

Robert Kroetsch's Verbal Parody of *The Studhorse Man* in *Seed Catalogue*

NATHAN DUECK

ROBERT KROETSCH WRITES to evoke speech. Although he does not transcribe voices per se, the rhetoric of his prose, the style of his poetry, and the tone of his criticism leave the impression of being verbal. I use *verbal* with some hesitation: the term applies here to written language that sounds, figuratively, like spoken language. A chorus of critics has examined the way voices operate in Kroetsch's earliest novels. Rosemary Sullivan explores the "old dualities" of speech and writing in *The Words of My Roaring*, Brian L. Ross declares that writing is an allegory for speech in *The Studhorse Man*, and John Clement Ball compares the monologism of *The Words of My Roaring* with the dialogism of *The Studhorse Man* and *Gone Indian*. While those critics established the basis for reading verbal expression in the novels Kroetsch published as the "Notikeewin trilogy," others have examined the function of speech in the long poems Kroetsch published as "the continuing poem."¹ Susan Wood considers how voices in "The Stone Hammer Poem" speak the "colloquial language" of the prairies, Aritha van Herk describes the polyphony of voices "enumerated" in *The Ledger*, and E.D. Blodgett evaluates how voices in *Seed Catalogue* contrast "rooted" with "grafted" intertexts. The common refrain throughout these arguments is that Kroetsch incorporates into writing the ploys he learned from oral storytellers.

Given that attention to voices in Kroetsch's writing, it is worth arguing whether or not Kroetsch writes to invoke speech from readers. A few critics have examined the affective potential of voices in his work. Peter Thomas shows how Kroetsch manipulates "the oral tradition" into "acts" of narrative within novels that "depend heavily upon voice and performance and even audience participation" (13), and Robert Lecker explains "an aesthetic centre in Kroetsch's work" in terms of a "border" that readers must cross to become "writers" (148). In an essay entitled "Some. (Canadian.) Postmodern. Texts.," Frank Davey positions Kroetsch's writing next to "diverse Canadian poetics" that "argued

a different sense of the spoken word not as encoding any transcendent and prior intention but as constituting an intrinsically significant act of speech" (109). "Meaning was to be created in the act of speaking," according to a movement "found in the sixties" which extended through "postmodern" literature from the seventies (109). Following Davey, I argue that Kroetsch dramatizes an interpretive process, or, more appropriately, thematizes a literary performance, that reverses or perhaps inverts the relationship between speech and writing. The principal concern of my argument is the way readers engage the voices in Kroetsch's writing.

This essay contends that readers generate meaning, or defer meaning altogether, in concert with Demeter Proudfoot, the first-person narrator of *The Studhorse Man*, along with an anonymous "poet," the speaker in *Seed Catalogue*. Central to my reading of *The Studhorse Man* is the assumption that Demeter borrows the techniques of oral storytellers. My reading of *Seed Catalogue* pursues the possibility that its unnamed speaker borrows the type of fragments, repetitions, and set phrases that Demeter uses in *The Studhorse Man*. The resulting metafiction — that is, writing that simultaneously reads itself — simulates the experience of reading aloud — that is, speaking that simultaneously listens to itself. "This ironic playing with multiple conventions, this extended repetition with critical distance" is how Linda Hutcheon determines "modern parody" (*Theory* 7). Her theory of parody set the terms for appreciating how Kroetsch's writing — "through rhetoric or through the power of language and of the vision it can create" (Hutcheon, *Canadian* 73) — doubles as *énonciation*.² According to Hutcheon, the irony operating within self-reflexive discourse is "structured as a miniature (semantic) version of parody's (textual) doubling" (*Irony's Edge* 4). Whereas *The Studhorse Man* parodies the oral tradition by collecting intertexts, challenging narrative conventions, and commenting on the act of storytelling, *Seed Catalogue* parodies the verbal expression within that novel. Moreover, the long poem performs its own interpretation through a "poet" speaker who appears to anticipate the responses of readers. Certainly, that performance is imaginary, a vicarious indulgence, but such a speech act incites the aesthetic engagement I call "verbal parody."

In "On Being an Alberta Writer: Or, I Wanted to Tell Our Story," Kroetsch recounts how he developed an ear for storytelling during his rural Alberta childhood. He suggests that writing is an occasion to "talk

ourselves into existence” (6). Reading, in turn, becomes the opportunity to enact that sort of talking: “The oral tradition, become a literary tradition, points us back to our own landscape, our recent ancestors, and the characteristic expressions and modes of our own speech” (7). Kroetsch cannot present the seed catalogue in situ, because archivists disturbed the site years ago, so he tries to represent its ephemeral textuality. In *Labyrinths of Voice*, a conversation with Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, Kroetsch elaborates on the “long oral work” in response to this question: “How can written literature supply the non-verbal context in which oral literature achieves its success, has its impact? The body gesture, the grimace of the face, the twists of nose and ear?” (165). Kroetsch claims that pneumonic “devices like rhyme and stanza and formulaic expressions” in poetry emulate the oral tradition and “enable a listener to continue” (165). With those words, he indicates that “oral literature” derives from an act of speaking, so readers become, metaphorically, self-conscious listeners. Kroetsch implies that his writing articulates a diverse range of registers to remind us how verbal expression is a mediated inscription.

A prolific critic and occasional polemicist, Kroetsch provides the lexis for understanding verbal parody. Of course, *verbal* is an adjective that cannot stand on its own. Even its synonyms *vocal* or *oral* only serve to qualify modes of expression *per os* — through the mouth. Because those terms describe an encounter between speaker and audience that cannot be inscribed entirely, their function within literature is figural. Such figures of speech potentially affect readers who recognize they are written and yet imagine they were spoken. In addition, I posit that figurative language might influence us to utter the words we normally read to ourselves. In effect, those of us who are willing to read aloud engage Kroetsch’s writing on its own terms. It follows that readers play the role of enunciating subjects while listening to our utterances. We “read by ear.” In other words, readers grant meaning to verbal expression on the page by reciting it, or by imagining such an interpretation. Recitation, therefore, becomes an ideological act that aligns the subject, speech, with its object, writing, under performative conditions. Such a reading practice materializes the compositional method in *Seed Catalogue*. It temporarily reconciles the contradictory aims of a long poem that provokes readers to speak.

Parody in *The Studhorse Man*

The Studhorse Man tells the story of Hazard Lepage from the perspective of a narrator given to big talking. Take his description of a wedding reception, for example. While the guests bow their heads in prayer, Demeter Proudfoot hears Hazard speak for the first time. “Little did I realize,” he recalls, “staring greedily as I did at the bearded figure with the curly black hair and thick shoulders and great hatchet nose (not unlike my own), that I was looking at the subject of many years’ study” (116). Even as Demeter gestures toward Hazard, his preoccupation with narrative gets in the way. In other words, the narrator takes stock of the studhorse man to tell the tale wherein he, Demeter, a man wrongly named after a Greek goddess, rides atop a “studhorse” of his own literary creation. He figures that writing about Hazard will provide an excuse to talk about his own quest for recognition. If, as John Clement Ball argues, Demeter longs to replace Hazard as the subject of his writing, *The Studhorse Man* exemplifies a reversal that Bakhtin associates with carnivalesque discourse. Ball argues that Demeter’s use of dialogism — for example, telling “the story of another man’s life” while “speaking himself into existence as ‘D. Proudfoot, Studhorse Man’” (13) — reveals how Demeter longs to supplant Hazard. Moreover, Ball compares the novel’s form of telling (that is, “the duality of book”) with what it tells (that is, “the duality of story”) (3). Because Demeter longs to capture Hazard’s speaking voice, self-reflexive irony enters at the level of narrative. Ball notes that appropriation does not end with the studhorse man’s story, because Demeter himself approaches the role of hero. Although Ball addresses the dialogic interplay within *The Studhorse Man*, he does not account for its rhetorical strategy, which cites the oral tradition of storytelling. With a knowing tone, Demeter writes to evoke speech.

The Studhorse Man asks readers to produce meaning from fragments of narrative. Demeter reproduces his notecards with short chapters “so as to suggest an order that was not necessarily present in Hazard’s rambling conversation” (44). Demeter does not arrange these fragments because he believes “the three-by-fives speak for themselves.” He ruminates to make sense of that idiosyncratic approach to storytelling:

I too get dressed up — by taking off my clothes. Sometimes of a morning I fold a three-by-five card into a little triangular hat and set it square on my perky fellow’s noggin and pirates we sail here

together in my bathtub, our cargo the leather-bound books and the yellowing scribblers, the crumbling newspaper clippings and the envelopes with their canceled stamps and the packs of notecards that make up the booty of our daring. (43)

Disorder develops into a trope throughout the novel. The haphazard arrangement of notecards reveals the narrator's mental state. "Yes, dear reader," he confesses, "I am by profession quite out of my mind" (69). That "posture of madness" only compounds a sense of self-consciousness about writing. Demeter admits he is unable to construct a plausible story, or even a stable telling, of Hazard's quest to find a suitable mare for his studhorse. The first chapter of *The Studhorse Man* ends with a quotation from Hazard that trails off: "'Whoever thought,' he went on, fumbling a button into its hole, 'that screwing would go out of style? But it did, it is . . .'" (9; original ellipsis). With those words, Hazard names a crucial tension in Demeter's fragmented narrative: while Hazard fears that his way of life has ended, Demeter worries that readers will not accept the way he tells a tale.

While lying in a bathtub, Demeter broods over notecards, groping for words because they are all he has to capture Hazard's utterances. He emphasizes the importance of repetition so that he may come to terms with the studhorse man. For example, he interrupts a chapter about the importance of naming to muse: "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" (148). In a word, "repetition" provides Demeter an occasion to overcome his frustration with writing:

It is only by a mastery of the process of *repetition* (you will note the repeated 'e,' and 't' and the 'i,' and the 'ti' standing out boldly in the middle) 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 The path that would appear to lead to madness is surely the highroad to art. (148)

While Demeter parses that word, the interruption and subsequent repetition demonstrates its effect by marking a limitation of transcription. The chapter, 24, ends with Demeter unsure whether he heard Hazard whinny while mating with a young woman. Because Demeter cannot transcribe that peculiar utterance, he resorts to writing about his unease.

“Perhaps I need elaborate,” Demeter narrates: “Hazard feared especially death at sea. A woman had prophesied that fate for him; an old woman on the battlefields of France during the Great War” (10). The French woman foresaw “*‘La mer sera votre meutrière.’* The sea shall be your murderess” (10). That word-for-wordplay occurs throughout *The Studhorse Man*. It hearkens back to the first line of the novel: “Hazard had to get hold of a mare” (5). Later, when he is “struck in the face by the hoof of a drowned pig,” Hazard recalls that warning about *la mer* (110). Here, Demeter conflates two kinds of “mares,” the sea and a horse, with a bilingual pun. The story ends with Hazard’s steed Poseidon, aroused by five fine mares, trampling his master. And, in that moment, Demeter exchanges subject positions with the studhorse man. Hazard becomes a breed of storyteller when he releases an “exquisitely piercing mortal cry, the cry half horse, half man, the horse-man cry of pain or delight or eternal celebration at what is and what must be” (198). As Poseidon circles “the figure of a man” on the floor, Demeter writes a “cry” in sympathy (199). Demeter yearns to become the hero in Hazard’s stead. Only, as he is pained to admit, Hazard’s utterance exceeds his ability with writing.

That indescribable sound is both the cause of Demeter’s worry and the reason he continues to write. He turns on his readers to instruct us in narrative conventions with this apostrophe:

You who stare blankly in your musty basement flats, in your rented upstairs apartments, in your so-called “living” rooms full of TV and offspring . . . all of you who *think* you do not live in a madhouse — do not smirk at Hazard’s inability to recognize and to do what was best. (165; emphasis added)

Demeter lashes out with set phrases from Victorian novels — for example, “dear reader” (69, 93, 115, 129, 155) — in fear that we will not grant him the respect due a proper narrator. With those words, he worries that his tale will not measure up to its hero. Note how the above statement turns on the verb *think*. Demeter suspects we will accept his judgment by allowing him to think for us. If so, as we are reading about Demeter, he is “reading” us through a literary convention. As long as Demeter tells us about what he is writing while he is writing it, he believes that he can talk himself into existence. He would also have readers accept his own hesitant interpretation of himself. That way, the

conditions of Demeter's narrative echo Derrida's suspicion of presence in speech and absence in writing. Susan Rudy Dorscht draws on deconstructive theory to argue, "We are each, like Demeter the biographer, readers and writers" (69). She observes how the narrator "worries over the end of dissemination, the imposition of order in a chaotic world, the desire for simplicity in the face of complexity — the issue that speech and writing see 'I' to 'I' on" (69). Demeter's self-consciousness leads to questions about whether his narrative serves as a coherent representation of Hazard's utterances. Parody in *The Studhorse Man* plays both sides of the speech and writing duality so readers will "listen."

Listen

In *Labyrinths of Voice*, Kroetsch expands on the theoretical position in his early novels, the "Notikeewin trilogy." "I started off working at the parody level," he acknowledges, "which is where you want to tell a story but you can't believe that there is only one assertable meaning in that story" (89). The divergence between a story and the meanings it conveys implies that readers are "left taking parody very seriously." Speaking with Neuman and Wilson, Kroetsch indicates how parody operates as repetition in *The Words of My Roaring*: "The great example in our culture is the rodeo clown who often does a parody of what the cowboy is doing out there, the clown risking life and limb to parody the cowboy, who is risking life and limb" (Interview 36). The narrator of that novel, a politician named Johnnie Backstrom, speaks to himself and immediately repeats what he says in order to prevent embarrassment. For example, after a rodeo clown is tragically gored, Backstrom turns to the other spectators and says, "We are afflicted" (92). Encouraged by the crowd's response, he repeats himself:

Afflicted and plagued, my friends. But *remember*. Let me repeat: *remember*. If you *feel* — if you *feel* in your heart and bowels that the heat can no longer be endured . . . maybe then you should vote, my dear friends — you should vote for the clown. (92; emphasis added)

Backstrom repeats "remember" to move his "friends" to "feel." Speaking to Neuman and Wilson, Kroetsch insists the "sense of complicity in carnival," which that rodeo clown and the cowboy demonstrate, is evidence of parody (Interview 36). Backstrom attempts to rectify his involvement with his audience the way Kroetsch tries to resist entanglement with the

phonos. He resists being pinned down to one interpretation. That way, *The Words of My Roaring* encourages readers to become self-conscious “listeners.”

While talking with Neuman and Wilson, Kroetsch comes to an ironic, almost euphoric conclusion about “listening” to the page. To exemplify “the delights of narrative,” he directs readers to a line from *Gone Indian* (Interview 38). The narrator of that novel, graduate student Jeremy Sadness, compares his embarrassment while learning how to snowshoe to the shame of feeling “like a bear that was learning to dance” (*Gone* 87). Kroetsch takes that simile from Theodore Roethke’s “Four for Sir John Davies” and Earle Birney’s poem “Bear on a Delhi Road.” He mentions “there is a bonus in the crudest sense for the reader who can *hear* dancing bears in the background there” (Interview 38; emphasis added). In other words, Kroetsch awards those readers “listening” for parody:

And I want the ultimate reader to have that obligation, to sense that weight. But narrative should also be available at a primary level. The other thing is, I think that finally what makes a book resonate is what a reader knows even though he [or she] isn’t quite aware of it. (38)

In “Carnival and Violence: A Meditation,” Kroetsch applies Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of ambivalence in medieval literature to the self-reflexive irony of parody. He refers to *Rabelais and his World* for support: “one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” (qtd. in “Carnival” 95). Bakhtin explains how social superiors and their inferiors exchange places during the medieval feast. Kroetsch endeavours to stage analogous “carnivals” by urging “the ultimate reader” to engage his speakers in an imaginary dialogue. However, just as a medieval court returned to “reality” a moment after the festival concluded, the carnival in literature ends when readers either ignore that obligation, or simply close their books.

Kroetsch draws on Julia Kristeva, “one of the most important interpreters of Bakhtin,” to point out how the carnival “is a drama located in language” (“Carnival” 99). “On the omnified stage of carnival,” Kristeva asserts, “language parodies and relativizes itself, repudiating its role in representation; in so doing, it provokes laughter but remains

incapable of detaching itself from representation” (79). For Kroetsch, written language is inherently double because it points to “reality” outside itself — that is, its referential element — and to itself as an artificial construct — that is, its self-referential element — at the same time. He maintains that metafiction crosses epistemological influence with ontological consequence. Kroetsch applies Kristeva’s concept of parody to argue that postmodern literature foregrounds the limits of representing “reality” with written language. (At no point does Kroetsch interrogate the meaning of “reality” to the degree that he questions the capacity of written language to convey meaning.) Postmodern literature, in Hutcheon’s formulation, obliges readers to engage that *énonciation*: “As in the Bakhtinian carnival, in the postmodernist novel there are no footlights separating art and audience” (*Postmodern* 63). I do not want to argue that performativity is necessarily a postmodern tenet, or a doctrine of phonocentrism, but that verbal parody in *Seed Catalogue* urges us to “read by ear.”

Read by Ear

In “On Being an Alberta Writer,” Kroetsch relates the writing of *Seed Catalogue* to Foucault’s “archaeological method.” Archaeology, for Foucault, accounts for shifts in knowledge systems, or *epistémés*, throughout history. Kroetsch’s use of the term provides a method for excavating the deposits of past cultures. He excavated a seed catalogue from one such “site,” namely the Glenbow Archives in Calgary. That particular artifact, once “a shared book in our society” (Kroetsch, “On Being” 8), attained importance because of its obscurity. Like the seed catalogue, the oral tradition, Kroetsch claims, was nearly lost. From that “explosive seed” sprung a long poem that germinates “the oral tradition and the dream of origins” (7). Despite misgivings about “origins,” Kroetsch asserts the centrality of the oral tradition in his compositional method. Because the seed catalogue no longer speaks for itself, he wrote on its behalf. “I wanted to write a poetic equivalent to the ‘speech’ of a seed catalogue,” Kroetsch reports, along with “the way we read the page and hear its implications” (8). He argues that *Seed Catalogue* emulates “oral literature” in order to overturn “the tyranny of narrative” (“On Being” 11). In an influential essay on the contemporary Canadian long poem, Frank Davey advances Kroetsch’s argument: “I see narrative as still the central issue of the form” (“Language” 184). He reads the

“inventiveness, linguistic and narrative adventure, game, jest, and play” within *Seed Catalogue* as an alternative to “sequential narrative” (184). Davey suggests that readers must put the long poem in a coherent order.

Even before Kroetsch sat down at his typewriter with a seed catalogue from 1917, literary theorists were asking, “Who is speaking thus?”³ or “What difference does it make who is speaking?”⁴ Although those questions are rhetorical, they also call into question the performance of rhetoric itself. With *Seed Catalogue*, Kroetsch responds to poststructuralist suspicions about the metaphysical primacy of speech over writing. The unnamed speaker endeavours to avoid the phonos as an indication of presence; he strives to evade phonocentrism by addressing the difficulty, the near impossibility, of a writer relating the ideality of meaning to readers. Within the oral tradition of storytelling, according to Manina Jones, “Kroetsch, significantly, *finds* (rather than originates) a response” that questions literary conventions “precisely by the repetition of inherited language, with a significant difference” (116). “Instead of attempting to replace the borrowed word,” Jones argues, “*Seed Catalogue* suggests a re-placing or re-situating of it through citation” (116). Conversely, Jacques Derrida argues that reiteration, citation with transformative force in a specific context, opens the possibility for language to become performative.⁵ I propose that the self-reflexive irony of parody presents those conditions for “a double gesture, a double science, a double writing” which deconstructs “the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system” (Derrida, “Signature Event” 21). To apply that Derridean idea, Kroetsch yearns to circumvent the consequences of phonocentrism in *Seed Catalogue* with recursive citation, or re-citation, that recasts the subject position.⁶ Just as the anonymous speaker claims to cite utterances he heard, self-conscious “listeners” recite them. Rather than question who is “speaking,” Kroetsch prods readers to ask, “Who is listening thus?”

Verbal Parody in *Seed Catalogue*

Seed Catalogue tells a harrowing tale of pastoral Alberta from the perspective of a boy unable to break his father’s land. The enfeebled, nearly effete, boy grows into a “poet” searching for words to describe “the home place” (Kroetsch, *Seed* 30, 31, 41). The nameless speaker begins the sixth section of the long poem invoking “His muse is / his muse/if / memory is” (37; middle slash in original). The “poet” repeats memories

with a forced rhythm to keep from forgetting them. Without the muse that the past represents, the speaker has “no song” and “no meditation” to write about (37). Each of these memories, however, contains verbal expressions that the speaker cannot inscribe entirely. The “poet” seeks to capture a speaking voice — “Once upon a time in the village of Heisler —” but, before he gets too far, he interrupts himself — “Hey, wait a minute. / That’s a story” (38). That digression and subsequent reiteration relates his frustration with writing that has built up since childhood. The speaker invites readers to “trace” his “coming / or going” across a “scarred / page, a spoor of wording / a reduction to mere black / and white” (39). In other words, we must come to terms with the techniques of oral storytellers without recourse to narrative. In *Seed Catalogue*, the “poet” speaker parodies the type of fragments, repetitions, and set phrases that make up *The Studhorse Man*. As *Seed Catalogue* encroaches on figures of speech within *The Studhorse Man*, the long poem illustrates the interpretive opportunities of verbal parody. Whereas Demeter thinks on behalf of his readers, the “poet” prompts us to either generate meaning or defer meaning altogether.

Seed Catalogue asks, alternately, “*How do you grow a gardener?*” (31), “*how do you grow a lover?*” (32, 34), and “*How do you grow a prairie town?*” (35, 36). That question, posed to no one in particular, develops into a trope throughout the long poem. Those phrases build toward the real question on the speaker’s mind: “*But how do you grow a poet?*” (37, 38, 39). By the end of *Seed Catalogue*, he breaks that line to separate the phrase “*How do you grow?*” from “*a poet?*” (40). Note how the speaker puts the question to readers because he cannot find an answer. “You’ve got to understand this:” he insists, “I was sitting on the horse. / The horse was standing still. / I fell off” (29). That interruption is met with laughter from another voice within the poem. “The hired man” expresses the incredulity that readers likely share:

. . . how
 in hell did you manage to
 fall off a horse that was
standing still? (29; original ellipsis)

The speaker replies by telling us that that fall was necessary to spur him toward literary creation. Smaro Kamboureli identifies a mythopoetic garden as the source text for that anecdote. “The parodic reversal” in

Seed Catalogue produces “ironic humour in these lines [that] work[s] against the consoling promise entailed by the dialectical structure of the myth of Eden: the fall is presented as a non-event” (Kamboureli 112). Following Kamboureli, the central tension of *Seed Catalogue* is that a tense, strangely terse exchange between the “poet” and the hired man occasions the poem. As a pathetic storyteller, the speaker is no hero.

It remains necessary to consider what compels the “poet” to “speak” or, perhaps, why he is so eager to embarrass himself. Take his description of love (or its fumbling alternative), for example. The speaker recalls an attempt to woo an unnamed “Lady” seated “at the end of the bar” with a catastrophic story: “I wanna tell you something” (*Seed* 42). “Pete Knight,” the “poet” teases, “King of *All / Cowboys*” was “killed — by a horse. / He fell off” (42). With that allegory, the “poet” vindicates his childhood fall by playing on “the lady’s” sympathies. Yet, she does not fall for it; she hears his come-on as a line, a set phrase. She provides a voice for our concern “— You some kind of nut / or something?” (42). Her response provides the speaker with a chance to get back in the saddle. Playing at having confidence, having false confidence, leads him to think he can master the affective potential of written language. As long as the “poet” tells us about what he is saying while he is saying it, we might share the pathos of that experience. He believes that he can align himself with his readers and wonder aloud about the “strange planting” (43, 44) of words on the page. That way, the speaker parodies Demeter’s inability in *The Studhorse Man* to capture Hazard’s utterance. Reading by ear allows us to recognize that rhetorical strategy while realizing, in part, its performative condition.

The final section of *Seed Catalogue* provides an opportunity for imaginary dialogue between speaker and reader. The long poem ends by splitting into columns that echo the call and response of a country-and-western duet, or the hero and teller duality of *The Studhorse Man*. The left-hand column perorates how “the city/falls” at the same time as “the rider/falls” (45; original slashes). The right-hand column responds with two lines of supplication: “*Poet, teach us / to love our dying*” (45). That doubled structure, combined with the “falling” metaphor and the typographical slashes within a line that indicates its break, repeats the trope of a boy’s growth into a poet within *Seed Catalogue*. Developing a writing voice illustrates the speaker’s maturation, which is motivated in the long poem by being broken. Embarrassment is the very sort of

“dying” that seems necessary for writing. And, as in the above example of “*The palimpsest of prairie*” (45), the “poet” not only parodies verbal expression, he leaves the impression of reading aloud. While one column expresses how an urban speaker becomes urbane, the opposite column is the expression of an unknown speaker at a loss for words. Although the sentiment between the columns remains unclear, that portion of the long poem “sounds” like speech. Yearning to hear from the audience, the self-conscious “poet” would switch places with readers. The speaker places the onus on us to read aloud.

“The Writing the Writing the Writing”

The self-reflexive irony in Kroetsch’s parody incites a reading practice as expansive as possible without submitting to a theoretical infinitude of interpretations. In turn, Kroetsch’s criticism attributes that ambivalence to postmodern discourse. Such preoccupation with multiple meanings, however, does not necessarily evade the implications of phonocentrism. What Kroetsch calls the contradictory aims of “oral literature,” Dianne Tiefensee argues is merely a reversal of the relationship between speech and writing. In “*The Old Dualities*”: *Deconstructing Robert Kroetsch and His Critics*, she criticizes the ideology beneath that binary opposition:

[Kroetsch’s] preference for multiple voices is believed to subvert traditional conventions of dialogue and narrative, and that belief seems to stem from a current notion that an avant-garde approach will, in itself, overcome our longing for unity, an essential Self, Presence. (7)

Whereas many critics suspect that Kroetsch’s “use of parody and paradox” resists the “Hegelian ‘completion of the Self’ from ever being accomplished in his novels,” Tiefensee criticizes those rhetorical strategies for fabricating a world within the word (106). For example, “the oral tradition and the quest” (106) in *The Studhorse Man* leads the storyteller to record speech on notecards. As Demeter replaces Hazard as the subject of his narrative, he becomes the enunciating subject. For Tiefensee, that exchange of roles demonstrates the influence of phonocentrism in Kroetsch’s novel.

Tiefensee takes issue with the way Kroetsch speaks about *The Studhorse Man* as “a parody of the biographical act” in *Labyrinths of Voice* (173). Kroetsch says to Neuman and Wilson that “Demeter lit-

erally gets himself together by pulling those two figures — Hazard and himself — together” while referring to that incorporation (173). Kroetsch proceeds to describe “that mythic notion of the split, the divided egg, whatever” (173) as a “gap” between narrative and story in his corpus (181). As he puts it, “there are often paired figures at the centre of my books as if I have split the thing but it’s also the hero/teller as one” (181). Kroetsch leaves it for Demeter to fill “the gap between the two” by narrating his own “story of high heroism” (181). “So there’s this awful split between story and self” that Demeter reconciles by switching roles with Hazard; “there’s a gap and yet there is a closure. That’s right” (181). Tiefensee takes Kroetsch to task for affirming his opinion with “*right*” (110). That term implies its opposite, “the wrong,” which she defines as “the transgression that is dissemination — the endless substitution by which the self is differed and deferred, never coming to rest in the transcendental signified, which is, in Kroetsch’s autobiography, the *hero*, the teller of the story.” Whereas Kroetsch claims *The Studhorse Man* illustrates dissemination through the leitmotif of a studhorse man, Tiefensee counters that Demeter is an example of a unified self that clings to language. Because the novel emulates “oral literature,” providing it an automatic and unconsidered privilege, the metanarrative requires deconstruction. Tiefensee reproaches Kroetsch for leaving readers out of a narrative loop that speaks only to itself.

It is possible to answer Tiefensee’s argument about phonocentrism in *The Studhorse Man* with reference to *Seed Catalogue*. Kroetsch’s long poem is largely about the impossibility of writing to communicate a transcendent meaning. The “poet” speaker asserts that “We silence words / by writing them down” (42). Certainly, writing does not silence words; it produces another sense of them. The implication between those lines is that writing cannot utter the sound that speech releases with ease. Even then, it remains unclear who is included in the pronoun “We,” whose predicate is “silence” and whose object is “words.” The speaker suggests that readers are just as culpable as he is. That way, we are complicit in subjecting words to silence by reading quietly to ourselves. Including readers within that pronoun indicates how the act of speaking inflects his writing process. The speaker implies that words are naturally sonorous, yet they cannot express themselves. He also suggests that, just as anyone speaking faces listeners, writers must confront readers. Because he does not speak for readers, the “poet” nudges us

to depart from the script — to go off-book. In other words, he grants enunciation to readers. Thus, the “poet” speaker grows self-conscious about the incapacity of writing to inscribe voices. Ironically, that anxiety results from an inability to hear himself.

In a statement about *Seed Catalogue* for *The Long Poem Anthology*, Kroetsch distinguishes “The writing the writing the writing” from “The having written” (312). Because of that repetition, he indicates that “the writing” takes several stages: writing the poem, “the writing” implied by reading the poem, and “the writing” in response to the poem. Every subsequent commentary of “the writing” engages the “poet” speaker in dialogue. Kroetsch tries to develop a style of poetry to replace “the having written” — that is, the process of writing that silences words — with “the writing” — that is, the interpretive process that “makes / us / readers” (312). Each iteration of “the writing” subjects “us readers” to opportunities for interpretation that “the having written” would close. *Seed Catalogue* directs attention not only to citation, but also to recitation. My use of “recitation” applies here to the act of reading aloud in response to “the writing.” I do not mean the term to imply that readers have the final word. Instead, we temporarily materialize the speech act that is occurring in the text. Readers, therefore, play the role of enunciating subjects while listening to our own utterances.

As Kroetsch repeats in essays and interviews, oral storytellers influenced his writing, which is why he parodies the oral tradition. For Kroetsch, “oral literature” includes notecards, a seed catalogue, and, most importantly, word of mouth: *vox populi*. As Barbara Godard argues, “Kroetsch sees the problem facing the contemporary writer as one of a choice between the language of literary convention and the relatively unknown voice of ours, ‘ordinary speech’” (52). The fragments, repetitions, and set phrases that *Seed Catalogue* parodies from *The Studhorse Man* encourage us to “listen.” If we keep in mind the oral characteristics of Kroetsch’s “poet” speaker, it becomes possible to read the long poem as verbal parody. The rewriting of verbal expression in *Seed Catalogue* does not lead to a transcription of voices, for such a reading would be too simple, relying on the very binary opposition that the long poem manipulates. Contra Hutcheon, the irony of verbal parody is that it promotes the “resolution of contraries” of dualities like speech and writing (*Canadian* 4). *Seed Catalogue* provides a context for granting meaning through the performative conditions of reading by ear. That

way, the long poem urges recitations that engage the literary performance it expounds. With *Seed Catalogue*, Kroetsch strives to invest readers in the oral tradition while inviting us to resolve, however momentarily, the contradiction of writing that invokes speech.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thanks to Aritha van Herk, Pamela McCallum, Harry Vandervlist, Linda Hutcheon, David Foster, and Tara Hyland-Russell for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this essay.

NOTES

¹ In "For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem," Kroetsch relates how he settled on a title, *Field Notes*, for "the continuing poem": "I think of the field notes kept by the archaeologist, by the finding man, the finding man who is essentially lost. I can only guess the other; there might, that is, be a hidden text" (129). Kroetsch finds the oral tradition of storytelling qualifies as "a hidden text," a type of "cite" reading, for rewriting.

² Kuester adapts Hutcheon's notion of postmodernism to argue that in Canada parody expresses "historical consciousness in a historically conditioned situation" (27). Although parody offers its source texts another presence, it cannot function wholly in retrospect, as Kuester argues. Hutcheon's postmodernism complicates parody's "complicity" and "separation" from the very text it incorporates (*Canadian* 12).

³ Barthes poses this question early in an argument about Balzac's *Sarrasine* (142). He introduces a passage from that novel with speculation about "writing" as "that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away." He suggests that language "knows a 'subject,' not a person" speaking. The reader, he proposes, is no longer subject to an author or any one person as the source of meaning.

⁴ Foucault repeats this question late in an argument with the function of an author. He introduces the essay with a quotation from Beckett that he returns to in conclusion (Foucault 391). He turns to this question when speculating about "authenticity or originality" in discourses.

⁵ In *Limited Inc.*, Derrida points to the crux of "[J.L.] Austin's procedure" in *How to Do Things with Words*: "the teleological jurisdiction of an entire field whose organizing center remains *intention*" ("Signature Event" 15). I will not dismiss out of hand the intentionality of Austin's "performativity." Qua Derrida, I will emphasize performativity as an act of interpretation.

⁶ Derrida's view of performativity in *The Post Card*, despite the anachronistic application here, offers another critical approach for addressing doubled language. Derrida offers apostrophe as a written figure of speech that encapsulates the introversion of phonocentrism. Just as "the man of discourse or writing interrupts the continuous development of the sequence, abruptly turns toward someone, that is, something, addresses himself to you," he is also speaking to himself (4). Derrida proceeds to state that apostrophe functions as performative utterance insofar as audiences feel they are influencing the speaker.

WORKS CITED

- Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962. Print.
- Ball, John Clement. "The Carnival of Babel: The Construction of Voice in Robert Kroetsch's 'Out West' Triptych." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 39 (1989): 1-22. Print.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." 1966. *Image Music Text*. Ed. and trans. Stephen Heath. Glasgow: Fontana, 1977. 142-48. Print.
- Blodgett, E.D. "The Book, Its Discourse, and the Lyric: Notes on Robert Kroetsch's *Field Notes*." *Open Letter* 5.8-9 (1984): 195-205. Print.
- Davey, Frank. "The Language of the Contemporary Canadian Long Poem." *Surviving the Paraphrase: Eleven Essays in Canadian Literature*. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1983. 183-93. Print.
- . "Some. (Canadian.) Postmodern. Texts." *Reading Canadian Reading*. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1988. 105-22. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. 1980. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987. Print.
- . "Signature Event Context." *Limited Inc.* 1977. Trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1988. 1-23. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?" 1969. Trans. Josué V. Harari. *The Essential Foucault: Selections from the Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*. Ed. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose. New York: New P, 2003. 377-91. Print.
- Godard, Barbara. "The Oral Tradition and Contemporary Fiction." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 7/8 (1977): 46-62. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988. Print.
- . *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- . *A Theory of Parody: The Techniques of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. New York: Methuen, 1985. Print.
- Jones, Manina. "Rooting the Borrowed Word: Appropriation and Voice in Kroetsch's 'Seed Catalogue.'" *Inside the Poem: Essays and Poems in Honour of Donald Stephens*. Ed. W. H. New. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1992. 113-22. Print.
- Kamboureli, Smaro. *On the Edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1991. Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. 1969. Trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez. Ed. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1980. Print.
- Kroetsch, Robert. "Carnival and Violence: A Meditation." *Robert Kroetsch: Essays*. Ed. Frank Davey and bpNichol. *Open Letter* 5.4 (1983): 111-22. Print. Rpt. in *Lovely* 95-107.
- . *Gone Indian*. 1973. Toronto: Stoddart, 1999. Print.
- . Interview by Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson. *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch*. Edmonton: NeWest, 1982. Print.
- . *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New*. Toronto, Oxford UP, 1989. Print.
- . "On Being an Alberta Writer: Or, I Wanted to Tell Our Story." *The New Provinces: Alberta and Saskatchewan, 1905-1980*. Ed. Howard Palmer and Donald Smith. Vancouver: Tantalus, 1980. 217-27. Print. Rpt. as "The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues." *Lovely* 1-20.
- . *Seed Catalogue*. 1977. *Completed Field Notes: The Long Poems of Robert Kroetsch*. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2000. 29-46. Print.

- . Statement. *The Long Poem Anthology*. Ed. Michael Ondaatje. Toronto: Coach House, 1979. 311-13. Print.
- . *The Studhorse Man*. 1969. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2004. Print.
- . *The Words of My Roaring*. 1966. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2000. Print.
- Kuester, Martin. *Framing Truths: Parodic Structures in Contemporary English-Canadian Historical Novels*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992. Print.
- Lecker, Robert. "Bordering On: Robert Kroetsch's Aesthetic." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 17.3 (1982): 124-33. Print.
- Ross, Brian L. "The Naked Narrator: *The Studhorse Man* and the Structuralist Imagination." *Canadian Literature* 104 (1985): 65-73. Print.
- Rudy Dorscht, Susan. *Women, Reading, Kroetsch: Telling the Difference*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1991. Print.
- Sullivan, Rosemary. "The Fascinating Place Between: The Fiction of Robert Kroetsch." *Mosaic* 11.3 (1978): 165-76. Print.
- Thomas, Peter. *Robert Kroetsch*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1980. Print.
- Tiefensee, Dianne. *The Old Dualities: Deconstructing Robert Kroetsch and His Critics*. Montreal: McGill's-Queen's UP, 1994. Print.
- van Herk, Aritha. "Biocritical Essay." *The Robert Kroetsch Papers: First Accession*. Calgary: U of Calgary P, 1986. ix-xxxix. Print.
- Wood, Susan. "Reinventing the Word: Kroetsch's Poetry." *Canadian Literature* 77 (1978): 29-39. Print.