

WHAT KROETSCH SAID

The Problem of Meaning and Language in “What the Crow Said”

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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 at 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)¹

WERE IT NOT FOR ROBERT KROETSCH'S generous attitude toward the critic's role, it would seem an act of hubris to attempt to interpret *What the Crow Said*, the novel that he wrote as his “own personal struggle with the temptation of meaning.” I think the critic can, however, delineate the parameters and expression of that temptation without ignoring his injunction that the temptation to impose meaning “is the reader's struggle too” (LV 15). In this novel, the tendency to impose meaning not only creates a dilemma for the writer and the reader: it is a central issue for the characters as well.

The world of *What the Crow Said* is a world without order — as we conventionally expect it: time warps frequently, and the laws of probable cause and effect do not seem to operate in Big Indian. Winter comes after spring and lasts an entire year, Liebhaber remembers the future, Vera Lang is impregnated by bees, a man missing one leg and his genitals impregnates Rose Lang, a child who sings in the womb is born into silence. The improbabilities in Kroetsch's text go on and on.² The community's response to this chaos is to assign meaning and causality willy-nilly: in fact the book opens with just such an attempt to explain life in Big Indian:

People, years later, blamed everything on the bees; it was the bees, they said, seducing Vera Lang, that started everything. How the town came to prosper, and then to decline, and how the road never got built, the highway that would have joined the town and the municipality to the world beyond, and how the sky itself, finally,

took umbrage: it was because one afternoon in April the swarming bees found Vera Lang asleep, there in a patch of wild flowers on the edge of the valley. (7)

Nearly everyone partakes of this strategy: when Skandl loses Martin Lang's body, he blames it on the comatose Liebhaber. Liebhaber's four minutes of coherence in the Lang Household are attributed to Tiddy's statement: "It's snowing" (39). People believe that the first hand of schmier dealt at the Church of the Final Virgin was brought about by Eli Wurtz's comment, "*Du* son of a gun" upon seeing the unwell, diminished Liebhaber. Blame for the "war with the sky" is variously attributed: some "blamed recent developments on the moment when the ice began to form on the wings of the Piper Cub in which John Skandl was flying home to Big Indian" (146). Others believe that Vera's boy is somehow to blame. When the plague of salamanders arrives, "Someone blamed the wind. Someone said it was the departure of the black crow that did it" (150). Vera's decision to take a husband is said to be caused by the cry of Joe Lightning as he falls out of the sky. People also respond to the uncontrollable chaos by trying to assert that they might have or can have some control over events. When, in August, it continues to snow, men aver that things might be different if they found Lang's corpse: "If they had found the corpse, the few men who went on seeking it, then something might have changed. The digging of a grave, attendance at a wake, the ceremony of burial, any one of those events might have made things normal again. The bees were to blame" (44). These myriad efforts to attribute cause and lay blame are a desperate attempt to assert that some kind of order, some kind of definable causality, regardless of how bizarre, operates in Big Indian.

It is appropriately difficult, given Kroetsch's preoccupation with the "temptation of meaning" to decide which causes actually operate meaningfully in Kroetsch's border cosmos, and which are asserted by the inhabitants of Big Indian in an effort to impose a perceived, explicable order on a world that seems to defy one's logical or experiential expectations. This difficulty is attributable to Kroetsch's use of a communal third person narrator, one who has entered the world of Big Indian with the inhabitants, and refrains from making judgements about the characters' behavior. Complicating matters even more is our own distinct sense that Big Indian does indeed have its own laws that do not necessarily have a direct referent in our world.³ It is only with respect to "what the crow said" that we begin to suspect that the attribution of meaning and causality is a desperate and foolish effort. Thus the work deconstructs itself for us, leaving us uncertain about which attributed causes are operative and which are wishful thinking.

It is initially the year-long winter that unhinges the characters' sense that the world they inhabit is predictable and orderly. Certainly, Martin Lang's death illustrates the fate of those who, either on the prairies or in Big Indian, expect to "believe June was June" (18). John Skandl's response is another kind of folly: in opposition to the temporal and spatial blankness of an unending winter, he decides

to construct a tower made from the very materials that winter provides. Needing to fix himself in a now unreliable, floating universe, Skandl will construct “a beacon, a fixed point in the endless winter” (33). His tower will assert meaning in the face of unmeaning (blank) winter, will function as “a center. A beacon. A guide. A warning sign” (41). Pre-deconstructionist man, he believes his phallic signifier is transparent, its meaning utterly clear. As a tower of babble (49), it demonstrates both man’s foolish impertinence in believing he can control and manipulate his world, and the “danger of making everything into one” (L 118), echoing the structuralist belief that language is a transparent medium with a single dimension, a single meaning.

In spite of Robert Lecker’s assertion (99) that the old binaries, which typically cause an interesting tension in Kroetsch’s work, are not present in *What the Crow Said*, I find them functioning in a very lively way. The most common (culturally imposed) binary opposition between men and women becomes obvious in the scene where members of the community evaluate and comment upon Skandl’s tower. It is the “*men* who would dream it in that snow-buried town” (41, emphasis mine). The women, on the other hand, argue against the ice (49). Tiddy Lang, in particular, is concerned about the implications of the tower: “Tiddy now recognized that the men, in their desperate confusion, were trying to get to heaven. They must be stopped. She was trying to find words. Tiddy, who did not argue at all. She was trying to imagine words” (50).

The men have, through their construction of the tower, been attempting to impose order, meaning, even purpose on the year-long (now seemingly endless) winter; in building the tower and in turning ice to profit they are asserting the primacy of culture over nature, and attempting, in Simone de Beauvoir’s words, to “transcend” the limitations or circumstances imposed by nature.⁴ Tiddy’s sense that they are attempting to get to heaven and Skandl’s assertion that they must continue to build the tower higher and higher are both images of transcendence. It is a sterile proceeding, however, this icy preoccupation, one that the earth eventually defies by sending spring thaw.

The women’s general opposition to the tower makes us aware that their response to the untimely and protracted winter has been of an entirely different order than that of the men. As Lecker (98) and Thomas (102) have both pointed out, Kroetsch has gone out of his way to emphasize the chthonic qualities of the Lang women, both through oblique — and often subverted — references to myth and through evocative, concrete details of their involvement in the earthly cycles and farm matters. Vera, Tiddy, and Old Lady Lang are indeed virgin, earth mother, and wise old crone. Vera’s mating of the bees recalls Danae (Lecker 98), who is also the north European triple goddess, Danae (Walker 206-7); floating down the river in the granary, her hand on her pubis, she recalls both Botticelli’s Birth of Venus, and Ceres, goddess of grain. Tiddy, with her perfect breasts, recalls the

earth mother, Cybele the many-breasted. When she turns her mourning for Martin to an effort to heal Liebhaber, she recalls Demeter, who in her grief for Persephone became nursemaid to Demophon and nearly conferred immortality upon the child. This proliferation of goddess imagery allows Kroetsch to avoid being “entrapped in those mythic stories” (L 96), entrapment that might occur if he were to fall into repeating the myths in which the figures play a major part. Instead, the many oblong, oblique references invite the unfolding of many layers which evoke, but do not necessarily *mean* a whole range of feminine archetypes.

ONE OF KROETSCH’S FIRST ENTRIES concerning *What the Crow Said* in his *Crow Journals* concerns his wish to make not only the tall tale and the mythological part of his book, but to maintain at the same time “always the hard core of detail” (CJ 11). This endeavor on Kroetsch’s part has been questioned by Lecker (99), who obviously ignored the rich, evocative detail of daily domestic life on the Lang farm. Perhaps the hard core of detail of women’s lives is invisible in more ways than one; however, the descriptions of the women’s routines illustrate that while the men have been building a tower, the women have gone on with their chores and their lives, not particularly disturbed by the strange weather, except insofar as it is an inconvenience. Vera, for example, knows that spring is inevitable. And descriptions of Tiddy evoke a woman comfortable in time, in life, and in nature:

Sometimes the cows moored. Sometimes they didn’t. Sometimes the chickens laid. Sometimes they needed oyster shells. Sometimes the thistles or the pigweeds grew faster than the wheat. Sometimes hail fell instead of rain. Sometimes the dust blew through closed windows. Tiddy, with her hardheaded radiance, held together the past and the future. Her daughters went on maturing. Her mother grew older, more wrinkled, forever clutching her ball of sorrow in a pocket of her apron. JG was more work than all the others, all the conundrums of the world, put together. He grew larger. He said nothing. Tiddy accepted his existence as she accepted the stinkweeds, the grasshoppers, the green grass in the spring, the sun. (68-9)

The scene at the tower, the men approving the endeavour, the women opposing it, crystallizes the binary opposition of man and women, culture and nature, the transcendence and entrapment, except that in Kroetsch’s cosmogony, the last element is reversed. By attempting to control and utilize the weather or give a meaningful centre to the blank landscape, the men entrap themselves in their preoccupation. It is the women who transcend by continuing their chthonic life, accepting of the weather and unconcerned about its implications. Vera, knowing spring will inevitably arrive, calmly plans and waits, learning about bees.

Liebhaber, however, doesn’t quite fit in the male category, largely I suspect

because his relationship to language and order (the phallic signifier of the tower of babble) — to meaning — is more problematic. While Tiddy is marrying, Liebhaber is fighting with the double bind of language. On the one hand, words, despite their arbitrariness, remain fixed: no matter how or where he distributes the letters, “out” remains “out.” This culturally-defined fixedness that he recognizes he cannot transcend seems to bind him to death with its over-determinacy. In an attempt to foil the over-determinacy of the letters O U T, Liebhaber attempts “a sequence of illogical sentences; he printed across the linoleum of his living room floor: I’M NOT ALONE. REALLY. He ran out of punctuation. He found his apostrophes and periods, what few he had, in a shoe box under his bed. He concluded his trilogy of sentences with I’M NOT” (55). The problem with Liebhaber’s three sentences is not that they are illogical, but that they have too many meanings. Our immediate reaction is to “naturalize” those three statements,⁴ so that they “mean” something, so that they assert that Liebhaber strongly believes that he is not alone; we see them as a psychological protestation against his loneliness as Tiddy marries. Doing so, we discover another property of language, its ability to express false statements; for Liebhaber, at the moment of Tiddy’s marriage, likely feels more alone than ever. Yet the sentence, “I’m not,” which we take as a reiteration of “I’m not alone,” might also refer to Liebhaber’s ontological status as a character in a book who both exists, as a linguistic phenomenon, and does not exist. These and other possible meanings make us aware that language is not an unbiased medium; it can be used to lie. Nor is it transparent and entirely clear, for it conveys the meaning (or illogical non-meaning) that we expect it to convey.

Liebhaber’s ambivalent relationship to language recognizes the problem of meaning, just as Liebhaber recognizes the ridiculousness of Skandl’s tower. If Skandl is pre-deconstructionist man, innocently able to assert his ability to create a transparent, meaningful, directive phallic signifier (which Tiddy finds attractive, as do some of the French theorists find Lacan’s notion of the phallic signifier), Liebhaber is on the way to becoming a post-structuralist, uneasily aware of language’s problems, in spite of the fact that, like the post-modern writer, he makes his living/meaning through language.

Also like the post-modern writer, Liebhaber believes uneasily in the ability of language to create an ontology. During the dedication of the tower, Liebhaber at first attempts to undermine Skandl’s ascendancy/transcendence by lying about the signs of spring: “I heard a flight of geese heading north”; “‘Cowpie,’ Liebhaber shouted. ‘I found a soft cowpie. Somewhere the grass is green’” (48-9). Part of this strikes us as sheer bravado; part strikes us as truth: for indeed, *somewhere* the grass is green; part strikes us as prophecy. We finally must acknowledge the creative element of language when the narrator comments that “Liebhaber, recklessly, in an endless winter, invented a spring” (49). Even Liebhaber’s use of lan-

guage to evoke, lie about, create a spring, bespeaks of language's multiplicity, its multiple uses.

In spite of Liebhaber's more realistic attitude toward meaning, he nevertheless succumbs to a desire to control, to order the world around him. Because he's relatively useless around the farm, Liebhaber helps Tiddy choose a hired hand: Liebhaber's candidate is Mick O'Halloran, who is missing one leg and his genitals, "and while his disability limited his usefulness on the farm, Liebhaber felt it was more than compensated for by the security he provided in a household made up of a grass widow and six unmarried young women" (66). Yet Liebhaber's judgment proves to be wrong when Mick, against all probability and reason, impregnates Rose.

His second lapse in judgment occurs when he helps Tiddy with cow breeding and ends up perfecting the three-titted cow (70); again a pregnancy results, this time the relationship is between Nick Droniuk, who helps with the artificial insemination, and Anna Marie. Finally, Liebhaber agrees to referee the hockey games, a role in which he exults: "Liebhaber, as referee, removed yet always there, watched the disputes, the hard checking, the high sticking, the errors, the affections and dissatisfactions of the swarming, eager players. The rougher the game became, the clearer his vision. He was some kind of arbitrator, the civilizing man: at the center, and yet uninvolved. The dispassionate man at the passionate core, witnessing both jealousy and desire, separate from either" (72). As referee, Liebhaber is the representative of civilization, culture, order, a patriarch who takes pride in his ability, "single-handedly, to restore order" (73).

But this effort of control, belief in order, patriarchal absolutism, also collapses when we find that Gladys was impregnated on the ice by "everybody" — and perhaps it was even her presence on the ice that limited the dispute. In spite of his judicial pretensions, Liebhaber finds he cannot control the fertility of Tiddy's daughters, as if the female and natural world remains uncontrollably outside his dominion. It is his inability to control, grasp this unfolding, fecund world, as well as his inability to see the world truly, or to see the same truth that others see, or to live in a world where one can identify absolute truth — that accounts for the protracted game of schmier. For in yet another of those questionable attributions of cause, we are told "That was the cause of the schmier game — the inadequacy of truth" (76).

I was interested in the literal use of game in daily life. In a small town, in a rural area where card playing especially is very central, I was influenced by the old women in the community who would read cards. I had two aunts who on occasion would read cards and read them with an ambiguous sense that it was just playing but at the same time that it was serious. That ambiguity intrigued me no end. I think that even in the most elaborate games, like religion, there is that double sense. The notion of necessary fiction really relates to that, doesn't it? (LV 49)

THOMAS HAS COMPLAINED of the sheer volume of human excrement in Kroetsch's novel (115), yet the unappetizing conditions of the schmier game aptly illustrate the lengths to which Liebhaber and his crew will go in order to confine themselves to a microcosm that has definable rules. In both *The Crow Journals* and *Labyrinths of Voice*, Kroetsch discusses his view of the world: that we exist within the godgame. That is, we know some, but by no means all, of life's rules. Games seemingly exist as antidotes to or relief from the godgame. Huizinga, whose book, *Homo Ludens*, influenced Kroetsch, describes those parameters of game that make it a free space, in some way unhampered by the unknown or partly known rules of the godgame: "Here, then, we have the first main characteristic of play: that it is free, is in fact freedom. A second characteristic is closely connected with this, namely, that play is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (quoted in LV 66). Playing schmier, the men separate themselves from the world they cannot control, placing themselves in a microcosm where they are capable of "ignoring the weather, ignoring time, family, duty, season; ignoring everything but their one passion" (90). Moreover, the rules of the game structure their lives in a way the rules of the godgame, with its year-long winters and genital-less men who impregnate girls, cannot. In *Labyrinths of Voice* Kroetsch comments: "I take a card game very seriously. For me, a card game is a model of life. . . . Card games are interesting because, on the one hand, there are absolute rules and, on the other, inside those rules there is absolute chance, or at least an indefinite mathematically large number of chances that even to deal yourself the same hand would be a grotesque unlikelihood. There are absolute rules and there is chance" (LV 64-5).

The second use of cards intrudes for a moment as Old Lady Lang "reads" the players' hands. When Old Lady Lang predicts Liebhaber's future, to die, of love, in the Lang house, Liebhaber plays even more ferociously: "That was the first time, really, that he recognized the seriousness of their game" (93). At this point in the novel, the deck of cards has two orders of meaning, one as a referent to the lives of the players, one as the symbols in the abstract order of the game. Although the men give some credence to her interpretation, having "never seen their cards in quite that way before" they would seem, ultimately, to reject the referential possibilities of the deck, concluding that "there was no meaning anywhere in the world" (94).

When they finally move their game from the Lang household to Isadore Heck's shack, they attempt to escape the world of meaning, to leave Old Lady Lang, who believes the cards can have a divinatory function, to move into the shack of Heck, who disbelieves in everything. Only the possibility of love calls them away to the

wedding ceremony at the Church of the Final Virgin, though here Eli Wurtz's chance comment, "*du* son of a gun" — so unfit do they look for real life — "causes" them to deal another hand. It is in the basement of the Church that the game is invested with a referential significance by the entry of Marvin Straw.

The desire, first of Liebhaber, then of the whole crew, to save Jerry Lapanne's life invests the game with a purpose it has previously lacked, changing the rules, making them unusually flexible and fluid, even imposing different rules on different players. It would almost seem that this flexibility, the cracks in the otherwise rigid society, allows the entry of Martin Lang's ghost into their midst, as if to say "This is what happens when you relax the rules a little: the unpredictable bursts in on you," leaving the players "totally without hope" (113), except in their belief that Skandl will return. When they are told by Vera that Skandl has disappeared, we see the extent that they have created an isolated world for themselves. Liebhaber does not want to believe in Skandl's death because it will force him to "surrender . . . the world" (123). The creation of insular cosmos of the schmier game has allowed them to ignore what they previously could not control. Playing schmier, their lives structured by other rules and other kinds of chance, they have avoided the unpredictable, natural world, refusing "to give any credence to the weather, especially to the idea of seasons" (123).

The schmier players have, in a parodic way, created a culture, an organization of human beings governed by shared values and established rules. It is a culture designed to insulate them from the unpredictability of the natural world and the domestic hegemony of women.⁶ Their culture, however, in its exclusivity and insularity is not, in the long run, "civilized." Ignoring the needs of their bodies and the impact of the weather upon their health, developing a "technology" solely devoted to making moonshine and eating without being involved in the production of their food, ceasing to use tools altogether, their lives are a parody of civilization. When Tiddy comes to seduce them with food, we find Liebhaber "ahead in the game, about to win a few nails and some pieces of broken glass and a pile of round stones they'd dug up from the frozen riverbed with their bare hands" (126). Even the medium of exchange, while still governing their insular culture, has no intrinsic value.

Yet the offerings made by Tiddy suggest that, unpredictable as nature is, it has continued: she has butter, jam, preserves, honey in the comb. It is the women who, as a productive, patient part of the natural world, have transcended, the men who have remained static, imprisoned within the card game that provided the structure of their microcosm.

The schmier game intensifies the binary polarization. At first, it is a time that is pleasant; the women in the kitchen watch over sleeping babies, talk of gardening and sewing, enjoy having the "men in the dining room, out of the way, playing cards" (81). By doing the men's chores, the women allow the players to remain

apart from the more demanding “real world”; they allow the separateness of the world of the schmier game and the world of the godgame. Eventually, Tiddy realizes the benefits of the system: “the women were running the world better than had the men; she was content to let them go on with their game of schmier” (85). That the schmier game is meant partly to protect the men from the women is revealed when the men discuss whether or not to attend the wedding of Cathy and Joe Lightning; they consider not going because it will mean “surrendering to the women” (101). Unlike Lecker (104), who believes that the female characters are parodies, I am inclined to see the male characters as parodic. Obviously Kroetsch is “questioning precisely those binary male/female divisions” (Lecker 104), but while the women may seem almost static in their chthonic associations and habits, at least they persist, without damage to themselves or to others; nor do we see their sensuous persistence as quite so ridiculous as the frantic efforts of men to escape what they cannot control or control what they cannot escape. At times I am inclined to see one tension of the novel in terms of two distinct plot types: the plot of the male quest to tame the universe vs the plot of the chthonic woman who is content to “ing.” Perhaps Lecker’s (male) reading which views the women as “a joke” and my (female) reading which views the men’s various ferocious struggles as ridiculous illustrate how the tension of two different types of possible plots deconstruct the novel.

Back last night from Castlegar, B.C. Flew in there from Calgary. The plane goes down a river valley, with mountains on both sides, makes a sharp left turn around a jump, a shoulder of mountain, a cliff. We turned. A small plane crossed the landing field when we were almost down. Great surge of engine power. Great surge of adrenaline. Got down next try, and I lectured myself on loving the earth, not the sky. Came time to drive to Fred Wah’s mountainside house — a mud slide had closed the road. Had to drive 65 miles to go 15. On the mountain roads. Next day I lectured myself on loving the sky. (CJ 53)

THIS CONFLICT BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE, between quest and persistence, between transcendence and immanence is continued in the war with the sky, which Thomas views as a “parodied ‘metaphysical’ version of [the] conflict of purpose” between the men who are trying to get to heaven and the “closure of female locus” the men are attempting to escape (Thomas 111). But the men’s battle is more than an escape from female closure, it is a war fought against time and death and nature, those laws outside our province but which “culture” seeks nevertheless to control with technology. In this war, the sky, the very symbol of transcendence, turns against them as if to indicate the folly of the undertaking.

The death of Skandl is the first symptom of the war between the earth and the sky, Skandl’s death in the piper cub mocking his effort at transcendence. The

natural world similarly mocks the predictions, already difficult to interpret, of Vera's boy. J.G.'s death indicates the folly of any search for eternity/infinity (symbolized by his figure eights and his agelessness) and escape from time: indeed, J.G.'s seeming physical escape from the kind of time that ages results in the innocent stupidity that allows him to believe he can fly.

The first battle actively fought arises as a result of the men's decision to go hunting rather than to clean up after the salamanders, which they regard as women's work. Yet later they admit that they wanted to avoid, could not face, "the stink of death." In this novel, women deal with death while men attempt to ignore it. Going hunting involves them in another exclusively male society, and another "game," but here nature plays a part and adversely changes the rules: the wind is so high and fierce that the ducks can't get down to the earth, and the ammunition the hunters fire turns on them.

While having a referential tie to the climate of the prairies, the war with the sky illustrates the male characters' second response to the world they cannot control. No war seems to exist as long as the predictions of Vera's boy are accurate, and the farmers believe in a friendly, predictable universe. Once the salamanders remind them of death, as part of the natural cycle of things, once the plague reminds them that nature's overwhelming force is outside the province of their control or prediction, their only response is an aggressive one.

Joe Lightning is one of the few male characters whose attitude toward the war seems sensible: "being the descendent of warriors, he knew when not to fight" (154). Playing, perhaps, with the stereotype of the native as "natural man," Kroetsch creates a character who believes "in the union of elements," and who, rather than antagonistically battling with the sky, seeks to learn its secrets. As a shuffleboard champion, Joe is invested with the obsessive horizontality of the prairie dweller, though unlike the other characters, he brings some skill and purpose to his obsession. His flight with the eagle is all the more heroic because he allows the new, vertical perspective to challenge his expectations and perspectives: "He was surprised at how small the town looked, the once immense town where he'd been ignored, insulted; perhaps the recognition occasioned his first laugh" (157). His fall has the character of ecstasy about it. Although he does not master the sky, he learns something of the truth that Heck glimpsed from his canon, something of the perspective and awe that generates "a version of a prayer, a kind of holy laugh" (159). As one of the first people, it is ironically appropriate that he experiences the Adamic fall into the church outhouse hole. His adventure in the sky does not kill him, however: he is one of the few who takes on the sky without dying — because he does so in a non-adversarial frame of mind. What does kill him is society's unwillingness to rescue him lest they get shit on their Sunday clothes: implying that those who do not war with the sky are outside community, outside society, outside the false "transcendence" of the male characters in the book.

In contrast, Nick Droniuk's accidental death is caused by his raging at the sky for not conforming to Vera's boy's predictions; Eli Wurtz is killed by a train while he hopes the thundershowers predicted by Vera's boy have finally arrived. The train arrives instead. Mick O'Halloran dies of a loss of faith when he finds his oil well is dry: he puts his weight on his missing leg and it fails to support him. Such deaths are caused, however, not so much by the sky's determination to do battle, to be hostile, as by the victims' foolish beliefs that nature is predictable. Their folly is highlighted by their choice of oracles. Nick and Eli, along with the rest of the community, place great faith in the predictions of Vera's boy, in spite of the fact that the narrator makes a point to remark on the unintelligibility of his pronouncements: "The only minor difficulty was that he spoke, always, a language that no one quite understood" (139). One is tempted to recall the Oracle at Delphi, which required expert (and even suspect) interpreters. Even his last "prediction," "The ercilessmay unsay shall urnbay us," (144), is a description only of the present, not of the future. It is, in short, the community's need to believe that the natural world is predictable, thereby giving them some mode of control or controlled response, that causes the deaths attributed to the sky. Meanwhile, the prairies are simply going on as the prairies, predictable only in their unpredictability and their harshness.

Their other oracle, the crow, is no more reliable. Our narrative experience of the crow is of a rather filthy-mouthed bird whose most common oracular pronouncement is "total asshole." He does, indeed, curse the people with abnormal deaths — which come true (with the notable exception of Liebhaber). He understands Vera Lang's relationship to the natural world; when Liebhaber does not, the crow suggests that Liebhaber kill himself. In short, the crow curses and belittles: he is not oracular. Yet in the midst of the first battle with the sky, "the black crow was first quoted as an authority. Men asked each other, what did the crow say about the flight of birds in a high wind? What did it say about salamanders? They wished the crow hadn't left them; they wanted to ask all the questions they'd neglected to ask while the crow was in their midst. And even while the crow had been talking, meditative and wise, they'd neglected to listen, they realized. Now and then someone claimed to quote the black crow on the subject of women or guns" (152).

In short, is it the same quest for meaning, known causality, predictability — for truth — that catapulted them into the schmier game that now launches the battle with the sky. If manly separation into a more predictable, ordered world of cards and drink is no longer possible, then aggression, downright war is a second-best alternative. They want the world to have a coherent meaning, and in typical patriarchal fashion think of beating it into submission.

Liebhaber's quest for immortality, which he believes capturing the truth will bestow on him, is present at the outset. It hinges upon his ability to fix truth with

a certainty that he attributes to Heck toward the novel's close, when Heck so officiously proclaims that someone left his canon out in the rain, ruining it: "Liebhaber was indignant: no man could be certain of anything on this lunatic, spun and dying planet. Heck was unyielding; he had guessed the way to heaven" (206-7). For Liebhaber, language is one of the possible vehicles of truth: in an earlier endeavor he had tried to reach truth by composing "absolutely true accounts of events; he would print only one copy before distributing the eight-point type back to its comforting chaos" (67-8). For some reason, this habit of Liebhaber's makes me recall the old "if a tree falls in a forest and no one hears it" question. Certainly, this approach to truth does not satisfy Liebhaber, for it is made in isolation from community; he is soon back on Tiddy's farm, perfecting the three-titted cow. Yet while language is here presented as an agency of truth, and hence immortality, Liebhaber also views it as part of what binds him to death (54); Kroetsch's text suggests, however, that Liebhaber comes closer to the truth when he claims that Gutenberg is the evil agent of language's death-like grasp.

Print fixes: by recording a symbolic representation of the past, it makes memory irrelevant (116); it organizes, through the alphabet, much of our life, subjecting us to the "tyranny of rote" (68). Once again, the male/female binary is evoked with respect to this ambivalent fascination with print: "It is his *men* who are print-oriented, who are therefore maimed and destroyed by their need to imprint themselves in a visual manner on their place and time. His women, earthy and fecund, exist in another world, one closer to the natural yet ritualized continuity of folk traditions" (Hutcheon 54). For the female characters, language has a fluidity, a flexibility that it does not possess for men, indicated by their use of the expression "It's snowing." These words have a metonymic as well as literal meaning, given that they signalled Tiddy's first moments of desire after her husband's death, and her subsequent impregnation by Skandl/Liebhaber. Thereafter, they indicate her daughter's pregnancies.

Only fear of death frees Liebhaber from Gutenberg's curse, without which "he would have lived another life" (163). Yet, under his boat, believing that he is about to drown, believing that he's free of Gutenberg and movable (or immovable?) type, he makes an effort to "write his own story, at last. He tried again, working with furious intent: *Enough would be enough*. He liked that. He could account for events, announce the presence of design, under the apparent chaos. *Enough*. That one, sufficient word, so neatly balanced against itself. He had no idea how long he'd been under the hull. Perhaps it was night now. Surely someone would miss him. All night he would type; everything set, everything forgotten. But now he had escaped; he had recovered the night, a dream, and memory. He would compose a novel one sentence long, a novel anyone could memorize. *You in my arms*. Yes, that would do it. He tested for revision, recited the four words . . ." (163-4).

The scene strongly suggests that it is not language that is problematic, for it is to language, to story, that Liebhaber turns in the moment he believes to be a prelude to his death. What he is free of is not language, but the tyranny of convention, here symbolized by the fixedness of type and its immutable record of the "past," and overcome by Liebhaber's evocative, suggestive texts that swell with but do not limit meaning. At the outset of the novel, he remembers the future, and he could then and there have typeset Martin Lang's death, except that he feels the possibilities to snatch Lang out of his own story seem lessened if the record already exists. Yet the experiences of Lang and Lapanne suggest that people cannot be snatched from their stories; that their life-narrative continues regardless of Liebhaber's attempt to avert Lang's freezing and Lapanne's hanging. Like the post-modern writer, Liebhaber is trapped by the self-generated direction of narration, in spite of his efforts either to subvert or follow the conventions.

Liebhaber's ambivalent approach to linguistic meaning echoes or influences (one is not sure of the causal relationship here) his approach to the war with the sky, which expresses love as well as war. The canon used to shoot the fertilising bees is certainly as phallic as it is martial. The rain-coated and hail-encased bees suggest a kind of literal "seeding" of the clouds that gives the water vapor a centre to cluster around until it becomes heavy enough to produce rain. On a second level, however, the canonade of bees is symbolic of the sexual act, almost partaking of the conventional in its symbolism. It is the expression of paradoxical war and truce, rage and love. By articulating the paradox of Liebhaber's response to nature, the canonade symbolizes acceptance of nature's own, indifferent, paradoxical role in life and death, in time and timelessness.

The acceptance of death at the novel's close frees Liebhaber from the tyrannies that have so preoccupied him: he admits that Gutenberg is only a scribe and that the agent of tyranny is not print or language, but the way they are inscribed, with believed absolutism, by humans. He cannot quite understand what the crow says (217), now not needing to attribute meaning wherever possible.

Emphasizing this acceptance, he lies in Tiddy's bed, contented, knowing "after all, he is only dying" (217) — evoking the Renaissance pun on dying — and thereby language's exuberant refusal to be fixed by Gutenberg or anyone else. Finally, time itself seems free from absolutes: Gladys's daughter bounces her ball off the housewall and Grandma Lang is breaking the sprouts off the potatoes, as she is at the novel's outset, evoking the cyclicity of time, its crafty ability to turn back on and repeat itself. At the same time, however, human memory allows for the collapse of time so that, lying in bed with Liebhaber, "Tiddy remembered everything. She could hardly tell her memory from the moment; all her life she'd meant to write something down" (214). But because she has not succumbed to the conventions of chronology by fixing her story, her experience is endowed with a spontaneous richness:

Tiddy, then, taking every man who had ever loved her. It was dark outside. The tower of ice, in the depths of her present mind, flared a crystal white. The white tower was almost blue. He had been so huge, John Skandl; he smelled of horses. Her husband was plowing the snow. His arms upraised against the night, against the held and invisible horses, his hair alive in the combing wind. Those same men who had loved her. Liebhaber: 'Whoa.' . . . She is living for the moment. She kisses Liebhaber, hard. And hard. He, the having lover, thirty-three minutes in one best trial. Tiddy was proud of him. "Now," she said. "Now. No. Now. Child. Husband. Son. Brother. Old man. Friend. Helper. Enemy Lover. (215-6)

I deconstruct even after I've come to the end of deconstruction: (CJ 67)

KROETSCH'S TEXT ultimately *means* not to expect/impose/attribute meaning (carelessly?). To do so is to trust unworthy oracles, to depend on the undependable, finally to be part of one's own wounding or demise in one's war with a world that does not operate according to "human" rules. To accept the ambiguities of life, to accept, for instance, that one is only dying, or to "live for the moment" frees one from the fruitless quest for meaning, locates one in a rich present that contains within itself the past and the future.

The novel does, as it were, deconstruct itself as the conclusions that we draw about the text — beware of expecting/imposing meaning — must ultimately be turned loose on the text itself. What the crow actually said was not particularly important or insightful: what about what Kroetsch said? The novel might indeed be said to express the post-modern angst of writing against the sense what one creates has no (fixed) meaning. It might equally well be said that the novel expresses the playfulness released when one is freed from the "temptation of meaning." Or, like Liebhaber's three "illogical" sentences composed as an attempt to escape the fixedness of print, *What the Crow Said* might also be said to express the exuberance of language, narrative, and myth that results not in meaninglessness, but in manymeaning. In his *Crow Journals*, Kroetsch writes "I am sick of the tyranny of narrative. And fascinated by the narrative that I'm creating. And that's the whole story" (67). In a very real way, that ambivalence is the whole story behind both the writing of *What the Crow Said* and Kroetsch's own struggle with his postmodern view.

NOTES

¹ Robert Kroetsch's non-fiction will be cited parenthetically in the text, using the following abbreviations: LV for *Labyrinths of Voice*, and CJ for *Crow Journals*. References to *What the Crow Said* will appear with page numbers alone.

² I speak here of improbabilities in the logical sense, in the sense that in order to avoid committing the causal fallacy one must be able explain the way in which the cause

produced the effect. We cannot, for example, determine how Eli Wurtz's comment *caused* the game of schmier. Yet within the context of the novel, the causal sequences do not always seem improbable.

³ Kroetsch has commented on the problematic relationship between art and world in *Labyrinths of Voice*: "Yet we do draw from the world: the great novels, in some way, are drawn from the world. Now *how* they are drawn from the world is the question? It isn't just a question of illusion or mimesis or anything like that. It *is* a question of axioms. . . . Finally, I don't believe that art is completely removed from nature, but I don't know what the hell nature becomes in art. . . . One thing that used to trouble me was the way in which so many readers and writers didn't see the game dimension at all. They made a simple equation between literature and reality. I argued for game theory in order to correct that over-simplification. Yet at this point I am somewhat worried about my own sense of divorce from that equation, from mimesis. One is always moving back and forth between positions." Kroetsch's final comment upon this dilemma is that "I would suggest that the fascinating place is right between the two" — between, that is, game and mimesis" (72-3).

⁴ The following passage from *The Second Sex* aptly describes the culturally determined roles of immanence and transcendence Simone de Beauvoir attributes to women and men, roles which are echoed in Kroetsch's novel: "[Woman's] role was only nourishing, never creative. In no domain did she create; she maintained the life of the tribe by giving it children and bread, nothing more. She remained doomed to immanence, incarnating only the static aspect of society, closed in upon itself. Whereas man went on monopolizing the functions which threw open that society toward nature and toward the rest of humanity. The only employments worthy of him were war, hunting, fishing; he made conquest of foreign booty and bestowed it on the tribe; war, hunting, and fishing represented an expansion of existence, its projection toward the world. The male remained alone the incarnation of transcendence. He did not as yet have the practical means for wholly dominating Woman-Earth; as yet he did not dare to stand up against her — but already he desired to break away from her." (83)

⁵ See the concept of naturalization in Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics*.

⁶ Kroetsch himself identifies the quest as a flight from women and from their social and erotic hegemony. See *The Crow Journals*, 20.

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A PELICAN IN THE WILDERNESS

Ricardo Sternberg

When the woman with the mapa mundi
tattooed on her behind said boys
the world is yours for the taking, I
for one, remained a skeptic. I knew

the rich got to the table first
and once done, started on seconds.
The rest wait their turn, blue
with hunger, sucking on empty spoons.

Two occupations broke my father
and I don't mean jobs. Then he fled
to the promised land but leashed
to his bruised, immigrant's heart.

In America he lives for Christ, work,
the bottle: half-plastered he slouches
on the sofa, Sunday mass on the tube
in a vernacular only half understood.

I walked into the room once to see
the old man kneeling on the carpet.
He bowed his head to a flickering
on the screen and then keeled over.