

THE POST-COLONIAL AS DECONSTRUCTION

Land & Language in Kroetsch's "Badlands"

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IT IS COMMONLY ARGUED that early imperial discourses of the New World inscribe an effort to make strange new lands familiar to Eurocentric systems of meaning and understanding.¹ However, conceptualised from the start as the site of the strange, the new lands continued to resist European epistemological appropriation and whatever the imperial's claims to control and knowledge, the sign of the land continued to enter the discourse as a site of the unknown and the resistant.² Now, current criticism often characterises post-colonial writing as constructing *counter-discourses* to the once-dominant imperial discourse, writing against the imperial's inappropriately Eurocentric systems of understanding, and instead writing the land as an element within *local* constructs of meaning and value. But the counter-discursive strategy still shares with the imperial certain basic assumptions about the relations among humans, discourse, and land: both discursive strategies still inscribe a belief that the land, though conceptualised initially as a site of the strange and the resistant, can somehow be controlled and familiarised by discourse, contained within the epistemological system of one discourse or another.³

However, a second, far more radically subversive possibility is available to the post-colonial effort of re-writing the strange land: that of the *deconstructive*. Unlike the counter-discursive, the deconstructive entirely rejects the possibility of achieving a "correct" or "appropriate" rendering of the land in *any* discourse, whether imperial or post-colonial, and it embraces instead the endless strangeness of both land and discourse, interrogating the very capacity of discourse to constitute the land. The sign of the land is conceptualised from the start as the site of resistance to discursive containment, this resistance understood within a larger system by which discourse in general, like the specific discourse of the land, depends upon an initial, irrevocable, and all-affecting assumption of difference, deferral, resistance. Any of the systems of understanding and containing the land, whether in the dominant discourse of the imperial, or in the post-colonial's newer, presumably more appropriate counter-discourses of the land, are based upon an initial experi-

ence of displacement and otherness, and it is this radical strangeness that such contemporary novels as Robert Kroetsch's *Badlands* seem to address in the writing of New World lands. Land and discourse are by definition signs ultimately of strangeness, of the undecidable and the resistant.⁴

In *Badlands*, the dominant image by which this deconstructive impulse works, in connection with the land, is that of *archaeology*. The image works to site the deconstruction of language in the land itself, in that the practice of archaeological excavation, entering the ground, deconstructs the New World myths of identity which have thus far created meaning in the intertextual tradition of post-colonial writing. Because of the nature of this breakdown of myth, language itself comes under scrutiny. Individual myths, along with the larger mythological systems of nation and identity, are broken down so that they can no longer express their appropriate values, even within the limits which they themselves set. The binary oppositions which the myths propose, in order to define their own values, are subverted.⁵ Archaeology, then — the act of entering the land — becomes the practice both by which myths are proposed, and by which these myths are subverted. The archaeological expedition as the reconstruction and retrieval of history, as an act of male heroic self-construction, as a journey in search of sources and origins (and so on), is also a journey of the loss and deconstruction of history, of the subversion of such male heroic myths as Dawe is entered upon, and of a movement away from sources. The land becomes the place where such oppositions, rather than being arranged hierarchically in order to structure meaning and value, are instead brought together and made at once to interact endlessly and undecidably, and eventually to collapse entirely into one another.

What is finally deconstructed are not only the myths of the land, but also the myth, perhaps, of language itself: if the basic structure of binary oppositions — in terms of which the elements of language are defined in relation to each other — are subverted, language itself becomes a problematic medium and practice. The land, as the object of archaeological examination, is written as itself a text, so that its treatment can be read as a discussion about the nature of language and discourse in general. This groundwork of language — groundwork for all the other discourses the novel examines — is itself the site being investigated, excavated, and contaminated.⁶ The archaeological expedition, then, becomes at once a search for and the loss of language. Discourse itself, in spite of all the words of the novel, begins to break down; and within this breakdown, the discursive constructs of land and language must become equally unstable — at the same time as they perform within the discourse as the agent and site of such a breakdown of the Western systems of meaning which they construct.

The archaeological expedition, of course, takes the form of a river trip, flowing downstream on the Red Deer, through the layers of time deposited over millennia of the land's changes. The notion of the river trip as a journey of discovery is a

familiar mythological construction in Canadian self-definition: as told in the proto-texts of Canadian history and identity, the exploration and fur trade narratives, it is largely through river voyages, of course, that Canada was explored, named, and defined. Dawe's journey draws upon the ideologies inherent in these earlier journeys of national self-definition, in this case the defining given the particular form of the search for history and origins. Here, however, such a quest involves the search for dinosaur bones, the remains of dead and extinct creatures: the search for origins, on the basis of which to define the young nation, is the search for the bones of death. The binary oppositions of birth and death, of origins and endings, begin already to be brought into disrupting interaction, so that origins are to be discovered in death, and beginnings are positioned in relation to endings: the myth, for example, whereby national identity was seen to begin with river journeys of exploration, is rewritten as a journey as much into death as into birth.

YET THE PARADOXES of the search for "bones" do not end with this scrambling of the basic life/death opposition. Web participates, however reluctantly, in Dawe's search for dinosaur bones, but his real interest in bones is in the "bone-ons" he is perpetually developing throughout the novel, whether when contemplating Anna Yellowbird's uncertain presence somewhere along the shore they are journeying past,⁷ or discussing the finer points of relationships between humans and snakes (16) or bears (155) or gopher holes (204). His "bone" is generally a central figure, one way or another, in his wild tales of physical and sexual prowess: the "*western yarn[s]*," the exaggerated stories of strength and achievement, which are another element of Western Canadian myth-making (45, Kroetsch's italics). The stories deny in their simple volubility and vigour the death which the dinosaur bones suggests: speaking of his hypothetical death and the coffin he would be buried in, Web protests, "'Bone-on I'm developing now, it'll take them a week to get the lid down'" (16).

Web's exaggerated and endlessly voluble discourse of the "bones" of masculine self-definition — and by connection, of Western Canadian self-definition — opposes Dawe's alternative text of self-definition, of the dinosaur bonebeds, as is most graphically evoked in Tune's dying in the effort to recover the bones of history. Though Tune has thus far not entered fully into the realms of masculine discourse which Web exemplifies, having failed to lose his virginity in the Drumheller whorehouse, his simultaneous admiration for and skepticism about Web's tall tales (his tall tales about tail), suggest that he is coming to understand and appreciate the discourse. As the summer progresses, he is losing his boyish fat and growing into his adult body, in preparation for heading off to that other testing ground for discourses of male self-definition: war. But not having had a chance to experience

fully the pleasures of Web's discourse of "bones," he is subsumed by Dawe's alternative discourse of bones, sacrificed to Dawe's fanatical desire for fame and fortune as a paleontologist:

From seventy million years deep in the black matrix of the past, the bones must leap to light. Must loose themselves from the bentonite. Must make their finders rich and famous. The bones that must satisfy their finders. (31)

However, Dawe's quest for self-definition, through the search for origins in the bones of dead dinosaurs, is not so different from Web's constant self-definition through his repeated, endlessly elaborated adventures with his "bones" — as the reference to satisfaction suggests, in the above quotation. Both searches demand that the bones — the discourses — satisfy their readers'/writer's needs.⁸ And both quests take size as the measure of their achievement: the bigger the bone the better — the bigger and more ambitious the myth-making, the more totalising the discursive system, the better. The final, largest dinosaur, *Daweosaurus*, is found when Web falls out of the sky while having sex with Anna Yellowbird in the middle of a twister, landing so that he straddles the fossil, "bone" and bone meeting painfully for Web, but fruitfully for Dawe (207).

But if this meeting of bones here favours Dawe's notion of self-definition through the recovery of the text of the land's past, equally strong is Web's opposing view of self-construction through the rejection of the past, endlessly starting anew. Web has burnt down his father's house, and possibly his father with it, before departing on the life that leads him, ironically, to Dawe's expedition in search of the past (4). But though he participates, however reluctantly, in the river journey of Dawe's effort to construct meaning from the text of the past, Web's fear of water continues to signal his fear and rejection of this past. The muddy water of the river, perhaps even more than the bones of the dinosaurs, comes to suggest the connection between the past, as inscribed in the text of the land, and the men currently excavating that past — a connection particularly suggested in the events following McBride's falling overboard. McBride finally reappears miles downriver, paddling his pig trough shaped like a coffin, and landing on the farmer's shore, his emergence from the water becomes the emergence of the first land creature from the depths:

the . . . woman [the farmer's wife] . . . saw . . . the man caked in mud from his feet to his hair, his body like an alligator's; she saw him step from his trough and into the willows. And it was not the smell that came with him that made her hesitate; she knew the smell of skunk. It was the man himself, coming formless out of the mud. Onto the land. The mud, the grey mud, cold, reptilian, come sliding into the yellow-green flame of the shore's willows. (42-43)

McBride is the one man on the expedition who has "*the ability to become a hero,*" but "*the wisdom not to*" (45, Kroetsch's italics): he is the one man who might actually live the heroism of Dawe's and Web's mythologising discourses, but he

rejects such discourse entirely and abandons Dawe's expedition into death, in favour of his life on the land with his family. Similarly, he is the one who lives the past, slathering himself with the mud from which he came, and emerging into human life, moving away from the bone-signs of the deadly discourses.

Web's fear of this seminal water, contrarily, and his simultaneous self-creation through his myth-making, reiterate his fear of the past. But his fear, perhaps precisely because it is still accompanied by his own discourses of self-construction, does not allow him to escape the past — the river — as seen when he follows McBride to the ferry crossing. McBride's escape from the journey into death and discourse takes the form of this ferry trip across the river, the irony being that the trip is precisely not the journey across the Styx into Hades, under the guidance of the other-worldly ferryman. Rather, as above, it is the journey of his return to life — a journey which the ferryman, associating Web with the expedition in search of bones, will not allow Web to make. "‘Dead is dead,’" the ferryman shouts at Web. "‘We don't need none of you damned graverobbers down here’" (54). Web's active rejection of the past — of the dinosaur bones of self-constructing discourse — nevertheless implies a continued connection with the past, as it allows or prevents self-constitution in discourse.

DAWE'S CONSTRUCTION OF THE MYTH of the land's history, then, is one way of defining self and nation, perhaps a notably staid and stodgy method associated with the established practices of the East — Dawe, after all, is only plundering the bone beds in Western Canada in order to take the bones back East and there to catalogue them into the accepted discourses of history and nation. Web's myth-construction, on the other hand, enters as an alternative possible way of defining nation, as frontier, as the locus of heroic acts of self-definition, as the land of tall tales — a Western construction depending upon the myth that constructs the West as the place to start again, to escape the bonds of the past. Web's tall tales are set against the long tails of the dinosaurs Dawe is excavating — against the never-recovered long tail of the *Daweosaurus* which was the intended object of the dynamite that instead killed Tune.

Both Web's and Dawe's discourses fail to fulfill their mythical agenda, however, of the construction of self and nation. Dawe's exercise of recovering history is at best only fragmentary:⁹ the fossil of his *Daweosaurus*, as above, is missing its tail, which he must construct by guess-work in a museum back East. And his general practice, of searching only for the largest bones, blinds him to many of the other elements of the text deposited by time: he misses all the smaller and less spectacular signs of the land's past. While Dawe is in Drumheller, for example, down in the coal mine searching for someone to replace McBride on the expedition, he is suddenly struck with

the truth of what he already knew: here, once, there were green branches of fig trees. Sycamores. Magnolias. A delta and a swamp. On this spot: *Ornithomimus* snapping fruit from the high branches, digging for the eggs of other dinosaurs. Carnivorous *Tyrannosaurus rex* stalking *Saurolophus*; dinosaur stalking dinosaur; the quiet, day-long hunt, the sudden murderous lunge, the huge and bone-cracking jaws finding at last the solid-crested skull, the long tails flailing the water a frothed red. (81)

Yet he will still not stop more than momentarily to examine the leaf patterns in the piece of coal Grimlich shows him — the smaller signs in time's text — and he heads immediately for the bonebeds again, the moment a new crew member has been recruited. The past he is constructing for Eastern notions of national identity is in fact only bits and pieces of the past, parts of it based upon the specimens found in the Badlands — specimens which are themselves already mineral substitutes for the actual dinosaur bones (56) — parts of it sheer guesswork, and much of it just plain absent.

Web's alternative constructions, which speak of a more Western Canadian construction of identity, also fail actually to define such identity, in that they work far more to deconstruct the concept of nation than to define it. His stories invariably suggest a barely contained chaos of radical, directionless energy, far from the value-laden order and encompassing system which usually characterise national myths. Lies, he discovers, are far more interesting than the ostensible truth, in any case: speaking of his effort to trace the departed McBride and bring him back to the boat, he protests untruthfully that he saw neither

“Hide nor hair,” . . . elaborating his lie, delighting in the ambiguity of his discovery, the skeleton that was not the beast, not even the bones of the sought beast but the chemical replacement of what had been the bones: “Didn't find hide nor hair —”
(56)

Neither his discourse of “bones,” nor Dawe's dinosaur-bone discourse, answers the desire for wholeness and satisfaction that both discourses create,¹⁰ and the closest they come to constructing such individual or national identity as the myth-making might aim at, is through the ambiguous practice of lies — of endless substitution. The signs never speak directly of the reality or the truth, but only make gestures at it, offering uncertain dis-/re-placements which connect only with other such implacements. Thus, whether constructing or deconstructing ideas of nationality and identity, both of the discourses, as discourses, result in the same failure of language. In the much-quoted words of Anna Dawe, “*there are no truths, only correspondences*” (45, Kroetsch's italics).

There *is* one moment of satisfaction for both Web's and Dawe's discourses — the one orgasm that Web actually has in the entire novel, while having sex with Anna Yellowbird in the storm — the incident ending when Web lands crotch first on the *Daweosaurus*. But the moment of satisfaction, as we have seen already, is

the moment of reconnection with the dead, with Dawe's dinosaur bones, which, bearing Dawe's name, will be shipped back East to be incorporated into its stultifying systems of decided meaning. Web's own description of his encounter with Anna Yellowbird — particularly, of course, the moment of orgasm — is couched in terms of destruction and death:

“we were locked together up there like two howling dogs. . . . And just goddamned then the lightning struck us. . . . the bolt came streaking straight at us, the ball of fire came WHAM — and sweet mother of Christ the blue flames shot out of our ears, off our fingertips, our glowing hair stood on end, my prick was like an exploding torpedo. . . .” Web trying to capture his spouting words. “And the crack of thunder deafened us. The inverted universe and undescended testicles of the divine, the refucking-union with the dead —” (206-7)

The lightning storm might replicate the first galvanising lightning that is theorised to have catalysed life from the mud on the edge of the primeval water, but in Web's use of it in his discourse of self-creation, it also links him back with the death of history. Web may try to escape the past by burning down his father's hut with his father still inside, but as long as he is controlled by his “spouting” discourse, constructing himself through the endless substitutions of language, he can never escape the death and the bones of the past. As Anna Dawe comments of Web:

Total and absurd male that he was, he assumed, like a male author, an omniscience that was not ever his, a scheme that was not ever there. Holding the past in contempt, he dared foretell for himself not so much a future as an orgasm.

But we women take our time. (76, Kroetsch's italics)

Web foretells the orgasm, which reconnects him with the death of the past, the death of discourse.

BUT AS THE LAST WORDS of the quotation suggest, outside the oppositions which establish the differences — and ultimate similarities — between the male discourses, is a third possibility entirely: the female and the a-discursive: silence. Breaking into the interplay of life and death in the male discourses, then, is a radically alternative possibility, which, because it has thus far been so completely proscribed from the myth-making discourses of men — myths that construct meaning through the establishment and stabilising of such oppositions — breaks entirely away from all such oppositions, and heads into undefinable, unidentifiable, realms outside language. Archaeology in the novel has worked to excavate the various discourses of the land, whether the text of the land itself in its layers of time's inscription, Dawe's discourse of Eastern ideas of national and individual male identity, or Web's “yarns” constructing a Western identity of wild action and superhuman performance. At the same time as the act of excavation reveals and

orders the signs of such discourses, it demonstrates the incompleteness of discourses — of such falsely totalising systems of substitution — and thereby problematises the very notion of language itself. Having reached such a point, then, it is possible to speculate — only speculate, of course, in an area by definition of radical uncertainty and strangeness — about what might lie outside of the endlessly self-constituting, endlessly unravelling construct of language.

As I begin to suggest already, this speculation takes place in the novel principally under the sign of the women (and the native), especially of Anna Dawe and her namesake, Anna Yellowbird. Within the main discourse of the novel — that describing the actual archaeological expedition of 1916, interspersed with Dawe's field notes — Anna Yellowbird represents one possible way of constructing the a-discursivity that surrounds the field of language. This is perhaps seen most clearly in the description of Dawe's having sex with her, where Dawe tries repeatedly to construct her as the sign against which he is defining himself in his male myth of his self, but where she repeatedly fades away from his discursive grasp, always evading definition or focus:

at that split second of penetration he must, he would, raise up with him into that underworld of his rampaging need the knowledge of all his life: into that sought darkness, that exquisite inundation, he would carry in his mind, in his head, the memory of wife and home, his driving ambitions that had swept him into this canyon, the furious desire and dream that had brought him here to these badlands, to these burnt prairies and scalded buttes; conquer, he told himself, conquer; and out of that blasting sun, into the darkness of her body he must, rising, plunge:

and found instead that at each moment of entry into the dark, wet heat of her body the outside world was lost, and he, in a new paroxysm that erased the past, spent each night's accumulated recollection in that little time of going in; the motion that erased the ticking clock, the wide earth:

. . . Until he began to believe that only his humped back might save him from some absolute surrender. . . . Dawe, not moving at first, wanting not to move, yielding to her passion, her violence, her tenderness; his male sense of surrender surprised and violated and fulfilled:

She made him lose the past. He began to hate her for that. (195-96)

Dawe, trying to use Anna Yellowbird as the vessel, female and Indian, in which he can construct and thereby contain his personal history — his identity — finds in the moment of fulfillment that his discourse has failed, and that he has not made a monument of his history, but has lost it entirely. Her yielding to him becomes a kind of endless yielding of the discourse which he has tried to embody in her, with the result that the discourse falls apart entirely.

The land has appeared in the novel as the site and agent of the various discourses' fragmentation — the storm rejoining Web to “the inverted universe and undescended testicles of the divine, the refucking-union with the dead” (207), and depositing him on the dead bones of Dawe's satisfaction. Parallel to and extension

upon this fragmentation is the female (and/or native) realm, not just of fragmented discourse, but also of complete departure from it. In the darkness of the coal mine, Dawe is presented, in the fossilised leaf, with evidence of the incompleteness of his falsely totalising discourse; in the darkness of Anna Yellowbird's body, his discourse is completely subsumed, and during the time of his relations with her, he becomes vague and indifferent, and has great difficulty keeping up the field notes in which, thus far, he has been recording his journey to fame as a paleontologist.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH to speculation about the a-discursive in the novel occurs in the use of the second level of narrative, of Anna Dawe's framing narrative. At its simplest, the construct works to place a female voice outside of and surrounding the male discourses which appear in the framed narrative of the expedition. Then, the action which Anna Dawe's narrative tells is precisely that of reading the male discourses and of destroying them. The reading she performs on the discourses is what is written in the first level of narrative: the level I have principally been examining. This reading is precisely one that deconstructs the discourses and that problematises the entire concept of discourse. Her framing narrative supports this process of deconstruction partly in the continuing comment on the specific incidents of the first narrative — such as those in italics — which encourage a reading of the first text involving the sort of discourse analysis I have attempted above.¹¹

The texts of male discourse are thus subsumed by the discourse of a narrative which, at the same time as constructing them, has deconstructed them. Then, in the concluding pages of the novel, the destruction of the actual artifacts of Dawe's discourse — his field notes — can take place. Significantly, this act of destruction takes the form of an alternative journey which writes over the older journey, reversing its direction, and heading for different sources, different points of beginning again, than Web's or Dawe's journeys did. Anna Dawe collects an aged Anna Yellowbird from the bar of a prairie hotel and heads West, back up the Red Deer river into the mountains — and towards the river's source in a glacial lake. The journey is Westward, away from the suffocation of Eastern Canadian constructs of meaning; it is a journey to purge Anna Dawe of her father's words: his dead dinosaur bones, his dead bones at the bottom of Lake Superior, his death-bringing "bone" that penetrated Anna Yellowbird and that fathered Anna Dawe. Unlike Dawe's search for origins in the dead layers of history, the Annas' quest for origins takes them to the brand new waters of the lake, untouched by history, untouched by discourse.

By the lake, laughing at the ridiculous figure of the male grizzly, his balls hanging from the net, they are at last freed from the weight of all the discourse they have

been fleeing, and throw the photographs and field notes into the lake to drown as Dawe himself did.¹² Leaving the lake under the light of the stars, in Anna Dawe's description, they

looked at those billions of years of light, and Anna [Yellowbird] looked at the stars, and Anna looked at the stars and then at me, and she did not mention dinosaurs or men or their discipline or their courage or their goddamned honour or their goddamned fucking fame or their goddamned fucking death-fucking death. . . . And we did not once look back, not once, ever. (270, Kroetsch's italics)

The lake absorbs the deadly discourse, the death inscribed in constructions of history and identity, and the sight of the stars, while their very light refers to ages gone past, also suggests the possibility of endless renewal. While the land can be seen, as in the layers of the badlands, to be itself a text, a language, it also represents that which might be beyond the constructions and constraints of language.

In the imposition of their desires on the land — in their discourses — the men create the land as a linguistic construct, contained within and controlled by the encompassing effort of their discourses. But the very fact of the land's being created as a language means that it must also cause the subversion and eventual deconstruction of the very constructs which rendered it as such a language in the first place. Then, the notion of language thus so radically destabilised, the land can be reintroduced as possible site of that which is outside of language entirely. The inescapable irony, that such speculation must take place within the very medium which it works to deconstruct — that Anna Dawe's position as a possible representative of the a-discursive must be communicated by her in discourse — does not negate the deconstruction of history, identity and discourse that has been performed. Rather, it represents an opening into the endlessly circling argument that is language itself, in which the effort to define land and language — even to define them as sites of the radical undecidability and resistance to definition that characterises language — must precisely occur within this ceaselessly shifting and deferring medium of language itself. Anna Dawe's discourse becomes an opening into a sort of impossible Möbius strip,¹³ that turns again and again back on itself at the same time as it twists to a new level of speculation and thought. Such an opening, by virtue of being an opening, also suggests the possibility of escape, at the same time as it implies here the entrance into an endlessly deferring, endlessly deferred en/closure. The land as discourse becomes such a Möbius strip, referring always to language at the same time as it perpetually suggests an alternative possibility of that which is never touched by language.

The result, then, is a post-colonial discourse that engages very clearly with all the activities of myth-making and history-writing that have been used to construct post-colonial belonging and identity here in these lands. The novel helps to inscribe the land, both as sign and as actual physical territory, as the authorising site of the values and meanings upon which the post-colonial counter-discourse bases its

subversion of the once-dominant imperial discourses. But at the same time, the land, precisely because it is the object of this discursive and territorial contention between the imperial and the local, ultimately enters the discourse as the site of the radical uncertainty which suffuses all the junctures between the signs of a discourse: the land, as the endlessly unsatisfactory and fragmented object of Dawe's discourses about meaning and identity, comes to represent precisely the fragmentations, replacements, and substitutions which characterise discourse in general, whether dominant imperial or post-colonial counter-discourse. This deconstructive post-colonial discourse, rather than merely replacing one system of meaning with another, instead destabilises the notion of any meaning, and locates the source of this instability in that very object which, in both imperial and counter-discursive epistemologies, has been constructed as *the* most stable and unchanging of ideologically-loaded signs: the sign of the land. In the deconstructive enterprise, the new land, like language itself, is still used to construct meaning; but at the same time, it must re-enter the discourse as precisely that which, endlessly and inevitably, *subverts* meaning, again and again.

NOTES

- ¹ See, for example, Kateryna Arthur, "Pioneering Perceptions: Australia and Canada," in *Regionalism and National Identity: Essays on Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Topics*, ed. James Acheson and Reginald Berry (Christchurch: Association of Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand, 1985), 202; I. S. MacLaren, "The Aesthetic Map of the North, 1845-1859," *Arctic*, 38 (1985), 89; MacLaren, "Retaining Captivity of the Soul: Response to Nature in the First Franklin Expedition," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 28 (1984), 57-58; D. E. S. Maxwell, "Landscape and Theme," in *Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture* (London: Heinemann, 1965), 83-84.
- ² See, for example, my argument in "Colonising Discourses: The Land in Australian and Western Canadian Exploration Narratives," *Australian-Canadian Studies*, forthcoming 1989. Arthur develops a similar notion, in her use of the image of *ostraneniye* to discuss early discursive responses to Australian and Canadian landscapes. The aesthetic strategy of *ostraneniye* (making strange), translated here into the aesthetic dilemma of artists and writers encountering an already-strange landscape, "[impedes] habitual reception, interferes with transmission, and so enforces a dynamic, constructive (or deconstructive) vision of the object [of the strange landscape]" (207). "Visions of the two countries are constantly altered. . . . Pioneering in the realm of perception is not just a thing of the past" (209). See also MacLaren, "The Aesthetic Map of the North," 101-2; and MacLaren, "' . . . where nothing moves and nothing changes': The Second Arctic Expedition of John Ross (1829-1833)," *Dalhousie Review*, 62 (1982), 485-94.
- ³ Helen Tiffin argues the correlation of the post-colonial with the counter-discursive in her "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourses" (*Kunapipi*, 9.3 [1987], 17-34), drawing upon Richard Terdiman's discussion of "the potential and limitations of counter-discursive literary revolution within a dominant discourse" (Tiffin, n. 3, p. 33), in his *Discourse/Counter-discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1985). Terdiman notes that counter-discourses "implicitly evoke a principle of

order just as systematic as that which sustains the discourses they seek to subvert. Ultimately, in the image of the counterhegemonic . . . the counter-discourse always projects, just over its own horizon, the dream of victoriously replacing its antagonist" (56-57). In the context of post-colonial counter-discursive contention, Tiffin similarly quotes J. M. Coetzee's expression of discomfort with a subversive, relativising reading he performs on several novels, when he says that "it is a mode of reading which, subverting the dominant, is in peril, like all triumphant subversion, of becoming the dominant in turn" (Tiffin, 32). The post-colonial counter-discourse of the land, then, may subvert the once-dominant imperial discourse, but it also inscribes an equally tyrannical version of writing the land, as part of local, post-colonial identity and meaning. There's still a sense of a need to "get it right," to see and thereby to write the land as it "really is," rather than a movement, such as Homi K. Bhabha discusses, to go beyond the imperialism of this European-grown notion of an (ideal) unmediated text evoking a transcendental reality ("Representation and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration of Some Forms of Mimeticism," in *The Theory of Reading*, Frank Gloversmith, ed. [Brighton: Harvester, 1984], 96-99).

- ⁴ Finally, however, it ought to be noted that my distinction between counter-discursive and deconstructive efforts is somewhat artificial, each movement sharing strategies and effects with the other. Many of the subversive strategies to be found in Kroetsch's novel could be shown to work within either general strategy of subversion. I note that Tiffin's article suggests a different way of viewing the post-colonial's subversive strategies, in that a division between counter-discursive and deconstructive practices and effects is not made at all. She says that the danger that the counter-discursive might become dominant in turn is not a problem in "post-colonial inversions of imperial formations," because in the post-colonial context, these subversions are "deliberately provisional; they do not overturn or invert the dominant in order to become dominant in their turn, but to question the foundations of the ontologies and epistemological systems which would see such binary structures as inescapable" (32). However, this latter description seems to me to be a workable definition precisely of how the more generally subversive strategy of deconstruction differs from the counter-discursive as Terdiman describes it. In the context of my discussion, some distinction can be made, I think, between whether a novel works to replace the imperialist formulations of the land, which it works to subvert, with some other system by which to organize understanding of the land; or whether it seems to aim at a more general subversion of Western thought and of the constructs which constitute the thought, thus preventing the proposal of any alternate systems. As my argument runs, I see *Badlands* as primarily performing the latter action.
- ⁵ Stephen Slemon similarly discusses the (eventual) breakdown of binary oppositions in another of Kroetsch's novels, *What the Crow Said*, as a movement towards — or gesture at — a post-colonial discourse "beyond binary constriction." ("Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse," *Canadian Literature*, 116 [1988], 15.)
- ⁶ Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch* (Edmonton: NeWest, 1982), 14-15. The discussion here of contamination of the archaeological site is in reference to a model of the text as object of *intertextual* excavation, tracing the influences, repetitions and subversions of precedent works; but I think the image can be applied to discourse in the way I attempt above, given the ubiquity of the structure, and the resulting multiplicity of its possible applications, in *Badlands*. (See also Brian Edwards, "Alberta and the Bush: The Deconstruction of National Identity in Post-modernist Canadian and Australian Fiction," *World Literature Written in English*, 25 [1985], 164.) In the context of my argument, the site of discourse, in a sense, is contaminated by discourse itself — by the desire which informs its very existence.

- ⁷ Robert Kroetsch, *Badlands* (Toronto: General, 1982), 16. Further references are to this edition.
- ⁸ Neuman and Wilson, pp. 19-21ff.; Brian Edwards, "Textual Erotics, the Meta-Perspective and Reading Instruction in Robert Kroetsch's Later Fiction," *Australian-Canadian Studies* 5.2 (1987), 69-72.
- ⁹ Neuman and Wilson, 9-11.
- ¹⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *Literature, Politics and Theory* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), 151.
- ¹¹ Note particularly the passage I have quoted, writing Web as a male author arrogating total omniscience to himself (*Badlands*, 76).
- ¹² Paul Duthie, "New Land — Old Culture," Unpublished essay, 1987, 37; Edwards, "Textual Erotics, the Meta-Perspective and Reading Instruction in Robert Kroetsch's Later Fiction," 165.
- ¹³ "A continuous one-sided surface, as formed by half-twisting a strip, as of paper or cloth, and joining the ends" (*The Macquarie Dictionary*, 2nd ed.). The effect is a figure which, as one follows the surface through its turn, brings one both through a twist and thus apparently to a new surface, at the same time as it circles unavoidably back to its starting point. It both changes and doesn't change.

VINNIE

Roger Nash

Vinnie DiSanto aged eight from the Bronx
 visiting a farm for an uncle's funeral
 heard clouds bleat distinctly
 fields strut then crow yellow
 corn at the dawn saw goats
 mow grass while backfiring badly
 from their twostroke tails and skunks mace
 every old lady in sight
 for stealing their huckleberries discovered geese
 clashed gears when anyone tried
 to think tractors gambolled and noon
 fought fields then buried their dead
 coyotes cries pickpocketed
 his dreams each night until he was glad
 to get safely home again and sit
 in the comfort of his favourite burnedout car
 a yellow rain drumming on its crusted
 roof the way rain should