

“‘I SEE ENGLAND, I SEE FRANCE . . .’
ROBERT KROETSCH’S *ALIBI*”

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All language, to quote Hayden White in his article on Michel Foucault,¹ is catachresis, in other words, misuse. The “doom in language,”² in the lexicon of Kroetsch’s most recent novel, *Alibi*, is that it is all alibi (from the Latin *alius*, other). It occupies an alien place rather than a literal one — at best, possibly a littoral, on which a great deal of the action of *Alibi* takes place. Thus, “we are all exiles,” (p. 151; cf. Kroetsch’s *But We Are Exiles*) displaced, most acutely, not from central Alberta, but from logocentrism, and denied what Thomas Pynchon has called “the direct epileptic Word” and “pulsing stelliferous meaning.”³

Underpants flesh out this motif in *Alibi*, but are, of course, no substitute for, or rather, are *only* a substitute for the flesh beneath. A less sophisticated postmodernist (here defined succinctly as one who accedes to Derrida’s maxim that “In the beginning is hermeneutics”⁴), such as Kurt Vonnegut, might, in *Breakfast of Champions*, crudely draw underpants and write, “I see England, I see France; I see a little girl’s underpants!” mocking the semiotics of desire before he draws the “wide-open beaver”⁵ that itself is only a sign. For Kroetsch, though, the play of language and consummation, word and world, is an intricate one, a Derridean replication of substitutions that always ensnares man in alibis. Dorf, Kroetsch’s protagonist, first encounters a profusion of panties when, early in the novel, he walks into a laundromat and discovers a woman named Estuary folding them: “and the panties . . . were splendid too, one pair golden, another lime green, one pair as blue as the noon sky, one pair the color of fire, suggesting beaten brass, filigreed; panties embroidered, emblazoned” (p 32-3) stacks of them.

Dorf, remember, is an agent for Jack Deemer, rich and idiosyncratic, whose passion is collecting esoteric and exotic objects; Dorf hunts, gathers and secures the various collections. In the novel’s present he has been commissioned to locate spas, especially the perfect one. Estuary’s name, certainly, is redolent of the spa, the underground river or source. Estuary needs the medicinal properties of spas for the deformed hand which is the

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1. Hayden White, “Michel Foucault,” in John Sturrock, ed., *Structuralism and Since* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
 2. Robert Kroetsch, *Alibi* (Toronto: Stoddard, 1983), p. 130. Subsequent quotations from *Alibi* will be followed by page references in parentheses.
 3. Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (N.Y.: Bantam, 1982), p. 87.
 4. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 73.
 5. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Breakfast of Champions* (U.S.A.: Delacorte Press, 1973), pp. 22, 24.

mark of her mortality; so, too, does Deemer, who is aging and, it is rumoured, ill. So, too, in fact does Dorf, who, despite his robustness, feels the need for an anodyne. Dorf enunciates his quest and links Estuary, underpants and a cure when he thinks, "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. I was hurting, I know that much. We cannot have what we want, and we hurt" (p. 35). Despite being able to collect and, by extension, organize all manner of things, and despite finding the woman for whom he searched, Dorf is denied healing. Alibis provide no such succor.

Indeed, after finding Julie, the woman he had been looking for, Dorf shares a triolage with her and the dwarfish doctor, de Medeiros, only to have the underpants motif recur:

I imagined she had on panties, strawberry red, and he took them off, and she still had on panties, the color of mint this time; and I spoke the colors aloud then, spoke aloud the names of these colors . . . I imagined he took off another pair, a bitter shade of lime, and still she wore beneath that lime need, against his taking, more panties and more, until he could never find her . . . (pp. 128-9).

The doom in language, which frustrates all of Kroetsch's central characters, is here yoked to the underpants; it is in its persistence as a seemingly friable, but ultimately unyielding, divide that it taunts Dorf, catching him up in a play of signifiers which always keeps covered what it promises to uncover. Also, it is a barrier to Julie's "motion, her mouth's silent need" (p. 128), and provides a contrast with "the delicious scream of her outraged pleasure" (p. 129).

Articulation (from the Latin *articulare*, to divide into joints) troubles Dorf as acutely as it plagues Jeremy Sadness of *Gone Indian*. Jeremy is first glimpsed in Professor Madham's anecdotal account of his having lost his suitcase, a precipitous divesting of his identity. Moreover, the first words heard directly from Jeremy (the chapters alternate between Madham's wry assessments of Jeremy's doings and Jeremy's tapes to Professor Madham) are that he could not, there at Customs, minus his own baggage, remember his name. "For a fatal moment my stumbling, ossified, PhD-seeking mind was a clean sheet."⁶ To rid himself of his identity is to remove himself from the prison-house of language as Kroetsch's juxtaposition posits. To become Grey Owl, his obsessive guest akin to Dorf's hunt for a spa, is to free himself from the welter of words which paralyses him throughout the novel. Dissertation topics recur in his mind on his notepads to taunt him about the lexical playfield he wishes to escape. In addition, the women with whom he engages in sex while a graduate student are connected in one way or another with libraries, literature, or the printed word; there was,

6. Robert Kroetsch, *Gone Indian* (Toronto: New Press, 1974), p. 7. Subsequent quotations from *Gone Indian* will be followed in parentheses by the designation, GI, and page references.

for instance, "Miss Petcock who worked in the library of the State University of New York at Binghamton, a young lady who wore short skirts, and who, one morning, showing me how to use a microfilm reader in the basement of the library, yielded, even there, up against the reader that she had only then switched on" (*G1*, p. 115). Also, of course, Jeremy's wife, Carol, worked in the xerox room at the university in order to support him while he worked towards his doctorate.

The clash in terms of language in *Gone Indian* is between a world written out painstakingly and pedantically, and an oral pre-literate culture freed of the fetters of dissertations and other examples of scholarly dissection. Jeremy's mentor, Professor Madham, given the task of "explaining everything" to Jill Sunderman, tries to make sense of Jeremy's actions by interspersing his own explanatory prose with excerpts from Jeremy's tapes. The contrast is clearly between a print-oriented approach and one that seeks to flee or evade such a mode. As Peter Thomas defines it, Madham "represents the whole postlapsarian intellectual tradition and its structures . . . Jeremy seeks to return to source, to deny the fall by decreation."⁷ In much of the novel Kroetsch indulges in something seldom seen in his other works, a caricature of the university ambit that he knows so well. Jeremy's nominal quest to the west is to land an academic job at the University of Alberta. From his conversation with the chairman, a Professor Balding, at that institution; to his encounters with his office mate and fellow graduate student, whose "idea of benefit [is] a lifetime subscription to *PMLA*," to his dalliances with his shapely students — "What is a destructive passion, Mr. Sadness? she inquired. My office looked like a barbershop after, there were pubic hairs scattered from my *Norton Anthology* through *Anatomy of Criticism* to my notes on Bishop Berkeley (thus I refute the Bishop)" (*G1*, pp. 45-6). Jeremy's wit, however, reveals not only Kroetsch's caustic sense of the academic milieu, but also an ennui, a jaded despair about the edifices of language and learning.

His anodyne, of course, is to be sundered by Jill and finally Bea Sunderman from a too stereotyped, too restricted and restrictive culture. Born in New York City, Jeremy's sadness necessitates that he use his trip to Alberta for a more elemental, atavistic pursuit. Finally, he scorns and rejects his wife, his major professor and advisor, and all the trappings of the civilized world represented by his hot-house academic and literary training and his potential career. Asked early in the novel if he is looking for someone, he answers, "No . . . Nothing. Yes, I am looking for nothing. The primal darkness. The purest light. For the first word. For the voice that spoke the first word. The inventor of zero" (*G*. p. 22). Despite a herculean

7. Peter Thomas, *Robert Kroetsch* (Vancouver, Douglas and McIntyre, 1980), p. 70.

effort in his first race on snowshoes, Jeremy Sadness spends the remainder of the novel metaphorically running backwards, running away from the accretions of civilization, accompanied by the wry interpolations of his wife's paramour, Mark Madham. Having learned to drive in the parking lots of SUNY Binghamton, Jeremy progresses to the point at which he drives Bea Sunderman to her home — apocalyptically and aptly called "WORLDS END." Later he and she abscond more literally to that place during their final escape.

Between those deliberately placed events — the last concluding the novel — Jeremy undertakes his regression or divestiture. While loitering in Edmonton before the supposed interview for an academic position, Jeremy spontaneously orders Jill to follow a pick-up truck driven by an Indian and containing a dog sleigh and dogs. That odyssey returns him to Notikeewin, where he is to judge the winter festival's queen. Accosting the Indian, he shouts, "Did you ever hear of Grey Owl?" and "Did you ever run into Grey Owl?" (*GI*, p. 65). Soon after, he enters a snowshoeing race, having never worn snowshoes: "But I remembered the drawings in one of Grey Owl's books, the pencilled notation: 'snowshoe lifts in front only, hanging by toe bridle.'" (*GI*, pp. 81-2). Throwing off clothing which impedes him, he snowshoes doggedly, attempting to discover the "Nothing . . . The first word. The inventor of zero." Even after he crosses the finish line, he continues on until he is tackled by someone who "was trying to pull me down. I was fighting to free myself. Because the magpie was escaping, was flying off, out into space. But someone, shouting, had caught me, was flinging me down in the snow" (*GI*, p. 88).

Kroetsch's novels are strewn with figures who are in flight, literally and metaphorically, from confinement of all kinds. From Hornyak's mad-cap driving, through *But We Are Exiles*, to the ski-jumper in *Gone Indian* who crashes in his attempt to overachieve to Roger Dorck for whom Jeremy substitutes at the carnival, Kroetsch depicts characters who have to be tackled, subdued, brought back to earth as happened to Jeremy. Nevertheless, Jeremy moves indomitably away from the academic-domestic world of Binghamton and its other cloned outposts of culture. Rescued by Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, the Indians whom he had espied in Edmonton, Jeremy is given and dressed in moccasins belonging to the Beavers. This further removes him from the persona he inhabited at the beginning of the novel. Soon after, Jeremy has his dream of absorption into the figure of an Indian, and also into an anti-social Dionysian ecstasy ("He danced himself free . . . dancing . . . until the flesh . . . tore free . . .") (*GI*, p. 101). Apocalyptically, "he dreamed of the scalping of Edmonton. The last city north. The Gateway" (*GI*, p. 103). Also he imagines his run backwards from civilization completed — "He might have been in a cave, the last Stone Age hunter at the end of the Great Hunt, dreaming his final prey.

Thirty thousand years from Europe" (*GI*, p. 103). Insistently comic as well as ironic, Kroetsch has Jeremy experience a final metamorphosis into a buffalo.

Regardless of the bathetic denouement, Jeremy's *rite de passage* is a meaningful one and culminates, again comically but vitally, in a mock death scene, which marks his progression from Ph.D. candidate to "BUFFALO WOMAN," which Jeremy writes on a pad while acting as the judge of the winter festival's beauty pageant. After his presiding at the festival and before sleeping in the coffin in Backstrom's funeral parlour, Jeremy, responding to Jill Sunderman's dictum, "We will dance until dawn," thinks, "I wanted to dance, let me tell you. Just once in my god-damned fucked-up book-spent life, I wanted to dance clean through the night: damn the unwritten papers. Damn the forthcoming exam" (*GI*, p. 123). Not long after his comic entombment, Jeremy, emulating Robert Sunderman and other Kroetsch escapees, arrives at "Worlds End" and carries Bea Sunderman off; in Professor Madham's words, "they rode away seeking NOTHING. They sought NOTHING. They would FLEE everything" (*GI*, p. 156). Their snowmobile is found on the cowcatcher of a locomotive with which it had collided on a trestle bridge; the tape recorder is discovered hanging from one of the pieces of timber in the middle of the bridge. The bodies of Jeremy and Bea, however, are not found. Jeremy thus attains liberation from his modern self.

Dorf's atavistic longings are as compelling as Jeremy's. They find their avatar, not in Grey Owl, but in the smelly woman of the Laspi mudbaths, who along with other women at the spa who seek healing, provide him with his last orgasm, an ecstatic muddy masturbation in which Dorf sees himself as his own baptismal "fount. I cried out, no words, no names, only a pure cry of total joy and total pain" (p. 180). Circumventing language here, Dorf attains an ecstasy free of identity. Because Dorf's full name is William William Dorf, (the patronym itself a short form of Dorfendorf) — a doubling troubling to Dorf who yearns throughout the novel for a unitary, a holistic sense of self and world, he is especially desirous of escape from language's leavings. He even foists one of his given names on a stranger who says he has no name and then takes on "Billy." Not incidentally Dorf has moved into Billy's shack at the end of *Alibi*, trying to live, as it were namelessly.

It is at Laspi, though, that Dorf is most fully realized; despite the fact that he cannot understand the Greek that is spoken around him, he communicates and communes more freely than he ever had been able to. Of himself and his uncomprehending spa partners he says, "We had a language that whole nations might envy" (p. 176). Furthermore, he becomes an autochthonous creature, revived by the mud which he daubs on his body and which is all he wears as clothing. "Muddily human" (p. 172), he has divested himself of the modern self with which Jeremy

Sadness had sadly to contend. Unlike Jeremy, though, Dorf does not "go Indian" indefinitely. Although Deadman Spring contains the ideal spa with its redemptive estuary, Dorf is not ready to die as Jeremy did. He remains, after all, at the end of *Alibi* writing his own alibi, the journal that is the sign of his continuing condition.

Ousted by the smelly woman from his prelinguistic (which makes it a prehensile) haven, he finds his loss, his being decentred, given more impact by his rediscovery of Estuary, panties to the fore ("the hot green flare of her panties" (p. 183)), this time sitting a little away from him in a Greek taverna. Immediately his thoughts return to the smelly woman whom he remembers as a hermaphroditic creature, taking on for him wholeness: "she was and she was not language and idea, dream and reality, good and evil, Satan and God" (p. 184). She represents a pre-articulate, pre-divisive bliss that he had for a short time known in Laspi. Embodying the wholeness, integrity and order that mock Dorf, especially in his role of collector, she makes him metamorphically and momentarily a hermaphrodite by drawing "invisibly, slowly, with one finger, the pattern of an opening on the top of my head" (p. 185). Absorbed in this reminiscence Dorf forgets Estuary, who has disappeared by the time he thinks to glimpse her panties again.

Underpants are not the only item Dorf catalogues through the course of the novel. Indeed, his job as Deemer's collector has caused him to itemize many things. That vocation is congruent with and as estranging as Jeremy's academic forays, his proposed dissertations. Dorf's taxonomic, his structuring enterprises, are vain endeavours to order a heterogeneous, articulated world; his order of things is as stylized, rigid and hierarchical as that delineated in Foucault's ironically titled *The Order of Things*. It is while having sex with Julie in one of Banff's sulphur pools that Dorf first remembers one of his collecting sorties for Deemer. With the key to his locker tied to his phallus by its wrist cord, Dorf thinks of the locks he purchased from a woman in Connecticut:

her locks, some of them, mounted in doors that were mounted in the middle of a large room, doors that led from nowhere to nowhere, the exquisite complexity of their locks available to any who would look, the secret connivance of figure and letter and sign, available, teasing the eye that would know, confounding the mind with the very unwillingness to hide (pp. 14-5).

While ruminating thus, Dorf's phallus (key) is in Julie's vagina (lock) unlocking their desire. Yet that unlocking is juxtaposed to the "doors that lead from nowhere to nowhere" and "the exquisite complexity of their locks." These are locks that can be picked, which give up their secrets ("the secret connivance of figure and letter and sign"). Language, though, is a more intractable medium, with no code that can be deciphered.

Soon after this coupling with Julie, Dorf goes to his hotel room with Karen Strike only to have difficulty with the lock; "the infernal key was worn" (p. 19). In his shower preliminary to their lovemaking, Dorf discovers that "the words HOT and COLD, it turned out, were on the wrong taps over the deep white tub" (p. 21). The scalded penis that results from the transposed signifiers renders him temporarily useless as a lover. Unlocking the secrets of language in which a man is enmeshed is infinitely more difficult than picking door-locks which man has made. As Dorf plangently tells Karen, "People never tell . . . That's the way it is. They can't" (p. 27). In addition, Dorf, musing snidely about his sister's positivism, thinks, "Sylvia regarded herself as the guardian of truth and language, as if there was, somehow, a connection between the two" (p. 86).

Karen, with whom Sylvia gets along well (in that neither is undermined by the ineluctable division of words and things), plays Madham to Dorf's Jeremy. A documentary moviemaker whose current work is "on the forgotten history of forgotten spas" (p. 17), Karen works intransigently to unlock their secrets. Girded with a government grant, she cannot be deterred from making a movie for television, from articulating "The Mechanics of Healing." As Dorf tells the reader in the journal which concludes *Alibi*, it is she who has provided Dorf's story with its patina of order: "Let Karen put in some headings, some chapter titles to trap the unwary eye and lure the customer; she with her gift for compromise" (p. 231). Indomitably she makes films and approaches men; "MAKE DO" is the logo she boldly wears on her t-shirt. She insists on her point of view as tenaciously as Madham insists on his, handling her medium, again, as surely as he does his.

By contract, Dorf is more vulnerable — this despite his skill as a collector. Karen reports that Deemer compliments Dorf in the following way: "You work in circles, in tangents, in loops, in triangles. But you always get to the centre" (p. 97). In fact, he manages to gather everything Deemer seeks; nonetheless, even the insistent Deemer's taxonomic and acquisitive enterprises, for which Dorf is his agent, cannot dispel for Dorf the thought that there is no centre, no source, nothing outside the system that disperses into a coherent pattern. As he waits for Deemer in the perfect spa at Deadman Spring, Dorf thinks, "possibly that emptiness, that absence, that nothing at the centre of the care where water falls from solid rock, is enough is everything" (p. 218). There is neither origin to nor regeneration in any of Dorf's quests for Deemer including the spa assignment; this despite Karen's best efforts at stagemanaging.

Called "Ecstasy, Extasie, Ekstasis," presumably by Karen, the last chapter promises an ecstasy that despite the apparatuses of a few languages eludes inscription in the text. After the lights fail, those in the spa seek to establish contact by calling each other's names: "we named our

strangeness away" (p. 227), god-like names, too, such as "Jehovius" and "Wah" (Yahweh) (p. 227). However, Dorf indicates in his journal that he was violated, sodomized, in the darkened spa. The Adamic naming of the moment is not a transfiguring naming. Articulation remains equivocation. As Dorf queries by Julie's coffin, "And what the hell isn't a message in this world we live in? And what is?" (p. 199). Julie, like Bea Sunderman, senses this condition; in a question reminiscent of Dorf's perspective she asks, "We all live by our alibis, don't we Dorf?" (p. 125). She also asks significantly, "Is the place of cure a place?" (p. 124).

Calgary, Dorf contends, is a gridded city, the dead of that city rest in "rows and patterns" (p. 195); in the Greek town, Sabnika, he sees "a jumble of shops that sold car parts . . . sorted now . . ." (p. 191). Dorf, who is Deemer the absent redeemer's sorter, senses the futility and sterility of this fundamental human activity. In the last entry we have of his diary, he remembers securing a collection of carved and ceramic horses for his employer. In the collection he finds a book of poetry in which the first poem contains the cry of the osprey, "Gwan-Gwan." The book is a translation, as is all language-substitution of sign for sign in a never ending play of signifiers. "Gwan-Gwan," the osprey's sound, though, is what the ospreys he has been observing utter. It is a pre-literate cry that Dorf reveres, one not trapped in the labyrinth, the prison-house, of language. Dorf's happiness, here, refers the reader back to his interaction with an octopus on a littoral. The octopus straddles his groin, in a way making love to him. "It was unimaginably cool, a cool poem I later explained . . . not a study of a poem but a poem itself, finding me" (p. 153).

Dorf's bliss, in the mud, with the octopus, is always an inarticulate, which is to say a non-divisive, one. Nonetheless, Dorf's dilemma is not naively solved. Unlike Jeremy Sadness, who must get out of the world to preserve his integrity, Dorf writes out his story (history) knowing that it is alibi, catachresis. Trapped in a language that is not an efficacious instrument which can write him out of his malaise, Dorf reveals the scepticism all Kroetsch's characters feel towards the illusory quality of language as a transparent medium. He recognizes the impossibility of being the "subject who would supposedly be the absolute origin of his own discourse and would supposedly construct it 'out of nothing,' 'out of whole cloth,' [who] would be creator of the *verbe*, the *verbe* itself."⁸ Only the octopus which disappears "perfectly" into the sea innocently manifests its language.

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8. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in R. Macksey and E. Donato, eds., *The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), p. 256.