

ROBERT KROETSCH, RUPERT BROOKE, THE VOICES OF THE DEAD

by
D. P. Thomas

John Barth has written of the "felt ultimacy" which drives much contemporary writing.¹ This dilemma of the extreme situation, so often a bewilderment, has been further defined by Frank Kermode as "the conviction that the end is immanent rather than imminent . . . so that this 'crisis' has become a permanent feature of human existence, but there is no 'end' to resolve it."² Kermode then goes on to ask "where historiography ends and apocalypse begins"³ — a question which this short note will evade. But to no Canadian writer does it apply better than to Robert Kroetsch, whose interest in "post-modern" theory has led to the joint editorship of *Boundary 2*, a journal devoted to post-modern writing. In three novels, *The Studhorse Man* (1969), *Gone Indian*, (1973), and *Badlands* (1975), Kroetsch has faced the problem of historiography and apocalypse with obsessive insistence.

During an interview with him (December 19th., 1972) I referred to Rupert Brooke's famous observations upon the Canadian prairies and Rockies. Kroetsch then repudiated Brooke as "imaginatively false" and alien to the intentions of his own novels. Before citing the relevant passages from Brooke, I would also note Kroetsch's reaction to Margaret Laurence when, referring to *The Studhorse Man*, she suggested "you are not writing an historical novel in any sense of the word, but what you are doing is seeing that the past in a sense is always the present and the present is always the future."

¹"The Literature of Exhaustion", *Atlantic Monthly* (Aug. 1967), p. 30.

²*The Sense of an Ending*, N.Y., O.U.P., 1967, p. 101.

³*ibid*, p. 116.

That's it. Yes. I'm trying very hard to work with that idea. I've heard Jim Bacque say that the loss of a generation in the First World War created a vacuum in Canadian life. And I notice now in looking back that a couple of my characters lost a father in a war. But the vacuum idea is wrong. *The experience of an absence is an experience* [my italics]. The continuity, if we must call it that, is not of the usual sort.⁴

Absence as an experience insists upon the essential dynamic of negation, a position leading easily into the rejection of "history" as a deadening fate.

It is here that Brooke's statements take on generational significance: the pre-1914, pre-modern romance of the past confronted by something in the Canadian landscape both troubling and repugnant:

It is the feeling of fresh loneliness that impresses itself before any detail of the wild. The soul — or the personality — seems to have infinite room to expand. There is no one else within reach, there never has been anyone; no one else is *thinking* of the lakes and hills you see before you. They have no tradition, no names even . . .⁵

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It is an empty land. To love the country here — mountains are worshipped, not loved — is like embracing a wraith. A European can find nothing to satisfy the hunger of his heart. The air is too thin to breathe. He requires haunted woods, and the friendly presence of ghosts.⁶

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There walk, as yet, no ghosts of lovers in Canadian lanes. This is the essence of the grey freshness and brisk melancholy of this land. And for all the charm of those qualities, it is also the secret of a European's discontent. For it is possible, at a pinch, to do without gods. But one misses the dead.⁷

Not only does Brooke typically erase the non-European past but he introduces the fundamental relation of the traditional historiography to selfhood. Without friendly ghosts, the "hunger" of which Brooke writes is a sense of incompleteness which creates its own "discontent" or angst. "The soul — or the personality — seems to have infinite room to expand"

⁴*Creation*, Toronto, new press, 1970, p. 60.

⁵*Letters from America*, N.Y., Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917, p. 117.

⁶*ibid.*, pp. 153-154.

⁷*ibid.*, p. 156.

— and this is clearly disturbing to Brooke: a loss of placement, of the essential structuring of selfhood in time and place. His memorable final comment is a succinct expression of the phase of European thought immediately before the “re-discovery” of myth. Do without gods? D. H. Lawrence would have leapt at his throat.

Compare Brooke’s position to that implicit in Professor Madham’s reflection upon his mistress (wife of Jeremy Sadness, the novel’s focal character) in *Gone Indian*.⁸ “Carol, in her delightful way, fails to grasp the consequence of the northern prairies to human definition: the diffusion of personality into a complex of possibilities rather than a concluded self” (152). Now the unconcluded self is a given, viewed neutrally and not, as in Brooke’s case, a source of unease. To return to Kermode: what Kroetsch expresses here and throughout the three novels in question is precisely that lack of a sense of an ending, either psychically or temporally, of which Kermode has written so eloquently.

Kroetsch seizes Canadian metaphors for their post-modern significance. Thus “from sea to sea” is used as the central structural pun of *The Studhorse Man*, where Hazard Lepage leads his mighty stallion Poseidon in search of the mare of the world. The play on “mare” is compounded by Hazard’s obsessive fear of death by water, his entanglement with a Marie and a Martha, and his violent end under the hoofs of his sea-king stud. The national motto can be seen to be finely appropriate to the theme of unconcluded selfhood and the loss of a linear sense of time with its formal consequences in a beginning, middle, and end. While the volumes of *The General Stud Book* were “Hazard’s history of man and his theology” (11), his yearning “to breed the perfect horse” — with its logically absurd aspiration to finality, to biological completion — is the fatal contradiction under which Hazard (and post-modern man) labours. His faith is in process, the creative flow from sea to sea, and yet he desires an ending. When Demeter Proudfoot says of Hazard, “the dear ninny was terrified of history” (38), he reveals that contradiction. For history *does* conclude the self, as Brooke obscurely recognized. Hazard’s fornication with P. Cockburn in the museum of which she is curator is explicitly symbolic of his resistance to the encapsulation of time. The wax figures from the Canadian past who overlook the sexual act are images of Brooke’s “friendly ghosts” — from which Hazard must flee.

As to where historiography ends and apocalypse begins: it is doubtful whether Kroetsch resolves that one. When Hazard “chances” on Eugene Utter as a travelling companion he encounters a kind of apocalyptic revivalist. Utter burns down the very dwelling in which he and Hazard

⁸All references to Kroetsch’s novels will be to the following editions: *The Studhorse Man*, N.Y., Simon & Schuster, 1969; *Gone Indian*, Toronto, new press, 1973; *Badlands*, Toronto, new press, 1975.

shelter from the frozen night; in him "felt ultimacy" becomes a mode of action. The shade of Utter reappears in the person of Web in *Badlands* who burned down his father's shack and walked away by the firelight. He can assert: "There is no such thing as a past" (3) — an attitude contrasting directly with that of William Dawe, the novel's central figure, who spends his life seeking freedom from the present by infiltrating and actually *releasing* the past. Dawe is the leader of successive expeditions searching for dinosaur bones in the Albertan Badlands. He seeks "the dead creatures, immortalizing the mortal man. The bones as crazy and obscure as my own" (36). Dawe is, of course, a counterpart to Hazard Lepage, in that his quest is for origins, beginnings, as compulsively as Hazard desires an end. Again, the absurdity of the quest denies the comfort of history and structure in time. What Dawe seeks is not the concluded self, but the freedom of birth.

This leads Kroetsch naturally into the myths of re-birth and a flock of thanaturgical imagery. It is Demeter-Proudford who narrates Hazard Lepage's tale; the sexual ambivalence of the name draws attention to the self-propagation of authorship, but Demeter's part in the Persephone myth cannot be ignored. Birth, re-birth, death and return, and the making of fictions which free us briefly from time, these are the elements of Demeter's function.

Nothing makes the insistence on the place of the dead more obvious than making Johnie Backstrom, first appearing in *The Words of my Roaring*, an undertaker. The death-dealer who is life-giver, the necessary fertilization of the creatures of light by the dark gods, is given ironical expression when Hazard Lepage breaks into Backstrom's Funeral Parlour and sleeps there. Jeremy Sadness sleeps in a coffin in *Gone Indian* and a temperance lady pops out of another in *Badlands*. This point could be laboured — when Hazard finds himself in a box-car full of bones, part of a consignment of Bones for War, the confrontation with the dead is self-evident.

Gone Indian and *Badlands* are of considerable interest in that the narrative technique of both is itself a comment on the temporality of fictional forms. First *Gone Indian*: here a Professor Madham, of Binghamton, N.Y., originally from Alberta, narrates and also excerpts the tape-recorded statements of Jeremy Sadness, a Ph.D student from NYC who went to Edmonton ostensibly for a job interview and disappeared, apparently having driven a snowmobile off a railroad bridge. Sadness's tape is itself a device against time; it insistent contemporaneity at odds with Madham's reflective observations. And no method better exemplifies the question of whether the dead are really *dead* or liars. Indeed, the fictiveness of the living, absurd victims of their own myths of selfhood, is clearly at the heart of this novel. Madham says of Jeremy: "He believed that his life's predicament found its type in Grey Owl" (7) — an assertion further confirmed by the following exchange: "The story of a man," I

agreed, 'who died into a new life.' 'He faked the death.' 'But he woke up free nevertheless' (62). Grey Owl not only combines the re-birth myth, the self-created personal fiction, and the denial of a European sense of placement, but he demonstrated an existentialist dilemma in the repudiation of an historic self. Grey Owl chose to be re-born, but Archie Belaney came back to claim his own. To live free we must *die enough*.

How to make a fiction and how to die enough are what Sadness tries to learn from Roger Dorck. Sadness is doubled with Dorck who is lying at the point of death in hospital after a snowmobile accident. Dorck had literally taken a great leap into the night on his machine. He was to be Winter King in the town Winter Festival; Sadness takes his place and disappears with Dorck's mistress. Dorck is Sadness's guide to the brink of the river which both heals and annihilates:

Now Jeremy realized the terror of Dorck's night. The leaping night. The falling night. No wonder Roger fled his own return . . . the secret rage to fuck the healing mother of death, the virgin stark. The flesh renewing the flesh. The bush of the mother's bush. (42-43)

Death and the return to creative source; this is to be Winter King. By going further than Dorck in his own leap — by vanishing, in short — Sadness shows that he has understood the meaning of Archie Belaney. He lives *only* in the fiction of Madham's narrative, and the voice from the dead in this case is free of the ending of history.

The narrative method of *Badlands*, too, provides its own commentary on the forms of the dead. The narration is partly authorial with the addition of passages from Anna Dawe, daughter of William. Anna, who saw little of her father until near his end, tries to recover him by means of the field-notes he kept of his expeditions. Her aim is explicit: she "imagined to myself a past, an ancestor, a legend, a vision, a fate" (3). Anna thus begins, by needing the dead for her own concluding. Yet her method of "recovery" — biography — is at odds with William's zeal for bones. Personal completion is set against the impersonal and illusory "immortality" her father seeks. These uses of the past are themselves measured by the author's narrative, the omniscience of which proclaims the fictiveness of *all* these voices and the futility of turning to the past (and not the fictive present) for self-concluding. The same point is made with the economy of art in the appearance of Michael Sinnot, photographer, and his Travelling Emporium of the Vanished World. Kroetsch is satirizing the current fashion in early still-photography, particularly in its claim to "authenticity". By giving his photographs portentous and cynically "naïve" titles, Sinnot is really exploiting the claim for historical validity made for such

"simple" records. Sinnot's fakery is also an exploitation of the romance of the past; images of the dead to comfort the living, wholly illusory identities dispensed by a carpet-bagger of ghostly relics.

Anna Dawe is doubled with Anna Yellowbird, an Indian girl who follows the Dawe Expedition and succours its members in their distress. Anna follows because she believes Dawe will go to "the place of the dead" yet her meaning in the novel is clearly anti-historical. When she sleeps with Dawe "she made him lose the past. He began to hate her for that" (196). The function of Kroetsch's female characters lies outside my scope here, but the traditional defeat of time in sex is one of them. Anna Yellowbird recovers the dead in the paradox of sexuality; she is untouched by the uncompleted itch for confirmation in time which afflicts both Dawes. And it is entirely appropriate that when Anna Dawe finds this other Anna, now an old woman, and asks to be taken to the places where she had known William Dawe, their journey transforms into a drunken joyous flight from the neurosis of the past. Ending high in the foothills together, the two Annas no longer care about the life of William Dawe and Anna Dawe is "cured" in the present.

There is more to be written concerning Kroetsch's wrangle with time and Western man. But the "complex possibilities" of selfhood he recognizes in the prairie ethos range far in their quest. If there is no ending, some clue to his purposes may be extracted from *Badlands*. "There are no truths, only correspondences" (45).