwards.

Chapter V:

Gone Indian: In Search of Metamorphosis

Jeremy Sadness, the central character in Gone Indian, like Hazard Lepage and even Demeter Proudfoot, has been saddled with a quest and an identity not his own. His attempt to become an academic, rather than his own desire, is more the result of his father's naming him after Jeremy Bentham, both parents' wish that he should be unlike his seaman father, and Professor Madham's example and advice as his thesis supervisor and surrogate parent. Jeremy's inability to finish any of the theses he has begun and his ability to sabotage any chance of getting a job is indication enough that his journey west in search of academic employment is not essentially his desire. His marital and financial situations seem similarly put upon him. Unlike Hazard, whose sexual odyssey proceeds virtually without cessation, Jeremy is burdened with a handicap: he cannot make love lying down. In Gone Indian, the two issues of identity and sexuality come together again. In order to find a cure for his sexual dysfunction, Jeremy must establish his authentic identity. In previous novels, Kroetsch's characters have been moved by the contrasting pull of the desire for connection and the desire for freedom to escape false and stifling situations--like Martin Lockner and Peter Guy--or to accept their role within the community

--like J.J. Backstrom and Hazard Lepage. In each of these cases, an actual or symbolic death plays an important role: in two cases, the death is or appears to be that of the central character himself. In _But We Are Exiles_, Hornyak's death seems to make possible a new identity for Peter, and in _The Studhorse Man_, Hazard's death seems to contribute to the integration of Demeter's personality. In _Gone Indian_, this transformation of identity takes the form that will become typical of later novels: the character must encounter death--sometimes several deaths, both symbolic and literal--before he can live his own life. For Jeremy Sadness, it is a matter of shedding the inherited self and the adopted voice, thereby letting Jeremy Sadness die and the new, authentic self come into being.

In "Unhiding the Hidden," Kroetsch talks about a trend in recent Canadian fiction by a number of "new writers," like Robert Harlow, Rudy Wiebe, and Dave Godfrey, a list that can be expanded to include him:

> In recent Canadian fiction the major writers resolve the paradox--the painful tension between appearance and authenticity--by the radical process of demythologizing the systems that threaten to define them. Or more comprehensively, they uninvent the world. . . . [These new writers] dare the ultimate _contra-diction_: they uncreate themselves into existence. (17-21)

By "uninventing the world," tearing down the falsifying superstructure of the spoken and revealing the active and open speaking beneath it, these writers allow their characters to do the same to themselves--they die, but do so in a mannner reminiscent of what Kroetsch says of the heroine of Atwood's Surfacing: she "will not die; rather she will give birth to herself" ("Unhiding the Hidden" 19).

An open, active setting serves both as opportunity and model for the rebirth, the reinvention of character. Although present implicitly as a theme in the earlier works, the importance of the experience of the frontier becomes explicit and central in Gone Indian. Many of Kroetsch's characters find themselves, or place themselves, in a frontier landscape. Although the setting, a small town near Coulee Hill, is not geographically remote from that of the first two novels, it is now its bordering on the North that is emphasized. The North, Kroetsch says, in a passage already cited, is "a true wilderness, a continuing presence. We don't want to conquer it. Sometimes we want it to conquer us" ("Canadian Writer and American Tradition" 11). Many critics, Lecker, Thomas, and Hutcheon chief among them, have discussed Kroetsch as working always on the border, situating himself and his characters between poles rather than at either end of the spectrum. Caught between the noisy technocracy to the South and the silent wilderness to the North, the "settled part of Canada becomes a borderland,

then, and a borderland is a place of interaction. This is, characteristically, a good place to look for poets, painters--man as artist" (Kroetsch, "The Canadian Writer" 12). In Gone Indian, Jeremy Sadness comes to the northernmost point of that borderland, an especially volatile setting, ripe with possibility. Edmonton's motto is "Gateway to the North," and the novel invokes that motto several times. Raised in New York City, Jeremy finds in the silence and emptiness that confronts him in Alberta an exhilarating but frightening glimpse of freedom. The only erections he spies on the prairie are the telegraph poles that interrupt the space only to make it more noticable for the interruption: "They made me notice the space . . . and I couldn't even pretend to sleep. Because if I did I might wink out and be gone forever" (15). Kroetsch says in a discussion of the novel and discontinuity that "to go into pure chaos is to vanish" (Labyrinths 25), and the vast unbordered openness of the frontier seems to offer that possibility or danger to Jeremy. The setting is rendered still more free by the carnivalistic atmosphere of the Winter Festival in which Sadness comes to participate.

The novel's narration is again split, in this case between Sadness and Professor Madham, a graduate student and his thesis supervisor. The academic critical act that the novel depicts, the interpretation of the artist's creation and the usurpation of his ownership of it thereby, is a

self-conscious version of the reading act, of piecing together the fragments and forcing them to cohere according to some personal or ideological vision. In Gone Indian, this critical act, critical method, becomes the model for the narrative: "I take the idea of the critical act and treat it as a way to write fiction" (Hancock, "Interview" 40). But it is the breakdown of the critical act, the exposure of the fallacy of objective academic investigation leading to a univalent conclusion, that is foregrounded. By the end of the narrative, the narrator has almost completely gone to pieces and the narrative is similarly in shambles, at least as a critical act. Kroetsch says elsewhere that "I almost feel I was unfair to the reader in Gone Indian" (Labyrinths 176), in part because its structure is so fragmented, so resistant to the reading act and so mocking of the critical act, and because the narrative voices are so untrustworthy. It resists closure most strenuously, eschewing a resolution to the story and to the mysteries raised throughout it. Kroetsch roughly defines the phrase "to go Indian," in Labyrinths of Voice, as

> . . . an ambiguous phrase: to become released or wild in the carnival sense. And I was playing that off the professor (Madham) and graduate student (Sadness)--people who are into the whole notion of control . . . ordering, explaining. 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 new identity 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. (36-37)

The importance of transformation, the shedding of the old skin of the learned self so that one can step into a new, truer, more complete self, is raised by this passage, but the notion that the novel itself is carnivalized is central also. In fact, the two aspects are integrally connected. In writing the novel, Kroetsch says he was tuning into "the kind of self-creation that goes on orally . . . . I'm fascinated by the content where we are literally in a new world telling ourselves about it, making each other up, inventing each other in this new world" (Labyrinths 39). Although it ends up in print, edited by Madham, Jeremy's story is ostensibly captured on a cassette tape recorder he carries with him: ostensibly he sends the completed tapes to Madham. In Labyrinths of Voice Shirley Neuman suggests that in The Studhorse Man "Demeter Proudfoot has an astonishing amount of knowledge for the few afternoons he spent on the Eshpeter Ranch (its source)" (170), and the amount of material to which Madham appears to have access is equally

suspect. Just as Demeter fills in details of Hazard's tale which he could not possibly know, Madham includes in his story, many episodes that take place when Sadness is without his tape recorder. And even if Jeremy had kept his machine with him at all times, he simply would not have had the time and opportunity to experience all he did and record all the messages Madham purports to have received. Kroetsch compares Madham's actions to those of the reader: "he is taking fragments--tapes . . . and he is imposing an order: that's what readers do. . . . readers pretend so marvellously at being sane" (Labyrinths 176-7).

Roderick Harvey suggests that the relationship of Sadness and Madham is comparable to that of Demeter and Hazard in The Studhorse Man also in that "a technological medium proves inadequate in capturing experience" (21), but there are aspects to Jeremy's medium that allow it to aid rather than interfere with the capturing of experience. The tape recorder allows an oral document to be repeated, albeit after passing through Madham's hands. Also, unlike Demeter, who takes the raw material of Hazard's life and seeks to turn it into a polished, edited, and refined document, Madham recieves from Sadness a document which he presents, at least in part, along with his commentary, so it retains some of the fragmentary nature of both the oral document and the experience it seeks to represent. Further, though, Kroetsch contends that the device actually forces the

document to be fragmentary:

> Jeremy Sadness is caught in a world of fragments in that a tape recorder compels one to be fragmentary. At least, we don't re-write our speeches. We can contradict later, we can splice in a question, but the words stay fragmentary. It's not like the writer rewriting, is it? (Labyrinths 40)

Madham, like the reader pretending sanity, tries to make sense of the fragments, tries to impose causality and rational order.

The basic form of the narrative, the critical act as a mode of fiction, has its most obvious antecedent in Nabokov's Pale Fire, in which a nine-hundred-ninety-nine line poem is subject to a wildly intepretive and personal one-hundred-sixty pages of academic commentary. As in Nabokov's novel, the commentary in Gone Indian tells the reader more about the commentator than about the subject. Kroetsch does not attempt to disguise the relationship between Nabakov's book and his own. Kroetsch refers to Nabokov's novel as a "paradigmatic text" in terms of its playful, game-playing aspect, and identifies some of the rules of the game that apply to his own texts: "In the case of Pale Fire, it is very important that the reader recognize that the author is not playing a trick on him. A good game is never trick-playing. . . . Nabokov blatantly shows what

is going on yet makes it incredibly difficult to interpret, to play" (Labyrinths 59). In spite of his concern about working the reader too hard, Kroetsch's game is not as hard to play as Nabokov's, and the basic rules of the game are also blatantly established: the reader knows virtually from the beginning what the situation is: that Madham is wildly unreliable, and that the reader must allow for and seek to correct at least some of his distortions, even if doing so makes the reader guilty of the same pretense of sanity that seems to have driven Madham mad. Shirley Neuman puts it in these terms:

> Insofar as he [Madham] and Jeremy (who is not exactly sane) are our access to this novel, what it seems you are doing is making the reader responsible because, like Madham, the reader has to work his way through what has happened to Jeremy. But he has to do so more effectively, more rationally, than Madham does and has to do so taking into account the effects of Madham's prior misreadings. (Labyrinths 176)

Professor R. Mark Madham, responding to Jill Sunderman's appeal to "explain everything" (1) about the disappearance of Jeremy and her mother, assembles a narrative of sorts out of the cassette tapes he claims Jeremy filled while on his quest. Madham tells Jill that he has been forced to edit some of the tapes, but that he has

included some direct transcription of the tapes as well, but she, and the reader, have only Madham's assertion for this. The general pattern of the narration is that the book's forty-six sections are narrated alternately by Madham and Jeremy. The final chapter should, then, be in Jeremy's voice, but since that voice is silenced, Madham has the last word. Sections twenty-eight to thirty, which contain a crucial juncture in Jeremy's story, allow his narration to continue uninterrupted, but as Jeremy lapses further into silence late in the book, Madham fills the silence for him, interjecting commentary into even those sections ostensibly narrated by Jeremy. It is clear that, as for Demeter, Madham's commentary on his subject's quest for identity becomes a quest for his own. And it becomes clear very quickly also that Madham is, again like Demeter, if not a madman, then seriously unbalanced and entirely untrustworthy. The reader has no way of confirming the veracity of any of the information presented, so the game becomes, much as in Pale Fire and The Studhorse Man, to learn about the narrator and his prejudices and preconceptions and to try to piece together the story through his disorderings of it. The reader, as player, is forced to accept that there is no final solution, no single ending--"Endings be damned" (24)--so like the Prairies' promise of diffusion of identity rather than a concluded self, the book remains an open field, a wealth of

possibilities containing a series of metamorphoses, rather than a single switch from one pole to its opposite.

One of the dangers for the reader playing this game is to fail to maintain enough critical distance from the attitudes and assumptions of the characters, or to identify them with Kroetsch's own. Peter Thomas sees the novel as typical Kroetsch: "once more Kroetsch pairs a restrained central character with his unrestrained doppelganger" (Thomas, Kroetsch 69). To Robert Lecker the novel presents "a typical Kroetschian conflict between a father figure aligned with the East, the rooted past, narrative definition, and institutionalized learning, and a surrogate son whose dream is counter-East, who responds unpredictably to immediate circumstances, who thrives on inventing himself" (Lecker, Kroetsch 62). There is a tendency to take the characters at face value in the critical writing about this novel, many critics seeming to believe what the characters tell them as the whole truth despite the main narrator's extreme instability and Jeremy's own limited focus. Stan Fogel notes that Jeremy's dream "To become Grey Owl is to free himself from the welter of words that paralyses him. . ." (Fogel, Two Countries 84), but Jeremy's vague struggle to become Grey Owl actually paralyses him from taking real action, leading him to reject real possibilities for transformation. It becomes clear that Jeremy's wilful attempt to become Grey Owl is as wrongheaded

as Madham's attempt to turn Jeremy into a younger version of himself. When Daniel Beaver tells Jeremy that Grey Owl would be proud of the way he handled himself in the fight after the snowshoe race, Jeremy's reaction makes clear that it is to a misty ideal of Grey Owl that he aspires:

> "He was a good fighter," Daniel explained. "He killed a man himself one time, in a fight."
>
> "He killed himself," I whispered. I didn't dare flex a muscle. "He killed Archie Belaney. Then he became Grey Owl."
>
> "I never heard of that, Daniel said. "But once he killed a man. Another man. He was quick with a knife, Grey Owl. He liked to drink. He liked women. . . ."
>
> "You didn't know him," I said aloud, defending Grey Owl. No one could say those things about my borderman. My pathfinder. (100-101)

The temptation to which Fogel and others appear to succumb is to see Madham as the negative role model and Grey Owl as the positive role model simply because Jeremy sees them that way, but surely Madham is as much a product of transformation as Grey Owl, even if we disallow the hinted possibility of his being the mature Robert Sunderman. And just as surely, Grey Owl is as much a concluded self as Madham, his character set down, idealized, and reified in the books he published. Jeremy's first name was the dubious

last gift of his father, who disappeared after naming him for Jeremy Bentham in the hope, Jeremy's mother tells him, that he would grow up to be a professor (52). Madham takes over as surrogate father, further encouraging academic discipline and rationality. Again the temptation is to label this inherited desire negative and Jeremy's desire for transformation positive, but the desire to become a professor would surely seem a dream of transformation for Jeremy's father, a rootless sailor, and for Madham as well, who has undergone such a metamorphosis. And the dream of becoming Grey Owl is equally an inherited desire. The tailor across the hall from Sadness's childhood home, who appears to have assumed the role of another surrogate father, provides an alternative to the ambition Jeremy's real father held for him: "He gave me his dream of the European boy who became . . . pathfinder. . . borderman. . . the truest Indian of them all" (94). The desire to become Grey Owl, however positive that ambition may seem when contrasted to the ideal of emulating Jeremy Bentham, is nonetheless an inherited desire, someone else's dream.

The reaction of most critics to the role of female characters in <u>Gone Indian</u> tends similarly to simplify the complexity, ambiguity, and indefinite nature of most of the characters in the book, male <u>or</u> female. Few characters in the novel are what they seem, and fewer still remain constant through the narrative, so it is unlikely that a

whole class of characters could be relegated to a single, unambiguous and unchanging role. Citing Thomas, Lecker notes the typical male-female opposition:

> . . . Jeremy must flee several constraints. One of these is Woman. Like Dorck, Jeremy persistently tries to escape from Bea and Jill Sunderman, both of whom threaten to sunder man in time. Conforming to Kroetsch's female stereotype, they are cast "as representatives of the female claim in time." (69)

Lecker, like Thomas and many other critics, fails to recognize that this "female stereotype" is one of the aspects of conventional thinking that is exploded in Kroetsch's work. He seems to confuse the stereotype of the entrapping, domesticating female Kroetsch perceived in earlier Prairie writing (and discussed most fully in "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction") with the role of the female in Kroetsch's own fiction.

The role of Woman as Lecker and Thomas discuss it is more in line with how the male characters and narrators perceive the female characters than with how the reader comes to perceive them. Linda Hutcheon attributes at least some of this distortion to the gender-bias of male critics, but, regardless of its source, her description of its result is germane. She points out that there are varied images of the female in the novel, not just the entrapping Woman:

> . . . while there are indeed images connecting women to enclosure in Kroetsch's novels, these are often the images offered by a male narrator and reflect more upon his individual (limited) view of women than upon the text's view as a whole. Bea and Jill . . . may indeed be named the ominous 'Sunderman,' but . . . first of all, it is Bea's _husband's_ name, and second, within a postmodern perspective, the notion of 'sundering man' may well be a positive. . . . Kroetsch has always . . . worked to show how male and female roles are fictions. . . . (171)

Jeremy's flight is clearly not simply away from women or even Woman, especially in that his ability to gain an erection in bed with a woman seems to be the barometer of his psychic well-being. It is when Jeremy's focus shifts from his own needs and his desire to escape attachments and responsibility and considers the female perspective that that barometer begins to rise. At Worlds End, Bea Sunderman's home, "As all thinking swooned from [his] mind" (146), Jeremy joins her in bed, wondering if she has mistaken him for her absent husband:

> All those years she had been waiting and now he had returned to the bed that was kept for him. . . . As if every woman kept a bed, not for a husband, not for her everyday lover, but for the

> mysterious youth who one night years ago walked into the darkness, vanished from the very surface of the earth. . . . And after all the waiting of all those women, one figure had finally returned, Finally. At last.
>
> And then I made a discovery.
>
> I was in bed. I had an erection. (148)

Perhaps the clearest indication that the role and nature of the female characters in the novel are determined by the actions and assumptions of the male characters is Madham's reaction to Carol Sadness's last statement in the book. As he attempts to convince her that Jeremy must have died in the collison with the train or the fall from the bridge, Carol interrupts, "I would have gone with him." "It is that kind of silliness that intrudes upon reason" (153) is Madham's only comment, but the surprise the reader experiences at Carol's remark is owing to the limited perspective both Madham and Jeremy have of her.

Critical views of this book, then, tend to over-simplify the oppositions--East-West, male-female, silence-sound, and the rest--by not giving full weight to the shifting nature of the opposed pairs, and to what quite often turns out to be the near identity of apparent opposites. The lesson learned by Backstrom at the end of The Words of My Roaring that much of the perceived opposition between him and Doc Murdoch is based on false,

stereotypical assumptions extends to the later novels as well. It is not so much that we live in a dualistic, dichotomized world as that the human mind insists upon dualistic structures and easily assimilated binary oppositions. Kroetsch's novels typically celebrate those characters who break out of the dualistic pattern, albeit often only briefly, not those who demonstrate the dominance of one aspect of a dualistic opposition. For instance, Jeremy is not celebrated for championing the West versus Madham's East, or for asserting male isolation over female domesticity, but because at the end, and briefly at various points in the narrative, he is able to make his mind a virtual blank, to experience without interpreting, without converting existence into binary opposites. When he is with Bea in bed, for instance, he feels like the "free man freed from his freedom" (149), is "as blank as the darkness" (146), and considers writing a thesis entitled, "The Quest Unquestioned" (149). Throughout the novel Jeremy is plagued by and resists the notion that "There is always a loser. . . . There is always a winner" (120), a logical outcropping of the habit of binary thinking. He is attracted by the characters who seem to be outside this restrictive world-view, like Daniel Beaver, who allows his opponent to win the dogsled race when he is himself assured of a victory. But like Madham, whom he pictures nervously fingering his grade book (49), he is unable to match that

indifference, unable completely to free himself from his scholarly, academic, reasonable view of life. He conceives his whole existence in terms of grades (47-8), and when he is asked at the Winter Carnival to pick the Winter Queen, to distinguish again between the winner and the losers, he is unnerved by the silence of the virtually identical candidates. Despite his dream of returning to elemental silence in the indifferent North, the experience of that silence sponsors only confusion and anxiety:

> Not once did any one of the candidates speak a word. Not a human word. To me, a man forever attracted to the maelstrom. Something in me wanted to write in the margins of those lives: Awk. Frag. Emph. Cap. Fig. Instead I was offered silence. What in heaven was I supposed to judge? (114)

Similarly, much as he is impressed by the indifference of the dog-sledders, he is made uneasy by their use of sounds instead of words, comprehensible to the dogs but not to him. He feels the need for the comfort of the words he seeks to escape:

> We heard the flow of their ancient syllables: the two men speaking commands that were little prayers. The curses that were affection. I needed my tape recorder: given a microphone I could have spoken, might have made a speech on

> silence and children and heroic dogs and victorious men, on the eloquence of watching. . . . But the two men only uttered sounds: out of hoarse throats, the driven breaths. (79)

Jeremy's reaction to what he sees as the stark amorality of the North is little different from Madham's own when he lived in the Northwest as a child. And as the narrative unfolds it becomes increasingly apparent that Madham is more like than unlike Sadness, taking over Jeremy's role as the mate of Carol, even imitating the lovemaking of the buffalo as Jeremy aspires to do. He shares, Jeremy says, Jeremy's impotence, and while Jeremy has been stalled on his dissertation for nine years, Madham has been unable to finish his masterwork for fifteen. Madham is not simply an Eastern, establishment academic who desires order for its own sake; he claims to have experienced at an early age the dissolution of identity and the fearsome indifference of the blank prairie that Sadness is now experiencing, and asserts order to escape it or contain it. If anything, Madham is more aware than Jeremy of the opportunity afforded by the frontier for transformation, noting of Carol, for instance, that she could not "grasp the consequences of the northern prairies to human definition: the diffusion of personality into a complex of possibilities rather than a concluded self" (152). Immediately after that passage he complains of being stifled by the Binghampton

weather, one of the many signals that Madham is not the "concluded self" he believes himself to be, that he still dreams West like Jeremy. Certainly his insistence on Jeremy and Bea Sunderman's dying and his lyrical rendering of that death suggests that Madham's inner life does not entirely mirror his outer life, that his transformation into an eastern intellectual is not complete, or at least not final.

And, if anything, Jeremy appears more insistent on words and meaningful symbols and interpretations than is Madham. The latter's commentary on Jeremy's reaction to the missing front tooth of the boy who comes to pick him up at the church suggests that Jeremy's desire to find meaning at every opportunity exceeds the professor's own:

> Jeremy raves on, comparing the tooth's absence to a sabre scar, a tattoo, a scarlet plume. In fact it was merely part of the game to lose a tooth or two . . . .
>
> Jeremy, of course, was always the student: he saw in the young face great portents. . . . (37)

Jeremy's oft-mentioned habit of doing grip exercises at every opportunity also seems to suggest a desire to have a firm grasp on things, to be able to catch meaning and hold it, as does his consternation whenever his preconceived ideas are disturbed:

> . . . open the right hand, stretch the fingers, make a fist; open the left hand, stretch the

> fingers--get that thumb back--make a FIST goddamnit, close that hand as if you are going to CATCH something; open your right hand . . . . (125)

Something of Kroetsch's personal history seems almost necessary to mention in the discussion of Gone Indian because, like much of his poetry and the later novel, Alibi, it includes unmistakably autobiographical detail. Although Kroetsch did not spend nine years in graduate school he did finish his doctorate in his early thirties, having been married for five years, so he has some notion of what Sadness is experiencing. And he has overseen doctoral theses, including one on Pale Fire, a relationship which ended when the student went "mad, and was locked up for trying to kill somebody" (Labyrinths 174), so he might have some compassion for Madham's position supervising an idiosyncratic student. More pertinently, Kroetsch experienced the geographical shift both characters do, leaving his boyhood home in Alberta to work on the Mackenzie River, then moving east and south, going to school in Vermont, Montreal, then in Iowa, the virtual center of America. By 1961, Kroetsch was situated in Binghampton, N.Y., at the address given as Madham's in the opening letter. It is tempting to identify Kroetsch with both the professor of English Literature who lives at his address and with the graduate student who has abandoned academic enquiry

in favour of a search for personal identity, a search which constitutes most of Kroetsch's work. But, unlike either character, the western boy dreaming east or the eastern boy dreaming west, Kroetsch's own reaction to the geographical shifts is to position himself, as always, on the border, writing about the Canadian West from the perspective of living in the American East. For Kroestch, a practicing academic, to lampoon academic pursuits and the state of mind of those who pursue them is a further manifestation of his distrust of the critical industry. But by including himself in the lampooning, by giving his own address to Madham, he manifests also his complicity in this pursuit. He is a critic who mistrusts the critical act, an author who mistrusts the reading act. Madham's unfinished masterpiece is possibly a symptom of this same mistrust, as are the twelve theses of Jeremy Sadness, most of which consist of little or nothing more than a title.

Madham tells us, "Jeremy believed his whole life was governed by some deep American need to seek out the frontier" (2), and speaks of his yearning for "the possibility of transformation" (7). Sandwiched between these statements is Jeremy's own: "I want to be Grey Owl" (6). Jeremy is seeking what all Kroetsch characters seek, finally, a kind of peace, a healing wholeness that will let them rest. They are all driven like the studhorse man, always searching for and evading that which completes them.

The possibility of transformation is one aspect of this desire for wholeness; the possibility of becoming someone else holds with it the potential for completeness. It is in this respect that Madham first indicates that he is not unlike Sadness, only older. He too is plagued by the restlessness of the body which mirrors the restlessness of the spirit: ". . . at forty-seven one is weary of many things. . . . One is weary of the voice within; one is weary of the desire that will not let the exhausted body rest" (10). Unlike Jeremy, though, he seeks not the freedom that transformation affords, but the control of the critic, asserting a narrow interpretation of fragmentary experience to mask the disquieting multiplicity and uncertainty of the world. Of the tapes he received from Jeremy he says, "Of course I have had to select from the tapes, in spite of Jeremy's instructions to the contrary: the mere onslaught of detail overwhelms. We grasp at something else. And that something else is the professor's domain: the world of reflection, of understanding" (13).

Entering the carnivalistic world at Edmonton airport and proceeding through customs, Jeremy gets his first exposure to a land in which "Illusion is rife" (8). Having picked up baggage belonging to Roger Dorck by mistake, he is detained in a holding cell with a young woman who turns out to be a young man, who claims further to have been a buffalo in a past life. Inspired by this vision of transformation,

Jeremy determines to escape, "DISGUISED AS MYSELF" (11). That Jeremy considers his own self a disguise indicates how far from psychic wholeness he is. This is one of the many transitory and unsatisfactory metamorphoses Jeremy will undergo. Although he already dresses and wears his hair like an Indian (albeit a stereotypical Indian--Daniel Beaver's children mock him for this (65)), he becomes even more an Indian when he receives Daniel's jacket (93). He also becomes Roger Dorck, and so the Winter King and the judge of the Winter Queen contest. He becomes a mock prisoner, and, in his dream, a buffalo and Has-Two-Chances (106). He becomes a corpse in a coffin, and flirts with being Robert Sunderman. Significantly, though, it is when he is not consciously seeking to <u>become</u> someone, but merely thoughtlessly voids his own identity, that he finds the freedom and peace he sought. In Madham's words, as Jeremy allows Digger to assume his identity, "The metamorphosis, one is tempted to say, was complete. Jeremy [was] no longer himself," having "unwittingly lent his precious self to that old gravedigger" (139). Jeremy yearns for the same release from identity Dorck seems to have found, the freedom of flying. As in previous novels, there is an elemental opposition of earth and sky, of body and soul, the image of the spirit soaring and then plummeting to earth again by the weight of the body's demands. In fact, the desire to fly, to escape the pull of the earth and so of the body becomes a

central motif in this novel. Sadness imagines Dorck's accident as a beautiful moment, ". . . he leaped up and over; like a dream of himself he climbed, into the night air, free of the earth at last, his freed engine roaring" (26).

In contrast to the image of freedom is Bea Sunderman's house, WORLDS END. Sadness likens it to Madham's house, its interior an "imprisoned garden" (31), a world of plentitude and fertility encased, contained, controlled. The house is filled also with clocks--"Someone didn't trust the sun" (32)--which no longer tick. This house of clocks is the evidence claimed by most critics, Lecker, Thomas and Fogel among them, for labelling Bea and Jill as "representatives of the female claim in time" (Thomas, Kroetsch 72), and Bea as "seeking to reduce the questing male to slippered pantaloon" (79). Robert Lecker, citing both of the statements by Thomas above, insists that WORLDS END is "filled with artificial time. . . . dominated by time, days, dates, numbers, history, closure. . . . both Madham and Bea are interested in closed structures that leave no room for Jeremy's achronological quest" (Kroetsch 70). But time is arrested in Bea's house; the clocks do not tick and the plants do not depend upon seasons, so the interior of the house is "achronological" too. Lecker and Thomas, among others, talk in terms of Jeremy's escaping Madham, Bea, and their ilk so that he may be freed into his quest, but in

this novel, as in Kroetsch's others, freedom consists not of the liberty to pursue the quest but to be liberated <u>from</u> it. At the story's end Jeremy returns to WORLDS END to tell Bea that Dcrck is alive, finding not a trapped Eden but a perfect darkness, a blankness, in which he is able to free himself of the academic need to explain and to find "a suitable metaphor" for his experience (148). He now imagines his final dissertation title, "The Quest Unquestioned," and finds at last his opening line: "Christopher Columbus, not knowing that he had not come to the Indies of his imagination. Imagined that he had come to the Indies" (149). He imagines himself, again, as the "free man freed from his freedom" (149). He is freed from the need to quest, the false male quest story that drives most of Kroetsch's male characters.

Clearly, then, it is not Bea, or women, or even WORLDS END itself that are entrapping Jeremy, since when he returns to all three with an altered inner vision he finds himself healed and liberated by them, not weakened and entrapped. It is worth noting too that the males in the story seem more desirous of stopping time than the females--not seeking to live outside time or with time, but to stop it, as it appears to be stopped in Bea's house. Like Miss Havisham in <u>Great Expectations</u>, Bea has maintained her house as a monument to her absent lover, but Madham, at least, suggests that Robert Sunderman's desire to escape, whether to death

or another life, was to halt the flow of time. He imagines Sunderman on th ice of the river, ". . . his child-bride pregnant, the boy-hu band alone, already regretting the boyhood he could not quite surrender . . . the perfect physique, the absolute potential . . . thinking and not thinking, chasing the puck across the new ice. . . " (155). Dorck's flyi and falling result in a similar halting of time: when he wakes, he remembers nothing from the moment of Sunderman's death or disappearance and believes Jill to be Bea (155). Time is restarted for Bea and Jeremy at WORLDS END not because Jeremy has completed his quest for a new identity, becoming Grey Owl, but because he has been freed from his quest. WORLDS END, then is not World's End with a missing apostrophe, not the trapped, entrapping Eden; it is instead a promise that worlds do end, that the "cosmologies" (to use Kroetsch's word) of belief can be escaped. Jeremy does not assume, so far as we can know, a new identity, but appears to allow the present layers of identity to become diffuse and open. He appears to be very nearly a blank, unthinking and nonverbal, by the narrative's close. But as Lecker also points out, the freedom afforded by "falling out of cosmologies" may be an "illusion of freedom, of becoming a fragment again . . . " (Labyrinths 25). Lecker asks, "If Jeremy's journey grants this illusion . . . how is true freedom to be found?" (Kroetsch 76). Gone Indian is in a sense a penultimate novel, as are the prior novels, ending

with the dissolution of the central character's personality and perhaps hinting at but not displaying potential resolution or even asserting that it is possible to maintain the openness that Jeremy appears to have accomplished.

Jeremy is at first sympathetic to the motives and the methods of Dorck and Sunderman, although even Jeremy seems to understand that Dorck is no longer flying but is merely avoiding life. On his first snowmobile trip Jeremy begins "to understand why Dorck went out to the edge of a cliff and took a crack at flying. The earth was too small. I wanted the sky as well" (39). Suddenly, "I was flying. . . . And then I was driven like a post into a snowbank. That wasn't so bad either. . . . I felt very comfortable. The world was liquid again. . . . I made no effort to stroke back to the surface. I gave up the ghost" (40). Disappointingly, he is rescued before he can join Dorck and Sunderman in their retreat from the world. Still, "rigid with cold" and barely able to move, Jeremy again envisions giving up the ghost, imagining himself as the perishing Scott of the Antarctic:

> You are right to make the last entry and close the notebook. . . . Say no more. Listen to the fall of silence, hear your own last breath and know for one instant you are no longer. After the long walk, the final pleasure; the surrender that is as good as, better than, the infinite struggle. (40)

Observing Jeremy's character in this light, it is easier to credit Madham's assertions that Jeremy's quest is born out of an "absolute fear of involvement" (13), and that the real goal of his quest was "Avoiding life" (25).

Jeremy recalls an exchange with Madham that depicts not only his fascination with transformation but his concern at the very real possibility of transformation into Madham, the fate he travels North to escape, the life he tries to avoid:

> "Sadness . . . there's only one problem in this world that you take seriously. . . . Why did Archie Belaney become Grey Owl?"
>
> "The story of a man," I agreed, "who died into a new life."
>
> "He faked the death."
>
> "But woke up free nevertheless."
>
> "Be serious."
>
> "One false move, Professor, and instead of addressing you, I'll be you. That's serious." (62)

Watching the ski jumpers he comes to the conclusion that "Flying is easy. The whole, the absolute mastery resides in knowing how to fall" (78). After the Indian dog-sledder throws the race at the end, with his victory assured, Jeremy sees his indifference in the dogs as well: "Their magnificent indifference held me. Filled me with admiration. Appalled me" (81). Charged by Jill Sunderman,

in a bear disguise, with the task of freeing himself and fascinated with the possibilities afforded by the freedom, he is, as on his first sight of the exciting but threatening openness of the Prairies, both attracted and dismayed by the options open to him. Preparing for the snowshoe race, he attaches his shoes "as if I had, in anticipation of having to run, anchored myself to the very earth itself. This fits the pattern, Sadness, I told myself: now wait until they freeze to the ice" (82). The pattern he describes is much like Hazard Lepage's pattern of attraction and avoidance: he desires to fly, metaphorically and literally, but is too fearful to let himself. There is a somewhat ominous aspect to the freedom of flying in this novel suggested by another work which is its subtext. Marlow says of Kurtz in Heart Of Darkness, "There was nothing either above him or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth" (67). Jeremy imagines Dorck during his snowmobile accident as "free of the earth at last, his freed engine roaring" (26), then later describes Dorck as having "kicked himself loose from gravity itself" (73). While running the snowshoe race himself, he feels, "I had left the mere earth" (88), and Madham describes Jeremy and Bea on the railway bridge on the snowmobile as though Jeremy has fulfilled his dream to do as Dorck did, to take "a crack at flying" (39): "They ride out onto the narrow bridge as if they are levered into the very sky itself: in the huge night there is no earth

beneath them . . . they are freed of the earth, airborne, flying free" (157). In Conrad's text, Kurtz has freed himself from human connection, even human civilization, which is also Jeremy's vision in his dreaming (or his dreaming of Mrs. Beaver's dream). Kroetsch identifies other aspects of Conrad's text that influenced his own--the use of embedded fragmentary stories, the irreconcilable binary of the two males, the paired females, "the problem of 'Did he lie or didn't he?'" (Labyrinths 12)--but the context of this set of allusions suggests that, while neither Dorck nor Sunderman is otherwise comparable to Kurtz, they both appear to be guilty of the same fatal separation from humankind. The example of Daniel Beaver, the only male character we see in even a relatively normal role as husband and parent, seems to suggest that this separation is unnecessary since he is able to win his race without losing his identity, without losing himself and his connection to others. Beaver goes so far as to outrage Jeremy by suggesting that even Grey Owl was human in this: "He liked women" (100).

After his own race, Jeremy is confronted by the other racers, mostly because he looks like an Indian. Like Madham or Jill Sunderman, they are demanding an explanation of why he won, or as Jeremy sees it, "how they had not won" (90). One of the other racers says there are "runners who run to overtake. There are runners who run to run away" (89), while another suggests that Jeremy "ran right out of

himself. That happens to runners" (90). Sadness tells himself to "Connect," to establish kinship: "I should have said something, should have explained. I was closer to making a connection than I had ever been" (90). He is driven into silence partly because of his too-keen awareness of the ambiguity of truth. When asked if he is part Indian, he knows he must respond, must explain if he is to avoid trouble, but "when I might have explained, I saw instead the potential truth of the observation" (91).

He now recognizes the magpie he believed had egged him on during the race and mocked him as a double of Madham:

> The magpie looked like _you_, Madham, all dressed up in black and white. The old mad Adam of the original day. The first night, outside the garden. Kee-rist on a crutch. The grief-spinner, horned and horny in his nightmare hope, and even then, that first time, trying to recapture everything that was gone. (91-92)

The image of Madham as old Adam exemplifies the modernist ideal he represents of assembling the whole from the fragments, of piecing Eden back together again, of achieving wholeness and so stasis again. The demands of the men for a satisfying explanation mimics such a reductivist approach to the truth. Jeremy can respond only with an Italian curse, remembered from his childhood in New York's Little Italy. He earns with that the imprecation, "You fucking Indian" and

several blows to the head. He is asked again if he is Indian. "Again I did not answer. When I might have saved myself, simply by speaking. But I would not speak. For if I had tried, it would have been a tongue I did not understand" (93). His identity is no longer his to such a degree that just as he could not claim his suitcase earlier, so now he cannot claim his own voice, his own language. He is, increasingly, going Indian, both in the sense of being carnivalized, being released from his static learned identity and freed into unrestraint, and in that he is almost literally becoming an Indian. In an elemental clash of the black and white of the sky and the stars, with the snow falling around and on top of him, he is knocked unconscious.

Another respect in which Jeremy divests his self while he races is indicated by the discarding of his jacket; after the race, Daniel Beaver's jacket fits him perfectly, like a new skin for a newly emerging self, but Jeremy realizes just how much he has shed:

> Only then did I realize: in throwing away my jacket I had thrown away my ring of keys. The brass key ring itself, a gift from Miss Petcock. The Yale key to the shared office where I am scheduled this same night to embrace Miss Cohen. The Lockwood key to an upstairs apartment where, my wife being out for a visit to the professor's

> attic, I might let myself in to the roaring silence. The key to a friend's VW, though the friend graduated after a mere five years and himself became a professor and a dolt. The skeleton key to Miss Kundt's levitation salon, though Miss Kundt has moved on to another salon, yea, even another vertical lover. The small tin key to a foot locker I left in storage, where, I can't recall. And a slender silver key that I could neither surrender nor, try as I might, connect with any remembered door or cash box or filing cabinet or steamer trunk or padlocked garden or chastity belt or emblazoned keyhole anywhere in the known world.
>
> (98)

The keys, which ought to be potential, the means of opening up possibilities, have become encumbrances, dead ends. His shedding of the keys is the shedding of, among many things, obligations, past lovers, the bond of marriage, the possibility of graduation into dolthood, his bondage to his typewriter and unfinished thesis, the burden of the past, and imprisoned Edens. The final image of a key which he could neither part with nor connect to anything is emblematic of much of Jeremy's dilemma, and suggests both the image of his anchoring himself to the ground when preparing to fly and one of the usual forms taken by his

grip exercises, grasping both handles of a door. (It recalls also Hazard Lepage's nightmare vision of being unable to get off a mare and being unable to leap through the flaming hoop either.) Jeremy is a fence-sitter. For instance, he diplomatically reassures Prof. Balding of the University of Alberta that he has merely been delayed for his job interview, but never gets any closer to the university. Similarly he is both attracted by the peace of total separation and by the satisfaction of connection. The throwing away of the key <u>may</u> be symbolic of his being freed from the quest; at the book's close Jeremy appears to achieve both connection <u>and</u> separation by finding a way, apparently, to fly with instead of away from Woman.

Asleep in the back of Daniel's truck, Jeremy dreams, we are told, the dream of Daniel's Blackfoot wife. It is a dream of re-established fertility and potency, of Nature's renewed command over the world, ending civilized man's dominance. In it, Jeremy joins his Indian brothers and their forebears. As the edifices of civilization and Christianity come crumbling down, Poundmaker comes upon Jeremy and rebaptizes him; "Now," Poundmaker says, "you are no longer Antelope Standing Still. . . . Now. . . you are Has-Two-Chances." (105-106). In "a dark so dark it could have been a womb" (106), much like that of Bea's room, Jeremy is transformed into a buffalo to make love to Buffalo Woman. Madham notes that the salient point of this

transformation is that "buffalo make love standing up" (106), but the struggle against gravity is manifested in other ways too.

> He reared up on his hind legs. He missed in his first lunging, and fell back. Away. In a dream he was falling, yet he did not know. He who would make a life of knowing. And he was afraid of his fall. (107)

His next attempt is successful, though, and he experiences an apocalyptic joy of such intensity that it cannot be wholly diminished by Madham's ironic and deflating rendering of it. Then, rather than falling, he "let himself back down to earth" (108).

The importance of this aspect of the dream manifests itself when Jeremy dreams again--possibly influenced by his lying in a coffin at the time--this time that he has died. He envisions possible headstone inscriptions, dismissing most as quickly as he dismisses dissertation topics, but then comes to the "stone of my most careful choosing":

JEREMY SADNESS

Arise (133)

When he awakes, still vaguely under the impression that he has died, he slowly becomes aware that he is in fact alive and that his penis is erect even though he is lying down. "I tightened the muscles of my belly and felt the new tension on my zipper, I was alive. I was alive, goddamnit,

I was back in the game, rearing to go, lusting to paw the dirt and snort a little. . . . And then my absolute joy was united inextricably with the usual unmitigated despair" (135). Typically, his joy is alloyed with disappointment because he suspects he will be able to "arise" only in a coffin. While he worries about this problem, he is unceremoniously tumbled out of his coffin, "like a child in a cradle" (136), into a chaos that "was more than human" (136). Earlier, in his fight following the snowshoe race, he had been knocked out as he raised his hands to protect his nose. Now, however, even that defense, the desire to keep his body inviolate, has been lowered, and his nose is bloodied in the fall (137). The contrast between his earlier annoyance at having been saved from drowning in the snow and his euphoria at discovering he is still alive, along with the bestial image of pawing the dirt and snorting, indicate that Jeremy has learned much about both how to connect and the need to connect. The absent-minded ease with which he surrenders his identity to Digger again underlies his freedom from his quest.

Having taken another fall, he resolves to consult with the comatose Roger Dorck in the hospital. When he suddenly wakes, Dorck's only, halting, statement is perhaps not surprising: "Where are we?" Despite their predictability, the words, especially "we," scare Jeremy right out of the hospital to WORLDS END to warn Bea Sunderman, though first

he must pass through the blizzard again. The elemental chaos of the swirling snow forces him to find his own way, to create a new path, just as he is now seeking to create a new, native identity instead of appropriating another's. "I was in the trackless snow, making ny own path" (144). He puts his trust in "a homing instinct that resided as much in my hands as in my head" (144). In bed with Bea he becomes aware that something different, something alive, has entered the house with him: "Of this I am certain, however: a clock that had not been ticking began to tick" (146). As it had when he found his instinct and body a better guide than his intellect, now "All thinking had swooned from my mind. I was as blank as the darkness around me" (146). He makes clear the cause of his previous impotency when it recurs briefly: "Yes, I was thinking again. . . . I was paralysed into thought. I was once again a total stranger to my own prick. I was at a dead loss as to what I must do." (147). Fortunately, Bea possesses the solution. She, "That invisible woman," is suddenly an earth figure, bringing to the entire room, the "smell of earth":

> . . . not of flowers only, but the dark breathing silence of ferns in crevices of rock. The lichens, orange and yellow, on a rotting limb. The green moss, cool to the sliding mouse. The smell of a northern forest, where the snow melts itself black into the last shade. (147)

She facilitates the final step in the process of dissolution of Jeremy's identity, the final confrontation with silence. In The Manticore, David Staunton's judgement by the bear takes place in the depths of a dark, deep, and narrow cave. Jeremy has already met the bear, but now he is at the entrance to the cave. Bea represents at this moment not the caretaker of imprisoned Edens, but

> The Columbus quest for the oldest New World. The darkest gold. The last first. I was lifting my hidden face. To the gateway beyond. To the place of difficult entrance. To the real gate to the dreamed cave. . . .
>
> I had tongued the unspeakable silence. (147)

The scene, clearly, can be interpreted several ways, perhaps the most literal of which is that Jeremy has initiated oral sex, a means of connection not dependent upon his penis being erect. The sense of it, though, seems to be that Jeremy, by his physical union with Bea, has in some way transcended language and his inherited voice to find the silence he had sought. Regardless of the reading of the scene, after it Jeremy discovers he does not need a coffin to achieve an erection while lying down. The union that results, to borrow from the same library of cliches that plague Sadness, is beyond words:

> To speak would be to boast. And I was speechless. Perhaps I roared. I am not certain

> now. I did not moan. To say that we were joined, Bea and I, would be, once again, to underline the failure of language. We were wedded in the smithy of our mutual desire. Fused in the bellowed flame. Tonged and hammered. . . . No no no no no no. I have ransacked my twenty-five years of education for a suitable metaphor. I have done a quick review of logic, called upon the paradigms of literature and history. I have put to test the whole theory of a liberal education.
>
> Nothing.
>
> Absolutely nothing.
>
> I only know that for a long, long time I had not heard the ticking clocks. (148)

Madham then takes over the narration and outlines the "facts" of the case: Jeremy and Bea disappeared on the same night that a stolen snowmobile was crushed on the cowcatcher of a train crossing over a bridge, and Jeremy's tape recorder is found dangling above the water of the river on the bridge's support timbers. Madham insists there is no doubt that the two fell to their deaths. Carol insists they hid until the train stopped, then got on and are together still. Madham's only defense in the face of Jeremy's possible happiness and his escape from the ranks of professorship is to deny both the happiness and his own muted and concealed desire to share it, and to assert his

controlling hand over it. He destroys the tapes so that no-one can contradict his version, and dismisses the importance of Jeremy's union with Bea by insisting simply and crudely she represented "the cunt he was always trying so unsuccessfully to get back into" (154). Images of the return to the womb do surface throughout the book, but if Jeremy returns to the womb, to his source, it is not to regress, but to be reborn into an identity at one with his chosen landscape, an identity as flexible and open as the north.

As a parallel to his diminishing of Jeremy's achievement, Madham describes the two lovers in terms that appear to be pejorative but are in the context of Kroetsch's thematic schema usually positive:

> And they rode away seeking NOTHING. They sought NOTHING. They would FLEE everything. THEY DID NOT KNOW WHERE THEY WERE GOING. (156)

To Professor Madham, not knowing where you are going, travelling without goal, is inexcusable foolishness, representing a lack of sense and morality rather than a victory of unrestraint over the bounds of static, stultifying reason. A more charitable assumption would be that Jeremy is able to trust his body and his instincts to guide him, trusting in his new connectedness with the earth and sky. Madham's past, his own prairie roots, show themselves as he seeks to discredit Jeremy's experiences in

what he jealously guards as "_my_ Northwest" (101). He cannot resist romanticising the final stand on the bridge, comparing the pair to buffalo at a buffalo jump, and recognizing in the approach of the train and the covering of the storm an "unbearable and sweet" indifference (157). In the fiction that Madham creates to coerce the novel into a clear resolution, they leap, sharing that indifference, the indifference of the dogs, of the Cree, of the earth. "Together they fall, clinging to nothing but each other's regret, spilling down the sudden sluice, the dark incurious flume, their eyes alive to the nail-point snow, their tongues unhinged in the whistling night. They are lovers. They do not even scream as they fall" (158).

Kroetsch typically takes his reader on the same trip his hero takes: led from a point of stasis and reason, he sinks deeper and deeper into the waters (or the blizzard) of disorder and imagination, only to arrive at a point of crisis, a point at which no decision based upon reason is possible. Just as the hero is left hanging over the abyss of endless possibilities, so too is the reader. One of the reasons this novel may seem less responsive than previous ones to a reader's expectations of coherency and clear resolution is the difference in the narrative stance. This is the first of Kroetsch's novels to involve a dual narrative approach in which neither narrative voice is directed at the reader: Jeremy's tapes are directed at

Madham and Madham's interpretation and commentary is directed to Jill Sunderman. The reader is in the curious position of eavesdropping, of listening in on conversations not meant for him or her, and so not designed to lead to a full and satisfying conclusion. Instead, the reader is left with a jumble of personalities and wild surmises, and a mysterious disappearance at the end for which no reasonable solution exists, Madham's diatribe to the contrary. This move to a more distanced, even less authoritative narrative stance is a part of a continuing process in which Kroetsch searches, much like his characters, for a way of connecting and communicating with the reader that will not require that he play the coercive "god-game" he associates with Modern writers and readers. Gone Indian is the result of a search for a narrative form that is open, flexible, and demanding rather than coercive, requiring reader interaction; a fragmentary form, but not so fragmented that the story does not get told, even if the story has no resolution or clear significance. The means to this fragmented story appears primarily to be fractured narration, overlapping narratives like pieces in a puzzle that do not quite fit.

Gone Indian introduces, or perhaps manifests clearly, two crucial elements of the structure of any of Kroetsch's later novels: the split narrative and the image of metamorphosis. The split narrative is not only a structural device but is integrally connected to the themes of the

novels. As the narrative form becomes more fractured and difficult to assemble into one piece, it resembles more closely the model of a universe in which elements may be linked contiguously, but not logically or metaphorically. In *What the Crow Said*, the story becomes fractured to the extent that there is no plausible way to connect it in even a causal sense; the story is more a series of anecdotes than a plot. As was noted above, the metamorphosis of the hero--his dying only to be reborn--was suggested in earlier novels, but is articulated fully for the first time here. The image is important because this metamorphosis is the way out of the dichotomies that trap the male characters into going on quests. The death of the hero frees him from his quest and allows him to live his life, rather than the role assigned to him by Western literature. And Jeremy is the first hero who *may have* survived his demise to do so (excepting Peter Guy, whose image is much less hopeful at the close of *But We Are Exiles*).

Chapter VI:

Badlands: Archeaology of Experience.

The narrative structure in _Badlands_, published in 1975, is in many ways familiar to readers of Kroetsch's earlier novels. The narrative voice is split, but in this case the two voices belong not to characters who embody masculine and feminine characteristics, like Hazard and Demeter, or who resemble parent and offspring, like Hornyak and Guy or Madham and Sadness, but two characters who _are_ male and female, who _are_ parent and child. And, again, a non-oral medium is employed for one half of the narrative. Also, although this aspect is not so clear as in earlier works, one of the characters seems to seek to order the story, to fashion it into a quest with beginning, middle, and end, while the other subverts and undercuts the attempts at wholeness; this aspect is also reversed, since previously the ordering hand was the one editing the raw material of the life, tapes, field notes. Now it is the rebellious spirit of Anna Dawe that upsets her father's intention to achieve immortality through his quest for the perfect specimen--a complete skeleton of a hitherto undiscovered species of dinosaur which would then bear his name--and through the records of that quest. His desire for immortality and her subversion of it point to the same theme explored in _The Studhorse Man_ and _What the Crow Said_: men go

on quests, seeking immortality by freeing themselves from the demands of the community, despite the fact that the opportunity to achieve immortality actually exists within the community by becoming a part of a whole larger than oneself and, especially, by engendering offspring.

William Dawe wages the most virulent battle against the entrapping forces of domesticity of any Kroetsch character. He virtually ignores his wife and child, especially his daughter, Anna. His time is occupied by the double quest: to uncover a complete and previously unknown dinosaur skeleton and to set his discovery and his life down precisely and scientifically in his field notes. The search is Dawe's assault on the passing of time; if the past can be recovered, then time does not truly pass and he will not himself disappear from the earth. The precise note-keeping is like Demeter's biography and Liebhaber's desire to state things exactly. Dawe appears to believe that if he can contain his life in his field notes in an orderly, manangeable structure--without the chaotic elements of his life intruding as they do outside the journal--then it can be sustained, preserved like the dinosaur skeleton he recovers.

The focus of the novel is often on time, on Dawe's desire to defeat it by achieving immortality and Anna's attempt to find her place in it. Her father's story of his life all but excludes her; because she has no story, no myth

about herself, she exists outside of time, and so hopes to reclaim her life by retracing--in reverse--her father's journey not just through geography but through time.

Another aspect of this narrative that is becoming standard in Kroetsch's novels is the presence of prefatory material, in this case two epigraphs and a chronology. The first epigraph, from "Coyote and the Shadow People," an American Indian trickster tale of orphic descent, and the second, from bp Nichol's Martyrology, help establish a tone as well as some thematic, mythic background. William Dawe's journey down the Red Deer River is a metaphoric--and at times literal--descent into the underworld, the sense of which descent is amplified by the setting, the strata of rock successively revealing earlier ages as the river cuts more deeply into it. In the chapter entitled "The ABC Mine: Dawe's Descent," Dawe descends into a coal mine, noting the fossils at successive levels that mark the journey back into time. Not securing what he sought there, an explosives expert, Dawe finds out instead that he must go deeper into the earth as they proceed down the river:

> . . . Dawe realizing: He and his crew must float downriver, float down below this geological level to a still earlier age . . . . [Where exists] a bed of fossils buried a million years before this one came into being, or flourished, or itself perished, itself was buried into oblivion. (82)

His orphic quest is to reclaim and restore not his wife or lover but an emblem of an ancient past; he seeks to assert his own immortality against the power of time to destroy and erase by restoring a past that seemed irrevocably lost. Avoiding the immortality afforded by procreation, Dawe instead seeks to attach his name to the skeletal remains of an extinct species, to be memorialized in a museum. In addition to alerting the reader to the mythic context, the content of the epigraph also sets the tone by presenting the moment in the Indian tale when the arduous descent ends with first the illusion of success and then the reality of failure; the object of the quest, reclaimed from the underworld, returns there. Dawe too gains at least the illusion of success, returning as he does with the proof of the perfect specimen that will bear his name, but in the process he becomes as ossified as that specimen. Everything that is human about him, every human connection or impulse, is drained out of him. Anna writes of him after his return:

> . . . he came back delivered of most of the impulses we like to think of as human. . . . somewhere, somehow, he shook himself free of any need to share even his sufferings with another human being. . . . he ceased to dare to love. (179)

Anna Dawe's own journey is the reverse of her father's: she begins at the end-point of his journey on the river, the

Loveland ferry, and she begins her inner journey at the place he ended, with all human connections severed, living in a book-filled house, virtually self-sufficient.

The second epigraph emphasizes the role of the setting, the Alberta Badlands. In earlier Kroetsch novels, the very openness of the Prairie allows dissolution and metamorphosis of identity, but the desolation and enclosure of the Badlands make them seem almost a grave, dug deeper the questors go further down the river; as the epigraph suggests, death is in the air itself, and images of death and burial--both real and illusory--permeate the novel. The immortality Dawe searches for results in several deaths or near-misses and is in itself a kind of death, while Anna Dawe, entombed in her house in Ontario, is similarly estranged from life. Peter Thomas, among others, has noted that while the themes of the book are similar to those of earlier Kroetsch works--the tyranny of time and death, the search for identity, for immortality, for one's source among them--it is in this book that the symbolism and imagery the setting affords are most evocative and most perfectly aligned with the thematic material.

> . . . Badlands is arguably the most perfectly conceived novel Kroetsch has written, in which the concordance of natural symbolism, particularly the geologically layered canyon of the Red Deer and the "source" implication of the river journey and

> the bone hunt itself, with the contrivance of character and narrative structure, is most complete. (Kroetsch 81)

The chronology tells virtually the whole story in about 125 words by outlining the main events in the lives of William and Anna Dawe with the same terse and reductive precison as Dawe's field notes, including such telling details as "birth of Anna Dawe, while her father is in the field collecting dinosaur skeletons." The Chronology mentions Anna Dawe only in terms of her father's actions--she is the still counterpoint to his questing--until the final item, which suggests in retrospect that her life, her ability to act, begins only with her recreation of her father's quest. This she does with Anna Yellowbird, who had shadowed William Dawe's journey, and with Dawe's field notes and two cases of Gordon's gin. One other thing the chronology does is prepare the reader for the task at hand, both for reader and narrator, that of deciphering brief notes to fill out a life, to make it a living presence again. Anna constructs a vision of her father by piecing together the increasingly fragmentary field notes he left behind, aided by the memory of Anna Yellowbird (and the photographs Anna Yellowbird almost shows her) and by visiting the site of the original journey.

Arnold K. Davidson has suggested that the quests of both Anna and Dawe result in "a history distorted by the

limited vision of the historian," and so Kroetsch is suggesting that "the true historian is the novelist, the true myth-maker, who knows that history, like life, must be fleshed out" (128). In an interview on Canada AM, Kroetsch says virtually the same thing. Indicating a distaste for history as it is usually presented, he says, "I'm more interested in what I would call the mythological, the way it becomes a yarn for us, the way it becomes a tall tale, the way it becomes an explanation" (27.28.3, 5). In "On Being An Alberta Writer," Kroetsch writes often of how his need to write, to "record and invent these new places called Alberta and Saskatchewan" (75), stems from his mistrust of history to do that job fully. He begins with a phrase that could apply to most of his characters, "memory is a disguise as well as a recollection," then continues: "My sense of the gap between me and history was growing. History as I knew it did not account for the world I lived in" (70). The "authorized history, the given definition of history" (71) excluded those aspects of Prairie life that did not fit the European model: buffalo wallows, Indian villages, magical stone rings, all remnants of a marginalized and nearly extinguished race, remain as traces on the Prairies of Kroetsch's boyhood, but have no place in the histories available to him. He was "on my way to embracing the model of archaeology, against that of history" (75), in which "even the wrong-headed histories written by eastern

historians become, rather than the narratives of the past, archaeological deposits" (76). The archaeological method involves unearthing these fragments, removing them from the contexts in which they have been embedded--suggesting to Kroetsch a violence that is attractive as a model for writing--and viewing them with a fresh perspective, speculating always about the whole that the shard represents, but never being able to conclude. Every new discovery of a deposit shifts the focus slightly. So the chronology, the two narratives, the photographs, every piece of the story becomes grist for this archeological process, this constantly shifting arrangement of fragments.

Kroetsch has said that what draws him to archaeology, and thus what archaeology brings to his fiction, is "That sense of unfolding or of opening up and of mystery; a sense of process, of deliberation, along with the unknown. I'm physically drawn to archaeology; it's no accident I wrote Badlands. . . . I like the sense of fragment and what fragment does--the demands fragment makes on us for shaping, for telling, for imagining" (Labyrinths 167). Kroetsch is also attracted to the game aspect of the process, the involvement of the reader, the way in which both games and archaeology force you to work back toward generative rules:

> One new discovery at a buffalo jump in Alberta suddenly shifts the whole game of archaeology: you date it, you get a new date, you have to re-play

> the whole structure, or game. I guess it's the same with a literary text where almost a single word can be a fragment from another text. (Labyrinths 11)

Kroetsch's interest in a particular instance of archaeology, as established by Elin Edwards in an unpublished essay, involves his reading The Life of a Fossil Hunter by Charles H. Sternberg. Both Sternberg and E.D. Cope, his mentor and leader of several of the expeditions, are mentioned several times in Kroetsch's narrative, and many plot details appear to have their source in Sternberg's book. Sternberg, like Dawe, was bedridden with a childhood illness, developed a lame leg on his expeditions, suffered a nearly fatal fall onto a rock ledge, experiences the journey through the river valley as a journey through time, and details the imagined form of a serpent in the river when he is back in the days of dinosaurs. And as Dawe notes himself, the idea to use their own clothes to wrap the bones of the perfect specimen is borrowed from Sternberg (222). Sternberg sees his mentor, Cope (an apt name for McBride if it hadn't already been taken), completely covered in mud. Cope also investigates a Crow [Dawe] Indian grave, keeping the skull as a gruesome keepsake, prompting the captain of the scow transporting them to refuse to let them "emulate the dead" on his vessel (95). In Badlands the ferryman refuses to carry Web across the river, saying, "We don't

need none of you damned graverobbers down here" (54). More important than supplying correspondences such as these, though, reading Sternberg's book affords a more direct view of the hardships and privations of a fossil hunter whose expeditions are roughly contemporaneous with Dawe's (Dawe writes of a discovery Sternberg made just four years before his own first season in the field (59)). Much like the fortitude and singlemindedness Anna Dawe says her father developed in that first season (139), Sternberg reports that he too had to strengthen his resolve to succeed: "I . . . determined that whatever it might cost me in privation, danger, and solitude, I would make it my business to collect facts from the crust of the earth" (17).

Photographs, which, like fossils, at least present the illusion of fact, are also an element central to the narrative of the novel, as to the Sternberg book, and have a similarly dual aspect for Kroetsch. Sinnott, the photographer who twice meets the expedition briefly, argues with Dawe about the validity of the photograph as fact, an argument Kroetsch has pursued elsewhere. On the one hand, Kroetsch contends, a photograph pretends to freeze a moment in time, to capture it forever against the passage of time: "The photograph is almost grotesque in its ellipis or its brevity. . . even in its kind of summary. There is nothing more grotesque, perhaps, than a snapshot which takes up one instant and suggests its incredible validity against time"

(Labyrinths 126). But, as with other archaeological deposits, wrenched from its context the photograph can produce fresh, even startlingly fresh, insight:

> I think the photograph is a terrible validation by stasis. . . . Still, when I was at a family reunion, I was given a photograph of my mother when she was sixteen and it's really shaken me . . . . So it was a terribly exciting thing to see that photograph and I can understand again the generative power of a photograph at its best . . . . It's like myth: I am more interested in the generative function than in the recapitulative. (Labyrinths 127-128)

Kroetsch discusses printed documents in almost the same terms as these, as having the same dual aspect.

> The field notes make things backwards just as the mirror does in The Studhorse Man because Anna starts at the bottom and then works up the river to the source. The idea of document is fascinating to me because it is another telling quite often and it's a telling that invites a further telling because of what it leaves out. It suggests all this other story body that you're talking about. Document is often almost grotesque in its ellipses and brevity, or even in its kind of summary. (Labyrinths 187)

As Kroetsch's comments might suggest, the novel is almost entirely made up of documents of one variety or another, some of which are fleshed out for the reader and some of which are left unretouched and unexplicated. The reader is given portions of Dawe's field notes, descriptions of some of Sinnott's photographs, the Chronology, and Anna's own narration of her journey, in effect her field notes. Her direct narrative is signalled by her name and distinguished from the main third person narration by being printed in italics. The main narration comprises forty-six numbered sections, and even these take on the appearance of document. Each has for its title a caption, more suitable for a photograph than a chapter: "Flatboat With Crew," "Chinese Cook on Deck," and "Scarlet Lady Sound Asleep," for instance. Even a section almost entirely made up of field notes is given the status of a picture by the opening, "Dawe writing: . . . " (57). Each heading suggests a static visual image which the section then proceeds to animate. It is as if the reader is leafing through the photographs Sinnott took, even though he could not have taken many of them, and is moved by each to fill in the lost details, just as the field notes demand of Anna another telling, a reclamation of the whole story, or at least an approximation of it. Sinnott becomes a central but shadowy figure in the story because of the dual aspect of the photographs he takes: they pretend to capture a moment in time and they

actually do preserve a fragment that, even if it cannot capture the original, can at least generate a version of it. The form of Badlands mirrors that of Kroetsch's poetry of this period--Seed Catalogue and The Ledger--in its use of the document as starting point, and its use of journal entries in the fabric of the narration will be recapitulated in Alibi and much of the later poetry.

Badlands' narration foregrounds a concern often raised by Kroetsch: where is the voice coming from? Anna is clearly the first person narrator of her interspersed commentary, but who narrates the other sections? There is no direct identification of the source of the narration, as in Studhorse, in which Demeter pieces together the narration, or Gone Indian, in which Madham handles that task. The numbered sections, set in the past and often containing portions of Dawe's field notes, are in the distanced, limited omniscient third person that Kroetsch will rely upon entirely in What The Crow Said. But while most critics seem to have assumed that Anna is the author not only of her own sections but of the whole text, there is no direct evidence to support this assumption. That Anna's commentary exists at all suggests she is not narrating the other sections, although her commentary often refers directly to the main narration and sometimes provides plot details not present in it. It is as if the main narration has an independent existence and Anna responds to it as to

the field notes, as document.

Peter Thomas says the main text is "narrated authorially" (Kroetsch 80), and suggests that irony is created by the uncertainty of "how much of the authorial narrative is known to Anna, since we cannot assume omniscience in her" (81). Robert Lecker insists, though, that Anna narrates the story of both her own and her father's quest. The main narrative is "Anna's rendering" of Dawe's journey, and it is she who transforms it into a quest (Kroetsch 79). In Lecker's version, Anna is not freed from the quest but imprisoned by it, and the narration represents her "missing the narrative point" of the field notes: "the field notes are fragments representing a male form of antistory virtually realized . . . yet she continues to believe that the notes have value because her task is to piece together fragments, to create a story" (81). Kroetsch's purpose is clear, Lecker claims: "he has aligned the concept of antistory with the male quest by transferring the concept of storytelling to Woman" (80). "Anna complains that women are never given stories. . . . now they will be given all they demand through Anna . . . . and Kroetsch will be free to blame the result on her" (85). In a convoluted, circular, and finally unconvincing argument, Lecker contends further that Anna creates the story after the final stage of her commentary, in which she "drowns" the field notes; therefore, she is a liar, an entirely unreliable narrator,

and certainly not the figure in the novel Kroetsch would have us admire.

> To get the "true" story we have to invert everything she says. When she claims that the men of Dawe's expedition "were trying to tell each other" a "western yarn," we read: the men told each other nothing, but from that void Anna would contrive a "western yarn." (83)

Virtually all of Lecker's argument is based on the assumption that Anna narrates the entire text, that she created the main narrative after experiencing her own journey up the river, and that there is a "true" story for Anna to falsify. Whether we accept her word that she destroyed the field notes or accept Lecker's contention that she lied about doing so, we still have no way to verify what the men did or did not say, just as we were denied that option in The Studhorse Man or Gone Indian, in both of which the sources of the stories--Hazard's life and Sadness's tapes--are destroyed. "Anna is constrained to live in the time frame she might have escaped had she not demanded narrative" (Lecker 85), but an implicit narrative was already present, ordering her life: the myth her father created about himself. Again, Lecker seems to have taken Dawe at his word that he had escaped language, even though we are told that he continued to make field notes for twenty years after he last went into the field. Like Kroetsch and

his reaction to Eastern historians who excluded marginalized figures from their texts, Anna is trapped in a narrative in which she is excluded. As Kroetsch has indicated often, one way out of an entrapping myth is to retell it. Despite Lecker's insistence to the contrary, Kroetsch does not present William Dawe as one "who lives out a magnificent antistory, inhabiting the narrative but defying language at every turn" (85). If anything, Dawe turns to language to help him reduce existence, to contain, define, and restrict it. He seeks to use fewer, more precise words, reacting adversely when emotion creeps into his expression, and there is every possibility that the final sentence "I have come to the end of words" is not a statement of release from language but of success in reducing it till it ceases to exist, just as he reduces himself as a human, until he ceases to exist. As in most Kroetsch novels, the narrative is too slippery and shifting to support much certain statement about it, and so I cannot absolutely contradict Lecker's positions. But I can also see no grounds for assuming Anna's story to be utterly false, for seeing Dawe as heroically living out his antistory, or even for assuming that Anna "both imagines and mediates" (85) the field notes to create and narrate the third-person text.

Anna herself uses the word "mediate" to indicate her relation to the story (3), as if she were the medium through which it passes. Kroetsch's own description of the

narrative stance suggests that he considers the narrative voice to be the story's own, the story telling itself out its own impetus, its own energy, the tradition shaping and telling the story:

> I was playing with the woman's first person narration and the whole notion that a story speaks out in what I call the male story. . . . 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. (Labyrinths 170)

The male story, the quest, has foundations so firm and reified that it virtually speaks itself, and Anna's response, whether it includes only her own commentary or the whole text, is not simply to what is actually in the field notes or to the "true" story, but to the implicit, understood, and powerful form of the male story.

Anna's need to tell the story, then, stems largely from the lack of a story of herself, except as a virtual blank in her father's narrative, as suggested by the chronology cited in the opening. She is outside the male tradition, and as such has no vision of herself. The novel opens with a piece of Anna's commentary in which she introduces her father, who exists for her only as a compendium of notes:

> I don't know that I ever received a letter from my absent father. He sent us instead, left

> us, deposited for me to find, his field notes; God help us we are a people raised not on love letters or lyric poems or even cries of rebellion or ecstasy or pain or regret, but rather old hoards of field notes. Those cryptic notations made by men who held the words themselves in contempt but who needed them nevertheless in order to carry home, or back if not home, the only memories they would ever cherish: the recollections of their male courage and male solitude. (2)

The notation, since there is so little to go on, includes not only the often indecipherable words but any and all marks on the page, "not only the words but the squashed mosquitos, the spider's legs, the stains of thick black coffee, even the blood that smeared the already barely decipherable words" (2). And the message received is not always the message sent: "the message was always so clear that my mother could read, finally, without unpuzzling the blurred letters or the hasty, intense scrawl. She could read her own boredom and possibly her loneliness, if not his outrageous joy" (2). Anna wonders why "it was left to me to mediate the story. . . women are not supposed to have stories" (3). She is trapped inside the story that says women do not have stories, but are relegated to the role of Penelope, "And yet I was no Penelope because no man wagered his way towards me" (3). In virtually every regard, this

one included, her story, her quest, is the inverse of Dawe's, and her story is the reverse in some ways of the journey the typical Kroetsch character enacts. She is, at the beginning of the novel, already at a point of confrontation with the frightening blankness of a lack of identity. Unlike the many male characters who have to shed their past, to sever their ties, in order to find the freedom necessary to realize their true selves, Anna instead needs to find her past, to establish some ties, to lend some solidity to her identity. Previous to the journey she "bought my gin by the case, bought and read my books by the parcel, imagined to myself a past, an ancestor, a legend, a vision, a fate" (3). So while Dawe journeys down the river, divesting himself of his identity and searching always for immortality, for a way to step outside of time by freezing a portion of the past in plaster-of-paris, Anna journeys up the river, towards the source, searching instead for a way to get into time, to become a part of the continuity, the cycle.

Web, a character much like Michael Hornyak, full of words and "nothing inside him, nothing behind that penis of his, that was destructible" (4), tells of burning his father's shack and his past with it and declares that "There is no such thing as a past" (4). Anna disagrees, identifying herself with her father in this regard:

> There is nothing else, Web. That you should

misunderstand is unfortunate; on that one issue, on that one issue only, my father perceived correctly. And he went out and looked for that past. Appropriately enough, with a pick and a shovel and an awl and a chisel and a hammer. And shellac to seal it with and burlap and plaster of paris to wrap it. And museums to sell it to at a handsome profit. (4)

When she first meets Anna Yellowbird, a link with her father and his quest, she is tempted by the Indian woman's silence, tempted by the thought that "by pretending I too might deny his ever having existed" (25). She learns that they either knew two different men, or that her father is not the man she thought he was:

"He did what he did," Anna said. That other Anna.

"He did what he wanted," I corrected her.

"Then he is not the man I knew," Anna said. . . .

"He did as he pleased," I corrected her.

"I did not know that man," she said. (26)

Anna speaks of the journey of the men as "the inversion of their souls" (26), but she too must experience an inversion, and "That other Anna" is to be both her guide and her destination; she must learn to know, to accept, Dawe the way Anna Yellowbird, who lived through more in the first fifteen

years of her life than Anna Dawe has in a lifetime, does.

Trapped still in her world of books, all too familiar with the traditional form of the male quest literature, Anna assumes that when Anna Yellowbird orders more beer at the tavern they are in, it is because the story is to take this familiar form.

> And I assumed the occasion would demand of her a formal telling, would sponsor the curious little narrative tricks of a male adventure: the lies that enable the lovers to meet, the mystery of who did the killing, the suspense before victory. As if we didn't know all the answers long before they asked their absurd questions. . . They have their open spaces, and translate them into a fabled hunting. We have only time to survive in, time without either lies or mystery or suspense; we live and then die in time. (27)

She assumes she will have access to the story only in the way that is normally available to a woman--hearing about it. But the drinking of the beer becomes a preliminary rite of initiation, not an accompaniment to a static story-telling, and the two depart upon their own journey.

Anna's role in the narrative seems to be to guide the reader--although her comments are not addressed directly to a reader--much as Anna Yellowbird must guide her, showing her that there is more to her father than she is willing to

admit at first. Somewhat like Demeter, but more self-aware, Anna interrupts the telling of the male story to accentuate the instability of story, the potential for gaps in veracity. She insists that "There are no truths, only correspondences" (45), and so discourages herself and the reader from expecting to arrive at something definite. That is, by interrupting and mediating the telling of the quest story, she undermines any temptation to take the male quest as seriously as Dawe does. It is made difficult to believe that achieving the goal of the quest is the end and sum total of the story, justifying the ignoring of marginalized characters and of the personal affections that are divested in the process of the quest. Anna admires McBride most at first because in "the western yarn those men were trying to tell each other, he was the only one with the ability to become a hero, the wisdom not to. Home was a word he understood, and heroes cannot afford that understanding" (45).

Anna guards also against her own temptation to find truths where only correspondances exist, to mistake her assumptions and interpretaions for the whole story. She immediately undercuts her interpretation of the limited evidence she has about McBride, and draws attention again to the tenuous nature of that evidence:

> Or so I would assume, from reading the field notes: and I allow, generously, for my father's

> weariness at the end of a long day, for his sinking ambitions. . . . Action and voice: how strange they should have so little connection. Or is there any at all, any familiar knock at the closed door, between the occurrence and the most exact telling? That I should have left home determined to set straight the record--fifty-six years after the event--is part of my folly. (45)

The possibility of their being <u>any</u> connection between voice and act, between the telling and the experience, is drawn into doubt.

Similarly, when the crew lands in Drumheller after a brief interchange with a man pursued by three coalminers, Anna Dawe interrupts the main narrative again, to counter the temptation to read metaphorically, to read Conradian undertones into the meeting of Dawe and the stranger, by mocking the propensity of men and male literature to see in everything a symbol:

> My father, there, in that brand-new town, found the word fugitive, and lovingly underlined it in his notes. Good God, how men do love their symbols. Each of them, every man, symbolic of another. Fugitive. From all the women in the world no doubt. (63)

While in Drumheller, they encounter a woman leading a temperance rally whose preaching of restraint begins to

affect Web against his best instincts. "A lifetime of trying to grow free on these open prairies. And yet he must be closer to that woman . . . " (67). He signs the temperance pledge-book and proceeds directly to the aptly named See-Saw bar where Dawe is having his fortune told by America, a barroom prostitute and fortune-teller who preaches no restraint; she tells Dawe that he will succeed only if he is able to "hold back nothing" (71). Once again, when the reader may be tempted to regard the two women as metaphorical components of an abstract dichotomy--the female as domesticating force and as freeing seductress--Anna Dawe interrupts to assert that they are presented that way only by token of Web's perception of them, and even then only insofar as Web's perception of them is accurately reported in the source material; and that perception, and then the telling of the perception, has virtually no necessary connection with the experience, the individual. To sketch a rough analogy in the terms Sinnott uses to describe Dawe's discoveries, if Web's perception of the two women is the bones of a dinosaur, the field notes are no more than the chemical replacement of what had been the bones: they are not the thing itself or any part of the thing itself, but an artificial representation of a skeleton of the thing. It must be fleshed out, and the interpretation that fleshing out invokes may have no connection whatsoever with the original. But, according to Anna, Web persists in believing

that the narrative omniscience of male literature operates in the story of his life too:

> Web would divide his women into virgins and whores. And yet it was the virgin who seduced him into his fine mockery of virtue; and I suspect he never went to bed with his whore at all.
>
> Total and absurd male that he was, he assumed, like a male author, an omniscience that was not ever there. Holding the past in contempt, he dared foretell for himself not so much a future as an orgasm.
>
> But we women take our time. (76)

The need for her own commentary to be judged on the same terms that she uses to judge that main narration is manifest throughout the novel, but perhaps first becomes clear when Tune, the bordello piano player, joins the crew and inspires paternal feelings in Dawe. Anna Dawe interrupts the narrative again to deliver an explication of what Dawe thinks of her, how he had really wanted a son, and of the repercussions of that unanswered need on both their psyches, that is so precise, assured, and complete that the reader is moved, I think, to question it. Until this point, for the most part, it is the quest narrative that is subject to doubt, but here it becomes clear that Anna Dawe is presenting as fact information that may be no more than mere supposition. Like Demeter with Hazard, it seems unlikely

that Anna could have spent enough time with her father to reach these conclusions. Kroetsch establishes a narrative framework which appears to legitimitize Anna's narrative against her father's quest-story, but the doubts aroused by one narrative pertain equally to the other. The reader, then, makes the adjustment Anna has suggested in previous interludes, to treat the material presented as document, as raw information. The conclusions Anna draws may be as removed from the reality of Dawe as Dawe's own beliefs about an experience differ from the experience itself. She assesses the crew and their relationship to her father:

> He would accept and endure destiny, my father.It was chance he could not abide. . . .
>
> The unintended nature of Web's existence drove my father beyond the decencies he would have expected of a fish. But at the same time he could not endure in McBride the surrender, the willingness to be the agent of orderly existence. Perhaps it was in the old man, in Grizzly, that he could imagine a balance; as he was able, at least at that time, that Grizzly had grown beyond the illogicalities of desire. As he could believe Tune not yet to have entertained those stormy reckonings of impulse, opportunity and regret. (109)

To sum up her father, Anna adds, "finding no live world that

was absolute enough to be worth the gaining, he would seek only the absolute of what was gone. His was a heaven of darkness" (110). This information, this perspective of her father, of course offers the reader a fuller understanding of the man, of his motives and desires. But again, the reader is asked to accept the information at face value; for the first time there is no disclaimer about the material being correct as far as the field notes indicated. Thus, though the information appears valuable and authoritative, it is necessarily contingent.

As if to underline the danger of letting one's perceptions lead one to overly firm conclusions, the scene that follows apparently features Michael Sinnott's car parked on the water in the middle of the river; to Dawe, "the spectacle . . . contradicted my senses" (112). Sinnott's name ("sin not") suggests the original impression we have of the photographer--detached, impersonal, recording scenes as they appear. His name has a further resonance, though, in being the original name of Mack Sennett, the famous director of silent film comedies, mostly slapstick. Sennett would have been about thirty-four at the time of the expedition, and the correspondance is noted by Kroetsch in his research notes (27.16.9). The notion of Sennett capturing on film the absurd and darkly comic antics of Dawe's crew in the manner of a Keystone Cops movie is somehow apt. The photographer is described in terms of Dawe

(twice the size of Dawe, beard as white as Dawe's is black) to suggest one as a double for the other. Sinnott's distinguishing characteristic is his indifference, a quality that aggravates Dawe. He is also given a patch over one eye, suggestive of the camera's lack of binocular vision, of limited, narrowed perspective. He is opposed also to Dawe in denying Dawe's ability to reclaim and reanimate the past. Sinnott speaks of everything's vanishing, but Dawe insists that so long as the accumulated remains exist, the species they represent has not disappeared. Sinnott insists the only legitimate remains are the records he captures on film. "We are both peddlars, you and I," he says, " . . . We are both charlatans" (118-119).

> "We are two of a kind Mr. Dawe, you and I. Birds of a feather. You with your bones that are sometimes only mineral deposits of what the living bones were. Me, rescuing positive prints out of the smell of the darkroom."
>
> "I recover the past," Dawe said. Unsmiling. Adjusting his grip on the sweep. "You reduce it . . . . You make the world stand still," Dawe said. "I try to make it live again." (128)

In the face of Sinnott's insinuating comparisons, Dawe is moved to defend himself and attack Sinnott. Sinnott's indifference is a challenge to Dawe's own, like Hazard's feeling his reign threatened by Utter's even greater

recklessness. In effect, Sinnott's indifference undercuts Dawe's, prompting him to action: "Dawe quietly furious, offended by an obsession, a drive, a compulsion as extravagant as his own" (125).

Dawe, for the first time, writes something, never to be recovered, on a page in his notes, then removes it: "Dawe, at last, come to doubt" (143). He is tempted into entering Anna Yellowbird's tipi made of fossils, having been rendered compliant by his speechlessness, able to move away from there only when faced with a fear stronger than his motivation to enter: "Dawe did not speak. It was the sheer domesticity of the scene that broke him away and back to the doorway" (145). As this portion of the novel progresses we become gradually more aware of Yellowbird's quest running a course parallel to Dawe's. He is tempted by her, but resists the temptation, intent on retaining his absolute autonomy. He is disquieted by her parallel presence to such a degree, though, that he becomes more acutely aware of the failure of his field notes accurately to render his image and convey his feeling, and of the deliberately false image he is creating:

> He wrote, pompously, not for himself but for his imagined wife in their remembered, imagined home: _Dawe in the desert. After the endless water, the endless walls of volcanic ash. I have stared at these ribs of death for four days, and already I_

> can remember nothing else. Liar, he thought, liar. (149)

Again, the reader has no way of knowing where the voice is coming from, what veracity can be attached to this reporting.

The privations of Dawe's quest make his shell of indifference both possible and necessary. Like Hazard, Dawe is tempted from the pursuit of his quest by the allure of domesticity, and is almost trapped by it when he is injured, Hazard immobilized by a gunshot wound and Dawe by a fractured leg. But Dawe's indifference to the charms of domesticity--all but impenetrable by the end of this journey--is already stronger than Hazard's. He lames himself permanently by breaking the cast off his leg to escape Anna Yellowbird's tipi and return to the obsessive solitude of his quest. The four men on the boat manifest different aspects of this indifference.

Grizzly is associated with indifference by Anna, but his indifference seems to be that of one who has escaped the need for a quest, just as he seems to have escaped the need for language. He has been sleeping with Anna Yellowbird before Dawe finally gives in to the temptation and briefly overcomes his fear of domesticity. Dawe sends him to fetch Anna Yellowbird from the house of bones Grizzly had helped her build. Anna Dawe interprets his response:

> Grizzly, through the tent flaps, bowed.

> Perhaps, in that self-effacing gesture, if it was that, he redeemed himself from the depths in the instant that he made his entrance. . . . In his not resisting . . . . In his letting be, perhaps . . . . he already knew what Anna was learning, what the others would never learn-- (187)

With Yellowbird at his side and sharing his bed, Dawe's obsession--both with the quest and with language--loses its compulsive nature for a time. "He had become careless of the entries in his field notes" (189). Sex with Yellowbird, described with metaphors that make clear it is Dawe's own venture into and out of the underworld, sounds more like an exercise in masochism than pleasure or release. Like Jeremy Sadness, he comes to see Yellowbird's vagina as the real gate to the imagined cave, "the sought darkness" (194). The darkness he had sought, though, the dark heaven of the past, is not to be gained by that return to origins. His succumbing to the temptation that Anna represents--to connect and be drawn out of his isolationist quest--and his sexual relations with her are typical of the various descents into the underworld he makes. It appears to allow him briefly, painfully to break through the wall of silence he has erected: "the silence that he could not break with words he broke with a long and whimpering whipped-dog, whipped-little-boy groan of exquisite pain and welcome

relief. . . " (192). Dawe fears rather than welcomes the absolute surrender that would allow him to blot out all other considerations, fears it in part because he does not control it and because it obviates his quest by taking the past from him as well as the present.

> . . . conquer, he told himself, conquer; and out of that blasting sun, into the darkness of her body he must, rising, plunge: and found instead that at each moment of entry into the dark, wet heat of her body the outside world was lost, and he, in a new paroxysm that erased the past, spent each night's accumulated recollection in that little time of going in, the motion that erased the ticking clock, the wide earth. (195)

In short, "She made him lose the past. He began to hate her for that" (196). Shortly after this passage, Web sights the perfect specimen; Dawe breaks free of the cast that had been on his broken leg, as if disposing of that encumbrance allows him to rid himself of another, telling Grizzly to warn Anna he will kill her if she comes around (208-9).

As he is by Sinnott's indifference, Dawe is threatened by Web's--which is manifested as a desire to bed any and all women. Anna Dawe notes Dawe arranges for Web to be with Yellowbird, so that Dawe could be just as indifferent about Web's indiscretions (198). Inasmuch as Anna's commentary is as subject to doubt as the narrative of the quest-story, one

is tempted to read into this litany of indifference Anna's desire to achieve the same indifference toward her father. Her narrative is shaped by her desire to break free of his, to become indifferent to his insistence on the importance of his quest for an absolute world. But it is an end to indifference that Anna seeks; she has been insulated from life by her cases of gin and shelves of books and needs to learn how to feel. Again, her quest is the reverse of her father's, who sought to cease feeling.

The men's quest to recover the dinosaur skeleton results in a cessation once accomplished, as well as deaths of various sorts, but the end of the women's quest is an opening out, the beginning of a long-stunted life for Anna Dawe. For years Dawe had kept Anna virtual prisoner out of his obsessive need to shut out the world, to stave off the world with reductive words. When he has "come to the end of words" (269), he has come to the end of his life, and he disappears, presumed drowned. Anna finds with Anna Yellowbird a freedom she had not had with Dawe. As a result, Anna now finds it possible to live, to laugh: "Not the pained and uneasy and nervous laughter of a lifetime of wondering, of trying to recover and then reshape and then relive a life that wasn't quite a life. I was ready for real laughter" (263-264).

The Annas' quest is not successful in the way William Dawe's is. They fail, or rather decide not, to follow the

trail back to where his quest began with Anna Yellowbird emerging from the grave, and they end up with even less than they started with, having disposed of the photographs and field notes. They veer from the trail of the male quest to find the source of the river. Anna Dawe suggests doing it for Web, but Anna Yellowbird corrects her: "Fuck Web . . . . Let's do it for us" (264). Clearly they have been freed from the tyranny of the male quest. They do not need even to seek to reverse the quest, but are free to pursue a different path. If her father's quest had been to cut off human contact, Anna's is to establish it, and on her journey she seems to have found a mother, discovered the father she didn't know, and gained the courage and knowledge of self to communicate with another human. Talking to Anna, testing the obscenities she had never spoken before, Anna Dawe feels the barriers coming down: ". . . I dared it too, tried those words on my mouth: and glanced at her face and saw she was letting me try in the same way that my father had stopped me--" (259). As they approach the mountains in which the river has its source, Anna experiences a version of the elemental inversion several of the male characters had undergone earlier, but instead of her being inverted, the landscape is: "We got out of the car, we stretched and shouted; and God we had turned the Badlands upside down, we were in the Rockies . . ." (265). Unlike her father, who fiercely resisted the freedom the surrender to such an

inversion promised, Anna finds a way out of her prison of books and money to connect.

The desperate, despairing tone of the conclusion of the male quest, the awareness of the price of success for William Dawe, is alleviated greatly by the joyousness of the conclusion of his daughter's quest, successful only in human terms, perhaps. The opening up is really a letting go; the journey to the source of the river is an exorcising of demons, a banishing of ghosts, a reclamation of the past. The final step in the process that allows both Annas to escape the bondage of the past, of the males that had sought to capture and imprison them and take their youth in different ways, is the sighting of the bear. They arrive at the source and are unmoved, except by pain in their feet. They are moved to helpless, silent, and liberating laughter, though, by the sight of a bear which is being transplanted. Drugged, it has been put into a sling and carried by helicopter, but it has awakened too soon, and in its panic is trying to escape his trap. The image of a Grizzly in a sling made out of a web-like material, and of a man running in mid-air, conjures up Web, Dawe, and Grizzly at once. The bear becomes for the Annas a symbol of the whole male species:

> . . . we could see now the grizzly's crotch; he was suspended upright by his head and upper limbs in the twisted net; his hind legs swung free in

> the air, galloped straight at us in the empty air, his sharp claw scratching for the gone earth, his testicles following crazily after.
>
> He was running in the air, straight overhead, so comically human and male that Anna fell backwards, laughing, off the fallen tree. . . . (268)

With that liberating vision still in sight, Anna Yellowbird takes the only remaining photographs of the men and flings "them up at the bear's balls" (269). Anna Dawe follows suit by taking out "the yellow field book I had carried like a curse for ten years," the book in which, when Dawe "might have been remembering, or regretting, or explaining, or planning, or dreaming, or hating, or even loving, I suppose, he was busy putting down each day's tedium and trivia. Shutting out instead of letting in. Concealing" (269). She remembers her father's imagined death, and throws the book "into the lake where it too might drown" (270). The two Annas walk back out together in an image of integration, peace, and fulfillment, undercut not even slightly by their singing "Roll Me Over In The Clover": "We walked out of there hand in hand, arm in arm, holding each other. We walked all the way out. And we did not look back, not once, ever" (270).

On their quest, the four boatmen are looking for what Dawe is convinced he will find in the Badlands: "the rib or

femur or skull that would insinuate to him, however grotesquely, the whole truth: the one gigantic and perfect skeleton of his dreams that would cast man out of everlasting vanity and conceit" (8). Anna Dawe characterizes her father's quest as the attempt to step out of time, the state Anna inherited and seeks to remedy:

> . . . he persisted as if he must one happy morning get back to the source itself, the root moment when the glory of reptiles . . . was focussed in one bony creature, one Adam-seed burrowing in the green slime-- But I was always left with the mystery of his own first season . . . . discovering the Mesozoic era, with all of Europe filling its earth with the bones of its own young --he removed himself from time.
>
> . . . His field notes, after that summer, were less and less concerned with his crew, his dangers, his days of futile prospectings, his moments of discovery, his weariness, his ambitions, his frustrations. They became scientific descriptions of the size and location of bones, of the compositions of the matrix, of the methods of extraction and preservation . . . . (139)

In his desire to find the unitary source, and so the absolute, perfect, and complete world of darkness, his

perhaps willful ignoring of historical events, his increasingly reductive and unemotional writing, Dawe is placing himself outside the imperfect world of chance and chaos, the world of human connection. Like Hazard, playing poker in the home for incurables, Dawe discovers that he cannot lose; all of his expeditions are successful. "Failure might have ruined him back into history; but failure was never to be his good fortune," Anna writes (138). Anna Yellowbird, the young Indian searching for her dead husband, tempts Dawe into connecting again, almost tempting him out his isolation and into domesticity. Although he would prefer to pretend she does not affect him, Dawe, who does not trust words to do more than the simplest tasks of recording, is surprised to find himself recording her presence in his records in a less prosaic manner than usual: "He broke off the enlarging sentence, surprised at his own unscientific noting of the world" (11).

As in previous novels, the travellers enter a new, foreign landscape, passing by buttes that "had those forms of the past, and yet they were not any landscape that Dawe had known, that Web had imagined" (22). As for Grizzly, "He did not seem to see the water or the sky" (22). The usual Kroetschean division of the two aspects of the imagination : intellect dichotomy into two characters is doubled here. Dawe believes in the power of words only to notate his scientific ordering of the world, the reclamation

of the past; Web unleashes a torrent of words to create a present, to fill the void left by his absent past. Grizzly is silent, not because he mistrusts words, but because his indifference stems from being in synch with time, not at odds with it. McBride is logical, uninvolved because his imagination is shackled by his responsibilities; he is the only one of the four with a sense of home, of family. He too is solidly rooted in time. The division and distribution of the polarized characteristics are not simply represented as a struggle between two men. The four men, with Tune later replacing McBride, can be opposed in different ways to create pairs of dichotomous characteristics.

McBride, Web, Anna Yellowbird, Tune, even Sinnott, whose wet socks resemble webbed feet, undergo an elemental inversion, an experience in which they and their worlds are turned upside down, in which the line between land and water, life and death, male and female, and so on is not drawn firmly. These characters, albeit often briefly and sometimes in small ways, seem to be able to cross boundaries, unlike Dawe who is studiously shoring up the borders which both imprison and protect him from human contact. If we include Grizzly's encounter with the bear, retrospectively told, Dawe and--until the book's close--his daughter are the only characters who do not share this freeing experience.

The image McBride presents when they find him after he is thrown from the boat is one of stillness, not of fighting the river or of submitting to its current, but

> . . . sitting in what appeared to be a boat, sitting stock still as if he might have been fishing, except that he had neither oars nor a fishing pole. He had somehow got himself onto a gravel bar, in the middle of the river, and he was sitting alone, not lifting a hand, not making a sound, the water swirling past him as if he might himself have been an island, a boulder deposited there twelve thousand years earlier by the advancing and retreating ice. (35)

The sense of stillness and peace in the midst of the flux of the river is underlined by details that become apparent as they draw closer: the boat he is in resembles a coffin and he is naked but covered with earth. Like Anna Yellowbird, who is emerging from a sham grave when they first see her, McBride has entered and returned from the land of the dead.

McBride, his tale peppered with repetitions of "I'm a married man," tells of his near death, of hitting a whirlpool, of being sprayed by a skunk and so being obliged to coat himself with mud. Covered with mud, a mixture of earth and water that has become his second skin, McBride becomes almost a natural creature. When the boat stops at a farm, he emerges "formless out of the mud. Onto the land"

(43). Dawe, who like Web cannot swim, is disappointed. Like the reader of quests, he expects apocalyptic events to have finality, a fatal end:

> Dawe not wanting to listen. Dawe thinking: This should be the cataclysm and the end and instead it's the mere beginning. Whirlpools and rocks and drowned men talking of home and no bones in the vast, empty grave we've contrived to enter. (40)

As for many previous Kroetsch characters, this encounter with death and the elemental forces of nature seems to allow for metamorphosis or rebirth. They emerge from the encounter, the many descents into the underworld, with the ability to forge a new identity and a new relationship with the natural world. But, typically, Dawe resists this change, becoming more fixed in his quest with each descent and each encounter with death, both his own and those of the others.

McBride, growing ever more comfortable in his mud coating, completes the transformation begun in the whirlpool. The acrid odor of the skunk becomes pleasantly bittersweet to him, and he begins to perceive the skunk's baptizing him as a sign. It has the effect first of all of separating him from the others, from the quest. Now the job of repairing the leaks in the boat, of making it impervious to the water, separates him further because he is the only one comfortable in the borderland between earth and water

where the boat rests for repairs. "McBride was totally alone; and yet he was as free as his own hands could make him, his feet in the mud working their way towards dry land" (50). He finishes the job secure and happy in the knowledge that "he would never again touch anything that looked like a sweep or an oar" (50). He has, metaphorically speaking, passed through the waters separating life from death, has faced death, been entombed, and returned. He is even less tempted than before by Dawe's quest for an absolute world of the past, for the single source, he has no need to fit the pieces together in a whole, in a truth. The pieces may fall where they will; McBride has already found his truth. Of the four men,

> only McBride was dreaming, and he dreamed his sleeping children, his quarter section of rich black dirt, his greening wheat. . . his wife's surprise at the figure returned from the water's edge, her cry of joy and her quick embrace. . . . (51)

The experience, and the signs McBride feels he has received, make the rest of the journey not only superfluous for him but unbearable. His imagination, his capacity to dream, has been awakened, and the dream of home, a lure of which the others know nothing, is too strong to resist.

When Web, sent after McBride, returns to camp, he lies and says he found no trace of him, and in so doing draws

forth an implicit correspondence between the fossils the men seek and the lies they tell.

> "Hide nor hair," Web said; elaborating his lie, delighting in the ambiguity of his discovery, the skeleton that was not the beast, not even the bones of the sought beast but the chemical replacement of what had been the bones. (56)

Connection between voice and experience, between spoken and speaking, between fossil and existence is drawn ever more finely until it appears not to exist at all. Web's moment of inversion, of fluidity and freedom in the river (54), freed him from language for a time. He differs from Dawe in that he is full of words and lets them all out, forever creating a barrage of noise which serves, finally, much the same purpose as Dawe's silence; Dawe's silence is a denial of any ties with the present, removing himself from time, while Web's continuous sound is an attempt to create a present, having denied himself a past. Both are seeking the same thing, a single solid source on which to base identity, as is made clear late in the novel when Dawe is dismayed to discover he has switched places with Web. The lies he tells Dawe replace the speech he had been prepared to make.

Just as Web's web of words, which connects everything in an ongoing ribald tall-tale of which he is the hero, is sometimes briefly broken by silence, so Dawe's silence and scientific prose are sometimes interfered with by emotion

and doubt. When McBride and their maps are lost going through the rapids, and Anna Yellowbird finds a significant specimen--more than Dawe had accomplished with all of his knowledge, equipment, and effort--Dawe sits down to do the one thing that can rid him of doubts, reaffirm his quest. While he is updating his field notes, he realizes for the first time what they have come to represent to him, how necessary they are:

> . . . this, finally, might be his way of communicating with his unborn descendents, with the wife to whom he could not speak but upon whom he intended to father those descendents of the renowned if momentarily unknown Dawe dynasty. (34)

While he is unable or unwilling to explore it, he realizes what potential exists there for self expression, to assert more than the blankly scientific rendering of the world:

> He might, it struck him, as the boat had struck the boulder, speak to her, to them, to himself, not only of the day's activities but also of the ambitions that drove him, the anxieties that obsessed his barren nights, the immaterial thoughts that shaped themselves against his headlong hurry. _I despise words_, he wrote; he stared down at the sentence, enjoying it. Writing it down had freed him, in some way he did not

fully comprehend. (34)

As he records a dream of his wife going swimming, seeing a snake, panicking, and drowning, though, his reserve reasserts itself: "Dawe thinking: I'm losing hold" (34). He concludes the entry in his usual methodical, unvarying prose: "he wrote, carefully, deliberately, to conclude the paragraph with a mere statement of fact and reason: No sign of my bow-man or my maps" (35). To Dawe, words are not a way to investigate the flux, the chaos into which his identity and his quest threaten to dissolve. Rather language becomes a way of containing the chaos, of asserting control over the fluidity of existence.

Dawe's reaction to the fate of the man he had met fleeing the coalminers outside Drumheller is typical of his response to the world of human connection. Dawe sees him as a potential replacement for McBride, but cannot make contact because he cannot persuade him to stay. Again, focussing more fixedly on his quest, he is dismissive when he hears of the man's later symbolic crucifixion, having had both hands crippled. Dawe is just as ruthless in dealing with people for whom he cares. When the tail of his perfect specimen remains covered, Dawe trades on the faith and trust Tune had in him, and Tune and the others allow themselves to be convinced that Tune's two weeks' work as a miner has qualified him to blast the clay off the Daweosaurus. Tune's blast is unsuccessful, covering most of their equipment and

burying Tune in the process. On the journey back, it is clear that it is Tune's death that allows or demands that Dawe cease to share his sufferings. His relationship with Tune was paternal, and at an earlier stage, "even Dawe could not abuse and exploit that one surviving relationship of trust and admiration . . . " (184). His inability to believe his own words, saying that it was a pure accident, reveals itself in the breaking down of his field note entries. He seeks once again for a whole amongst the fragments, to make sense of the doubt, remorse, guilt, and sorrow: he seeks a reasonable, rational explanation that will silence the emotions that have been unleashed. Even the fact of Tune's death is an uncertainty that must be contained; Dawe fears he may have been buried alive.

> . . . Dawe, furiously, in the outrageous silence of his writing trying to cite or fashion or penetrate or plumb or receive or accomplish or postulate or pretend the absolute truth that would have given him his necessary lie: _Crushed_. _Must have been_. _Beyond_. Dawe not finding a sentence, a word, that consoled him into the community of his attendant slaves: _Will notify the proper_. _Hire and send in_. The sentences breaking in the middle of creation. The pencil freezing in his shovel-stiffened hand. _Dead_. _And buried_. _I found one finger_. _I think_. _I_. _Kicked the dirt_.

<u>Over</u>-- (239)

With increasing violence, he begins to assert his innocence, the purely accidental nature of the death, tears pages out of the book and discards them (but we are, somehow, allowed to see them). As the ferry comes into sight, thoughts of Tune leave his head as his mastering obsession takes their place. When Sinnott, who greets them there to take "after" pictures, shows Dawe the earlier photos, Dawe is disquieted breifly by a picture of Tune, but responds only by urging the others to more vigorous action loading the ferry. Both Sinnott and Dawe are proudly displaying the fruits of their recovery, but Anna Yellowbird seizes the picture of Tune and asks Sinnott, "You can bring him back?" (251). Sinnott vanishes under his cloth and the lifelessness of both his and Dawe's methods of recovery is manifested. By contrast with the Orphic myth, which allows the traveller to bring back the thing itself, the deceased person (and in this novel Tune is an ideal, if ironic, figure of the sacrificial Orpheus, whose music could move mountains), both Sinnott and Dawe can offer only a shadowy and distant recreation, chemical deposits left in place of the thing or its remains.

While it is a success in archaeological terms, in human terms the expedition is a failure. Dawe either achieves or is well on his way to achieving what he has quested for, an isolated existence, walled up in a controlled, ordered world, much like those of Demeter Proudfoot and Professor

Madham. The lightness and joy of the ending of the Annas' quest does not disguise the depth and extent of human suffering displayed on each quest; most of Anna's early commentaries focus on the pain Dawe caused her and others. Badlands seems to me to represent a change for Kroetsch in terms of presenting characters whose misery we feel deeply despite the comic form of the novel they are in. This is the first Kroetsch novel in which one gets a sense of real anger, sadness, frustration, and despair, as well as happiness and relief when these miseries pass. Here, unlike the earlier novels, the comic tone is not pervasive enough to mitigate the human suffering, the outrages to human decency, and the waste of human life that are depicted. Despite the mediated narrative--impossible to say just how mediated--the emotions of the characters, especially Anna and her father, are presented directly, both in the field notes and the commentary chapters, and the presence of that first-person material prevents the third-person narration of the main text from distancing the reader from the inner life of the characters. Badlands is in many ways the most strongly felt Kroetsch novel to this point in his career, though certainly not humourless for all that.

In many ways Badlands represents a change or shift also in terms of complexity and sophistication in plotting, thematic development, and characterization. The division of thematic attributes between characters--one character the

repressed Easterner, another the open, flexible Westerner, for example--is much more subtly achieved, much more even-handed than before. Instead of one or two main players working out the struggle to attain a sort of balance in a wildly dichotomized universe, almost every character in Badlands is going through this process, with differing degrees of intensity and success. William Dawe is the first Kroetsch character in whom is reversed the typical development from restrained and restricted to free, fluid, and flexible. We see also some characters blithely, eagerly returning to domesticity, while others, equally happy, avoid it, presumably to their dying day. The range of characterization is much fuller because the characters have more directions in which to travel and grow, or regress.

The narrative strategies are becoming more complex too, less simply dichotomized. The opposition of the mediated field notes to the italicized commentary of Anna Dawe is familiar enough, but the status of the ambiguously voiced chapters fleshed out through the interaction of the two complicates the questions of narrative authority. If we do not know who is telling the story, how do we know what to believe of what is said? The refusal of the narrative to address the reader directly and to resolve the ambiguities inherent in its form and presentation mirrors the many instances which display the failure of communication in the novel. It seems the only successful act of communication

ceaseless repetition of existence, not a resolution of it. Again, as Backstrom insists, the admixture of life and death, domesticity and freedom, self and community, creation and destruction, and all the other disorderly combinations that disturb Demeter are a necessary part of the contradiction that is man.

With The Studhorse Man, the dichotomous universe Kroetsch posits in his novels--in which creation and destruction, life and death, immortality and mortality are inextricably yoked--is matched not only by characters who embody the different aspects of these dichotomies, but also by a narrative form which partakes of the same ambiguity, uncertainty, and instability that plagues the characters. And this novel suggests a double narration, even if one narrative stream is formulated by what the other leaves out or interprets, and in the later novels, both the problematic narration and the splitting of the narrative voice become increasingly central. The emphasis on the role of desire--both to connect and to break free, and its connection with the forging of identity, also becomes central from this novel onwards.

is, not surprisingly, through the oral medium at the end, with the sense of give and take in the discussion the two Annas share. Neither seeks to order the world with the words they speak, to connect everything like Web or connect nothing like Dawe, but rather simply to share the uncertainties and ambiguities of human intercourse.

The emphasis on man's desire to remove himself from time, the splitting and mediating of narrative voices so that the individual voices merge to become an impersonal third person voice, and the complicating of characters so they they can be even less firmly identified as personifying one aspect of a dichotomy is carried through to What the Crow Said. The splitting of narrative voices further manifests itself in the abandonment of the first person narration altogether, and the adoption instead of the limited omniscient third person narration, in part because it allows access to an unlimited plurality of voices. And the characters in Crow are even harder to pin down than in previous novels; they continually shift and contradict themselves. Badlands is not a transitional novel; it has a purpose and a vision all its own. Viewed in the perspective of this thesis, however, it begins to resemble a bridge between what Kroetsch had done in his earlier novels, establishing the thematic patterns and narrative strategies that would come to typify his work, and what he does in Crow, which is his most powerful and successful work.

Chapter VII:

What The Crow Said: Letting Go!

What the Crow Said marks the height of Kroetsch's interest in creating a text that challenges the reader to virtually collaborate with the author to make an even provisionally comprehensible novel out of it. As such, it also discomfits those readers who are accustomed to and comfortable with the traditional realist novel.

> When What The Crow Said first came out, two very good readers told me, the book's way too short. They wanted the elaboration visible in front of their eyes. . . . why tell it all? What are the pleasures in reading a long novel that just lays everything out? (Labyrinths 162)

What The Crow Said is also, somewhat surprisingly, the Kroetsch novel that has prompted the most extreme critical opposition. Many long-time admirers of Kroetsch's work were wildly dissatisfied by the novel, even though, or perhaps because, it actually does what the previous novels only threaten to do. It is the first novel that is arguably not a novel, which completely subverts itself, allowing pure story to take over, leaving paraphrasable meaning and set patterns of order behind. Peter Thomas, for instance, contends in his book on Kroetsch that the story is not comic because it is often grotesque, violent, and brutal. He sees

it also as the most straightforward rendering of the Kroetschean dualities yet, not recognizing that Kroetsch is continually violating and inverting the dualities he sets up. Aspects of it are, he says, "about as comic as the sprint of a headless rooster" (115), but as Badlands' closing scene of a foaming, excrement-covered bear flailing in mid-air attests, Kroetsch is no longer looking for mild images of the comic absurdity of existence. His fiction is becoming only as brutal, as violent, as grotesque as life, and so is comic in the sense giving full play to the elements of chance and absurdity in our lives. Thomas does accurately note that Crow is "the least compromising book Kroetsch has written, the one furthest from novelistic tradition, which it actively seeks to subvert" (100). He nevertheless bemoans the relative lack of metaphorical content, looking for the solid core of meaning that Kroetsch's novels and criticism warn us to mistrust.

Robert Lecker also has little use for Crow. For Kroetsch, he says,

> writing a fabular tale of prairie life seems to take precedence over any rendering of prairie experience in terms of metaphoric expansion or felt immediacy, so that we are constantly reminded of the self-conscious narrative intent that colors the book and its formal assumptions. (99)

While I have to disagree about the lack of felt immediacy,

my central point is that Kroetsch's tendency to avoid metaphoric expansion and to stress self-conscious narration has been present and growing almost from the beginning of his career. Why is the achievement of his aims suddenly a fault when the desire to achieve them had been considered a virtue? Curiously, unlike Thomas, Lecker seems to think the binary oppositions have disappeared altogether, rather than simply being allowed to shift freely.

P.L. Surette has also been a long-time admirer of Kroetsch's fiction, and he too is unsure about Crow: "It is the one Kroetsch novel that I do not know what to make of. It is not funny, but it is powerful and puzzling" ("Lecker's Kroetsch" 110). In his review of Lecker's book, though, Surette suggests a reason for the failure of Lecker and other reviewers to appreciate Crow:

> Lecker is uncomfortable with the fundamental unseriousness of Kroetsch's fiction. . . . He becomes irritable when his hermeneutical antennae fail to pick up a clear signal [from the novel]. . . . Lecker is still stuck in the New Critical expectation that ambiguities and complexities will and must be resolved . . . in the attendant sapience of the critic. (110)

While I have to disagree about the novel's not being funny, even if grotesquely so at times, much of what Surette claims is true. The novel is powerful and puzzling, and designed

to be puzzling. It is a novel that strenuously resists resolution of its ambiguities, solution of its puzzles. With each of the previous novels, it has been possible, I think, to piece together a whole out of the fragments offered us; no matter that we had constantly to call the veracity of that whole into doubt, it was reassuringly there. To render What The Crow Said as a unified whole is necessarily to falsify it. It is, as Kroetsch has stated, "fragments out of which the reader can almost make up a novel" (Labyrinths 14). Kroetsch says further that he was actively denying himself and the reader the option of a metaphorical reading of the events of the novel, another aim implicit in the earlier novels but not fully realized until now:

> The temptation to read metaphorically, from the simplest kind of superstition up to the most elaborate theological system is a temptation of meaning. . . . I think that novel is my own personal struggle with meaning, and it's the reader's struggle too. (Labyrinths 15)

He speaks also of his growing away from Homer, even as a parodic source, and toward Ovid, who "just put his stories in a bag. . . . Ovid is much more metynomic and much more inclined to let myths be, to let them do their own thing" (Labyrinths 113). The more disjointed pattern that results, a series of anecdotes rather than a mythic structure, frees

up the narrative, allows almost anything to happen: "anecdote breaks down the control asserted by myth" (Labyrinths 116).

Kroetsch signalled the shift he was making from the earlier works to this one even to himself by crossing out the word "novel" and replacing it with "story" on the title page of the manuscript. In the earliest drafts of the book, there is much more fleshing out, much more motivation is provided for the characters' actions, and more attention is paid to probability, but these aspects are winnowed out as the book becomes leaner, more fraught with possibilites than saddled with actualities. A typical instance is Kroetsch's pencilled notation next to an early description of the schmier game: "take out the interpretation" (Second Accession 9.2). Similarly, in early versions, there are no doubts about the crow's magical gifts, and the crow has a lot more to say, while J. G. speaks enigmatically through symbols--Kroetsch removes this temptation of meaning. A series of consecutive notes gives an indication of what Kroetsch was striving to contain with the looser fabric of his new book. He has mentioned elsewhere that "what has come to interest me right now, is what I suppose you can call the dream of origins" (Enright 29), the search for the "great union that perpetuates the world" (Crow Journals 55), and the following notes are part of a series concerning this dream, the notion of creating a myth of origins:

> the need for a form, the need to create a world in which _everything is possible_.
>
> what form is natural to Canadian writing?
>
> Canada: that which has not yet happened.
>
> (7.1)

Kroetsch is moving from the parody of myth, from the use of myth, to its creation, from making a novel out of mythic fragments to making a myth that stands fragmented, uncoerced into larger meaning.

In a conversation with Linda Kenyon, Kroetsch talks about both the necessary fragmentariness of _Crow_ and the higher realism that fragmentary nature supports:

> The dance of the possibilities of perception. . . . I used to work with a larger kind of design, and what I liked in _What The Crow Said_ is that fragmentariness. It's more realistic than realistic fiction, because that's where we live. We go through a day picking up fragments everywhere and somehow patching them together so we won't fall off the edge of the world, or through a hole in the story. . . . it's not fantasy. Some of the older conventions of realism, and of narrative, were deceiving us about our world, were imposing a coherence that isn't there and imposing limitations that aren't there as far as I'm concerned. (14)

A side-note to the question of realism is that while most reviewers, favourably or not, noted the lack of plausibility in the events of the novel, there is in Kroetsch's notes a good deal of documentation of the "fantastic" events that occur in the book. For instance, there are articles from Time and The Edmonton Journal on "The Year of the Plagues" in the Canadian West, including a plague of caterpillars much like the salamander plague--it is real!

What The Crow Said, inasmuch as the story is paraphrasable, is about what happens in the small prairie town of Big Indian, on the border between Saskatchewan and Alberta, over a twenty-five year period early in the twentieth century (Crow 177), although the time frame "feels" more like it covers just over a single year in the reading. The story was originally intended to involve an extended family, a town in which everyone was each other's cousin at some level. That notion of the self-contained world of a family unit still remains in Big Indian, a town shut off from the rest of the world, mostly by choice. It is difficult to pin down the exact time frame, although clues pointing to certain periods do occur, partly because of Kroetsch's desire to "avoid specific time, [to] use imaginary time that reflects the actual time without actual mimesis" (7.1). For instance, the time that passes between the conception and birth of Vera's Boy and JG seems to be at least as long as the whole of each of their lives because

there is no firm sense of time passing. Long periods of time may slip by unnoted, while a number of days may stretch out to seem like years. Again, the aim is to display reality without recourse to the "falsifying" mode of realism or the illusion of mimesis, as it was once understood.

By the same token, in an outline for the novel from November 25, 1973, Kroetsch writes that he is not simply creating stories out of thin air, but is rendering experience and expressing reality in a mythological form: "my own experience, basically, expanded to the tall tale, the mythological, but always with the hard core of detail" (7.1). Despite its grounding in reality, though, there is a meta-fictive aspect to the narrative, a level on which it is about not reality but itself, about its bookness. Two of Kroetsch's notes during composition indicate that, however much the novel reflects experience and reality, it is grounded in "LANGUAGE: the novel, finally, is language: after story, after character." The image of the isolated small town is then an analogue of the isolated self-inventing universe of the novel, a "form, . . . a world, in which <u>everything is possible</u>" : "small town: parallel to the novel: a self-contained world" (7.1).

The story centers on Gus Liebhaber, the printer of the Big Indian Signal, the town's only newspaper. Liebhaber is in many ways like the typical male Kroetsch character, constrained by a preconceived vision of what it is to be

male. Consistent with Kroetsch's choosing Ovid instead of Homer for a model, Liebhaber is not trapped into a quest. He is not, as previous Kroetsch characters have been, trapped by what male literature tells us to be, but rather by what society dictates. In a small agricultural community, sexual roles are usually fairly rigidly set, as they seem to be in Big Indian before a series of fantastic events conspire to tilt the world on its axis. Kroetsch has written of the sense of feeling that he lacked an identity because, growing up on the farm, he did not fit firmly in either the male or female spheres, and there was no middle ground--it was uncharted territory. Liebhaber seems similarly estranged from both male and female worlds--he is male but as newspaper man he does not fit the traditional male role in this community--and he is also uneasy about his own identity. Out of this dis-ease, perhaps, comes his difficulty in adhering to the precepts of what a male in society--especially in opposition to females--should be.

He is the solitary male; as much as he hates his loneliness, he strenuously resists the entrapping domesticity of the female and the dissolution of self that full interaction with the community seems to require. Even on those occasions when he does feel himself part of the community, it is still as an outsider, an observer. He _is_ an outsider, in that he comes to Big Indian from somewhere else. That nobody in the town--seemingly not even Liebhaber

himself--knows where he come from or anything else about his past recalls Anna Dawe. Perhaps, like her, he seeks not only to rid himself of a constraining version of himself but also to establish links with the past and with the human community. He wishes to write his own story, rather than play out a part in someone else's.

Typical of Kroetsch characters also in his vacillation between seeking to free himself into his own story and retreating to the comfort of the pre-ordered story he inhabits, the symbolic manifestation of Liebhaber's striving is somewhat different from that of previous characters. Although Kroetsch's characters have always struggled with language, both as an entrapping web and as a way out of the web, Liebhaber's struggle with language is figured much more directly and concretely. He is obsessed by language--physically, in the form of his movable type--and is suspicious of but also comforted by locking the type into a form. Throughout the novel, again, he vacillates between attempts to escape language and to conquer language, to tease it out of meaning or to force it to do his bidding. He is obsessed also with death, and his attempts to subvert or conquer language are part of his many schemes to defeat death and achieve immortality. His schemes are connected, as Kroetsch indicates in his outline, with "his need to write things down (print) in order to invent some semblance of an 'alibi' for his existence" (9) (a concept that is

foregrounded in Kroetsch's next work, Alibi). He fears that if he does not write it down in the intensely print-oriented world he blames on Gutenberg, the experience, and he himself, will not exist.

Tiddy Lang, another central character, is in many ways the opposite of Liebhaber. She is free of the knot of language that he feels bound by to such an extent that the only part of his newspaper that she pauses over is a blank space where her husband's obituary should have been. She normally uses language directly and emphatically, seeking neither to subvert nor conquer it. Liebhaber's obsession with time, his separation from the past, is in contrast to Tiddy's role as the stable core of the novel, the force that holds the past and future together, maintaining some semblance of order. She tends to the practical concerns of the family and the community. At the end of the novel, she and Liebhaber come together; he surrenders his solitariness and embraces time, becoming part of the community, while she relinquishes her grasp on time and on the fabric of the community to live for the present and for herself. I should stress that this union, this cessation of the struggle, is not a resolution of the struggle, but an acceptance of it, a willingness to go along with the rhythm of Nature, the flow of life and death, rather than imposing a stabilizing pattern upon it, attempting to escape death by evading life.

The slim plot concerns Liebhaber's attempts to get

Tiddy to marry him, although he often goes to extreme lengths to avoid her domestic pleasures. He has to contend with rivals, most notably John Skandl (whose strong belief in the solidity of existence tempts Liebhaber as well as Tiddy); elemental wars; plagues of various kinds; multiple deaths and maimings; fantastic events of all sorts; bizarre births; unusual children, perhaps even his own; encounters with ghosts; and, most debilitating of all, struggles with faith and doubt, his attempts to prove somehow that he exists and to gain immortality. And when he does manage to consummate his relationship with Tiddy, without benefit of clergy, he does not find the kind of immortality he sought, but instead freedom from his need for immortality, in itself a kind of immortality in surrender to the cycles of existence.

The narrative technique, to be discussed at greater length below, is not the dual first person narration of Gone Indian or Badlands or the relatively uncomplicated first person narration of The Words of my Roaring, but neither is it the traditional omniscient third person narration of Coulee Hill or But We Are Exiles. Rather, it involves a shifting third person voice, sometimes appearing to be a distanced, almost omniscient, undramatized narrator, and at other times seeming identified with one or another of the characters. There are suggestions, for instance, that one of the three characters most closely tied to writing--

Liebhaber, Vera, and Rita--is the author of the book, but the reader cannot securely identify any of then as the narrative voice. Similarly, Tiddy, who pulls everything together for everyone else, appears to be identified at its end as the source of the story, dreaming the world. In his notes for the novel, Kroetsch ponders the problem of narrative voice, wondering if Liebhaber's clearly being at the center of the story (as he was to an much larger extent in the original conception of the novel) means he should narrate the tale as well: "But is it then a first-person story? Or limited third-person? No, I have to keep it in third-person. But the presence of the author has to be more demanding/against the story itself" (7.1). A later note indicates further what this strategy will involve: "develop possibility that Vera is creating the novel--through the district news that she sends to Liebhaber--i.e. after establishing him as possible narrator, then bring the possibility into doubt" (7.1). The narrative voice shifts constantly, becoming finally a sort of collective voice; it cannot be ascribed to any one of the individuals, but it is clearly not removed from them. The possibility of multiple narrators is just one of the many aspects of <u>Crow</u> that tempt the reader to make a choice, but whatever choice the reader makes is undercut and any total sense he or she makes of the book thereby is also undercut.

The title of the novel is the first temptation of

meaning. It encourages the unwary reader to believe that what the crow says will be important and meaningful, perhaps even to the point of providing the clue with which the puzzle of the novel can be solved. A scanning of the following list of what the crow does say, though, indicates that what the crow says is often scatological, usually insulting, consistently cynical, and never remotely as important or revealing as the portentous title would have us believe.

What the crow says:

> "Liebhaber. . . . Liebhaber you are a _dumbkopf_ beyond my worst expectations. Don't you _see_ what our friend is doing? Why. . .don't you go out to one of Vera's bee yards, take off your right boot, hook your dirty big toe onto the trigger of a borrowed shotgun, and hope for the best?" (64-65)
>
> "Dummy. . . . Dummy." (78)
>
> "Jack and game. . . . Jack and game." (79)
>
> "Asshole." (79)
>
> "Asshole." (80)
>
> "Tomorrow will be as miserable as today." (82)
>
> "Asshole." (83)
>
> "Scared? Scared shitless." (85)
>
> "Scared? . . . Scared, Uncle Leo? Scared shitless?" (86)
>
> "Bugger off. . . . Bugger off." (86)

"Bugger off." (87)

"Win. . . . Win. . . . Win? Win? Somebody's going to win?" (87)

"A bunch of raving idiots." (88)

"Shame on you." (91)

"Well, Leeb . . . I've got to hand it to you. You are finally a total asshole." (128)

"Gentlemen . . . I want to welcome you back. We missed your filthy mouths and your slovenly behavior. We missed your abrasive laziness and your dirt and your stink. May you all die abnormal deaths." (128-129)

"Hello. . . . Found?" (130)

"Some people claimed that as it left it called out one last time, 'Total asshole.'" (148)

What the men said:

"Caw caw caw caw caw caw caw caw caw caw caw caw caw caw caw caw." (87)

The gap between what the crow says and what we expect or hope it will say is a measure of the typical failure of language in the novel. The title is also a pun, of course, in addition to being a reference to one of Kroetsch's favorite manifestations of the trickster figure. The reader waits to hear what the Kroetsch says, waits for the author's "message" to come clear. Part of the frustration many readers of the book feel has its basis in the fact that the

narrator's comments are no more edifying, no more consistent with expectations, no more helpful than those of the crow. The crow, like Kroetsch, acts as a trickster, pulling the reader and the characters out of their rational selves, out of the frame of mind that demands resolution and full, satisfying answers to every question.

This failure to communicate, at least to communicate what readers have been trained to hear, points to the major thematic field of the novel. Although all of the thematic dualities that have become commonplace in Kroetsch's fiction are present here, the primary focus is again on language, on language's failures as well as its potential for success. Because of language's inadequacy as a tool of communication as well as its seductive, entrapping qualities, many of the characters seek at some point to escape language entirely, to lapse into silence, but they are fearful too of the death, the vanishing, that silence portends. At different times, also, the very characters who have sought to abandon language will put their trust in it and all it entails. There is no rigid schema of dichotmized values. Although most major characters have established tendencies in their personalities, they are also always in flux, shifting unpredictably with new circumstances.

Finally, though, through concern with language, the characters seek a version of the dream of origins, a way of perpetuating the world, of knocking it out of its present

alignment into a new one more suited to reality as they find it, not as they are told they should see it. Kroetsch has talked often of the Canadian's writer's task being to un-name, to force the perceived world into a state of pre-creation so that it may be created anew, replacing the static, learned sense of reality with a fresh, vital sense of its flux. What The Crow Said is essentially a chronicle of this process of un-naming and the necessary re-naming, a recasting of the world with new words, new metaphors, and new myths to describe it, not to contain it.

The narration shares in this lack of rigid schematization of values by refusing to dichotomize voices. Instead of the interplay of two opposed narratives, a process that had become standard by Gone Indian and was already being undercut in Badlands, there is instead a continuous interplay of voices, none of them taking precedence. Kroetsch's interest in M.M. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism--that in the utterence of even a single word "there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (Holquist 426)--is apparent in the dialogic tension between the plentitude of varied, often contradictory stories and the narrative voice trying to coax them into unitary form. The narrative voice is rendered unstable and non-unitary by attempting to contain all of the contesting voices in the novel. As was beginning to happen in Badlands, the

narrative takes on its own voice out of the plurality of voices. The result is a third person limited omniscient undramatized narrator. The distrust we feel for anonymous, authoritative narrators--presenting the "authoritative discourse," in Bakhtin's phrase (442)--is belied by the presence within the narrator's voice of all the voices of the community. In earlier novels, the two opposing narratives could not co-exist, being too absolutely contradictory; they were thesis and antithesis, and a synthesis was achieved in the reading. With Crow, though, the different narratives are expected to co-exist, are not designed to prompt some final synthesis. Kroetsch has said of the narration, "I was playing with that sense of multitudes of voices that become one voice; it isn't quite third person because there's always the temptation of possible narrators there" (169).

Kroetsch has written often of the oral tradition as alive, an ongoing process in the west. In the silence and vastness that threatens to envelop the people on the prairies, as well as in the face of a literature that does not tell their story, "our endless talk is the ultimate poem of the prairie. . . . the oral tradition is the means of survival" ("The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues" 30). Kroetsch taps into that resource fully with the narration of Crow. The technique attempts to present the speaking, to capture it for the reader without stilling

it, without turning it into the spoken, by leaving it entirely open, ambiguous, and flexible. In the published journal of the writing of the novel, which serves--like Dawe's field notes--almost as a second narrative, Kroetsch describes sitting in a prairie bar, listening to the men, who are "swapping stories in a way that once again makes me realize where the method of What The Crow Said really comes from" (Journals 83). The image of a barroom full of men, some drunk, some sober, most in between, telling, yelling, their stories, each voice competing with the others, each voice speaking both the individual's knowledge and shared knowledge of the community, each one modifying the composite tale slightly, exaggerating, emphasising his part in the center of the action--it seems an apt analogy for the way the parts of the novel work together. The coming together of the voices into one voice of the whole fabric of gossip and story gives some form to the proceedings, but since no one voice can be separated from the whole, none can ever be privileged, allowed to assert unitary meaning.

The opening, "People, years later, blamed everything on the bees. . . " (7), brings together the voices of the story, the voices of the community. It also signals a tall tale, as "Once upon a time" signals a fairy tale. The first mention of the bees seducing Vera Lang is delivered baldly, and conspires with the opening to establish something akin to a willing suspension of disbelief. We no more question

whether a swarm of bees could seduce Vera than we question whether Zeus could turn into a swan and seduce Leda, or whether a woman's love could transform a fairy-tale frog or beast into a handsome prince again. The fantastic occurences are unquestioned not simply because we have entered a fantasy realm, since much about the novel is not fantasy-like, but because the happenings have a certain resonance, a connection not with surface reality but with deeper patterns of life and death and other facets of the ebb and flow of existence. As with all effective myth, we recognize in it not a representation of the surface of existence, but of the currents of life below the still surface. For all its seeming oddness, incredible events, and fantastic characters, Crow is still about the real world, though it does not represent that world directly. When Lecker and Thomas point out a lack of metaphorical meaning, what they mean is there is no coherent, cohesive, consistent pattern of metaphorical meaning. Meanings abound, both metaphoric and otherwise, but consistent patterns of meaning are harder to find. So while the introductory words prepare the reader to accept the incredible aspects of the story, it is a sense of the resonance with the deep structure of existence, along with the sheer impetus of story, that carries the reader forward in the face of uncertainty and strains on credulity.

In this novel, as has been progressively the case in

the previous novels and the poetry, Kroetsch is moving deliberately away from metaphor and the kind of identifying connection metaphor makes. Metonymy, instead, creates a merely contiguous relationship, a closeness based not on identification but on sequentiality or spatial propinquity. Kroetsch responds to Robert Wilson's definition of metonymy ("two things, or two signs, are sequential. It establishes a relationship of sequentialities or contiguities . . .") with a statement which indicates how the move toward metonymic representation parallels the avoidance of the larger, firmer patterns created by metaphor:

> And so one just moves on and around, and there are further namings and renamings. I trust that process. I trust the **discreteness** of those naming acts. And it is very important, I think, that it is this very discreteness that becomes a part of how writers are getting at stories, not the connections made by analogy, or by metaphor, which keep on insisting upon stable, definite structure. I think that through this focus on metonymy we will get entirely new notions of both poems and narratives. (Labyrinths 93)

Although Thomas, Lecker, and others lament the loss of metaphoric depth and connectiveness, Kroetsch's playful, parodic use of metaphor is another aspect of the readability of What the Crow Said. It both allows and encourages the

reader to continue reading and to derive satifaction from doing so, even without the satisfaction of finding out where everything fits. There is, in fact, plenty of metaphor in the novel, a wealth of it, but the meanings the metaphors announce and the patterns they seem to form cannot be trusted. It is this raising and then flouting of reader expectation, this playing with the desire for a meaningful metaphorical reading, that gives the novel a good deal of its humour and provides perhaps the only pattern that the reader _can_ latch on to: any temptation to meaning will be undercut. Also, in the pattern of raised expectations of a delivered meaning and the fall of those hopes when meaning is discovered not to be present, the structure of the novel mirrors the content, for which the rise and fall of existence is the primary image. Structures are erected and torn down; planes take off and then crash; Joe Lightning and several other characters fly, only to fall; the sex act, the simple act of walking or riding a horse--everything is linked to this same cyclical pattern of rise and fall, which characterizes language as well.

Another aspect of the readability of the novel, despite the discontinuities and ambiguities, is highlighted by Roland Barthes's _The Pleasure of the Text_. Kroetsch is clearly familiar with the writings of Barthes and in sympathy with much of what Barthes contends about the pleasure of the text being released by the kind of

disjunctiveness Kroetsch strives for in Crow. Barthes's description of the reader at the moment he derives pleasure from the text is a description of what Kroetsch's reader must be to participate in the playfullness of Crow:

> Imagine someone . . . who abolishes within himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions, not by syncretism but by simple discard of that old specter: logical contradiction; who mixes every language, even those said to be incompatible; who silently accepts every charge of illogicality, of incongruity; who remains passive in the face of Socratic irony . . . and legal terrorism. . . . (3)

Kroetsch is interested in Crow, as elsewhere, in the failure of language, because it is through that failure that we identify and resist the systems made up of language. "Once we lost our belief in the verbal structures that announce belief . . . we came back to language itself" (Labyrinths 143); "When the language fails--then we hear the language. Then we begin the poem" ("Canada Is A Poem" 34). He has increasingly stressed the necessity of doing violence to form, of introducing subversive, contradictory elements to the text to free it from the strictures of traditional form. According to Barthes's conception, and Kroetsch would concur, the pleasure of the text arises not simply from the violence or subversion but from the co-presence of both the

subversive and traditional forms. It is necessary to maintain the novel's place in the tradition of the novel in order for the subversion of its novelistic aspects to have any significance: "To lose the tradition is fatal but to surrender to it is fatal" (Labyrinths 4). Discussing Sade's works as paradigmatic of the earliest forms of this contradictory pleasure of the text, Barthes describes this same need:

> . . . the pleasure of reading him clearly proceeds from certain breaks (or certain collisions): antipathetic codes . . . come into contact; pompous and ridiculous neologisms are created; pornographic messages are embodied in sentences so pure they might be used as grammatical models. As textual theory has it: the language has been redistributed. Now, such redistribution is always achieved by cutting. Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge . . . and another edge, mobile, blank . . . which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed. These two edges, the compromise they bring about, are necessary. Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so. (7)

A further aspect of Barthes's conception that meshes

neatly with Kroetsch's own is what he claims transpires when this pleasure is allowed to be transmitted, when the contradictory voices are allowed to remain unresolved: "Thus the Biblical myth is reversed, the confusion of tongues is no longer a punishment, the subject gains access to bliss by the cohabitation of languages working side by side: the text of pleasure is a sanctioned Babel" (3-4). Kroetsch's own exploration of the possibility that Babel is a blessing rather than a curse is also connected with the move from metaphor to metonymy, from meaning to a plurality of meanings: ". . . to go from metaphor to metonymy is to go from that temptation of the single to the allure of multiplicity. Instead of the temptations of 'origin' we have genealogies that multiply our connections into the past, into the world" (Labyrinths 117). Kroetsch remains uneasy about the dangers of disappearing into chaos, into the utterly meaningless babble of undifferentiated voices. What is necessary, and what I think Kroetsch achieves, is what Barthes contends began with Flaubert:

> . . . a way of cutting, of perforating discourse without rendering it meaningless.
>
> . . . for the first time, discontinuity is no longer exceptional, sporadic, brilliant, set in a base matter of common utterance . . . a generalized asyndeton seizes the entire utterance, so that this very readable discourse is

> underhandedly one of the craziest imaginable: all the logical small change is in the interstices.
>
> This is a very subtle and nearly untenable status for discourse: narrativity is dismantled yet the story is still readable: never have the two edges of the seam been clearer and more tenuous, never has pleasure been offered to the reader--if at least he appreciates controlled discontinuities, faked conformities, and indirect destruction. (8-9)

The pleasure offered to the reader in the last phrase could serve also as a description of what Crow offers to its readers, as well as the demands it places on them to participate in the text, to take active pleasure in its intentional inconsistencies.

The setting of the story is Big Indian, a town split in half by the Bigknife River and situated ambiguously on the border between Saskatchewan and Alberta. It is a town disconnected in time and place. It is without the roads that "would have joined the town and the municipality to the world beyond" (7), and once Vera mates with the bees at the opening of the story, time is no longer a constant, the seasons no longer follow each other regularly. The mating takes place in early spring, appropriately, as the world of nature is coming to life again. Vera has, for whatever reason, removed her clothes and lain down on the grass.

Mysteriously, the bees "mistook a swarming into a new nest for a mating flight" (10), and Vera undergoes a transformation brought about by a union with nature, not unlike transformations undergone by many Kroetsch characters. "Locked into silence, she lay as if transfixed by death. . . " (8). "Her body was not hers now, it moved with the surge of grass in the wind, a field of green oats, a flowering of clover. . . . She had no mind left for thinking, no fear, no dream, no memory. The bees had closed her mouth, her eyes" (11).

While this is going on, Vera's mother, Tiddy, is contending with a husband who is not where he should be and a bull not where it should be. Tiddy is always the one who makes things happen, who maintains a domestic haven for the errant males. She is a desirable woman, but is also the terrible mother, the other side of the domesticity dichotomy. She is always forced to contend with the folly of males, with their stupid, slovenly, phallocentric single-mindedness, and it is her struggle that is the contrasting back-drop for Vera's surrender to the bees. Tiddy is saddled "with an ordinary husband when she needed a paragon; she stood against the red bull, its savage pawing, its snorted breath" (9). Tiddy's situation lends credence to Vera's contention that men are useless bastards. The other contrasting, or complementing, back-drop is the continuing presence of Old Lady Lang, who has always been there, "from

the beginning" (10). She is always mourning, not any particular death, but "the inevitable absence. 'It's too sad,' she would say, 'I don't want to talk about it'" (10). So while Tiddy has to contend with the living presence of men and Gertrude Lang mourns their inevitable absence, their daughter/grand-daughter is undergoing a ritual union that seems to promise an upswell of fertility and growth.

At the moment of entry, Vera gives a cry. The loafing men had been expecting to hear the locomotive's whistle, but instead they

> heard a sound that was almost human. . . . They could not describe it later, those same men, and yet there were surely as many of them, that day, in Big Indian, as there were drones in that swarm of bees. . . . Terrified and prolonged, it was not a cry for help; despairing and ecstatic too. At first it was a cry of joy, a joy inhumanly exquisite; then it released a sorrow beyond all sorrow. . . . it was a human outcry, pain-filled and sweet, beautiful, wild, terrified. . . . it was a woman's outcry, lament and song in one. . . . (11-12)

In the field, it was "love, pure love . . . the hiving bees arriving home, the whole nectar of her world-old virgin body poured into their instinct to begin again" (13). The men who hear the call would, years later, claim also to have

smelled the moment spring arrived and the bees brought life to the flowers again: "the crocus and the cold earth smell, the smell of the spring earth, breaking alive" (12). And all who heard the cry were certain of one thing: after that union with the bees, an entering into a mystery of divine proportions, "No mortal man would satisfy her" (13).

Thus ends the first of the forty-three numbered sections of the book. Once we adjust to the tall tale, mythic aspect of the story, everything fits pretty neatly into place: against a background of paired opposites--male and female, life and death, presence and absence, speech and silence, and so on--Vera Lang experiences union with the elements, becoming by virtue of the union a veritable earth goddess, a Persephone returning the breath of life to the land and heralding the fruitful spring and summer. Except, the second section begins, "That was the year the snow didn't melt. After those few hot days in April, the cold returned" (14). The expected transformation does not take. Even when certain events of the novel fall into the patterns suggested both by the narrative and by previous Kroetsch narratives or pre-existing myth, the pattern does not hold. Explanations will not suffice, and fragments will not cohere into a grid. The mating of Vera and the bees, instead of bringing about a fruitful, fertile change, with the countryside exploding into spring, has instead a stultifying effect (if any causal relationship can be asserted), locking

the land in snow and ice, locking Vera more rigidly into her disdain of men, and locking the men of Big Indian more tightly into the sloth that spring-time chores would have ameliorated. And it results in Vera's being beyond communion, even more locked within herself; she is like the queen bee, which, once fertilized, need never be fertilized again, reproducing in selfish isolation, much like the many other women in the novel whose offspring have absent, ghostly, or only half-present fathers. Vera later takes three husbands, but appears to regard them much as Rita regards her imprisoned pen-pals--as the focus for the "pure sensuality of desire aroused and denied" (Crow 91).

The refusal of the events of the first chapter to inaugurate the pattern they seem to suggest is, paradoxically, paradigmatic, a model for the workings of the book in general. As Kroetsch has said, in life we come across fragments and pull them together into provisional unities out of fear, but the unities are necessarily false. In this novel, the characters and the readers are in the same situation, faced with a myriad of fragments, many of which appear to point toward pre-existing or comfortable patterns of meaning. Neither group, though, is allowed to settle into complacency because the pattern established never coheres for long.

Still in the second section, the reaction of the people to the unseasonal snow is emblematic of a willingness either

to force fragments, even pieces which clearly don't fit, into the pattern of choice, or else to adopt a new pattern: "Not that people really complained; the snow became a handy explanation, an excuse, a useful provocation, even an absolute truth" (14).

News of Vera's pregnancy, like later pregnancies in the Lang clan, is heralded by Tiddy's announcement, "It's snowing" (14). The snow becomes metonymically associated with the fertility--the pregnancy appears directly connected to the presence of the storm--but there is no recognizable metaphoric connection, at least not at this point. That lack does not preclude the inventing of a connection at the opening of the third section: the snow looks like white bees, buzzes like them as it hits the window, so it is possible to relate them to the fertilizing function of the bees.

As that section opens, Liebhaber, watching the bee-like snow, remembers the future. This too is handled as if it were the simplest, most straightforward of concepts. He remembers the future in part because he must in order to fill a space on page one of his newspaper, the _Big Indian Signal_, with the still living Martin Lang's obituary. Once again, the pattern demands that a piece which clearly does not fit, temporally this time, be made to fit. The swarming of Vera, rightly or wrongly, is blamed for setting the whole town awry, and time has become as much a matter of flux as

the weather. Again, no-one sees fit to complain very strenuously.

Liebhaber's struggle with Martin Lang's obituary after remembering Lang's forthcoming death also reveals the human need to make events fit a form or pattern. The realities of Martin Lang will not answer to the expectations of the form and if the details do not fit, they will have to be changed. All he can think of to say about Lang is "Mr. Martin Lang of the Municipality of Bigknife was an ordinary man. He liked to go berry-picking. . . . But that wouldn't do to finish a story" (16). The inability to finish this story causes Liebhaber considerable anxiety; he is prevented from locking this version of reality into type and preserving it. "He couldn't finish the story; he couldn't complete the page and add up the quoins, check the footstick, the sidestick, lock up the form" (16). Liebhaber, when pressed for words, wants to search with his hands, not his head; he likes words to have a solidity, a precision, that, like Dawe, he does not find in his head. He is especially fond of Vera's submissions to the paper because of their "impartial concern" (17), their essential indifference. His weekly instruction from his publisher about the advertisements and news items is, "Make them fit, will you, Gus" (18), and every week he ensures that the events fit the space available. On this one occasion, he is tempted to

> snatch this one man out of his own story. Lang

> drunk now, gloriously drunk, happily drunk: and maybe that was the only story that mattered: the solitary man walking bare-headed through the fronds and leaves of frost on the front window, that blind man, able to believe that June was June. (18).

Martin, who resembles Web and Hornyak, is one of many solitary males in the story, fighting against the constraints of domesticity even as he enjoys its fruits. Earlier, Liebhaber had commented on the "innocence of a man who dressed in June clothing because it was June" (16), and Lang's persistent belief in labels even if the reality they are supposed to indicate has slipped, must evoke sympathy, even empathy, in Liebhaber; he is similarly although more self-consciously trapped by language. The isolating nature of the male idiom is displayed most prominently in the male domain of the beer parlor, a room of bullshitting men, into which Tiddy Lang brings her response to Vera's pregnancy, the direct "Someone must take a wife" (18). The men close ranks:

> Tiddy tried to say something. But now they were resisting, the three men; subtly they were not letting her exist in their secret place. They could not send her outside, into the storm. But they could not let her in either. (20)

But to Liebhaber, who normally forces language into

prescribed form, and who is now engaged in the conventionalized language of the male barroom, with its stock, repeated phrases, the directness of Tiddy's statement takes on epic proportions. "The simple statement slammed through Liebhaber's mind like an exploding rock. It had all the excitement of theft about it. A vast and terrible conspiring to unhinge the world's illusions" (19). To help preserve the illusions, the men pretend not to hear her, using the snow again as an excuse, but Leeb has an insight. Vera, in Liebhaber's eyes now--the narrative shifts between central consciousnesses almost imperceptibly--has developed an indifference to men, reducing them to strangers, and generating silence into which she sends her vitriolic messages against them. The mating of Vera and the bees, Liebhaber decides, has resulted in "the world dumbfounded into an unending winter" (19). He explicitly links the winter and snow to the silence, the failure of spring to arrive becoming a failure of language.

Tiddy, though, seems "immune to the sky, to the seasons," which prompts Liebhaber to make his claim, "I'm not going to die" (20), moved also by the need to convince Martin to "avoid life for the evening, somehow to suspend himself for a night . . . out of time's way" (21). Martin, caught in time, is paired with Tiddy, who like most of Kroetsch's female characters, does not feel time as a constraint. Despite the male conception of her as outside

of time, unaffected by it, she operates in time, understands and accepts it. Liebhaber, mystified by the time he is caught in, has also his timeless counterpart. Zike, his assistant, is an albino, suggestive of the blank page Liebhaber is regularly obliged to fill. His relations with women are certainly not fraught with fears of domesticity: "Women went to bed easily with Zike. It didn't count, they said; he was an albino" (21). Equally uncomplicated is his relationship with time; unlike Martin, who believes the calendar before his own senses, Zike "never tore the month of January off a calendar pad" (21).

Liebhaber decides to see Martin home to rescue him from time, but on the horse they are both riding through an elemental blizzard, "Liebhaber, for the first time, felt the embrace" (24). Although this is, almost certainly, literally the embrace of Martin, riding behind him, the fact that it is not made explicit suggests that it could, metaphorically, be the embrace of death. Or, metonymically, he feels the embrace of death in the tightening embrace of Martin's soon to be death-stiffened arms. Regardless, it is clear that Liebhaber is moving toward his own union with the elements. He becomes almost submerged in the blizzard, almost consumed by it, but when he is at the point of surrender to the natural force, the sound of the bees compels him to push on. The winter bees appear to act like the studhorse in <u>The Studhorse Man</u>, as a manifestation of

the male sex drive, the drive to keep moving, to keep rising, against the buffeting winds of the blizzard. Liebhaber, in the snow, begins the transformation begun by other characters in similar situations, in whirlpools, twisters, and blizzards. He begins to learn something of the unceasing struggle between the earth and the sky, between women and men, life and death, and of the value and potentially fatal attraction of indifference:

> [Liebhaber] letting himself go, fighting and letting go too, stranded between the sky and earth; he would never give in, never, he remembered that, plummeting. He fell back into Martin's arms. He felt that embrace loosen. Or, no: the indifference released him. . . . He lay on his back in the snow. . . . He heard the bees. . . . He forced himself to turn. (26)

The bees, and whatever they represent to him, prevent Liebhaber from giving in to the elements, to the embrace of death, just as he is about to vanish into the chaos. Like Jeremy Sadness and many other Kroetsch characters, Liebhaber briefly experiences the freedom of indifference, but resists it, driven again by the need to assert his identity, to fix reality, and thus, he hopes, achieve immortality. The image of being stranded between earth and sky becomes central to Liebhaber, and to other characters. The continual push and pull between the contesting elements is what make necessary

the erections of language, of desire, on the blankness of the prairie. Liebhaber thinks, in his near delirium, that he has found a solution to this problem: "He believed he was rolling. Against all the rise and fall that constituted existence, he had found a solution" (27). On a literal level, this is a solution to the immediate problem of freezing to death, but the desire for literal survival is paralleled by Liebhaber's desire to live forever by evading life, by circumventing the rise and fall of existence.

Tiddy, unfazed by the seemingly miraculous appearance of the near-dead Liebhaber on her doorstep, brings the frozen man into the house and into her bed in a passage that is carefully, seemingly portentously, detailed. Next, though no explanation is offered why she should go to the foot of the stairs, we are told that _instead_ of doing that she paused to ponder the blank space in the paper where Martin's obituary should have been:

> . . . she returned to her reading of the front page of the _Big Indian Signal_. She studied again the blank space, the absence of words, at the bottom of the right-hand column. She read the space for a long time before she folded the paper, then laid it carefully at the base of the coal oil lamp, in the middle of the flowered oilcloth that covered her kitchen table. (27)

It is only after digesting the absence, the absence now of

her husband too, seeing not just the loss but the opening up of possibilities a blank page affords, that Tiddy moves to Liebhaber's aid. The snow that almost killed Liebhaber is also the balm which will heal him; it takes on the dichotomous nature of domesticity. Again, although it may sound fantastic, rubbing snow on the frostbitten area is an actual treatment for the affliction. As Tiddy lets the healing snow fall upon him, again like white bees, the scene becomes a clear parallel to that of Vera's mating with the bees. Like her, though for a very different reason, Liebhaber is beyond consciousness, out of time:

> Years later, Liebhaber would insist it was somewhere in that night that his memory of the past began to fail him. Everything was erased, blanked into nothing by snow. . . . What he remembered, if he remembered anything, was the bee-like swarming of the flakes of snow, out of her hand, down onto his parted legs. (28)

Removing the frozen Martin Lang from his plow, John Skandl is forced to break the limbs with a steel hammer, the first of many incidents in which men are maimed, in which body parts are broken or separated from their owners, both before and after death. Virtually none of the men are whole. From this moment on, Martin's appearance in the novel is signalled by his dangling legs.

Skandl, one of the few men who is whole, has a firmness

of purpose and faith in himself that is at times both disquieting and tempting to Liebhaber. While Liebhaber vacillates wildly between faith and doubt and searches for a way to step outside the pattern of rise and fall, Skandl asserts his faith strongly by initiating the building of a veritable ice Tower of Babel. After deciding he would be Liebhaber's chief rival for the newly widowed Tiddy, Skandl "hit upon the need for a beacon, a fixed point in the endless winter. He did not at first plan a lighthouse at all; that ambition came later" (33). Skandl dreams of the perfect ice that could be forming on the river, the ice that could make him rich. Much like Web, Skandl is looking to hold time still, to freeze it. He is uncomfortable with in-between situations, like the weather holding between freezing and melting. His desire to erect a beacon against the endless winter and snow foments a typical Kroetschean opposition of flux and stasis. The snow is a fluid element, associated both with the fertility of the bees and the Lang Daughters' pregnancies and the infertility of the winter. It possesses the power both to hurt and to heal; it seems to free Liebhaber, for a time, into an indifference to his obsession, but freezes Martin forever on his plow. The ice, fashioned into the phallic lighthouse, is hard, solid, unchanging, asserting an apparent permanancy in the midst of the flux, striving to escape the enveloping element by penetrating it. This is, of course, a long way from the

relatively rigid schema Kroetsch outlined, descriptively rather than prescriptively, in "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space," wherein the female is viewed exclusively as the threatening, enclosing, stultifying force, while the male is the agent of change, of action and flux. Now, in many ways, the active principle of the male is seen not as leading into but away from flux and openness. In Crow, as in Badlands, it is the female who is most capable of achieving flexibility and openness, of resisting the impulse to order, while the men are, for the most part, strenuously avoiding any sort of change, giving themselves instead to inertia, following preconceived patterns. This opening up of the schema is not simply a reversal of gender roles, though; these associations of women with flux and men with stasis are not sustained for the length of the book.

When Martin Lang's body slides off the back of Skandl's sleigh, the comforting finality of the burial ritual also evaporates, and, with the disquieting effect of a mystery, introduces a riddle without a sure answer. Typically, Skandl is enraged. He is the only male character who has not yet lost a piece of himself and his male wholeness, his ability to stand in isolation, as well as his aggressive masculinity, appears to make him the scion of the male principle. As such, he is outraged at the lack of solidity, the imprecision of a missing body, especially since he intends to marry the widow of the deceased.

Also typically, Liebhaber, with Tiddy Lang, is caught between the male and female principles. He remains unconscious, shedding his cold-burned skin like a snake, all the details of his convalescence suggesting re-birth, right down to the use of diapers and breast-feeding. He lies in "that temptation to die" (37), as opposed to the rigidity and fierce clarity of Skandl's beacon as he was to the enveloping fluidity of the snow. Tiddy provides the incentive not to die, an answer against the beacon: "Into the old and habitual dark she had come, after the supreme clarity of Skandl's ice" (39). When Skandl visits to tell her of the lighthouse and that she can see it from the window, Liebhaber is awakened into four minutes of lucidity by her phrase, "It's snowing." But it is the silence following Skandl's invitation that moves Liebhaber from the bed. "Liebhaber, in bed, listening, heard the silence that followed. It was too long a silence. It was that that got him out of bed; not the speech, but the silence" (40). He is moved also by the need to choose, to accept one half of the male-female, speech-silence, stasis-flux dichotomy, sure that he could not accept both: "he must see for himself, either the snow or the beacon. He could not see both, he knew that" (40). He lurches out of bed, finds Tiddy, and in his desire for her has the temptation of erection--he issues into speech out of the silence.

> . . . the strokes of his body sounded, first, like

> waves on a shore, then like the breaking of sticks to build a fire. Liebhaber, his body ferociously wise, listened. Perhaps he too, for that short while, dreamed the lighthouse. As all the men would dream it in that snow-buried town. A center. A beacon. A guide. A warning. On the ice on the river, a high flame in the closing night. Liebhaber dared to speak. He whispered: "I love you." (41-42)

Liebhaber issues into fresh speech, into the speaking, after having been immersed in and reborn out of the silence. Silence becomes an irresistible temptation into speech, and will become the speaking, just as the speaking, when it has become reified as the spoken, will necessarily be dismantled into silence again, tempting new speech. The cycle, like the continuous rise and fall of existence, is unbroken.

The opposition of the swirling, fluid snow and the solid, inflexible lighthouse brings to mind one of the potential sources of _What The Crow Said_, Virginia Woolf's _To The Lighthouse_. Kroetsch identifies--somewhat reluctantly, it seems--the influence that novel has had on his work but only in terms of the narrative stance: "her kind of daring with voice" (_Labyrinths_ 14), and the narrative shifts in _Crow_ are similar in many ways to the flexible narrative in Woolf's novel. There are also a number of thematic and incidental similarities between the two novels, but the most

obvious one is the symbol of the lighthouse and its flickering light, the solidity of its rocky base in the midst of the fluid, everchanging but eternal sea. Critical approaches to Woolf's novel have stressed different aspects of the lighthouse, but as James Hafley has claimed, most of the critics make the mistake, like many critics of Kroetsch, of going against the grain of the observation James Ramsey makes about the lighthouse, that "nothing was ever simply one thing" (Hafley 135). Symbols in both novels have shifting values; their symbolic value changes with perspective and circumstance. But while Woolf's symbols form coherent patterns and accumulate to announce meaning, Kroetsch's tend to be arbitrary and contradictory. Another significant correspondence between the two texts is the emphasis placed on the artist-figure Lily Briscoe's forfeiture of a single, final revelation that would make all things clear and stop the forward march of time in favour of smaller fragments of perception, of insight. This decision made, Lily becomes then satisfied with her work of art as an attempt, as an expression, that does not need to become a masterpiece in order to have validity.

On the subject of potential sources for Crow, a short story of John Barth's comes to mind. Although Kroetsch does not identify Barth as a source, and in fact indicates an uneasiness with his approach to writing, Barth's short story, "Ambrose His Mark," bears several strong resemblances

to _Crow_ in incident and general intent. A young nameless child of dubious parentage, referred to simply as Honey, is at his mother's breast when, after a bizarre happenstance, she is mistaken for a hive by a swarm of bees. The swarm settles on her breast while she suckles the child, eventually named Ambrose, after the saint, who is said to have gained the power of great speech when bees landed on his infant mouth. After the incident, a birthmark with three components suddenly appears to be an image of a bee in flight, and an angry neighbor hints that the boy's conception is due also to the bees: "Brat's got no more father'n a drone bee!" (26). The narrator, the grown child, has told us of his Uncle Konrad that "To see things in their larger context was his gentle aim; to harmonize part with part, time with time. . ." (15), and all of the characters seek to read a pattern of significance into the fantastic event, harmonizing the parts into a cohesive whole, seizing upon whatever fragments they have. The preacher sees the significance in religious terms--"There's an omen here someplace" (28)--and the family members see the significance in whatever light suits their respective interests. To the narrator, though, the event and the interpretations are unrelated--significant, but not part of any clear, indisputable pattern. To him, it is only "the coincidence of my nickname, my birthmark, and my immersion in the bees" (30).

The story concerns itself finally with the dual aspect of one's name, that part of one's identity, as Professor Madham said, which is "so totally invented and so totally real" (51).

> Vanity frets about his name, Pride vaunts it, Knowledge retches at its sound, Understanding sighs; all live outside it, knowing full well that I and my sign are neither one nor quite two. Yet only give it voice . . . and see what-all leaves off to answer! (32)

In addition to the obvious shared concerns with naming and forcing metaphoric significance on occurrences which possess only a sequential relationship, there are two passages in particular that seem very close to similarly intended passages in Crow. The first is a description of the swarming, the second a report of the interpretation of the event:

> For now the bees, moved by their secret reasons, closed ranks and settled upon her chest. Ten thousand, twenty thousand strong they clustered. Her bare bosoms, my squalling face--all were buried in the golden swarm. (23)
>
> The extraordinary swarming was variously interpreted. Among our neighbors it was regarded as a punishment of Andrea in particular for her wantonness. . . . Even Aunt Rosa maintained there

> was more to it than mere chance, and could not be induced to taste the product of our hive. Grandfather on the contrary was convinced that a change in our fortunes was imminent--so striking an occurence could not but be significant --and on grounds that things were as bad as they could get, confidently expected there to be an improvement.
>
> (29)

The similarity resides not so much in the details but in the overall effect. The description of the swarm brings together the bees swarming in a sexual area of the body, silencing the child as Vera was silenced, and suggests the conception of a child by the union as well as stressing the impossibility of knowing why the bees behaved as they did; the second passage is reminiscent of the reports of the various things the men heard in Vera's cry, the significance they attached to it, and the various interpretations of that significance they made.

The context of these two potential sources for <u>What The Crow Said</u> emphasises again the stress Kroetsch lays upon undercutting the interpretive acts that his characters attempt and often live by. The dangers of solidifying into truth these acts of interpretation, these acts of language, are apparent in Big Indian. In the face of the endless snow and the stark perfection of Skandl's ice, the residents of

Big Indian see in him their salvation. There are indications, though, that the erection of ice represents a sham fertility, a sterile eroticism, and represents only the stability of the spoken which must finally give way again to the speaking. In "The Exploding Porcupine" Kroetsch cites two theorists to stress not only the necessity but the inevitablility of this issuance:

> The ultimate violence that might be done to story is silence. Roland Barthes, writing on Roland Barthes, goes farther and says, "A cessation of language is the greatest violence that can be done to the violence of language." But that possibility of silence, finally, is only a provocation into speech. Foucault tells us that "every language . . . erects itself vertically against death." This erection must issue into speech, speech must issue into story. (58)

Skandl's ice lighthouse is, of course, an erection against death, a vertical signpost on the horizontal landscape, rising out of the silence of the endless winter. Out of the "babble and chaos" (49) of the arguments in the lighthouse for and against it come many new developments. As in several other similar instances in the book, the reader is tempted to link causally and metaphorically events that are merely juxtaposed or metonymically connected. The building of the beacon is connected, we are told, with the birth of

Vera's son, whom Vera soon after throws from the cutter carrying them in order to save the horses from pursuing wolves. Later he returns as Vera's Boy, whom Vera claims has been living in a den of coyotes. He speaks an obscure language, "a kind of speech that was half yips and barks, half what his listeners took to be pig Latin" (135), and has acquired, somehow, the ability to predict the weather. The lighthouse also encourages, seemingly, Tiddy's marriage to John Skandl ("Why Tiddy Lang chose John Skandl out of all her twenty-four suitors was never explained to anyone's satisfaction" (51)), although Tiddy, startled by the black smoke that appeared from the lighthouse instead of the celebratory bright light Skandl had planned, faints before she can make her vows. Very shortly after, her son is born, and is named John Gustav, or J.G., after both Skandl and Liebhaber. There is confusion over who the father is, and about whether Skandl is really her husband, and there is new confusion over whether her old husband is really gone. Martin Lang's ghost makes its first appearance to Liebhaber amongst the chaos of voices in the lighthouse. J.G.'s birth, and more particularly his lifelong condition of silence, brings the crow into play as well, since the crow is said to act as J.G.'s voice. Skandl's plan to "anchor himself to the earth" (61) by linking Big Indian to the rest of the world through an extensive network of roads also issues from the chaos of the lighthouse. This necessitates

his flight to the capital, the cause of his eventual disappearance and demise, frozen after his plane crashes.

Skandl's lighthouse is a beacon in the endless winter, but it is also frozen, concretized. It stands as a symbol of the winter, the freezing that has stilled the cycle of life and death. "The ice of Skandl's erotic dream shimmered a translucent blue in the blank glare of what should have been a harvest sun" (47). "There were those muttering few, wives and mothers, who saw the tower as a kind of tomb or monument" (47), and Old Lady Lang thinks of it too in terms of absence, stilled fertility. The women of the town are moved to argue against the ice in spite of its beauty, while the men argue that it should be made ever taller (recalling of course the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel). But it is Tiddy and Liebhaber, both of whom are tempted by its beauty and fixity, who resist its lure most strenuously. "Tiddy recognized that the men . . . were trying to get to heaven. They must be stopped. She was trying to find words; Tiddy, who did not argue at all. She was trying to imagine words" (50). Tiddy is moved out of her silence, her accepting passivity, her directness of speech, to try to enter the male realm of argument, of reason. Liebhaber, in yet another of his schemes, is moved instead to try to exit that realm of order and system. The rigidity of Skandl's dream leads Liebhaber to try to destroy the system of language, to render the language flexible and new. He

begins to print lies and false prophecies in the paper, and privately battles with his personal demon, the alphabet. He seeks to loose the "intricate knot of language that bound him to death" (54), the system that asserts a beginning, a middle, and especially an end. The following sections are representative of this struggle:

> He tried, with the twist of a wrist, to turn an M into a W. Failing at that, he turned a T upside down; but he could read it as easily upside down as upright. . . . He set the word OUT, building from the T he had tried to mock out of meaning. He left the T on the table. He placed the U on the windowsill. He carried the O into his living room. But he knew the word OUT was still OUT. It was his failure to reduce a mere three-letter word to nothing that made him attempt a sequence of illogical sentences. . . . He decided to make the word GLOT. (54-55)

> All the capital letters in his collection of wood type were set in neat rows, arranged alphabetically. He couldn't bear that either. In terror at the domestication of those free, beautiful letters--no it was the absurdity of their recited order that afflicted him: ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ--he opened a twenty-six of rye and, with an immense effort, tried to

> disentangle himself from the tyranny of rote. . . . He tried to resay the alphabet and failed. . . . He tried again, the simplest changing of the alphabet--and heard himself making sounds for which he had no signs at all. (69)

In this struggle to escape death and the verbal structures that link him to it, Liebhaber passes through all of the positions Kroetsch characters typically adopt in the individual : community dichotomy, moving from detachment to desire to "embrace all mankind" (71), becoming "the civilizing man: at the center, and yet uninvolved" (72), back to a stubborn resistance to domesticity paralleled by a stronger sense of masculine community, then finally, after experiencing his personal brush with chaos and silence, into an acceptance of community and its demands. Liebhaber remains obssessed with immortality throughout, whether he is seeking to control language or escape its control, and he seeks to control his own life by turning it into a story written by himself and presumably interminable. He enjoys his position as referee in the hockey game because he is removed, dispassionate, but controlling. A fight breaks out, though, and when he turns out the lights to quell the disturbance, Gladys Lang is impossibly made pregnant in an orgy by all of the players. Liebhaber had hit upon the notion that by telling the absolute truth he could again evade death, but the apparent truth of this impossiblity

demonstrates to him the folly of his venture.

Liebhaber has a moment of revelation, an apparent epiphany, trapped under his overturned ark, which he built to escape the flood he predicted (much like Backstrom's prediction of rain). While there, expecting to drown, Liebhaber curses Gutenberg, whom he blames for forcing him to try to "remember a life he hadn't lived" (163). Liebhaber's attitude toward Gutenberg, the inventor of the movable type, is central to Liebhaber's obsession with language and form. He blames Gutenberg, or his type, for destroying man's connection with the past. When he is immersed in his scheme to avoid death by telling the truth, printing up a single copy of truthful reports and then breaking the form again, he realizes that "it was Gutenberg who'd made all memory of the past irrelevant" (68). In contrast to the oral history of Big Indian, for instance, Liebhaber sees his own past, which is a mystery to the town, as written, as having been set in type and locked up, thereby making any memory of it irrelevant. Similarly, he sees all printers as completing a vast novel for Gutenberg's ghost, and he seems to feel either that he has been trapped in someone else's story, or, as he says of Gutenberg, that he has left himself out of his own story. He feels very much alone, isolated from the community, from Tiddy in particular, and blames Gutenberg for this. Liebhaber vacillates in his attitude toward Gutenberg, according to

how he feels about his own circumstances. When he is pleased a little later to see himself as the civilizing man, the referee, as part of the community,

> He began to feel a condescending pity for poor Gutenberg, crazy as a bat in a curious way, obsessed to the point of self-destruction . . . almost not invented into his own story. (73-4)

But the condescension disappears when Tiddy announces that Gladys had been made pregnant by "everybody." In the night of drunkenness that follows Martin Lang's breaking up the schmier game, Liebhaber tells a Mountie, "Gutenberg did this to me" (115); he realizes that while all memory of the past is irrelevant, "the future, and only that just barely, was free of Gutenberg's vast design" (116). He makes his first prediction of the future, that John Skandl will return home, and the schmier game then resumes in Skandl's granary. But his predictions, while they often come true, do so only after a long time, or in a roundabout or disappointing manner.

Under the ark, however, believing his death to be imminent, he declares he is writing his own story at last. "He could account for events, announce the presence of design, under the apparent chaos" (163). He determines to write himself into the story, to write a novel. His resolve is weakened by the realization that his proposed one-sentence novel--"*You in my arms*" (164)--appears not to be

enough. The crow, whom he believes is on top of the ark, raps on the hull, appearing to signal to Liebhaber that more is needed. Liebhaber offers to retract everything he has said about the crow, and to feed the bird richly. The narrator says, "He couldn't stop; he was composing his novel" (164), which seems to suggest that Liebhaber has succeeded in putting himself in the story. But the pattern is not his; Liebhaber is still responding to what the crow says or what he hopes it will say, waiting hopefully for the crow even to shit on the hull. Despairing of any sign from the crow, though, he finally reaches the point at which he desires the release of death. He lets his legs go limp, and discovers immediately that he had been stranded in very shallow water just off shore; he shits himself instead of listening for the crow to do so. But the crow is not there when he emerges, the only birds in sight being some snipes on the shore, "monstrously indifferent" (165). Liebhaber is freed from the need to seek immortality by his acceptance of death and mortality. The liberation is short-lived, however, and he returns home to his two comforts, the twenty-six ounces of rye and the twenty-six letters of his movable type, both of which serve to isolate him further, leading him usually to fall asleep on the toilet with both of them near.

Liebhaber blames Gutenberg because he feels trapped by what appear to be the conventions of the form: just as his

type has to fit into a form (the name for the steel frame in which type is locked), and each item in his newspaper is required to take a certain form, so his life seems to be lived according to form. He feels forced to live out a version of the stereotype of the solitary male in opposition to domesticating women, fleeing death by fleeing life, saving self by escaping community. As with previous Kroetsch characters, freedom comes for Liebhaber not by fleeing the female, domesticity, or even death, but by freeing himself from the form of the fiction he inhabits, the form that fits somebody else's conception of life. Thinking of how he feels trapped in someone else's vision and of his own lack of a past, he thinks of "Fust, Gutenberg's coadjutor, even away back then, condemned merely to fulfil what Gutenberg had ordained (196). Zike, his Albino assistant, seems not to be trapped, as Fust was, into what Liebhaber or Gutenberg ordains; he is the blank page, formless, but more importantly, it seems, he is forever claiming to have done what Liebhaber must do to bring about his own freedom: "Fucked my head off last night" (68). At the end of the novel, Liebhaber realizes while making love with Tiddy that "Gutenberg, too, was only a scribe" (216); Liebhaber is free then to begin his own book, which begins with his dying, read metaphorically perhaps, like the shedding of his skin earlier, as his discarding of the many devices with which he sought to avoid death, and in the

process missed out on life.

Before that end, though, Liebhaber launches into yet another obsessive and self-destructive evasion of death. Frustrated by the failure of his scheme to tell only the truth ("That was the cause of the schmier game--the inadequacy of truth" (76)), Liebhaber launches the schmier game, which goes on for 151 days and becomes an obsession, not just for him but for virtually all of the males in the community. The card game becomes a means of ordering life for Liebhaber, who apparently hopes that, as in Hazard's card game with the Incurables, he can live forever if the game does not end. The world of the game, like life, has its element of chance, but it also has, unlike life, rules which are entirely comprehensible and predictable, and which, if the players choose, can be changed. Its appeal is demonstrated by one of the players, Isador Heck, who is "the most eligible bachelor in the district. Unfortunately, he was laughed at by many people for his skepticism: he claimed to believe in nothing. When he broke his big toe by dropping a post maul on it, he healed himself by disallowing the theory of gravity" (76). In the card game, the men need be bound only by very limited rules and can imagine themselves outside of the ordinary flux of existence.

Like Liebhaber, the men resist most strongly the rule that like life, the game must end. They also strenuously resist the lure of female love. The announcement that Cathy

Lang and Joe Lightning are marrying for love throws the game into disarray, and the other men have to assure young Eddie Brausen (in a motif likely borrowed from One Hundred Years of Solitude) that "no person in this municipality ever . . . had married for love" (100). During the game, the various physical infirmities that the men had concealed or downplayed--Leo's horseshoe imprint, O'Holleran's artificial leg, Morgan's missing eye, Martz's deafness, Eddie Brausen's missing finger, Andy Wolbeck's billiard ball toes, Art Van Slyke's broken nose (broken at the moment Skandl's imminent arrival is announced)--become proud emblems of their incompleteness, their solitary stands against community and domesticity, and they glory in them. For Eli Wurtz, a Hutterite farmer, who has no infirmity we know of, the game lacks the seriousness it holds for the others: he "had not been playing schmier to win. Eli, obviously, had believed for so long in the communal good, that he was almost useless in a card game" (102). The card game is simply about individual self-interest, winning the game and keeping the game going, until Marvin Straw, the hangman who is heading to the jail to hang Jerry Lapanne, one of Rita Lang's correspondents, enters the game. Then it becomes like the famous chess game with Death in Bergman's Seventh Seal. It becomes an individual effort in a different way: "They were playing to win, and to win they had to lose" (108) to prevent Lapanne's death by keeping Straw in the game. It

becomes apparent, though, that one player is still trying to win, encouraging Straw to leave the game to keep his appointment--the extra player is Martin Lang's ghost!

In a scene paralleling Vera's initial encounter with the bees, in which an obvious sign of fertility and life results in sterility and a kind of death, the men respond to identifying this emblem of death, the ghost, by lurching into life, the game breaking up into a chaos of terror and riot. At the moment of discovery, the men let out a cry that is linked with Vera's and with Joe Lightning's, yet to come:

> The roar that went up that morning . . . was third only to Vera Lang's immortal cry and the cry that was to come from the air itself, many years later, over Big Indian. . . . Why all those stooped and spent men reacted in unison, at what signal they found their common fear and terror, remained a mystery. . . . They prayed, the listeners. . . . They were, all of them, too horrified to weep or to moan or to ask a single question. Children learned stillness. The old experienced the call of death. . . .
>
> The roar was an animal roar. Some remembered it, after, as a bull sound, ferocious. . . . Some remembered the horses that drowned . . . trumpeting a perfection of despair. Some thought

> a pack of wolves was loosed on the town, purely and simply rabies mad, yelping and howling to a final feast. (111-112)

The men resist surrender to Tiddy's attempts to seduce them away from the game with the fruits of domesticity, even though they are now reduced to playing for "a few nails and some pieces of broken glass and a pile of round stones they'd dug up from the frozen riverbed with their bare hands" (126). They resist the homemade bread and butter, the apricot jam, the fresh pancakes with chokecherry jelly, the fresh eggs, sausage, raw-fried potatoes with onion, and more. The straw that breaks their backs is the seemingly significant announcement that "Vera has some fresh honey in the comb" (127).

With the end of the game, and with the town in the grip of a drought (once again, the natural world's cycles are out of synch), Liebhaber, still insisting to the crow that he intends "to live forever" (129), predicts a flood. This scheme of Liebhaber's suggests yet another temptation of meaning. The possibility of a flood of the epic proportions Liebhaber posits foregrounds the Biblical patterns that Kroetsch is playing with in this section of the book. Putting together some of these patterms with the pattern of the three cries (things are expected to happen in threes in Big Indian, as in fairy tales and folk wisdom, so they do) a possible--albeit somewhat implausible--

interpretation emerges. As has been noted, Kroetsch said he was interested in dreams of origin while creating this novel, and this has led to the conflation of several types of existing creation stories. As is obvious from the war between the earth and the sky and the linked opposition of men and women, along with all of the transformations and mating of animals and humans, there are echoes of ancient Greek and Roman creation myths. In addition, as Geert Lernout and others have noted, there is also a level at which the novel is a "Heideggerian parable" in which Vera becomes "Being" through her experience with the bees (59). There is also a parallel Biblical mock allegory which is reaching its climax here. The creation of the world of Big Indian begins, in a sense, in the Edenesque garden where the naked Vera becomes a natural being when penetrated by a swarm of bees. Her link with nature has the innocence and purity of Eve in Eden, although this Eve is far more resistant to further temptation, at least to the temptation of men. Her mating with the bees, moreover, establishes a new world--years later, the point of creation can be traced back to her. The fall of man--or at least that of _a_ man--comes with the crash of Skandl's plane. His disaster signals a fall out of faith into doubt. The men all grow sceptical when the faith they had placed in Skandl is unrewarded. His fall takes on an importance equal to that of the mating with the bees:

> A few people always blamed misfortunes on the swarm of bees that had appeared out of nowhere some time in the past. Others were now more specific and vituperative: they blamed recent developments on the moment when ice began to form on the wings of the Piper Cub in which John Skandl was flying home to Big Indian. (146)

The fall of man occasions the need for a savior. JG, his name evocatively and deliberately close to JC, is a parody of the saviour, the innocent man who will bear the sins of mankind and so bring them into the proper relationship with their creator again. Vera's act of creation brought into effect a world in which nature itself was freed from constraints, freed of time. All manner of fantastic occurrences--wolves raising a baby boy instead of eating it, the winter refusing to end, the ghost of a man returning to his home, droughts and floods and plagues of Biblical scope--take place in the world which Father Basil insists is off its axis. Skandl's desire was to fix that flux, to still the world again. On his return from the outside world, presumably bringing connection with the outside world with him, Skandl is done in by the very ice he cherished.

JG is not a part of any struggle; he is entirely innocent: "JG was not guilty of thought. It was a simple knowing that took him where he went" (147). He is innocent

also, it seems, of common sense, for he follows the crow into a tree, and then "tried to step directly into the sky, in imitation of his only friend, the black crow" (148). He lands on a half-dozen pointed crosses in the graveyard where Rose O'Holleran buried her dead pets, to complete the Christ imagery in appropriately ludicrous manner. His death gives way to a salamander plague, although only Liebhaber sees in this a sign (their seeking higher ground reaffirms his prophecied flood). It also ushers in the actual war against the sky, the attempts of the men to force the sky to give up rain, to restore fertility to the earth. Now the men are behaving contrarily to the way they acted while they had faith only in Skandl and his lighthouse--when the endless winter was not only accepted but turned into a profitable venture--by seeking strenuously to end the drought. Vera's original, originating, cry seemed to have instilled in them an awareness of the nature of woman, of creation, of Nature, and had in effect frightened them into the shelter of Skandl's tower. The next cry, the men's own in the cellar below the church, was the confrontation with the spectre of death into which the fixing ice had delivered Martin Lang and will deliver John Skandl. That cry, that fear, drives them out of their shelter, but without faith. They need a savior to deliver them with his cry. JG, of course, gives no cry, having come no closer to communication since his birth than filling his pants. His innocence, his continuing

beauty, his freedom from time and aging all depend upon his freedom also from language. So where does the necessary third cry come from?

Joe Lightning is the only man in the district not involved in the war against the sky--"he believed in the union of the elements" (156)--and the only man who "remembered JG; or at least he alone honored the memory" (156). He is, to take this entirely too far, like Christ after his death on the cross, returning to earth from the heavens to redeem mankind. He determines to learn the secret of the sky. Inspired by JG's apparent communication with the crow, Joe traps an eagle, hoping to wrestle it into a pit where he could learn about the sky. Instead he is carried into the sky. As he falls from the eagle's grasp, "more of a laugh than a cry of terror" (158) escapes him. The third cry is the male version of Vera's initial cry.

> Some people, years later, believed they heard from the sky a version of prayer, a kind of holy laugh. Others . . . admitted to hearing a laugh of such absolute obscenity they'd refused, for a whole lifetime, to acknowledge it. (159-160)

Joe might have been saved, but was made a martyr because he landed in the hole behind the church where the woman's outhouse should have been, and "the churchgoers, at the time of the fall, had on their Sunday best" (160). This third, culminating cry leads to the realizing of the possibility of

the union of the elements, of earth and sky, the male and female principles, first suggested by Vera's experience, then made necessary by the men's fall from faith, and demonstrated by JG and Joe Lightning's entering the sky. Vera is the originator, Skandl brings about the fall (the confrontation with death is the expulsion from Eden) and so necessitates redemption, and the martyrs, JG and Joe, make such redemption possible.

Obviously, there are large holes and forced correpondences in this rendering of a Biblical parallel, but the falsifying lengths to which it is necessary to go in order to flesh out or complete the parallel demonstrates something of the way the book is constructed: the reader is teased into constructing such structures, analogues and parallels by perceiving clear and unmistakable aspects of that parallel (such as JG's impalement on the crosses) but then is prevented from completing the pattern for want of enough material or because much material contradicts the reading. Just as the book comprises fragments out of which a reader can almost construct a novel, according to Kroetsch, so it comprises several almost complete patterns, none of which can be made whole or dominant. Aspects of the Biblical parallel exist, but the pattern is not full enough to allow us to label the novel a Biblical allegory, to reduce its plurality of meanings to that single thread of meaning.

The parallelism of the three cries encourages both reader and characters to connect them meaningfully. Critics, too, give in to this temptation. Geert Lernout would have it that the three cries, besides playing a part in the above mock-Biblical interpretation, are also serving another function:

> Vera's represents a female orgasm; the card players' is a reaction to death; Joe's is a male orgasm "of . . . absolute obscenity." Vera's happens on the earth among the flowers, the men's under the earth in the church cellar, and Joe's in the sky. The three cries also have in common that they are extremely unsettling and that they are repressed immediately by the people who hear them, because they cannot face their pure animality. This, in turn, leads to mythification or denegration. (57)

The arrangement of these elements to lend themselves to a mythic pattern reinforces the human tendency--present in both characters and critics--to step back from the fullness of reality, to retreat into mythic structure, into comforting interpretation. Whether they are reacting to the violence, the animality, the banality, the meaninglessness, the instability or any of the other aspects of life examined in the novel, few of the characters can resist the temptation, to lesser or greater extent, to conceal the

riddle of existence in a cloak of meaning, of cause and effect, of rationality. This temptation is, for instance, what leads the men to declare, after the crow has left, that it had been talking, "meditative and wise," while they failed to pay proper attention (152). There are moments when this constant shoring up of reality ceases. During the schmier game, there is a point at which the players are forced to drop whatever illusions they hold about the game they cling to: "studying their cards in the presence of Old Lady Lang, they knew there was no meaning anywhere in the world" (94), a revelation that, like most others, seems to have no lasting impact on them.

It certainly has no lasting effect on Liebhaber, who continues to launch incredible schemes. Perhaps Liebhaber's most extravagant scheme involves his role in the War Against the Sky. He arms himself with a cannon, following Isador Heck's example; "set on gaining a victory over death . . . . [he] would fertilize the barren sky" (182). He loads the bees into the cannon and fires them into the clouds.

> And people, years later; years later they will say: He pumped them into the sky itself, rammed them into the sky's night, into the sky's blue breaking. At the mere command of the merest need. He knocked them high, shot them into the one androgynous moment of heaven and earth. He spent the queens into their myriad selves; he, the

first and final male, horny to die. (216)

Male bees die after mating. And Liebhaber, much as he pursues the mating, fears too the acceptance of mortality that accompanies his proposed mating with Tiddy, the cessation of his freedom, his solitariness, his ability to pretend that time and the seasons do not exist or affect him.

The firing of the bees does bring about the wanted rain, but the overreaching battle with the sky is intensified nonetheless, until the rain brings floodwaters and then hail. With the rain too come falling bees, some of them encased in the ice of the hailstones, uniting the separate earlier images of the live bees and the snow bees. The remaining eight sections of the book contain many such convergences of thematic and symbolic conceits, and of various plot threads. Drawing all of these together is a literal convergence on the overflowing river of Vera, her bees, Vera's Boy, Jerry Lapanne, and Marvin Straw. Lapanne and Vera's boy die in a crash that is rendered in sexual terms: "They became one. The boat that had turned and was floating backwards. The machine that flew. The center piling of the old bridge, stiff and tall like a lighthouse, in the middle of the swollen river" (202). The union of Vera and Straw is explicitly sexual too, the two of them naked, floating down the swollen river like an Adam and Eve. Theresa O'Holleran unites sexually with the ghost of her

grandfather, Martin Lang, and romantically with Daryll Dish. We learn of the particular man whose absence Old Lady Lang feels. Everything is, in a sense, coming together. For Liebhaber, though, things continue to fall apart. He is increasingly troubled by his connection to language, by the curse of Gutenberg, by his lack of memory, and his need for his ark and his type, both of which insulate him from the passage of time. Throughout the novel a relationship has been established between communication, acts of language, and excrement. JG's only form of communication is to fill his pants, Liebhaber speaks his humiliation when trapped under his boat by doing the same, his forays into teasing language out of meaning usually end with him passed out on the toilet, and Joe Lightning's obscene laughter stops when he lands in the excrement of the outhouse. The reaction of the church-goers to that last mode of expression and Liebhaber's own insular tendencies suggests what the connection between the two may be. Like the three cries of pure communication that have to be repressed and denied by those who hear them, the expulsion of excrement is a natural, animalistic aspect of human existence that most seek to ignore and hide. It speaks of decay and mortality. JG is freed from language and the notions of civilized behavior that the verbal structures support, and is free also of the shame over his excremental communication. Liebhaber, though, is triply insulated in this act: he is

hidden in a bathroom on the ark dreaming of his type. Just before the acts of convergence take place, that is, Liebhaber is on the boat on his two-holer, contemplating his bond with his type, realizing that it is the only link he has to his past. He has rendered himself incapable of understanding or interacting with the world except through the strictures of inflexible language. The events of the recent past do not conform to his limited conception of how the world works, so he grows increasingly angry. Lapanne's hanging--strung up on telephone wires in the crash of his flying machine--despite the efforts of the schmier players to save him from that fate triggers Liebhaber's doubt in the systems he has trusted. "Jerry Lapanne was hanged by the neck. Whether he was innocent or guilty had not made the slightest difference" (206). Isador Heck's certainty that someone had wrecked his cannon, something Liebhaber knows to be true, angers him nonetheless: "no man could be certain of anything on this lunatic, spun and dying planet" (206-207).

Liebhaber is primed now for his own moment of androgyny, of union, of flying and falling. He is going to propose to Tiddy for the thirty-third time (like Hazard Lepage, Liebhaber had been given a conditional acceptance to his proposal: Tiddy would marry him, among other earlier conditions, when it rained). In the meantime, she has decided to live for the moment, to relax her efforts to hold everything together, including past and future. She takes

Liebhaber to bed, Tiddy remembering all the men she did have and those she did not have but desired, Liebhaber remembering the moment of firing the bees from the cannon into the sky. Liebhaber is being freed from the web of language, receding into a nonverbal existence and then emerging into words newly minted again, as he had tried to recreate words with his type earlier:

> And his words, Liebhaber's whispered wild words, incoherent, his whispered cry: "Here. Hold. . . . Helm," Liebhaber whispered. He was a little boy. He held himself close to her body, and in the night he was the inventor of the world's words. (214-215)

In his working notes, Kroetsch makes it clear that Liebhaber is finally finding his much desired immortality by letting it go: "Liebhaber, for all his questing to avoid death, never sees that the avoidance is taking place right in his own house--in the women who, in spite of his disapproval, are forever getting pregnant" (7.1). The screen on the bedroom window is broken, allowing the bees to enter and mingle with the sexual actors. In an earlier draft of the novel, the screen is identified as "a grid on the outside world. The grid was broken" (8.2), and it still clearly serves that purpose. The screen which isolates the characters from the world, the grid with which it is ordered, has broken, inviting the random inside. As Tiddy

did earlier, Liebhaber has his final communication with the crow. In "Effing the Ineffable" Kroetsch writes of the need to cease speaking with borrowed voices, to tear down the spoken and get on with the speaking. And he gives some advice that is relevant to this part of the novel:

> Listen to the voice of the blackbird, my dear friends. When you hear not one phoneme, not one morpheme--not one smidgen of sound--that is familiar: then you will cease to be afraid of your own Voices. (23)

Liebhaber and Tiddy have reached this point:

> Liebhaber hears the crow. The crow is outside the bedroom window. It is talking, not listening, croaking endlessly on. Liebhaber cannot quite understand what the crow is saying . . . .
>
> Liebhaber is happy. He cannot remember anything. (217)

Liebhaber had tried unsuccessfully in the past to free himself from the knot of language and pattern, but he succeeds now because he has fucked his head off. The sexual union releases both participants from their rational selves, making Tiddy's freedom from responsibilty and Liebhaber's freedom from language possible. They lay "in the naked circle of everything" (215), no longer seeking to clothe that nakedness, accepting an existence unmediated by

structures of language or ordering patterns. Tiddy is, "with no imagination at all, dreaming the world. Liebhaber, finally, understands. She only dreams what she has dreamed, But she is dreaming" (216). Seeing this, Liebhaber realizes that "Gutenberg, too, was only a scribe" (216). That is, Gutenberg and all those who came after him had not locked up language and reality once and for all; Gutenberg has not "ordained" anything. He is the scribe for another shadowy "author"; someone is dreaming him. The illusion of permanence created by Gutenberg's invention necessitates rather than precludes another telling. Liebhaber realizes that, just as Tiddy can dream what has already been dreamed, he can speak what has already been spoken, can free up the language locked into type. In the manuscript notes, Kroetsch writes of Liebhaber's illumination: "He realized that Gutenberg had started a vast novel, by inventing print: the novel is still acting itself out" (7.1). Gutenberg's novel remains open, much as Kroetsch's own does. Liebhaber accepts death, accepts the reality that living is necessarily dying: "Liebhaber is happy. After all, he is only dying" (218). The structure of this line recalls a similar one from The Crow Journals: "I am only lost. From there is a possible finding" (66). Liebhaber is dying into a new self, finding his own voice in the silence, discarding past voices: "Liebhaber is happy. He cannot remember anything" (217).

The book ends as it began, in the earliest stages of spring, with a young woman walking barefoot in the grass, ready for a lover from the sky. Now, though, it is Cathy Lang, the "normal one," who hopes sometimes, looking up at the sky, "that Joe Lightning will fall into her arms" (218). In his manuscript notes, Kroetsch identifies the rhythm of the novel with the rhythm of existence, of love-making: "the rhythm of the novel itself been [being?] the rhythms of their fuck: love-making" (7.1). As Liebhaber and Tiddy make love, the rhythms of life are manifested not only in their actions and memories, but also in those of the other characters, bringing together past, present, and future, and exhibiting the desire that provides the impetus for the rhythm, the rise and fall of existence. Vera is gone, but is remembered by Theresa; JG is gone, but is recalled by Rose O'Holleran; and Joe Lightning is gone, but is remembered by Cathy Lang. Cathy is walking through the pasture like Vera, while Rose O'Holleran is characteristically opening a grave in her graveyard just below the tree from which JG made his exit. Terry O'Holleran, Rose's daughter, is with Darryl Dish, while Old Lady Lang is in the cellar, breaking sprouts off of potatoes. Gladys, gathering eggs in the barn, remembers Eli and rubs one of the eggs between her bare thighs. Theodora, her daughter, is throwing a ball against the wall and catching it, as Gladys loved to do in her youth (72). Rita

is again writing letters of desire to her convicts, an image of solitude contrasting with the union in the bedroom, of lovers as prisoners of desire, unable or unwilling to unite with others, or dying in the attempt, like Lapanne. Even the crow makes a return appearance. The myriad connections which establish the rhythm of love, desire, birth, and death establish also the context in which Liebhaber and Tiddy make love. The rhythm is that of Theodora's "bouncing ball" (217), the rise and fall, the ebb and flow. When Liebhaber gives in to that flow of existence he ceases to be buffeted by it, as he was briefly freed by the indifference caused by the freezing cold on horseback with Martin Lang, and by threat of death under his boat. By accepting death, he finds life; by accepting silence, he finds a voice; by abandoning patterns, he finds meaning. Liebhaber is, as he imagined he was trapped under his boat, "writing his own story, at last" (163).

Or is all this so? Although the fragments can be assembled into a figure that resembles the one I have shaped here, they could easily be swept into disarray again and shaped into a markedly different configuration, as the critical variance on this text suggests. The novel ends without concluding any of the stories it begins. Even Liebhaber's dying seems somehow to lack finality: he is dying, never dead. It is not an ending at all, but a beginning. In fact, virtually all of Kroetsch's novels end

with a death, literal or metaphoric, that represents a freedom from constricting preconceptions, entry into the fluidity of a new identity and existence. Like Gutenberg's "novel," What The Crow Said does not end, but plays out. Again and again; each reader, each reading, results in a different account of the story. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, What The Crow Said is the first of Kroetsch's novels actually to do what the earlier novels threatened to: it subverts itself, continually using and undoing conventions of the novel so that the fragments resist coalescing into a novel, so that the stories do not coalesce into one story, so that the meanings are not reduced to unitary meaning. The book is certainly "powerful and puzzling," as P.L. Surette claims, but it is also meaningful even if it cannot be reduced to paraphrasable meaning with any firmness. Crow is also the Kroetsch novel in which the experience of the reader is, potentially at least, most like that of the characters: the reader and the characters are both exposed continually to what Kroetsch calls the temptation of meaning, but the careful reader is likely to resist that temptation because of the book's continual flouting of expectations. The characters' need to pattern existence is accepted as both necessary and desirable, as is the interpreter's need to lend order to the characters, events, the images, the setting, and so on. But the patterning ideally proceeds always from a first

principle of openness, a blankness which suspends preconceived patterns in order to be receptive to new configurations.

In _What The Crow Said_, then, Kroetsch achieves finally what he had sought to do almost from the beginning of his novelistic career. He has created a novel which not only tells of the unreconcilable fragmentariness of existence and of the impossibility of fixing those fragments into a whole but which displays it, a novel which partakes of precisely the fragmentariness and stubborn irreconcilability of life as Kroetsch experiences it.

Chapter VIII:

Conclusion

Alibi, published in 1983, serves nicely as the focus for a conclusion because it represents at once a turning point for Kroetsch, a step in what may prove to be a wholly new direction for his work, and an encapsulation of all his previous fiction. As I suggested in the last chapter, Kroetsch's stated purpose as a novelist is manifested most fully in *Crow*, with the flowing stream of story that refuses to cohere into unitary meaning. It is a playful but often extreme flouting of the reader's expectations of novelistic form, with its continual undercutting of the authority of the narrative voice, freedom from such conventions of traditional fiction as plausibility of event, foregrounding of the form rather than characters or plot, and especially its heightened awareness of the power and failures of language. The world in *Crow*, though, is unmistakably an imaginative construct, making obvious what is true of the world in any novel: fictional world must remain a closed system to exist.

Kroetsch has said that he intended to have Isador Heck return to Big Indian from the "real world," but then discovered that "The world would have destroyed my novel" (*Labyrinths* 72), so Isador's reports of the outside world are disbelieved and ignored. *Alibi* moves Kroetsch's fiction

back into the "real world" again. It is set in real places, and its realistic characters are involved in plausible, if unlikely, events. The shift seems to be from creating an obviously fictional world which cannot be regarded as a direct representation of the real world, to creating a representation of the real world, apparently following the precepts of traditional realist fiction, thereby exposing the fictiveness of any such representation. In Labyrinths of Voice, whose conversations took place while Kroetsch was working on Alibi, he says the notion of "teller as hero" will be central to the novel (187). This interest in the hero as narrator, rather than the typical Kroetsch secondary character as narrator, coincides with a growing interest in autobiography, both in terms of content and form. Kroetsch also talks of how previous novels, including Crow, have been to some extent autobiographical (163-4); as his characters show, any telling of a tale, no matter how mediated, becomes an implicit autobiography of the teller, a manifestation of his self.

> I started from the modernist notion, derived from Joyce, that the artist is behind the scenes, paring his fingernails or whatever, and I moved more and more away from that to the posture [of intertextuality] announced by Kristeva. And I think that's why we're so interested in autobiography right now; because we rather

abruptly recognize how complex that problem is . . . . the self is a kind of fragment, a shifting pattern, you see, and the notion that the self was somehow a nut somewhere that hadn't been cracked or whatever is absurd to us now. (Labyrinths 6-7)

In the last couple weeks, I have recovered a sense of how to get intertextuality into the novel again. And I feel I can write fiction, again. One way has been for me to dare to move away from the conventions of fiction toward autobiography. Because I had almost cornered myself in a very labyrinthine and duplicitous set of conventions, but they remained conventions. I'm still interested in the duplicity but the duplicity can now extend to the notion of autobiography, to the radically different, marvellously different conventions of autobiography. (Labyrinths 25)

Both in terms of the characters in the novel and his own search for form, Kroetsch is interested in how an individual is always at least two selves, the fragmented self, the shifting pattern of identity described above, and the invented self, the coherent, consistent identity that is coerced from the instability of the shifting pattern. The writing of autobiography makes clear the process in which everyone partakes to some degree, the creating of an invented, articulated self that one presents to the world

and to one's own consciousness.

Alibi's William Dorfendorf, penning his autobiography, is startled to catch himself in this act, piecing together a self with the same detachment as his friend Karen Strike takes pictures of seemingly disassociated sites and objects. Dorfendorf is Alberta oil millionaire Jack Deemer's agent, procuring for him collections of various sorts, while Karen is shooting a documentary film on the subject of Deemer's latest collection, spas. The relationship between Dorf and Karen is similar to that of William Dawe and Michael Sinnott: Dorf strives to acquire the item itself, while Karen argues for the validity of the photographic image of the item. Like Dawe, Dorf keeps a journal of his quest, although the journal entries are mediated both by chapter headings that appear to have been supplied by Karen Strike and by Dorf's own retroactive editing of his text. Rather then reclaiming the past, Dorf and Karen are seeking a place of healing. The self-sufficiency that Dawe sought, the release from mortality and human community, are afforded also by the dream of being made whole, of being cured. Jack Deemer, in Dorf's estimation, is trying to purchase and control the entire world. Dorf shares but distrusts Deemer's dream of ordering the world into categories, by amassing collections of every variety and storing them in vast warehouses. While he comes to despise the voracious appetite of Deemer, he also realizes that his own existence

depends upon engaging in an interpretation and categorization of existence of which Deemer merely represents the extreme. Not only, as in previous Kroetsch novels, does the main character have to interpret events and the actions of other characters to interact with other people, but he must do so simply to establish a personality for himself. Even in virtually complete isolation, Dorf cannot free himself from the necessity to pattern life, to make sense of it and to give his own existence a comprehensible shape.

It may seem curious, with this emphasis on the creation of a self and the almost complete concentration on character, that _Alibi_ is criticized most consistently (and its critical reception was even less hospitable than that of _Crow_) for its characterization. The characters are said to be flat, unconvincing, uninvolving. I do not find the characters as offputting as do most of the reviewers, and in any case Kroetsch indicates that he deliberately moved away from any notion of "rounded" characters:

> I'm very uneasy about this notion of depth in characters. I'm much more interested in how we work . . . _grammatically_ in the story. . . . The notion of depth is almost a denial of our responsibility as writers and readers . . . . We can't achieve a god's-eye view. But to explain that away in terms of depth is to lose the glories

of surface and function and act. (<u>Labyrinths</u> 192)

Robert Lecker recognizes the flatness as a pointed avoidance of "rounded" characters, linked with the repudiation of the "god's-eye view" that makes such depth of character possible:

> [Kroetsch] is concerned with the death of conventional methods of storytelling, which, like the murder mystery, force us to believe in, and indeed reconstruct, various levels of cause and effect, various conclusions drawn from our knowledge of motive and intent. To move away from this world . . . . means disposing of the notion of collected evidence as a means of verifying the "authenticity" of a "rounded" character's world.
>
> (<u>Robert Kroetsch</u> 120)

The move away from characters with depth is linked to the attitude Kroetsch holds toward story, and perhaps suggests why he did not repeat the third person narrative stance of <u>Crow</u>. To create rounded, consistent, knowable characters is as true to the way we actually encounter and become aware of other people as is a wholly coherent and comprehensible plot reflective of our actual chaotic lives. Kroetsch's use of autobiography, with Dorf writing his own story as both a third and first person narrator, shows also that not only are other people inconsistent, unpredictable, and incomprehensible, but that neither is one's self. Dorf is

continually surprised by his own actions, statements, and attitudes; the character is himself, and the writer still cannot comprehend him fully or find consistency and "depth." So the emphasis on the form of autobiography reflects Kroetsch's growing awareness of how all tellings are ultimately autobiographical.

Another reason why a discussion of Alibi makes an apt conclusion to this study is that reducing character to its formulaic components crystallizes the basic pattern of character development common to Kroetsch's novels from the beginning, though this appears in embryonic form in the earliest works: the central character, typically doubled by another character who is a mirror image of himself, a figure as rigid as he is flexible, is both lured and frightened by the dissolution of inherited, fixed identity that the descent into the silence of elemental chaos affords; there are many teasing glimpses of this darkness, often associated with the female characters, many advances and retreats. In effect, the hero, torn by desire, seeking both to reach and to escape the object of desire, proceeds through a series of jolts of escalating intensity until he suffers/achieves a total loss of identity, a blankness which seems always to promise the potential for a new, fresh, "truer" identity. This process of abnegation, often accompanied by metaphoric and even literal deaths, leading to rebirth into a new life is echoed nicely by these lines from the third section of

T.S. Eliot's "East Coker":

> In order to arrive at what you do not know
>   You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
> In order to possess what you do not possess
>   You must go by the way of dispossession.
> In order to arrive at what you are not
>   You must go through the way in which you are not.
>
> (201)

Typically, desire is accepted, finally, not as either a curse upon or the salvation of humankind, but as both. The temptation is always there to remain in the comforting blankness. Liebhaber, for instance, encapsulates the entire scope of his philosophical pondering in one question, "why would any person, having been fortunate enough to fall asleep, wake up?" (What The Crow Said 130). But the Kroetsch character, to continue living in the world, is forced to recreate his self and his view of, or version of, reality. Another aspect of the temptation to remain silent within the comforting blankness, is the desire to be healed, which is central to Alibi: to be healed is to be made complete, to lack nothing and so to desire nothing.

The conflict can be seen in these terms: the temptation to remain in the flux of blankness, the healed wholeness, the comforting end of desire must be resisted, but not, ideally, by reasserting identity with its original fixity. There is a return always to the notion that it is the

fiction which makes us real. All is fiction, finally; we exist as imaginative contructs. But discovering that one is living out someone else's fiction may lead to seeking to tell your own story, however imperfect and incomplete though it may be; not to remove yourself from the web of story entirely but to assert one's own voice against the inherited voice. Typically, too, a person shadows the main character, appearing to be a paternal forebear: Peter Guy and Michael Hornyak, Backstrom and Murdoch, Demeter and Hazard, Sadness and Madham, Anna and William Dawe, Liebhaber and Gutenberg, Dorf and Deemer. Also, there is always a third person, a third presence in or contributor to the narration: Sinnott, Anna Yellowbird, Kettle Fraser, Jill Sunderman, Karen, and Eugene Utter among them. The stages of this pattern are made very clear in Alibi, and are often commented upon by the characters as they move through them.

William William Dorfendorf, whose doubled name suggests the doubling of identity implicit in him, is assigned to find Jack Deemer a spa. Over the course of the narrative, roughly from early April to the middle or latter part of July, Dorf behaves like a typical Kroetsch male. He rids himself of his wife, renounces the influence of various women in his life, falls silent, watches his body disappear into mud, loses his identity as he draws a mud face over his own, has his "final" orgasm, supposedly freeing him from desire, and achieves in this way his wholeness, his cure. He

lives as a hermit at the book's end, seemingly able to live without people, and especially without women. But, again typically, this wholeness cannot be sustained, as is made clear by his desire to offer his manuscript to a publisher, or even his ordering his journal into a manuscript at all. Also, his concern over the fate of two baby ospreys, he says, will determine the site of his continued hermitage.

George Bowering writes positively of Alibi, as do most other critics who get past their disappointment over its failure to be a traditional narrative, in terms of its refusal to allow any sense of completion or resolution. Speaking of the ending, Bowering contrasts Alibi with traditional fiction:

> Dorf's journal seems to be starting something new, and then the book is gone. So is hope of resolution, comfort, redemption, rest. . . . . A novel is much like the history of an illness. Near the beginning we see the breaking of calm, the disruption of order, the discomfort of the disease. . . . At the end the little history is complete, the patient probably discharged. The result is sometimes a complete cure; more often there is a kind of accommodation of some wound . . . and a hint of harmony and art's re-creation of the aging soul. What of a writer who delays closure? Maybe he should see a doctor. Maybe he

_is_ the doctor. (Bowering, _Errata_ 100)

While Bowering is certainly right--there is no cure for the disease, for desire--there is, I think, "hope of resolution, comfort, redemption, rest"--one does not finish _Alibi_ disquieted by the lack of a final answer, but comforted by the recognition of the shared, ongoing search for identity, for connection, for love, and hope, and the implied movement of Dorf from isolation back into interaction with the community. This does not signal a final state of peace or freedom from the pressure of desires, but perhaps a grudging acceptance of its necessity, even its value.

One final aspect of _Alibi_ that makes it a fitting subject for a conclusion is that Kroetsch himself appears to regard it as a summing up of sorts, a recognition that he has cornered himself in a set of conventions that have become recognizable as marking a Kroetsch novel. One of the punning, parodic aspects of _Alibi_ is Kroetsch's use of sometimes direct but often oblique references to his own other works. Some of these may simply be aspects of repetition, Kroetsch using the same form of expression or the same type of character as in previous novels, but others unmistakably refer to earlier texts. For instance, at the Deadman Spring spa, Dorf helps "a woman who could only make love while saying the rosary; she was an attractive older woman from some little town in Alberta, Big Indian; she brought me a pot of honey . . ." ([220])--this is clearly a

reference to _Crow_'s fictional world. Some repetitions of elements from earlier books appear to be taken seriously while others seem to poke fun, to parody the reader's expectation, not only of novelistic conventions, but of the specific conventions of a _Kroetsch_ novel, including the pattern of development mapped above. For instance, Dorf and Karen's driving away from the paradisal hotel into a blinding, elemental blizzard recalls Jeremy Sadness and Bea Sunderman seeking nothing at the end of _Gone Indian_; but here, instead of heeding the voice of the trickster leading them into the chaos, Dorf and Karen turn back rather than risk oblivion. The traditional trickster figure of the coyote appears to be present, but instead of being led by it, Dorf manages to run it over with his car (18). Also, many Kroetsch novels contain the motif of corpses, coffins, and bodies trapped in ice; here, owing to a gravedigger strike, there are an absurd number of corpses in coffins on ice in every available ice rink in Calgary (194).

A partial list of some of the apparent references to other Kroetsch works follows. The phrase, "I had the sense to kick myself free" [67], Fish's insistence that, "I collect _nothing_" (57), Dorf's insistence about Karen that "god knows, I have spent most of my life in winter and don't need any further education in that matter" (65) (recalling Madham's similarly phrased commments about going Indian), Dorf's being buried in snow ([67]), the reference to an

unfinished thesis (184), and to the subject of several of Jeremy Sadness's many theses, "that greatest collector's agent of all, a certain Mr. Columbus" (143) all refer one back to <u>Gone Indian</u>. "We are all exiles..." (151) has its obvious referent. Dorf's sending imaginary telegrams from a train, particularly with the same punning use of STOP (156-8), Karen and Deemer's being both "Lunatic on the subject of history" (8), and Dorf's obssessive transcription of experience, correcting perceived mistakes (recalling Demeter correcting Hazard's life) (230) refer to <u>The Studhorse Man</u>. Karen Strike as a Sinnott figure ("she has a dream of one day making a perfect film, the perfect replica of a dismissed life" (17)), one of Karen's chapter headings, "THE ARCHEOLOGY [sic] OF HOPE: AND THESE THE SHARDS FROM A JOURNAL THAT WILLIAM WILLIAM DORFEN KEPT BUT DID NOT KEEP" ([168]), Dorf's statement, "I had retreated to the water's source, to be alone, to give myself a rest" ([203]), and his destroying his journal irreverently--as toilet paper and kindling (228)--suggest <u>Badlands</u>. The question of whether Julie really killed the spy who fell in the dry hole (suggesting both the death of a man in a dry well and the question of Vera's culpability in her husbands' deaths) (90), Dorf turning a note upside down (like Liebhaber turning letters upside down) (7), Dorf's, like Leeb's, ". . . resolve to tell the whole truth and nothing but" (25), Dorf, like J.G., being born into silence--"Deeply I farted,

steady and strong, shitting a little, possibly, and a smile grew inside the smile I had painted on my new face" (167)--the card game in which Dorf plays to lose so he can remain in the artificial world of the game, Dorf seeing himself, like Leibhaber, as referee--"I had come to the still center. . . I, the thinking men, the man who reasoned his way free of action" ([181])--all suggest Crow. A coming together of fiction and autobiography is intimated also by the inclusion of material directly from Kroetsch's own life, as if it were more or less as solid and relevant as that of one of his characters. Both Dorf and Medeiros (the married name of Kroetsch's sister Sheila) attended the University of Iowa, as did Kroetsch (184); Karen has worked with one Rick McNair, who has prepared a dramatic presentation of The Words of My Roaring (23), and several of the names called out in the darkness of the cave at the end of the novel belong to people closely connected to Kroetsch who otherwise have no place in the text (227). The location of the crucial spa near Salonika (137) recalls both Letters to Salonika and the actual home of Kroetsch's wife and foregrounds the difficulty of distinguishing between the fictional and autobiographical use of it.

One of the key elements in the pattern of character development typical to Kroetsch novels, recognizing that one's life is being led according to preconceived attitudes and inherited belief, is manifested in several ways, the

first being an obsession with locks and doors. Fornicating with Julie in the hotel pool, Dorf is opening the real gateway to the dreamed cave with the locker key on his penis, but the key, rather than opening things up, prevents their full union and leads Dorf to remember enormous, unwieldy keys (14) and doors that lead nowhere (15). With Karen, Dorf discovers that his room key is worn, and that he needs her help to open the door (19), shortly before he renders his own key to the dreamed cave useless by scalding his penis in the tub. Dorf comes to recognize, at least for the moment, that he needs keys only because he has been conditioned to think of life in terms of doors and seeking to pass through them.

> I had found, after all, the perfect lock. . . . the door itself vanished, the room itself only remaining. A world without doors is not a world that any one of us recognizes. We are conditioned by doors; the very notion of entrance and exit give direction to our lives. Time itself was erased; I saw that time is an artificial construct, something we've invented, a kind of airy equivalent of doors. (48)

Dorf continues his struggle against his need to make sense of things, to put things into words, by engaging with Karen in the animalistic freedom of sex, which is for him also freedom from language.

> We did not speak. Yes, uttered not a single lie, the two of us together; arms were enough. The silence confounded, rebuked, and then, finally, acknowledged nothing but our quickened breathing. (49)

But, as is typical, Dorf cannot give himself up to the oblivion he relishes for the moment, "drawing back from the first perception of oblivion" (50). An opposition is established between the demands of "the old hunger to connect..." (23) and the possibility of being healed, of being "free of the everlastingly nagging sexual needs of one's body" (56). Randy, Karen's cameraman, sees "Healing. . . as a kind of absence, a reduction to nothing" (53), and Dorf seeks this cure by absenting himself, by removing himself from the influence of Karen, Julie, and his sister, Sylvia Thorn. The heading of the chapter in which this flight occurs suggests the fruitless nature of the attempt: "A CURE OF SORTS IS EFFECTED,/OR, IT MIGHT BE SUGGESTED,/FEIGNED" ([100]). "I'll be my own man" (102), he declares, and heads to where Julie has beckoned him, drawn not only by lust for her but by the desire to piece together the puzzle she represents. The novel, as its title suggests, is in part a mystery novel--the mystery centering on Julie and her relationship to Deemer and to several deaths--and Dorf's attempt to solve the puzzle of who Julie is leads him to a more central mystery, the riddle of his

own identity.

The desire for a solved puzzle and so a complete picture is connected also with collecting; it does not matter what is being collected, to Deemer or to Dorf, because there is something intrinsically comforting and at least provisionally satisfying in the fact of the collection. Deemer's collecting is an attempt to coerce reality into comprehensible form. Like the conditioning to see life in terms of entrances and exits rather than as process, the collections form a pretence of order and manageability. By abstracting that part of the world that can be ordered, they obscure from view the chaos from which they have been plucked. Dorf notes of his obsessive interest in Estuary's stack of neatly folded panties that "maybe it was that, the collection itself, that kept me from seeing anything else" (33). "What else is there but the dream? I connected the panties with Estuary and Estuary with the woman I was looking for and the woman I was looking for with a dream of being healed" (35). The collections and the panties are both types of alibi, the substitution of a believable story for the truth, for the thing itself. Later, in bed with Julie and Medeiros, both Dorf and Julie react not to the object of desire but to its alibi, the panties, the separation which creates desire. Julie says later, "We all live by our alibis, don't we Dorf? . . . We were somewhere else when it happened. Or should have been.

Or shouldn't have been" (125), and Dorf's alibi, addressed to Medeiros, is that the collecting, the desire, is Deemer's, not his: " I am only the collector's agent. I only act out the collector's desire. The desire is his" (133). It is this fiction that allows Dorf to continue, to believe himself free of the desire to order, to believe that he acts on someone else's whims, not his own needs. As Julie notes, "You hate the desire that makes you love. . . .the cure is always, finally, in the acceptance... of desire ..." (123-5). The process of keeping the journal and then editing the entries into narrative form is also the process of Dorf's becoming aware of his ordering of the chaos, of collecting those facts which fit into a whole, complete picture of a self.

He sees Deemer, begrudgingly, as "an artist in his own right, a kind of looney [sic] sculptor intent on tacking together. . . all the high-class garbage of the riddling earth" (20), but is slower to appreciate that he is himself dealing also with "garbage" and is also tacking it together. He characterizes writing in terms of

> The indefinite dribble of excrement that is life. Why go on? For the mixed pleasure of an orgasm? For the brief decency of a mind-scorching drunk? For the blustering of a few words that have chanced to become a business deal, a legal document, a journal entry, a telephone call, a

riddle, a library, an obituary? (29)

In addition to breaking his leg in an avalanche apparently engineered by Julie, Dorf develops a toothache, which leads to the story of a tooth-collector, who is himself missing a nose--collectors collect to heal, to fill gaps, to plug holes; Deemer to stave off mortality. The tooth's combination of crown and root suggests a relationship between surface and source that makes Dorf suspicious that he is a shadow of Deemer's in a way that suggests narrative connections. "I am the comic imitator of what he proposes in earnest" (108) could be Kroetsch speaking of Dorf, instead of Dorf about Deemer; Kroetsch as author is the comic imitator of those who would collect fragments and assemble them into a whole, and the relationship between the readers and the author can be likened to that of the collector and the collector's agent. The reader of traditional fiction, like Deemer, demands of the author, the reader's agent, that he assemble the disorder of the universe into a comprehensible form.

Dorf's own authorship proves problematic. He can imagine how to construct the story if he treats it as fiction (16), but finds it difficult to order his own story when abiding by his stated aim to tell the whole truth. Talking to Karen, Dorf "realized I would have to tell a lie. I had to make up part of the story" (25), and that "I was telling myself the story. I had to hear it before I could

understand, and I had to understand before I could proceed" (26). In one of the many retrospective views offered in the midst of the text, Dorf looks back on his raw entries: "Looking back at my journal now, I looking at what I wrote then, trying to make sense of it all..." (26). Kroetsch says, "The notion of retrospective action as an organizing principle distresses me" (Labyrinths 209), and that is the principle employed by Karen, Deemer, Dorf, and even the reader in making sense out of the welter of surface detail, order out of chaos. Dorf sees Deemer's wanting a spa as signifying that "now, against all the randomness, he wants to collect, possess, some special and immovable part of the earth itself. Some place of entrance and exit, right there, wherever that is, where the mystery might or might not be" (58-9). Dorf does begin to understand the process, but remains alternately comforted and disturbed by it and its results. "Life is unendurable. The trouble is, I enjoy it. Yesterday made sense, I can see it all now. But today doesn't. Maybe that's what journals are about. Or Karen Strike's Documentary" (39). Karen puts Dorf's journal-keeping in terms of her movie-making, suggesting that the truth about Dorf does not reside in any single image but in a series of them: "You invent yourself, each time you sit down to make an entry. . . . That's the truth.... You do those real 'takes' on this Dorf guy you're trying to put together" (61-2). The difficulty lies in making sense of

Chapter VII:

What The Crow Said: Letting Go!

What the Crow Said marks the height of Kroetsch's interest in creating a text that challenges the reader to virtually collaborate with the author to make an even provisionally comprehensible novel out of it. As such, it also discomfits those readers who are accustomed to and comfortable with the traditional realist novel.

> When What The Crow Said first came out, two very good readers told me, the book's way too short. They wanted the elaboration visible in front of their eyes. . . . why tell it all? What are the pleasures in reading a long novel that just lays everything out? (Labyrinths 162)

What The Crow Said is also, somewhat surprisingly, the Kroetsch novel that has prompted the most extreme critical opposition. Many long-time admirers of Kroetsch's work were wildly dissatisfied by the novel, even though, or perhaps because, it actually does what the previous novels only threaten to do. It is the first novel that is arguably not a novel, which completely subverts itself, allowing pure story to take over, leaving paraphrasable meaning and set patterns of order behind. Peter Thomas, for instance, contends in his book on Kroetsch that the story is not comic because it is often grotesque, violent, and brutal. He sees

the moment as it happens, and to Dorf the solution is retrospective ordering: "We are so seldom perceivers of the apple falling, rather of the apple that has fallen, did fall. I told myself that. Remember, I said. Remember everything. And I wrote down everything I could remember" (79). His memory, though, and therefore his sense of himself, is challenged by his sister's jarring reminders of childhood incidents Dorf has suppressed.

The final line of the section--"'Remember?' I said. To my big sister" (78)--foregrounds a way in which Alibi differs from other recent Kroetsch novels, although it is much like his recent poetry in this regard. Unlike the central characters of most of the novels--all of them, to stretch the point slightly--Dorf has a family and a past, childhood memories and associations. He has a mother, sisters, daughters, an ex-wife, like Kroetsch (Dorf's father dying in his childhood is the mirror image of Kroetsch's mother's death when he was young). Previous characters seem to exist in almost perfect isolation, both from family and any other ties of the past--Liebhaber is the perfect example of this--and even those characters who have relatives, like Peter Guy, have no communication or connection with them. For the reader, then, as well as for Dorf, it is somewhat jarring to meet Sylvia on the plane.

Dorf says, "Sylvia regarded herself as the guardian of truth and language, as if there was, somehow, a connection

between the two" (86). In spite of his own attempt to present his story with clarity and integrity, he suggests that, for the moment at least, he believes that truth resides not in observable facts but in the perception of them: "In my slight exaggerations . . . in my careful and deliberate tilting of the mirror, you might, if you chose to look, recognize truths that have forever been denied you" (86). Of course, as the narrative proceeds, he recants and seems to share Sylvia's precision and concern for veracity. One chapter begins with the somewhat desperate proviso, "I must let this entry stand as I originally wrote it, in the interest of making clear my own integrity; I have emended and summarized elsewhere only to establish a narrative account whose clarity matches my insight" (101). Dorf grows increasingly confused about who is writing the story and about the solidity of its subject. The transformation from journal entries to a linear narrative occasions a shift in narrative stance, highlighting this confusion: "I cross out _I Am_ and write in _He is_...He...I... What does it matter?" (51). Karen, who claims to have actually spoken to the reclusive Deemer, reports Deemer's praise to Dorf: "He says you've never failed him. You're remarkable. You work in circles, in tangents, in loops, in triangles. But you always get to the center. " (97). Dorf's ability to work in circles and tangents is intact, but what is becoming obvious is that there is no center here; as Kroetsch puts it, the

self is not a nut to crack, it is <u>all</u> circles and tangents.

Another related aspect of identity which Dorf enters into the flux is his gender. Virtually from the beginning of the book, while his penis is scalded and he uses his story to arouse Karen instead, Dorf wonders, "What does it feel like to have a cunt?" (25). His interest in being penetrated instead of penetrating is mocked when he is in the cocoon of snow caused by the avalanche, blissfully waiting for death like Jeremy Sadness in similar circumstances; "I was, however, awakened by the pressure of the end of a ski pole being rammed up my ass" (70). Later, in the mud with the androgynous Smelly Woman, Dorf is entranced as she leads the group of men drawing faces in mud over their faces, ending with a pattern on top of her head: "He had pictured an opening on his head. A cunt. As if he was to be born out of his own head. As if he figured a way to escape the world. Or enter it. The thickened lines that were the lips, that opened and closed" (166). That vision leads him into the mud, with his penis "shriveled and shrunk" (166). The transformation of gender continues with Dorf then joining the group of women for their time in the healing mud. There, passed from hand to hand, he has his "final" orgasm. And like the earlier sex with Karen, it is a release from language: "I cried out, no words, no names, only a pure cry of total joy and total pain" (180). He feels blissfully released from male desire, from maleness

itself, which is clearly connected with his writing. He discovers that just as he finds he is unable to leave, he is also unable to write in his journal (187). He feels a preternatural bond with the others, aided by having to communicate without language since they speak only Greek, but when he refuses to wash the mud off his body after leaving the pit, it becomes clear that, rather than becoming a part of a community, he is isolating himself even more than previously. He is linked to nature by the mud covering him, hardening on him, and he feels first like an earth and seasons unto himself and then like a statue of himself: "I was my own man. . . . I might become my own four seasons, my plowed and seeded spring, my scarecrow fall. My own green flame in the summer heat. My own stiff winter" (174-5). While in this state, he believes "Everything can be fixed up" (182), but reality, in the form of the Greek police investigating Julie's death in Dorf's rented car, intrudes.

Reading the newspaper account of Julie's death upon his return home, Dorf becomes aware of the scale on which the rendering of life into a coherent form is practiced as well as the role he plays in it:

> The story had no doubt been dictated by Jack Deemer himself. I was beginning to understand the plot that connives the world into visible being; the necessary plot that makes us seek each other, if only to do violence to the meeting. . . . he

> thinks it's his money and his silent manipulation that make the collection. Too bad for him is all I can say; it's my scrounging and snooping and my talking, talking, talking that make his famous collection. . . . The collection itself only confirms the discontinuity of this scattered world; it's my talk that puts it together. I rave the world into coherence for Deemer. . . . (195)

It is appropriate to read this passage in the terms suggested above of Deemer as the reader and Dorf as the traditional author, talking the world into coherence, commissioned, in effect, by his readership.

Dorf, entering into a cocoon-like anonymity at Deadman Springs (and the name suggests the symbolic death that typically precedes rebirth in Kroetsch works), again has his reverie disturbed, this time finding out something like what it is like "to have a cunt." In the darkness of the cave, Dorf is raped, although he cannot say/write the word: "I had been seized, caught from behind, surprised, ambushed, captured, taken" (227). Dorf, on the verge of lapsing into unconsciousness as the arms that held him push him away, connects his "ambush" with Julie's death:

> And then I was at her falling; she had come to the cliff's edge. I was held tight, there in the cave . . . . I assumed it was a gesture of love and that was why I did not resist. Julie, there on

> the cliff's edge, held by her lover. Or held by love. (228)

In seclusion at Billy's cabin, Dorf's need to cocoon himself is stronger than ever, and the dominant aspect of this attempt to insulate himself from the world and the old hunger to connect is, paradoxically, the editing of his journal into a clear, linear narrative. He has trouble with the task, at times, not being able to provide motivation for events or even a full report of them, and he finds it necessary to destroy the pages of the journal as he transcribes them but also to fill new pages at the back of the journal. It is only the existence of the novel, split into the edited manuscript and the ostensibly unedited final section, "Dorfendorf's Journal" that indicates he finished the task. That Dorf is not healed of the hunger to connect is suggested by his urge to have his text read, even to the point of allowing Karen to add headings (earlier, reacting to his outrage over her reading his journal, she insisted he wanted her to (61)): "I'm tempted to show the manuscript to a publisher. _Dorfendorf's_ _Journal_. A manual of health. . . . Let Karen put in some headings, some chapter titles to trap the unwary eye and lure the customer; she with her gift for compromise" (231). In his isolation he becomes obsessive about making the story complete, filling in details and altering the events--"I am trying to make sense of my journal, since I was sometimes remiss, sometimes left

little gaps here and there. I make a correction, where necessary" (230)--and he refers to the actual journal entries as "only the negatives which I now develop" (232). The degree to which these "negatives," and the word choice again suggests that Dorf is not as different from Karen as he would like to think, are transformed in the processing can be gauged in the section in which both the journal entry and its full manifestation are presented ([100]-103), in which the journal entry occupies about one-tenth of the space.

"What I find in those journal entries now, confronting them, is the recurring pain that all lovers must feel. I was happy; I was happy indeed; and yet the nature of love is such that to be happy is, paradoxically, to know suffering" ([134]). Removing himself from the source of that pain, then, Dorf decides that all naming, all attempts to establish separate identity, the separation thereby creating desire, is to be avoided: "It is better to have no name, perhaps. To give no names to the passing days. And to let the birds in their departing, the fish, in their descent and their long climb, count the years" (233). In one sense he has ceased to give names to the passing days in that the days are identified now not by one of Karen's(?) headings but simply by the date. By the very task of editing his journal, of adding to it, he belies this impulse, though, as he does in the significance he places on

the two baby ospreys he watches. Their fate, whether they fly or fall to their deaths (recalling the many instances of flying and falling in other Kroetsch texts) will determine if Dorf will remain where he is or go to "Mount Athos, where women are not allowed. . . . It depends upon my oracular birds" (234). Regardless of which omen is received, Dorf is resolved to escape women and so desire. He is forced to assert his identity, at once his kinship with and separation from the rest of humanity, though, by the appearence of Medeiros: "I knew I must, for all my instinct to remain anonymous, announce my boundaries. . . . No man can live in a paradise. Nor woman either. The world will not allow it" (236). Disposing of Medeiros, accidentally, he believes, with a gun-shot, Dorf watches as the ospreys, startled by the noise, tumble out of the nest. Like Julie, Dorf, and the rest of humankind, they did not choose to fly and so risk falling, but were pushed. Falling toward death in the water, like Medeiros, at the last instant the ospreys "realized they might fly....awkwardly, they rose; they rose and faltered and rose; they found and lifted, above them, the blue sky; they tore, in their innocent talons, the sadness from my heart" (239). The implication seems to be that Dorf, rather than absenting himself from the field of action can, as he has already begun to do, assert his identity once more, now that it has been all but obliterated. In the cave previously he had heard a voice

that he knew that was not his, but he could not be sure it was not him calling (227); even his voice, the emblem of his identity, is estranged from him. Dorf learns from his oracular birds that having been pushed, having been ambushed, violated, harmed, and held by love and desire, one may still find the will to fly, to rise and falter. Another level of human connection is suggested by the two young birds as well, that of Dorf's daughters, Jinn and Jan, the responsibility for whose well-being is at least partly his. They represent the only human connection he is unwilling or unable to renounce, and the Greek police were able to force him out of his earlier isolation because of their presence: "I suspect I was traced through my daughters. The human emotions, again, were my weakness; love lays a trap" ([193]). Desire cannot be eradicated simply by isolation, the will not to desire, or the obliteration of identity. Even the lack of an object of desire cannot impede it: "Sometimes we have a need to speak the words, I love you. Sometimes, lying in bed, I say them aloud. And I wonder to whom I speak" ([110]).

The resolution, if it can rightly be termed that, involves an acceptance of the ongoing process of struggle against the rise and fall of existence, acceptance of its often chaotic, absurd turns rather than trying to contain that chaos. The need to order reality, to pattern existence in some provisionally comprehensible way is still present;

it is the means by which we communicate and so assuage the hunger to connect. The crucial difference between that and what Deemer does, creating an ordered cosmos of his own to assert against the randomness of the universe, is suggested by the crucial distinction Dorf makes in an argument about Karen's documentary technique: "Selection is distortion, and distortion breaks the truth into visibility. The historian and I disputed, agreed, talked about the design that is not created but, rather, creates us" (210). As in the pattern of development suggested above, Dorf moves from an ignorance that the design is creating him, that he inhabits an inherited story, through a progressively keener awareness of the imposition on his life of someone else's fiction, to a renunciation of all story. But he is forced finally to accept that story is necessary, that the fiction truly makes us real if the story told is a new one, told in one's own voice. Typically, again, when a Kroetsch character breaks through the web of deceit, duplicity, and fiction, he does not arrive at the "truth"; rather he gains an awareness of the process of fiction-making by which man renders life liveable.

*

To reiterate, then, the concentration in <u>Alibi</u> on character and the creation of a self rather than the creation of story helps to delineate clearly the pattern

established in the previous novels. And _Alibi_ also seems to represent a new direction, although perhaps not so profoundly different a direction as Kroetsch indicates in the passage cited above. The concern with the divided self has been present from the very beginning of Kroetsch's fiction; even his earliest published story, "That Yellow Prairie Sky," deals with two brothers who have contrasting personalities and aims, locked to each other by familial ties and the bonds of place. All of the many and varied sets of dichotomous pairs that trouble both Kroetsch and his characters ceaselessly reflect this central split of identity. _Coulee Hill_ and _But We Are Exiles_ deal with the theme in an uncertain, often heavy-handed way, without the comic touch and playful ease of narration of later works. _The Words of My Roaring_ first establishes the model of what would become the recognizable type of the Kroetsch male: robust, lustful, given to drink and women, but contemplative as well, registering the ironies and injustices of existence; a walking amalgam of contradictions and uncertainties, but often joyous in the midst of them, his soul soaring despite the weight of his fleshly needs. The importance of voice, both in terms of speaking and writing is foregrounded in _The Words of My Roaring_, making clear even at this stage that identity and the fictionalizing process are integrally linked. _The Studhorse Man_ and _Gone Indian_ radicalize Kroetsch's fiction, bringing the split in

each of the characters into the narration itself, calling into question the firmness and surety of the identity not only of the characters but of the narrators. Badlands represents a more daring move away from linear narrative, authorial authority, narrative clarity, and plausibility of event. Most significantly, perhaps, it presents a narrative which, despite Robert Lecker's insistence, does not have a sure source; in previous novels, we knew who the narrator was, even if he or she were wholly unreliable, but the mediated sections of Badlands seem to speak out of a voice of their own. Badlands is also, as Peter Thomas believes, a deeply affecting novel, indicating perhaps that Kroetsch is now entirely comfortable with this radical new form and is able or willing to show more of himself in it.

And in What The Crow Said, the radicalization is complete, or at least reaches one point of exhaustion. The book (Kroetsch calls it a story rather than a novel) is a free-flowing but not wholly untethered series of spatially and temporally linked anecdotes rather than a linear narrative of causally linked occurrences. The narrative voice cannot be identified except perhaps as the voice of the community itself, or the voice of its accumulated stories; its narration is third person, but neither omniscient nor distant from the story. Like the trickster Coyote, who is duped as often as he dupes, the narrator is often as much in the dark as the reader as to the

significance of events detailed. The emphasis on resisting metaphorical readings and reducing story to a single, comprehensible meaning that was first significantly manifested in The Studhorse Man and becomes progressively more central and radical in the novels that follow reaches, I think, a peak in Crow. The splits and dualities present in each work are given an open field for a much freer dance between the elements of the dichotomized pairs, an ever, and wildly, shifting pattern of potential and teasing meaning, an almost limitless number of metaphorical patterns that are mocked and disassembled almost as soon as they are set in place.

In a parallel but opposite charting of Kroetsch's novelistic output, Robert Lecker sees a falling off:

> Badlands explores the radical possibility of finding freedom by denying narrative. Kroetsch seems unwilling to bear the very tensions that give his work its power: he foists the story on Anna Dawe . . . . In What The Crow Said he abandons the tension further: the central narrator is gone, the text is disembodied, fabulation takes precedence over observation, innovation seems to win. But in fact this is Kroetsch's weakest novel. It is weak because he kicks free too much, too often. This may be why he returned to the predominantly binary form in Alibi . . . .

(Kroetsch 150)

Peter Thomas, while he views Badlands as Kroetsch's most human work, also sees Crow as a low point:

> Liebhaber's humiliation and the abundance of shit in the novel are reductive in a way that is new for Kroetsch's fiction; compounded of terror and contempt for humanity they exceed any misgivings about the validity of tragedy. . . . to bring the quest for love down to a pitiful crawl back to the womb and a matter of shit and silence makes enormous demands upon the aesthetic virtues of the novel. (Kroetsch 115)

Thomas does note, though, that Crow is "perhaps at the end of one line of his development" (124).

Kroetsch does not, in my view, turn to the new form of Alibi because Crow has failed, but because it has succeeded. If anything, it succeeded too well, displaying to Kroetsch, as Lecker and Thomas might agree, that he had come to the end in that line of development and the option was either to repeat or move on to something new. And Alibi is not a retreat to a more orderly examination of the same set of binary oppositions that plague Kroetsch's characters, but a new focus for them, a direct examination of the problem of how one creates a self, the fiction that creates one. This was previously an important theme, but not the central one. And, as I suggested in the previous chapter, it seems odd

that critics who admire Kroetsch for his daring, for his ability to explore the borderland between opposing concepts, to keep shifting and calling into question the reader's and his own expectations of what a novel should and could be, would now respond to this daring, borderland, shifting, questioning novel with what seems a close-minded denial of its virtues, aesthetic or otherwise. Both Thomas and Lecker, among others, seem uncomfortable with the book's refusal to reinforce a single reading, to produce a clear narrative thread and an easily reducible pattern of binary oppositions. Lecker's comment that Kroetsch "kicks free too much, too often" would perhaps be applicable if the book resisted reading entirely, refused to let the reader participate in the games the text is playing, but the game, though difficult and demanding, is also played by rules which are fair and understandable, especially to readers of other Kroetsch novels. Kroetsch complains of some readers of Crow who "were so compelled to impose on it a total explanation instead of allowing the . . . game to happen" (Labyrinths 15), and while Lecker and Thomas do not so much impose a total explanation, they do seem to wish one would announce itself. And as Kroetsch goes on to point out, the reader engaged in the text in Crow is not cut loose or disconnected by a lack of immediate coherence and comprehensibility, but is actually placed in a distinctly life-like situation; the reader is playing a game to which

he does not know all the rules, and in which the rules can be changed without notice. So, although it makes some of its readers uncomfortable, or perhaps _because_ it does, _What The Crow Said_ is the work which best typifies and exemplifies Kroetsch's work as a novelist, at least in the strain he has followed to that point.

Kroetsch's poetry, the interests in which seem always to predate the appearance of the same interests in the novels by some years, also go through the process of radicalization, of split narration, and apparent incoherency, with poems like _Delphi_: _Commentary_ working the reader at least as hard as _Crow_ does. The novel and the poem engage the reader in different games, since the conventions of form differ, but they are played on a similar level of self-consciousness and intensity. And poems like _Delphi_ and "The Frankfurt _Hauptbahnhof_" also focus on the question and creation of identity, especially that of the poet, the writer. And, again, like the fiction but to a much greater extent, the poetry grows increasingly autobiographical.

Robert Kroetsch is one of the foremost exponents of postmodernist writing in Canada. In challenging those critics who insist he retain and be bound by conventions, even those he sets up in his own works, he remains aggressively postmodernist. Jean-Franccis Lyotard says of the works of a postmodern writer that they "are not in

principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artists and the writer, then, are working without rules to formulate the rules of what <u>will have been done</u>" (81). As Kroetsch discovers, even once the rules of "what will have been done" have been elucidated, they must be discarded to allow for a new game with fresh rules, appropriate to the demands of the text. Kroetsch is always striving, in increasingly radical ways, to create an open field for his work, a place in which his critical writing, his novels, and his poetry are not easily separated into different categories but may be accepted, despite differences of form, which are being obliterated more and more anyway, as a body of work, each element of which interpenetrates every other one.

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