ROBERT KROETSCH: CRITICISM IN THE MIDDLE GROUND

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I

> One of the things we seek, I think, is freedom from definition, because definition is as restrictive as cosmology. (*Labyrinths of Voice* 7)

Robert Kroetsch's career as a writer has been marked throughout by his attempts to "kick free" from the many literary traditions and models that threaten to confine his texts. In his novels, Kroetsch has disrupted the conventions of characterization and plot structure in an effort to make the reader a more active participant in the signifying process. In his long poems he has broken down distinctions of genre by mixing lyrical meditations and prosaic reflections, and has erased the distinctions between literary and non-literary discourses by filling his texts with passages from newspapers, seed catalogues, and farmer's diaries. In his essays and interviews—our main source of information about his theoretical positions—Kroetsch makes similar moves to free himself from the logocentric and positivistic impulses of thematic criticism and New criticism, by searching out positions that proclaim a faith in process and multiplicity. His rebellion from the traditional critical stances of Eliot, Leavis, Brooks, and Richards is complete and certain; but Kroetsch is not always as clear about what positions he is rebelling towards. Having passed through stages in which he aligned himself with structuralist and phenomenological schools, Kroetsch has, in the last ten years, drawn closer to post-structuralist theories; though his relationship with those discourses are troubled at best. Robert Lecker has called his methods deconstructionist, and Donna Bennett has linked him with Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, and Barthes, but when we

carefully examine the oppositions which structure his texts, and excavate the assumptions behind them, we discover that Kroetsch's "kicking free" from logocentrism does not entail a complete acceptance of post-structuralist thought.[1]

Kroetsch's search for critical plurality has drawn him towards a playful mix of epistemologies: at times he privileges concepts of presence; more frequently he is drawn towards theories of absence. Indeed, some commentators have characterized Kroetsch's theoretical positions and critical practices through the use of a border metaphor: "If Kroetsch is a borderman it is because he chooses to live in two worlds, both of which he rejects."[2] For Robert Lecker and Linda Hutcheon, Kroetsch's decision to promote multiplicity while recognizing his involvement with logocentrism becomes the essential and defining feature of his criticism:

> Kroetsch's poetic is about the paradox of creative choice, it is about the contradictions in the reading/writing process. If we ignore those contradictions, if we forget Kroetsch's fertile border, we run the risk of naming an author who, like his tricksters, remains powerfully unnamed.[3]

> This double seduction is never resolved in any ecstatic union of poles, however. The tensions remain unresolved.[4]

Both critics develop an image of an ever restless Kroetsch who tirelessly subverts "the one" while never stopping long enough to set down permanent roots of his own:

> Any attempts at totalizing systems of thought or expression are subverted, even at the moment of their installation. The tension between use and abuse is critical: there is no resolution in either direction.[5]

As we shall see, this border metaphor is problematic, but at least it provides an accurate introduction to Kroetsch's habit of structuring his world in dualities: his habit of fostering pluralities and chaos while still being marginally involved in the positivistic structures.

The benefits of tentatively linking Kroetsch to the border metaphor becomes clear as we investigate his interviews and essays and discover that he repeatedly develops his ideas through a series of comparisons and contrasts. As a result his texts are filled with oppositions, in which a first term concerned with a

static vision of the world is rejected in favour of a second more radical term which focuses on process and activity. This movement from stasis to animation is at the base of Kroetsch's desire to replace centrality with chaos, God with Coyote, myth with oral anecdote, metaphor with metonymy, and traditional reading styles with archaeological models.This shift also grounds his vision of critical writing as the continuation of story.

Fundamental to Kroetsch's critical vision is a deep distrust of unitary and singular interpretations of the world. While he recognizes that "the temptation of meaning is upon us all the time" (*Labyrinths of Voice* 15),[6] Kroetsch fears monolithic interpretations of the world because they destroy the diversity essential to life: "We don't want that center which encompasses, which entraps .... One version of entrapment is simply being dead center, being caught in any dead center" (*LV* 130). Given his recognition that "making historical, cultural, or linguistic diversity into one is a present danger"(*LV* 118), it is not surprising that Kroetsch rejects the primary symbols of unity in Western culture: the Garden of Eden, and the Christian/ Hebraic God. In opposition to logocentric visions of the world, Kroetsch endorses a decentering of unity through a recognition of the "total ambiguity" that lies behind language, society, and culture (*LV* 124). Within multiplicity Kroetsch finds the freedom to confront the chaos of experience and in that confrontation discovers the vitality of life. The new emblems of Kroetsch's chaos become the tower of Babel and the trickster Coyote, both of which represent the confusion of a world freed from oppressive cosmologies:

> I now happen to think that it was a great thing, one of the greatest things that has happened to mankind. From the tower of Babel all of a sudden, we gain all the languages we have. (*LV* 116)

> The trickster's a mythic figure that really speaks to me. Partly this is because a trickster breaks down systems. There is no logic to his behaviour, or only an anti-logic. . . . He's energy independent of moral structure and moral interpretation. He's very subversive, very carnivalesque. (*LV* 99-100)

The tyranny of system is also challenged structurally in Kroetsch's essays as he refuses to develop logical arguments, preferring instead to follow the Coyote's anti-logic by assembling papers from series of loosely connected fragments. By rejecting

logical structures, Kroetsch frees his readers into a field of language from which they are able to construct their own significance. In the same way, Kroetsch endorses the forms of parody and satire for they speak by repeating a recognizable form or model while at the same time inserting a critical difference which reminds the reader that "you can't believe that there is only one assertible meaning in that story" (*LV* 89).

In his fictions and in *Labyrinths of Voice*, one of the totalizing forces which Kroetsch works hardest to decenter is the power of myth. As a collection of narratives that has descended through the ages and accumulated a stable set of meanings, Western myth is something Kroetsch finds "frightening because it is entrapping" (*LV* 96). With its predetermined set of meanings and interpretations, myth, especially as it is used by the Moderns, removes the reader's freedom to construct her own meanings and inscribes her within an already defined system. Kroetsch's solution to the totalizing power of myth is not simply to abandon mythic structures and allusions, but rather to break them down by retelling them in a new context. The regeneration of myth through recontextualization is the focus of Kroetsch's concept of the anecdote. As a fresh story which is grounded in a specific local context, and does not yet carry an inherited set of meanings, the patterns of anecdote provide an effective means of retelling/replacing monolithic myths: it "touches upon larger patterns without involving itself with them. . . . Anecdote stays looser than myth because it hasn't compromised itself for a larger pattern. . . . Anecdote frees up the grammar of narrative" (*LV* 115).

Just as Kroetsch uses anecdote to disrupt myth, so he celebrates oral speech as a means of resisting the canons of literature. It is important to note from the beginning that Kroetsch's privileging of the oral over the literary is in no way a rejection of, or even a resistance to, Derrida's assertions that speech is a form of writing. In *Of Grammatology*, his seminal critique of Saussure and Rousseau, Derrida confronts western philosophy's long tradition of viewing speech as a natural, direct communication, and "writing as an oblique representation of representation." The privileging of speech represses certain features of language such as *différance*, which, if recognized, would undermine the metaphysics of presence that have characterized Western thought since the days of Plato.[7] Through his work with the logic of the supplement, Derrida reverses this hierarchy of speech/writing,

repositions speech under the broader category of "*archi-écriture*," and thus demonstrates that all language, be it speech or writing, is part of a nonrepresentational, arbitrary, differential system of signifiers and signifieds.

Kroetsch's celebration of the oral is not a return to a metaphysics of presence in speech; rather he sees, in the oral traditions of the "chant, song, ballad, [and] tall tale" (*LV* 39), and in the "art speech" of such artists as Wiebe and Laurence, a fluidity and transience that foregrounds the deeper absence of all languages.[8] Oppressed by the canon of English literature, with its pressures to maintain a certain body of traditions which he finds "overwhelming" (*LV* 3), Kroetsch turns to the informalities and incompletion of the spoken word to decenter the conventional body of works. The literary/oral binary is an opportunity to violate the canon, to reopen the borders of literature and deny its totalizing impulses: "I keep thinking of Artaud: 'Literature is bullshit.' He didn't say writing was bullshit, he said literature is bullshit, because to make it into literature is to systematize" (*LV* 160). As we shall see, Kroetsch eventually pulls back from the full implications of deconstruction, but at least he agrees with one of Derrida's fundamental deductions: though one can be used to rejuvenate the other, "there is no difference finally between written text and spoken text" (*LV* 39).

At a more concrete level Kroetsch privileges a series of literary techniques which help texts—both critical and fictional—break from the confining practices of the past. For example, rather than encouraging the use of such figures as similes and metaphors—devices which create closed systems by replacing one term with another—Kroetsch stresses the importance of metonymy and synecdoche, figures which move the reader from a part to a whole, initiating him into a chain of signifiers which highlights the material and differential nature of language. Metonymy becomes a means of reminding the reader that reading a text is only a matter of following/choosing a series of traces: thus, instead of the "temptations of 'origins'" inherent in figures of replacement, "we have genealogies that multiply our connections into the past, into the world" (*LV* 117).

As a writer, Kroetsch attempts to foster multiplicity and process by stressing metonymy, anti-logical structures, anecdote, and oral stories. On the other side of the page, he continues to encourage plurality by proposing that readers abandon tradi-

tional practises of interpretation, and adopt an archaeological model of reading which focuses on the fragmented nature of the text.

Though Kroetsch refers to the writings of Michel Foucault as he develops his model of archaeological reading, there is actually very little similarity between the two authors' practises. For Foucault, "archaeology" is a powerful term referring to the process of unlayering the many ideologies and struggles which are imprinted in the text by the social and political powers of their day. Foucault rejects any possibility that language can be separated from the use of power, and thus his textual excavations are primarily concerned with the ideologies at work in the structures.[9] Kroetsch, on the other hand, is not interested in the power structures embedded in texts; indeed, he claims "I'm quite aware of being without ideology" (*LV* 33). Thus archaeological reading practises become a way, not to a deeper understanding of western society, but to empower the reader and make her a more active participant in the signifying process.

In Kroetsch's world all texts, be they postmodern or classic realism, are artifacts of language that are inherently self contradictory and fragmented. While traditional interpretive reading strategies encourage the reader to ignore the seams in a text, Kroetsch encourages us to focus on the textual breaks and the reader, "like the writer, becomes archaeologist, seeking the grammar of the fragments."[10] Like the realm of the oral for the writer, "archaeology, of necessity, involves violence" (EP 111), but out of this violation of unity comes a new freedom: "Archaeology allows [for] the fragmentary nature of the story, against the coercive unity of traditional history. Archaeology allows for discontinuity. It allows the layering. It allows for imaginative speculation." (BAW 76). Kroetsch's archaeological model for reading forces the reader to take control and construct his/her own sets of meanings in much the same way that Roland Barthes encourages the reader to read in a writerly way, to uncover and recover the playfulness of language which rests in every text. The activity of "uncovering," "uncreating," and "unnaming" a text encourages the reader to fully recognize and accept the *jouissance* inherent in the world of differential language. The reader, like the writer, is given greater freedom if he/she accept the second terms of Kroetsch's dualities.

As Robert Kroetsch proselytizes for multiplicity, plurality, process, and chaos, he is well aware that he himself is caught in a contradiction. Each stage of rebellion against the unifying forces, each attempt to critique the logocentric, involves a certain level of complicity with the very forces that are being attacked. In order to encourage the absence and silence of meaning beneath language, Kroetsch must write and speak— involving himself in the traditions of Western discourse. To encourage anti-logic, chaos, and confusion, Kroetsch must, even in his most story-like criticism, retain some semblance of logic order and coherence in order for his message to be effective. The paradox that critique necessarily includes complicity is recognized by Kroetsch as he admits:

> One can't escape by discontinuity itself—it contains the word continuity doesn't it? It says dis/continuity. I am totally involved in a sense of the tradition, but I relate to it by discontinuity. Not to have that is to be just absorbed into tradition or erased by it. (*LV* 26)

As Kroetsch strengthens his vision of multiplicity, many of the traditional boundaries between genres begin to dissolve. Oral speech becomes a model for written text, prose is blended with poetry, and criticism is merged with the larger field of writing. Roland Barthes, in *SZ*, was one of the first post-structuralist critics to envision criticism, not as a metalinguistic supplement hovering over the text, but rather as a creative—even primary—extension of the initial text. Kroetsch echoes these sentiments when he claims:

> I think criticism is really a version of story you see; I think we are telling the story to each other of how we get a story. It is the story of our search for story. That's why criticism is so exciting. Not because it provides answers, but because it is a version of story. (*LV* 30)

Kroetsch himself is aware that not all of his essays live up to these intentions to continue the story without providing answers and conclusions, and in many cases, as Barbara Godard has pointed out, "the deconstructive influence remains essentially a stylistic one."[11] For example, though the nine fragments of "Effing the Ineffable" disrupt the structural logic of an essay, in the last two sections Kroetsch suggests that writers can reach a state of wholeness called "Voice," and then reaffirms this allusion to presence by poetically linking a series of writers with totalizing images

which capture their characters: "Chuff Chuff says Lorna Uher, I am the Great Beetle of Love . . . Chuff Chuff says Robert Kroetsch, I am the Red-Winged Blackbird."[12] Nor, as shall be seen, is this essay alone in its return to rather structuralist and positivistic visions of the world. In a few cases, however, Kroetsch's form and content come together to create a strong story/criticism that resists closure and unified meanings. Kroetsch is often able to walk the border in his essays without stumbling.

Kroetsch's analysis of novels by Sinclair Ross and Willa Cather—"The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction"—was written in 1978, shortly before Kroetsch's interviews showed the marks of his full initiation into deconstructive criticism; but nonetheless this essay does attempt to map out the gender concerns of the novel without providing a solid conclusion. As Jeanette Seim points out, Kroetsch's subversion of the horse/house binary, and his portrayal of women as the controlling figures while men become the characters of compromise, shows a deconstructionist desire to rewrite the primary novels without proclaiming a single interpretation.[13] Similarly, in "Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue" Kroetsch proposes that Canadians attempt to locate their literature though a genealogical model that affirms rather than represses the wide diversity of Canada's many texts. Though the essay is limited by Kroetsch's decision to trace the thematic rather than the formal multiplicities, the analysis does effectively resist any attempts to hierarchize the many novels under consideration, and suggests instead that we view the wide variety of fictions ranging from Ross to Hodgins as part of the "nightmare and welcome dream of Babel."[14] Perhaps the best example of criticism as story would be "For Play and Entrance: the Contemporary Canadian Long Poem," a fragmented and wandering essay which grafts observations about the importance of beginnings, language, delay, and absence in the long poem, with many passages from the texts of contemporary artists. In the end, "For Play and Entrance" functions as much as a creative collage and long poem, as it does as a critical commentary.

Using the metaphor that Kroetsch continually balances and unbalances himself along an epistemological border is very useful in understanding the dualities which obsess him, the writing and reading practices that interest him, and the attempts he has made to produce a new type of response to Canadian texts. However,

the border metaphor does have some disadvantages in that it veils those occasions in Kroetsch's interviews and essays when he attempts to establish himself in a single, stable philosophic space.

II

> I guess I have the absurd hope that if I provide twenty names, then somewhere I will reach a point where they all connect and become more realized or identifiable. (*LV* 93)

As the many oppositions of his interviews and essays demonstrate, Kroetsch has attempted to kick free from the defining, oppressing power of logocentrism. But, while Kroetsch has fled away from the spectres of presence and unity, he is not always clear about what he is heading towards: his relationship with post-structuralist discourses—currently the dominant ideological alternative for those critics interested in overturning logocentric discourses—is troubled and uncertain. In such essays as "The Fear of Prairie Women," "Beyond Nationalism," "For Play and Entrance," and most recently "*Hear Us O Lord* and the Orpheus Occasion," he has ventured productively near post-structuralism, but throughout the rest of his work there are recurring hesitations that complicate the suggestions that Kroetsch happily flits between presence and absence along a borderline. Kroetsch's frequent reservations about the full critical implications of post-Saussurian thought, his attraction to such traditional concepts as mimesis, and his underpinning need to preserve some elements of order, all indicate that Kroetsch has turned the supposed middle border he continually transgresses into a solid middle ground of his own—a position which rejects logocentrism while still resisting the full implications of post structuralism. There is, in Kroetsch's criticism, as Barbara Godard has pointed out, "a metaphysical presence in the valorization of absence," and this presence/position becomes clearer as we push into Kroetsch's hesitations about contemporary criticism, and examine the apriorias of his thought.[15]

The foundation stone of post-structuralist discourse is located in Saussure's discovery that the sign not only consists of a signifier and a signified that are related deferentially and arbitrarily, but that language is completely non-referential, having absolutely no contact with the continuum of reality. At first

Kroetsch appears to accept this definition of the sign as we can see in this exchange with Shirley Neuman:

> *Kroetsch:* I don't think I understood at first how language is separate from what it signifies. I was interested in language as signifying things that were not allowed, were taboo . . . it's only recently that I came to see that what language signified was language.
> *Neuman:* In linguistic terms, every sign refers to another sign. So that in effect, the temptation of meaning . . . means resisting the linguistic convention of the unity of signifier and signified in the sign.
> *Kroetsch:* Yes I think there's a real danger in our society of a simple belief in that conclusion . . . Rudy [Wiebe] has a much stronger belief in that connection that I have for example. (*LV* 143)

As language becomes nonreferential, as signifiers trace only to the next signifier, never fixing on the signified, the possibility of mimesis in literature disappears. Instead of writing so as to capture reality and communicate it to the reader, the "serious writer," in Kroetsch's mind, must now inject a "kind of mockery into our sense of security in the mimetic" (*LV* 200), in order to remind the reader that language can never capture the Truth.

Yet even as Kroetsch appears to endorse the basic tenets of post-structuralism, he sounds notes of resistance—sometimes simply expressed as a sense of unease that the sign is being too quickly divorced from its referent:

> They made a simple equation between literature and reality. I argued for game theory in order to correct that oversimplification. Yet at this point I am somewhat worried about my own sense of divorce from the equation, from mimesis. One is always moving back and forth between positions. (*LV* 73)

> I'm uneasy about my own interest, really troubled. In fact I am uneasy about the whole South American school of magic realism. But I am totally seduced by it . . . that allowing into language of every story possibility, and thus the whole world . . . I'm very uneasy about my own fascination with language as that which is signified. (*LV* 159)

This note of resistance sounds throughout Kroetsch's interviews and finally near the end of *Labyrinth of Voice* he retracts his support for the differential arbitrary sign by regrounding language,

tentatively, in experience. Although the exchange is lengthy it is worth reviewing in its entirety.

> *Kroetsch:* But I think there is also another grounding and for me it's very important to go back and test what I really call ground, using that word deliberately. Ground as something that precedes interpretation or categorization—or what I'm calling meaning. Realizing of course that the act of naming was already an alteration of sorts. . . . I do get satisfaction out of many kinds of accuracy. I go check things compulsively. But I don't return to experience under the illusion that I'm going to write it down as it is. I mean, I'll even go look at the color of the sky when I'm writing.
> *Neuman*: Would it be correct to say then that your obsessive checking of things is an activity you know to be fundamentally meaningless since the language you use has to do with language, not with whatever is out the window.
> *Kroetsch:* Well there's another possibility that for me is very generative: I like the feeling of the physical world; it turns me on to look at a street or to think what does a hand look like? I find energy in the dialectic of language and ground. (*LV* 200-202)

At the end of the exchange Kroetsch has clearly appeared in a newly constructed middle position. While agreeing that language cannot capture experience as it is, he pointedly refuses to endorse Neuman's challenge that language is solely self-referential, insisting instead that some dialectic is possible between the sign and the preinterpretive ground of experience. Such a linkage of language and experience is radically different from such theorists as Barthes, Derrida, and Kristeva, and helps us understand how, in such essays as his 1985 "The Grammar of Silence," Kroetsch can suggest that writers can discover a new native voice by "bringing the signifier and signified back into conjunction through a change in story model," or that a new life is possible when the signified is "joined again with its signifier, and name and object come together."[16] The careful reader of *Labyrinths of Voice* cannot help but notice that while interviewers Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson are deeply grounded in the current French theorists (indeed they are the ones who compiled the many quotes which flood the book), Kroetsch is more reticent about the abysses in post-structuralist epistomologies.

In order to resist the full impact of post-structuralist discourse, while still rejecting the overt logocentrism and unifying power of traditional criticism, Kroetsch constructs a linguistic middle position. Nor are Kroetsch's comments on language the only places where we can see the crystallization of this middle ground. Rather than viewing Kroetsch as treading the border between a series of binaries, it becomes much more productive to look for incidences of triads—textual moments when Kroetsch considers the contrasting ideas of new criticism and deconstruction and responds by constructing his own solid mediating voice.

In the first section of *Labyrinths of Voice*, Robert Kroetsch launches a brief attack against confining interpretative strategies by opposing logocentrism with the concept of game: "The difference between game and cosmology is an important one. Cosmologies invite closure. Game insists on its own fictionality" (*LV* 27). While such critical schools as the Leavisites insist that art represents life, reflecting its real emotions and problems (a position which forces the reader to draw moralistic conclusions about texts), Kroetsch proposes that literature should be approached as a game—a playful make believe world— separated from reality and the necessity of finding clear, firm answers. Initially, Kroetsch goes so far as to connect this playful criticism with the non-representational theory of language he later rejects:

> I play on the edge of convention; I suppose that's one place where I bend the rules. I think I also take the risk of falling right into language: the danger of language taking over. There is an anxiety about language being separate from reality or being its own reality. I think that a kind of erasure of self goes on in fiction making. It's interesting that we play the game isn't it? . . . The two words contradict each other in a significant way. Play resists the necessary rules of game. (*LV* 50)

As a model of criticism that urges readers and writers to throw themselves into the differential fabric of language, the game model draws Kroetsch nearer to his anxiety about nonreferential signifying systems. Yet even as Kroetsch approaches the void here and elsewhere he defends himself, unconsciously, by situating the potential anarchy of play under or within the safer structure of game. For example, at one point Wilson criticizes Leavisite and psychoanalytic criticism which are bound by inflexible rules, and

praises deconstruction for being "an informal game, such as children play on playgrounds where they simply kick the ball this way and that, without any anticipated goal" (*LV* 63-64). Kroetsch attempts to recuperate a sense of order not by contradicting Wilson, but by drawing an analogy. He proposes that "Surrealist literature is also a kind of informal play," in which rules " do not seem to be operating," however, "Surrealism, like all writing is true playing. By the time you write the work, you have a game plan" (*LV* 64). The potential purposelessness of surreal play is confined by Kroetsch within the structures of planned rules.

As the violence of play is contained Kroetsch begins to see, within the theory of games, the possibility of resurrecting the concept of mimesis. Just as he reconnected language to experience through the positing of a preinterpretive ground, so he suggests that game, while unable to represent the true substance of the real, may imitate the processes of the real. Literature as game cannot reflect real emotions, but may be able to enact the anxiety of people caught in the games of their lives:

> First of all, game is seen as a preparation for life. If we look at children playing, or at animals playing, there is a kind of mimetic function at a further remove. It is almost a structuralist parallel, isn't it? (*LV* 64)

> 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, by the paradox of its differences from life, again becomes mimetic. We are all in games where we can't quite perceive the rules. (*LV* 68)

By situating "games" within a framework of mimesis, Kroetsch displays a positivistic impulse which arises again at the end of *Labyrinths of Voice* and in the essay "Carnival and Violence: A Meditation," when he endorses the theories of Bakhtin.

For a critic like Kroetsch, who is looking for the middle ground between logocentrism and *différance*, Bakhtin's notion of the carnival is a very attractive option. In his work on nineteenth century novelists, Bakhtin develops the theory that fiction grew, not out of the romance patterns of the middle ages (a theory that suggests the novel is an essentially closed genre), but rather from the prose satires and parodies of the seventeenth century (a position that views the novel as inherently disruptive and ideologically challenging form). While shying away from Bakhtin's Marxist

ideology, Kroetsch cleaves to the concept of "the carnivalesque" in which texts, their readers, and even the whole society, sanction a temporary release from the repressive systems of society and indulge in a wild process of celebration and festival. For a critic who has already privileged multiplicity, Babel, Coyote, and anti-logic, the carnival's emphasis on "becoming, change, and renewal," through a "liberation from the prevailing truth and the established order," and through a "suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions," would be enormously attractive.[17] One aspect of carnival that Kroetsch especially supports is the fact that though social structures are threatened they are never in danger of disappearing. As the carnival spreads through language, texts, and society, conventional structures are either: "temporarily collapsed" only to reemerge later when the festival ends (CV 101), "turned upside down and inside out" in the creation of a new society which is then the mirror reflection of its predecessor (CV 99), or in the most violent of occurrences the "carnivalesque is a process of renewal by destruction" (CV 104). The carnivalesque contains a revolutionary impulse in its vision of language as a disruptive force, but in the end Kroetsch ensures that some form of order will be maintained or rebuilt: "We are carnivalized into the possibility of our own being."[18] Neil Randall has pointed out that in his fiction Kroetsch uses the idea of carnival to attack the center, but in his criticism and theory, the carnival is used to retain that center.[19] The logocentric, conventional world can be rejected, but that rejection through carnival need not include support for the opposite extreme of complete chaos and confusion.

Kroetsch's rebellion against centered, monolithic systems is clearly more complex than the border metaphor or his interest in oppositions would initially lead us to believe. His rejection of confining and defining structures is complete, but his revolution does not go as far as the theorists who draw from the writings of Derrida and Foucault. Kroetsch insists on violence in language and through that violence the destruction of modernism, but once a new space is cleared Kroetsch is equally determined to rebuild and retell: "A loose generalization would have it that creation and destruction go hand in hand. But my destruction would have it take the form of trying to make an old story work, for instance having to almost destroy the old story to tell it anew."[20] Once again Kroetsch invokes the conditional 'almost' in order to halt the

process of violence and restart the reconstruction. Robert Kroetsch has made productive use of such language-oriented terms as freeplay, violence, destruction, and decentering, but significantly missing from his critical lexicon is the verb dismantle. Unlike Edward Said who draws from Foucault in order to dismantle hierarchies rather than simply reversing them, Kroetsch insists on decentering only until he has created a space for his own voice, after which the revolutionary fervour subsides. Unlike the American deconstructionists who are distinguished from the New Critics, by Barbara Johnson, by their refusal to reassemble the discovered textual disorder, Kroetsch is tentatively willing to embark on rebuilding projects.[21]

Certainly there is an emerging "metaphysics of presence" in Kroetsch's "valorization of absence," or more precisely a negative hermeneutics, which arises as silence, absence, violence, and chaos all become conditions of the texts rather than processes in the text. The metaphysics of presence are further strengthened as Kroetsch shifts to more positivistic theories such as language's dialectic with ground, game's linkage with mimesis, and carnival's retention of structure. Robert Kroetsch simply refuses to use the *différance* of language to deconstruct texts and leave them unassembled: he must begin his own theoretical and fictional reconstructions.

The theoretical impulse to secure a middle ground inevitably makes its mark on Kroetsch's critical articles. His intentions as stated in *Labyrinths of Voice*, to make criticism into a version of story which provides no answers, begins to change as he attends to his negative hierarchies and his positivistic conceptions of language and game. The Kroetsch who speaks from his middle positions continues to speak against centering critical practises, but instead of using criticism to engage in creative play, he begins to evaluate themes and build structures, a process that involves a level of value judgement as well as a separation of criticism from the art it studies.

An example of Kroetsch's tendency to move from playful criticism towards hierarchical criticism can be seen in his essay "Contemporary Standards in the Canadian Novel," an essay written in 1978 two years before the marks of deconstruction really began to appear in his work. In this article—which reasserts the importance of Richardson, Ross, Buckler, Laurence,

Davies, Ondaatje, Lowry, etc., as essential Canadian novelists—Kroetsch struggles with the issue of developing canons before establishing his own. Though he is "tempted to agree that the only way we can avoid dodging [new literary voices] . . . is by accepting everything," he ultimately concludes that "one of the ways in which we build a culture is by selecting and elaborating a few texts."[22]

Even after deconstructive terms appear in "The Exploding Porcupine: Violence of Form in English Canadian Fiction," Kroetsch continues to treat criticism as a secondary, metalinguistic activity, by establishing a hierarchy of violence in Canadian fictions. Rather than playfully extending the texts in question, Kroetsch's paper evaluates them and constructs three categories: he labels Watson and Ross novelists of disbelief; Wiebe and Hodgins are termed writers of the apocalypse; and finally Ondaatje and Thomas, the most disruptive of the set, are named violent "Gangsters of Love." Kroetsch has succeeded in his rebellion against system and is now able to detail the formal and thematic value of violence in Canadian fiction, but his use of hierarchy signals a conventional vision of criticism underpinning his work.

Similarly, Kroetsch's studies of Moodie, Haliburton, and Carrier, in his essay "Carnival and Violence," show a continuing trend towards using and recuperating the concept of carnival by using it as a thematic guide rather than as a textual practice. By using Bakhtin's theory of carnival as a touchstone, Kroetsch condemns Moodie's conservative outlook, admires Haliburton's ability to reverse orders, and praises Carrier's violence in *La Guerre, Yes Sir*, but fails to disrupt the whole idea of value judgements. The same tame use of criticism can be seen in Kroetsch's analysis of Grove in "The Grammar of Silence: Narrative Pattern in Ethic Writing," an essay which details Grove's logocentric visions of the world but does not attempt to challenge or dismantle the assumptions of the realistic texts.

Robert Kroetsch's ability to form a mediating ground between the confining practices of traditional criticism and the dismantling practises of post-structuralism have given him a unique position in Canadian letters. As a writer of novels and poems, Kroetsch has made the most of his rebellion from unity, and has created a series of texts which force the reader to participate in the

signifying process. As a writer of articles and a participant in interviews, Kroetsch may, at times, fall short of his own goal to erase the boundaries between commentary and art, but he has nonetheless articulated an innovative position from which he has made these major contributions to our understanding of contemporary Canadian fiction and poetry. Robert Kroetsch has resisted the full impact of post-structuralism, but he has constructed a very strong postmodern position from which he will continue to decenter and disrupt Canadian traditions.

NOTES

[1] Robert Lecker, "Bordering On: Robert Kroetsch's Aesthetic," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 17. 3 (Fall 1982): 132.

Donna Bennett, "Weathercock: The Directions of Report," *Essays on Robert Kroetsch, Open Letter* 5th ser. 8-9 (Summer/Fall 1984): 138-139.

[2] Lecker, 127.

[3] Lecker, 133.

[4] Linda Hutcheon, "Seeing Double: Concluding with Kroetsch," *The Canadian Postmodern* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988) 163.

[5] Hutcheon, 183.

[6] Robert Kroetsch, *Labyrinths of Voice*, eds. Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982). Hereafter referred to as *LV*.

[7] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G.C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1974). For a very brief but clear introduction to Derrida's thoughts see: Jonathan Culler, "Jacques Derrida," *Structuralism and Since*, ed. John Sturrock (New York: Oxford UP, 1979).

[8] Robert Kroetsch,"On Being an Alberta Writer," orig. pub. 1980, rpt. in "Essays," *Open Letter*, eds. Frank Davey and b.p. Nichol, 5th ser. 4 (Spring 1983): 75. Hereafter referred to as BAW.

[9] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971).

[10] Robert Kroetsch, "The Exploding Porcupine: Violence of Form in English Canadian Fiction," orig. pub. 1980. rpt. in *The Lovely Treachery of Words* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1989) 112. Hereafter referred to as EP.

[11] Barbara Godard, "Other Fictions: Robert Kroetsch's Criticism," *Essays on Robert Kroetsch, Open Letter* 5th ser. 8-9, (Summer/Fall 1984): 18.

[12] Robert Kroetsch, "Effing the Ineffable," orig. pub. in 1976, rpt. in "Essays," *Open Letter*, eds. Frank Davey and b.p. Nichol, 5th ser. 4 (Spring 1983): 24. Hereafter reffered to as EI.

[13] Jeanette Seim, "Horses and Houses," *Essays on Robert Kroetsch, Open Letter*, 5th Ser. 8-9 (Summer/Fall 1984).

[14] Robert Kroetsch, "Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue," orig. pub. in 1981, rpt. in *The Lovely Treachery of Words* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1989) 71. Hereafter referred to as BN.

[15] Godard, 17.

[16] Robert Kroetsch, "The Grammar of Silence: Narrative Pattern in Ethnic Writing," *Canadian Literature* 106 (Fall 1985): 71, 74. Hereafter referred to as GS.

[17] Robert Kroetsch,"Carnival and Violence: A Meditation," orig. pub. in 1982, rpt. in *The Lovely Treachery of Words* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1989) 96. Hereafter referred to as CV.

[18] Robert Kroetsch, "Learning the Hero from Northrop Frye," *The Lovely Treachery of Words* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1989) 160.

[19] Neil Randall, "Carnival and Intertext: Humour in *What the Crow Said* and *The Studhorse Man*," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 14. 1 (1989).

[20] Robert Kroetsch, "Uncovering our Dream World: An Interview with Robert Kroetsch," eds. Robert Enright and Dennis Cooley, *Essays in Canadian Writing* 18-19 (Summer/Fall 1980): 28.

[21] Godard, 17.

[22] Robert Kroetsch, "Contemporary Standards in the Canadian Novel," orig. pub. in 1978, rpt. in "Essays," *Open Letter*, eds. Frank Davey and b.p. Nichol, 5th ser. 4 (Spring 1983): 39-40.

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