

Rescaling Robert Kroetsch

A Reading across Communities, Borders, and Practices

Robert Kroetsch has had a tremendous influence on Canadian writing. Kroetsch's insistence on local pride has been taken up by writers from many parts of Canada—beginning in earnest in the 1970s and continuing to this day; so many scholarly papers have been published about his work (in Canada and in Europe, as well as numerous conferences dedicated to it) that it is difficult to represent their breadth in one volume such as this.

—Nicole Markotić, *Robert Kroetsch: Essays on His Works*

Thus Nicole Markotić opens her volume on the Canadian literary legacy of Robert Kroetsch, a volume that gathers some of the best critical voices on Kroetsch's influence. Any reader modestly familiar with Kroetsch's literary fame cannot but agree with Markotić's stance. Exploring why Kroetsch may be more famous in Europe—even though he has not influenced European literature—would make for an interesting topic, and would require a study of the funding of Canadian literary studies in European universities, but it is outside the purview of this essay. Instead, reflecting on the possible reasons why Kroetsch is not better known or more influential on American literature is of import here, since so much of Kroetsch's poetry organically aligns with what has been done by poets across the border. However, there is not much American criticism devoted to Kroetsch's contributions to American poetics, and this is unfortunate to say the least. How literature, and poetry in particular, are anthologized and canonized is part and parcel of the problem, of course, and, in Kroetsch's case, a lot of the blame falls on US poetry scholarship. Looking at the American context, Christopher Beach laments the "continued polarization or even balkanization of the poetic field . . . leaving many deserving poets within what [Ron] Silliman calls 'the ranks of the disappeared'" (Beach 8). In the US, Kroetsch can be said to belong to this rank. The "balkanization of the poetic field" mentioned by Beach brings into view the operations in reading in which, as literary critics, we engage, and

the communities that we help establish through our readings. In this paper, I engage with Kroetsch from a comparative perspective that highlights points of connection between different intra- and inter-national intellectual communities and poetic practices.

In *Poetic Community*, Stephen Voyle argues that

some of the most significant practices in contemporary poetry—projectivism, “nation language,” concrete and sound poetries, the “new sentence,” aleatoric and constraint writing, even confessional verse—occurred *generatively and collectively*, through a process that involved many poets adapting and transforming a poetics to which they contributed (5, emphasis mine).

Voyle uses a comparative approach to bring together four distinct groups of poets active in different parts of the world in the Cold War years—the Black Mountain College in rural North Carolina, the cosmopolitan Toronto Research Group, the Caribbean Artists Movement between London and the Caribbean, and the Women’s Literary Movement between Europe and the US. What is refreshing about Voyle’s approach is how the concept of *poetic community* is understood as a *shared practice of poetry* that expresses itself within a specific historical and social milieu, i.e., through readings, journal editing, lectures. He shows how geographically and ideologically distant groups of artists were understanding and practising poetry in very compatible ways between the 1950s and the 1990s, and how their larger communal experience is often made invisible by our common—and institutionalized—ways of reading. Literature scholars traditionally rely on the distinctness of nations and/or languages. That is how we organize literary histories (Italian, English, German, French, etc.), literature anthologies, and course syllabi. In the case of Canadian literature, the language division within the nation marks the separation between francophone and anglophone literatures, and comparative studies of anglophone Canadian and francophone literatures are quite rare. One such study, Caroline Bayard’s *The New Poetics in Canada and Québec* (1989), still stands out as one of the most thorough and valuable explorations of poetic forms in twentieth-century Canada and a great model for a Canadian comparative literature. Although Bayard’s and Voyle’s books are about thirty years apart, they share a comparative approach to reading literary movements horizontally, with a focus on poetic forms rather than national constructs, and therefore prove particularly useful to reconsider a literary icon as complex and multi-voiced as Kroetsch posited at the intersection between different traditions that were extremely generative on both sides of the border and that, collectively, participated in postmodern practices.

Reading Kroetsch as a postmodern writer, as many have done, imposes by default a transnational model of understanding. If, in fact, Kroetsch's works performed an invaluable cultural function to establish a sense of a literary community—Canada- and Prairie-centric—at the same time, his involvement as a critic and a journal editor produced a counter-hermeneutics that set Canadian literature forcefully against the backdrop of world literature. The region Kroetsch is associated with (the Prairies), and the genre that defines his poetic production—the long (or never-ending) long poem—can be seen as North American in a large sense, and the same, in fact, can be said about Kroetsch's critical corpus. Linda Hutcheon famously dubbed Kroetsch “Mr. Canadian Postmodern” for the multisidedness of his intellectual intervention:

In his novels he has radically problematized the notions of creativity and commentary. . . . In his critical essays Kroetsch deliberately subverts academic convention: They are willfully fragmentary, discontinuous, asystematic, incomplete—and provocative because of this. . . . Kroetsch is at the paradoxical centre of the decentered phenomenon called postmodernism: as novelist, poet, critic, teacher, mentor and clown. (160-62)

In particular, Kroetsch's poetic corpus, for the way in which it organically aligns with the leading poetic movements of his time—from Charles Olson's *field composition* (honoured in the very title of Kroetsch's never-ending long poem), the Black Mountain College teaching and writing experiments, and the West Coast *TISH* experiences, to the formal experimentalism of concrete and conceptual poetics—places him as a seminal cross-border figure in terms of late-twentieth-century poetics in North America.

In this paper I look at three communities I consider essential to understanding Kroetsch's poetry. The first is the cross-border community of North American postmodernism during the Vietnam War years that coalesced around the journal *boundary 2* and its engagement with European theory and political activism. The second group is the Prairie writers community and the network of friends with whom Kroetsch was in constant dialogue throughout his career. And the third is the “transgeographic community” (Beach, 5) of like-minded poets, influenced by Charles Olson, who played an important role in pluralizing the forms and the themes of poetry in North America in the 1960s and 1970s.

Writing about Kroetsch outside of the Canadian national framework represents an obvious challenge for me as a critic, for this is a writer who played a pivotal role in the definition of a Canadian aesthetics from the mid-1960s

throughout the first decade of our century. However, it is an intriguing challenge, as it allows me to re-read Kroetsch against a different background, spelling out connections and alliances that go beyond the Canadian literary framework within which Kroetsch is usually studied. My reading originates from the conviction that the poetry of Robert Kroetsch has not yet received a fair and comprehensive assessment within the larger field of North American poetry studies, and that such an operation is simply overdue.

1. *boundary 2*: A Cross-Border Postmodernism

[T]he title had its “origins” in the sense of crossing over, of crossing a border into the unknown, or entering into a “period” which was not really a period but which was precipitated by the end of Modernism.

—Bové, “A Conversation with William V. Spanos”

Kroetsch’s exposure to poststructuralist theory and his active engagement with the decentering operations of postmodernism would be inconceivable without considering his experience as co-editor of *boundary 2* with William Spanos at SUNY, Binghamton, between 1972 and 1978. *boundary 2: a journal of postmodern literature* was the first literary magazine to use the term *postmodern* in its title. The editors read the word as “a kind of rejection, an attack, an undermining of the aesthetic formalism and conservative politics of the New Criticism” (Bové 21). It was Charles Olson who, in the early 1950s, had started using the term in his writing and lectures at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Postmodernism for him pointed to the need to debunk the rationalistic grids of liberal humanism in order to recapture the possibility of a pristine experience of the world (Bertens 20). From the oral poetry of Olson, Creeley, Antin, and Rothenberg, a new poetic practice would emerge, a practice in which language ceases being the expression of a transcendent self but expresses the subject’s unmediated experience. In the early 1970s in the US, Hans Bertens writes, there developed “a distinctly Heideggerian postmodernism” (22) that found its philosophical ground in Heidegger and its major mouthpiece in *Boundary 2*.

In those years, Kroetsch and Spanos were both working in the English Department at SUNY, Binghamton. They were “ideologically compatible” (Spanos 188) despite their dissimilar readings and interests: Spanos was drawn to the postwar European existential novel, and especially to the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Husserl, and Heidegger; while Kroetsch’s interests floated in the realm of the long poem as it had been articulated by Whitman, Williams, Pound, and Stevens in the US, and

was being reshaped by contemporary writers on both sides of the border such as Dorn, Olson, Creeley, Nichol, Marlatt, Bowering, and Mandel. Other important influences on Kroetsch in this period were the Latin American tradition of magic realism, and the writings of two Canadian critics—Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye—who spoke of the need to provide Canada with a more secure literary identity. Above all else, however, it was their common engagement with Olson and Beckett that provided the shared ground between the *literary* Kroetsch and the *philosophical* Spanos.

A cursory look at some of the first issues of the journal and at the years in which these topics were explored gives an idea of the groundbreaking project that *boundary 2* represented: *A Symposium* (1972); *Charles Olson: Essays, Reminiscences, Reviews* (1973); *A Special Issue on Contemporary Greek Writing* (1973); *A Canadian Issue* (1974); *The Oral Impulse in Contemporary American Poetry* (1975); *Martin Heidegger and Literature* (1976). It also reveals the main directions the journal was embracing in its early years: on the one hand, a commitment to establishing a dialogue between Canada and US writing, from the open forms of poetry after Williams and Olson to experimental fiction in the works of Barth, Pynchon, and Nabokov; on the other hand, a more international commitment to European theories understood as part of the emancipatory politics of the journal.¹

Within this framework, *boundary 2*'s Canadian issue, published in 1974, provides an interesting case study for the exploration of the postmodern cross-border community and its importance in shaping Kroetsch's own literary self-consciousness. The Canadian issue of *boundary 2* marked an unprecedented occurrence in US literary history. Kroetsch showed what the border hid in terms of intellectual possibilities by making Canadian literature and criticism visible to the American reading public as having their own specificity and constituting a lively intellectual community. He pointed to a fertile cross-pollination of interests, concerns, and styles, while remaining keenly aware of the differences between the US and the Canadian literary establishments and dominant modes. Thinking in terms of intellectual community provides an ideal angle to understand how this issue worked and what it represented. As a matter of fact, while he figured as the general editor, Kroetsch turned to his colleagues in Canada for the actual editorial work: Eli Mandel oversaw the selection of criticism, Margaret Atwood and Warren Tallman selected the poetry and were listed as guest editors, while the two world-renowned Canadian critics of the time—Frye and McLuhan—were discussed in a section called "Context," their roles

reviewed, respectively, by George Woodcock and Wilfred Watson. The Foreword marked Kroetsch's famous first words as a critic, recording his attempt to locate and define the Canadianness embedded in the works produced by contemporary poets and novelists north of the border: "The country that invented Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye did so by not ever being Modern" (*A Canadian Issue* 1). Kroetsch's project to tell a different story of Canadian literature started with this bold statement and would be developed, from that moment onward, in his critical essays.

It is within this context that Robert Kroetsch's creative work assumes its relevance: he used the decentering pull of postmodern theories as "a provocative force" (Pache 67) to push the boundaries between reading/criticism and writing, regionalism, and nationalism, the local and the global. This would not have been possible without the *boundary 2* experience and the affiliation with the postmodern writers and critics around the journal. *boundary 2* was a formative *and* generative experience for Kroetsch. More than that, it constituted one of Kroetsch's intellectual communities that provided him with a comparative framework to establish a dialogue between what Canadian writers and what writers elsewhere were doing. In 1974, he wrote to Spanos:

There is a danger in too narrow a definition. I suppose I even feel there is a danger in definition itself. *Exploration is the key: not to make boundaries but to cross them.* And as you well know, that involves some desperate risking. . . . (Letter to Spanos, June 12, 1974, emphasis mine).

In the end, if postmodernism identified to Kroetsch and Spanos a global revolutionary movement set to debunk any form of dominant thinking, that "desperate risking" is indeed what Kroetsch would do in his own writing.

2. Postmodern Practices: From the Prairies to the West Coast

Kroetsch's poetics and his cultural affiliations are of a piece. His abiding love for the local and his respect for contemporary theory prompt him into a body of writing that bears his unmistakable signature and his peculiar brand of prairie postmodernism.

—Dennis Cooley, *The Home Place: Essays on Robert Kroetsch's Poetry*

Kroetsch's relationships with his fellow Prairie writers is wrought into his long poems, explored in his critical essays and in the many interviews, and well documented in the critical literature about the writer, not to mention the vast body of correspondence between Kroetsch and his friends. Dennis Cooley's reading of Kroetsch's poetry in *The Home Place* provides a brilliant—and loving—study of Kroetsch's poetics hand-in-hand with a

rich and detailed contextualization of how that poetics came into being. Cooley—a lifelong friend and one of the most active members of the Prairie community of writers, artists, and academics Kroetsch belonged to—reads Kroetsch’s poetry in light of the writer’s progressive uncovering of the Canadian Prairies as *home*. Writing about *Seed Catalogue*, Cooley notes that Kroetsch “provides three different ways of naming ‘the home place.’ They enact Kroetsch’s attempts, in *Seed Catalogue* and elsewhere, to uncover what has been obscured in his world” (138-39).

The Prairies are indeed, as Cooley maintains, the *primary* locale animating Kroetsch’s creative energy; however, they are not the *necessary* locale for its reading. Kroetsch was a pivotal figure in the 1970s poetry scene in English-speaking Canada, not just in the Prairies, as he was able to render, through his collected work, the shared existential experience of his generation. As Susan Rudy writes, with his poems *The Ledger* (1975) and *Seed Catalogue* (1977), “Kroetsch redefined the long poem, the work of the poet, and the function of poetry” (115). So, while it is true that the early long poems (*The Stone Hammer Poems*, *The Ledger*, and *Seed Catalogue*) deal with the home place, the tension that generates the desire to write stems from a profound and existential feeling of dislocation, as Dennis Cooley points out. It is not accidental, thus, that the poems forming *Completed Field Notes* find one of their main motifs in the journey; yet the poet’s is not a journey of nostalgia for, and return to, a lost home place but rather of meditation on the existential condition of homelessness of the contemporary (North American) poet. In *Completed Field Notes*, home is the place of familiarity of touch and taste, but it is also, intensely, the place where absence manifests itself to the poet’s consciousness for the first time. Additionally, home is the place of storytelling, and therefore the place where the poetic vocation of the writer shaped itself. In *The Stone Hammer Poems*, the link to the lost home place is provided by a stone hammer that is used as a paperweight by the writer and that figuratively metamorphoses into the poem being written; in *The Ledger*, it is an old ledger that performs the same function of both localizing the poem and the poet while opening its metaphors to include meditations on history, time, and writing. In “Mile Zero,” the operations defining the poetic process are displayed by the layout of the poem: the page on the right contains the central poem, inspired by the trip that the poet is taking through western Canada, while a black arrow moves backward along a diagonal line to the notes about the parts that were erased from the main poem, that is to say, to the traces of the compositional

process contained in the page on the left. The poem that is visible on the page is not only there in words to be read, but it also creates a figurative space to be seen. The lines below are from the left-page poem:

: being some account of a journey through
western Canada in the dead of six nights

I.

I looked at the dust
on the police car hood.
I looked around the horizon.
(Insert here passage on
nature—

try: The sun was blight
enough for the wild rose.
A musky flavour on the milk
foretold the cracked earth ...

try: One crow foresaw my fright,
leaned out of the scalding
air, and ate a grasshopper's
warning ...

try: A whirlwind of gulls
burned the black field white,
burned white the dark ploughman
and the coming night ...)

I AM A SIMPLE POET
I wrote in the dust
On the police car hood. (126)

Kroetsch's reflection on the process of artistic creation and reception provides the connecting ground to other writers and other communities. One author, in particular, is mentioned repeatedly in Kroetsch's writing, criticism, letters, and interviews as marking an inevitable influence on his idea of poetry and of the postmodern intellectual. That unavoidable figure was Charles Olson, the author of "Projective Verse" and *The Maximus Poems*, the rector of Black Mountain College in North Carolina between 1951 and 1956, and one of the first intellectuals to use the term postmodern in his writings and in his lectures to describe a "Heideggerian poetic practice that breaks with the western rationalist tradition and . . . allows a primordial experience of the world" (Bertens 21). If Olson's "Projective Verse" was among the readings shared by Spanos and Kroetsch in their early years, it was his *Maximus Poems* that pointed, for Kroetsch and for many poets

of his generation, to a new way of writing and a new way of being a poet. Interestingly, Kroetsch came to reading the poetries of Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Robert Creeley through his conversations with the poets of the *TISH* group in Vancouver, particularly George Bowering and Fred Wah.² Pauline Butling describes *TISH: A Poetry Newsletter, Vancouver*, founded in 1961, as “one of the main socio/historical sites for the development of radical poetics in English Canada in the 1960s” (“*TISH*” 49). It was the closest collective, ideologically, to Black Mountain College poetics. The Black Mountain idea of poetry arrived in Canada through Robert Duncan via a series of invited lectures at The University of British Columbia, but also through Donald Allen’s anthology *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, which Warren Tallman put on his reading list for his course Studies of English Poetry at UBC in 1960-1961. The 1963 summer poetry workshop organized at UBC by Tallman brought the two communities together: Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, Margaret Avison, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan participated as the instructors and many Canadian poets participated in the workshop itself. However, as Eli Mandel points out about the *TISH* mandate: “[T]hey were not poets of American poetics; they were poets of Vancouver” (“Talking West” 29). Along the same line, Kroetsch was quintessentially a Prairie poet, but in the forms through which he turned the Prairies into poetry, he was *not* a Prairie poet, but a North American poet, participating in the “network of multiple, asymmetrical, interconnected nodes” that, as Butling writes (“One Potato” 29), describes the radical poetics field of the 1960s and 1970s.

The wavering between an idea of form, read and learned in Williams, Olson, and Stevens, and the new openings of structure that current poets—from the Toronto Research Group to the *TISH* collective—were showing exerted a major role in Kroetsch’s evolution as a writer, and particularly as a poet. What Kroetsch was doing was not only claiming a right to speak as a Canadian Westerner, but also drawing attention to the form, rather than the themes, that writing could assume.

That the whole of Kroetsch’s art is conceived—as is the final book that he writes, with the coalescence of his poetry, fiction, and criticism—as a crossbreed book, androgynous in its appropriation of ways and styles from the various literary genres, is one reason for it being called postmodern. The ways in which the author pursues this formal enterprise are many and diverse and explain his polymorphous idea of writing and the many forms that he explored: fiction and non-fiction, (long) poetry, literary criticism and literary

theory, travel writing. Among the techniques used to break away from formal constrictions are the inclusion, explicit or implicit, of other texts; allusion to the socio-cultural contexts outside the book; use of vernacular idiom; deliberate intrusion of nonsense into the poem; abundance of visual play with language, of puns, or hyperbolic and digressive narrative strategies. Thus, Kroetsch's poetic language, growing out of an oblique relation to cultural and literary authorities, works through absence and resistance while it attempts a new language. It is a poetic method that returns continually to the poet himself and to his personal experiences of difference. When he looks for foremothers and forefathers, Kroetsch finds settlers and homesteaders keeping records of their daily activities, and when he looks to foreign models, he reveals his position as a disinherited son of their cultures. And so, he fools around: with words by playing with prefixes, hyphens, suffixes (*un-hide, un-write, muse/if, book-ness*); with genres, like the novel of the West, the impossible autobiography, the never-ending long poem; or with themes like identity—national, regional, sexual—history, place. To what an extent his experience of cultural and poetic dispossession can be read as quintessentially Canadian, or postmodern and transnational, is a question that only a comparative reading of Kroetsch can yield.

Like Olson, Stevens, and Rothenberg, Kroetsch makes place and language the central issues governing the form of his poetry. And, following Olson's model, one perception moves on to another, pulling the reader through a tunnel where words flicker and flash out of assonance and sense, where phrases clip and abandon syntax, voices weave in and out of prosaic statement, and the structure of the single poem falls apart. The final poem, *Completed Field Notes*, is not to be read primarily in isolated sections, but as a simultaneity of twenty instances, the twenty long poems it contains. The lifelong poem—*Completed Field Notes*—becomes, then, a configurative field in which the multiple directions taken by its single elements find a coherence in the potentiality provided by a unified reading.

3. Kroetsch's North American Epic

This is the problem which any poet who departs from closed form is specially confronted by. And it involves a whole series of new recognitions. From the moment he ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION—puts himself in the open—he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself. Thus he has to behave, and be, instant by instant, aware of some several forces just now beginning to be examined. (It is much more, for example, this

push, than simply such a one as Pound put, so wisely, to get us started: “the musical phrase,” go by it, boys, rather than by, the metronome.)

—Charles Olson, “Projective Verse”

Olson, I think, is the central figure of postmodern poetics. Because of his difficulty, Olson’s direct influence has not been very great outside limited circles.

—Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple*

Kroetsch can be said to have written the postmodern epic for the Canadian Prairies, and the poems composing this epic are all the poem-series included in his *Completed Field Notes*, with *The Hornbooks of Rita K* functioning as the epilogue. As a collective work, *Completed Field Notes* is divided into several sections: “Stone Hammer Poem” makes up the prologue, “Field Notes” occupies the first section, “Advice to My Friends” constitutes the second, and “Country & Western” the third. *The Hornbooks of Rita K* picks up from where the *Completed Field Notes* left off: the collection ends with the author’s note containing the long poem’s dedication to “Ishtar,” the reader “towards whom one, always, writes” (*Completed* 270), and this emphasis on the reader, on the centrality of the experience of reading in poetry, becomes the major motif in the *Hornbooks of Rita K*.

Within the general economy of Kroetsch’s epic, each poem sequence marks a specific step in the process of the collective poem, both a continuation of and a disjunction from what has gone on before. There is always a narrative engine in Kroetsch’s texts, an urge to tell a story as their central motive, so the poems are all interrelated by the overarching metaphor of the writer-as-archaeologist’s field notes, inscribing the names of people, animals, and places in his own text, but also, and well-fitting James Miller’s definition of the American epic, “resonant with interrelated images and allusions” (297). The writing process in North America, in one of its regional contexts—the Prairies—is recorded as it happens, and related to texts and authors from other regions and other times in the attempt to write out of the forgetfulness of a post-settler culture. *Seed Catalogue* opens—famously—with these lines: “Start: with an invocation / Invoke—” (25). And on the next page, we read: “A strange muse: forgetfulness” (26). The Prairies are not idealized: they embody absence as an ontological experience. Kroetsch was not alone in his exploration of absence. Robert Creeley, for instance, turns to absence, emptiness, and the void as the generative energy of his poetry: “All I knew or know / Began with this— / Emptiness” (*Pieces* 58). Like many of his contemporaries, Kroetsch seeks to find his identity in the ordinary and familiar objects around him. At the same time, he does not let his readers forget that absence is all around, that his own attempts at a new poetry are:

. . . only a scarred
page, a spoor of wording
a reduction to mere black

and white/a pile of rabbit
turds . . . (*Seed* 33)

The whiteness of the page surrounding the lines reminds us that the void is all around us, as a condition of our living and our self-consciousness. Kroetsch's poetry steals a smile from its readers, but it's a melancholic smile, one that recognizes the ironic distance between the Prairies and what they are not:

The absence of the Parthenon, not to mention the Cathédrale de Chartres (*Seed* 25)

Typography and semantics are fused like in the absence quotation above: the layout of the lines on the page, the breaking up of the word *Cathédrale*, in French, make it stand out: the familiarity of the Parthenon leads to the partial familiarity of the word cathedral, but the accent and silent *e* at the end of the word make the foreignness of the building—its magnificence, the actual distance from the place of writing—immanent and palpable in the moment of reading. In general terms, the syntax of the poem, in *Completed Field Notes*, is broken through delay, parataxis, free association, erasure, superimposition, wordplay. The line extends in a continuous flow from left margin to right margin, or else, it is broken down, in fragments, the white of the page engulfing the vertical trickling down of words. No metrical convention is followed; the line seems to *just happen* in a certain way, absorbing as it goes maps, dictionary entries, quotations from other poets, letters, scraps of journal articles, ads, tombstone inscriptions.

As one of his later books, *The Hornbooks of Rita K* (2001) marks a culmination of the various techniques that have permeated Kroetsch's poetry from the beginning. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, in fact, several of Kroetsch's early works were republished with editions that recuperated the original mixed media textuality (Bertacco 2009). I have in mind here especially the twin works *The Ledger* and *Seed Catalogue*, published in book format in 1975 and in 1977, which were re-issued, respectively, in 1997 by Brick Books and in 2004 by Red Deer Press. From the *The Stone Hammer* to the *Hornbooks*, we follow the development of Kroetsch's poetic language from the documentary, anecdotal impulse, aimed at locating the place of writing, to the reflection on the trace left behind by writing, collected in the book, and interpreted by the reader.

It is precisely the way in which it marks the act of reading as its central theme that makes this book the epilogue to *Completed Field Notes*. The book plays with the poet's real name—his initials are the same as Rita Kleinhart's—as the supposed author of the hornbooks. Raymond who puts the hornbooks together—whose name begins with R—describes himself as a reader but is actually the author of the book as well as the writer of some of its portions. All of this erases the poetic persona—the I—of lyric poetry. It stages the Author's final disappearance, his Barthesian death, but it also stages the reader as the archivist and as a central figure in the text. By picking up the book, the reader is picking up the hornbook and finds that the hornbook reflects her image like a mirror.

[hornbook # 4]

The hornbook is itself a book, but a book one page in length. Framed and wearing a handle, covered in transparent horn, it sets out to fool no one. It says its say. Rita Kleinhart seems not to have got a handle on this realization. What she claimed for her poems was exactly that which they did not provide: the clarity of the exact and solitary and visible page. The framed truth, present and unadorned. Not a page for the turning, no, but rather the poem as relentless as a mirror held in the hand. (*Hornbooks* 24)

What we, as readers, see in the texts is a reflection of ourselves and what we are doing: reading. The return to the materiality of poetry—through the use of another object-poetry in this late collection and through the use of images as part of the poetic composition—is powerful. As a poet, Kroetsch is at his best when he is grounded, when his poems sound different from his essays, when he leaves behind his reflexions on linguistics and archaeology and revels in the elation of naming the world as he sees it. “hornbook #19,” which, Raymond informs us, is written on the reverse side of the sheet, does precisely that:

A patch of scarlet mallow appears in each spring in the *grasses* on the edge of the coulee directly in front of my house. That little patch of orange-red blossoms, *emerging* on a dry, south-facing slope, is one of my reasons for living. (*Hornbooks* 36, emphasis mine)

In these four lines, we find the compositional signature of Kroetsch's poetics: the vision is precise and powerful (“the clarity of the exact”), its value conveyed, in concrete, ordinary language, by the plural of grass at the beginning of the second line. The scarlet of the patch blurs into the orange-red blossoms that

“emerge” despite the unfavourable position in which they are planted (grasses, dry, south-faced). With Altieri we could call this a poetics of immanence. At the same time, the poems make us reflect about the implied limits of our visions; they present us with a poetry of the trace, of a flawed, incomplete, subjective, and decentred vision. Self-effacement and cumulative defacings are processes that happen again and again in Kroetsch’s work, and *The Hornbooks of Rita K* is no exception. But the self-destructive process seems to reach its limits, and it might be worth asking why this happens and what it means. As always, with Kroetsch, readings are complicated. And it is with a reflection on reading that I would like to close this essay.

4. Rescaling Robert Kroetsch

Instead of further dividing history into yet smaller and more precisely delineated epochs, critics might choose to trace practices, mapping generative constellations of authors, groups, social spaces, events, texts, and technologies. If one insists upon the connection between experiments in forms of writing and experiments in forms of living, it is because poetry does.

—Stephen Voyle, *Poetic Community*

[hornbook #28]

A poem is an empty house.

[Stranger, you must enter, then knock.]

—Robert Kroetsch, *The Hornbooks of Rita K*

What turns linguistic innovation into a literary event, rather than just a fun game to play (and there indeed is a lot of fooling around in all of Kroetsch’s works!), is the event of reading—the moment, that is, in which the reader walks through that back door into Rita’s house and reads the stacks of papers that she has left behind and tries to articulate the possibilities of meaning and feeling conveyed by the text. This kind of experience of the literary text is described by Derek Attridge in *The Singularity of Literature* as an invitation to “ideas and emotions, or conceptual possibilities that had hitherto been impossible—impossible because the status quo (cognitive, affective, ethical) depended on their exclusion” (59).

Readers of *The Hornbooks of Rita K* can relate very intensely to this experience of *invitation into the unknown*, as conceptual possibilities are unlocked by the strange way the poem holds together. In reading, we have the responsibility to make new meanings and new feelings happen through our own acts of interpretation. The emphasis falls on our responsibility in the meaning-making process enacted by the act of reading: What are the

changes that Kroetsch brought to poetic form? And what is the best literary framework to read them: a national or a transnational one?

The answer to the first question is straightforward: Kroetsch's texts bring to the page a poetry that does not believe in first times, poetry as abrasively honest about its limitations as a tool of knowledge, but aware of its power to move its readers beyond rational discourse. The second question is still open: Kroetsch's critical and literary legacies are crucial to read Canadian literature, but Kroetsch's poetry also imposes a conversation with other—cross-border—communities to read late-twentieth-century poetry in North America.

NOTES

- 1 The political strain of the journal was never consistently articulated and it represents one of the main reasons for the *failure* of Spanos and Kroetsch's original project. It is surprising, actually, when we consider the inaugural issues, to see that the editors did not try to limit the political range of thinking about the postmodern of the journal. It is even more surprising to look back at those issues and see no feminist or Black critic represented in the wake of the many liberation movements of the 1960s. In the last editorial piece he wrote for the journal, Spanos admits the failure of *boundary 2* to represent a real "Copernican Revolution" within the intellectual scene in America, and reads it as an effect of the lack of material support on a regular basis which could have won a larger readership. The limited financial resources also imposed a natural resistance to, and a delay in, extending the intellectual horizon of *boundary 2* and thus inhibited the realization of the full potential of the journal. That said, *boundary 2* was able, in its first years of publication, to bring together some of the most fertile minds of the period, whose names range from the critical and theoretical field (Hassan, Altieri, Stimpson, Bloom, Said, Cixous, Starobinski, Barthes) to the literary one (Antin, Rothenberg, Ignatow, Eshleman, Pynchon, Nabokov, Barth, Vonnegut, Barthelme, Robbe-Grillet, Baraka).
- 2 "It's ironic that I discovered these 'distant allies' by reading the poets of the West Coast of Canada," Kroetsch stated (Miki 124).

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