

HOW “THE STUDHORSE MAN” MAKES LOVE

A Post-Feminist Analysis

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ROBERT KROETSCH IS A WRITER who “effs” the ineffable. He “screws up” or parodies our attempts to speak (of) a transcendental signified. He defers the possibility of the word being made flesh (except, possibly, horse/whore’s flesh). He plays “on the edge of convention,” takes the risk of “falling right into language,” and effects a kind of “erasure of self” in his fiction-making (*Labyrinths of Voice*, 50). In the language of deconstructive theory, Kroetsch’s writing undermines the Western philosophical discourse — the metaphysics of presence — which has defined our binary notions of male and female, presence and absence, meaning and non-meaning. Kroetsch as the bisexual self “he/she” (Kroetsch, “Effing the Ineffable,” 23) speaks of/for the plurality of identity, textuality, and meaning.

Frank Davey argues that Kroetsch’s “interest in Derridian deconstruction and archaeological approaches to the past rests squarely on this distrust of meaning” (9). But I would argue that his “distrust of meaning” signals another philosophical/critical moment in a Kroetschian text — a moment which I would like to speak of as not simply post-structuralist but also as post-feminist. To consider this issue, I will read one of Kroetsch’s relatively early novels, *The Studhorse Man*, as a post-feminist text, both, and perversely, because its title so obviously places it outside the realm of the feminine and because some of its content — if considered apart from how the narrative produces meaning, or not — seems to be what essentialist feminists speak of as “sexist.” I will begin with a brief outline of what I consider to be the initial theoretical/textual issues in a post-feminist analysis. I will then consider the text of *The Studhorse Man* in light of what it has to say and, significantly, what it does not say, and, therefore, is paradoxically able to assert, about the possibilities of meaning and sexual identity.

In order to speak of a post-feminist literary theory, we should be aware of what feminist literary theory means and has meant. French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva sees the feminist struggle as occurring on three distinct but interrelated levels. In North America we are most familiar with the first level — the liberal feminist

struggle for equal access to the symbolic order (Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 12). In feminist literary criticism, this aspect of feminist theory insists either that male texts — by which these feminists mean texts written by biological men — be scrutinized for their inherent sexism, or that female texts — that is, texts written by biological women — be recognized, included, and valued within the canon.

The second level of the feminist struggle is more radical; it rejects the entire male symbolic order in the name of difference. The paradox that exists within radical feminist writing rests on the notions of femininity as an essential difference and of female writing as a writing of the body. Although the “feminine” is valorized, it remains an unquestioned, indeed unquestionable, commodity, and so perpetuates the patriarchal myth that anatomy is destiny, that identity is a pre-cultural essence. This paradoxical affirmation and deconstruction of the feminine is evident in the work of a number of French feminist writers, including H  l  ne Cixous and Luce Irigaray pointing already towards the third level in the feminist struggle, a level which I am speaking of as post-feminist.

A post-feminist theory both breaks from and yet remains a part of the first two levels of the feminist struggle. It becomes a possible alternative only when we recognize that the dichotomy between male and female is a metaphysical one, based on the ideal of pure (male) self-presence upon which a phallogocentric world depends, and must therefore be rejected. H  l  ne Cixous has described *feminine writing* or, if I can carefully use the words “feminist” texts, as those which, as Toril Moi summarizes, “‘work on the difference’ . . . struggle to undermine the dominant phallogocentric logic, split open the closure of the binary opposition and revel in the pleasures of open-ended textuality” (108). This definition itself points beyond the radical feminist struggle merely to point out female difference and towards the post-feminist struggle to undermine binary oppositions.

Although Kroetsch recognizes that traditionaly we have “conceived of external space as male, internal space as female. More precisely, the penis: external, expandable, expendable; the vagina: internal, eternal,” his reading of the sexual/textual politics between male and female overturns these phallogocentric assumptions:

The maleness verges on mere absence. The femaleness verges on mystery: it is a space that is not a space. External space is the silence that needs to speak, or that needs to be spoken. It is male. The having spoken is the book. It is female. It is closed. (Kroetsch, “The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction,” 47)

This positing of the male as “mere absence” itself undermines the metaphysics of presence which insists that the male is self-present, the female an/other absence. His definition of the female is equally provocative. If the female is “the having spoken,” “the book,” “she” is both closed and open. She is, as Kroetsch says, “a space that is not a space.” Like the text, she is endlessly misreadable, unfixable, plural. The pleasures of textuality and sexuality are thus interchangeable, spoken,

as I will argue that they are in *The Studhorse Man*, with/in a common language.

The following scene, in which Hazard seeks to describe the breasts of one P. Cockburn, serves as a textual springboard for this kind of discussion:

This P. Cockburn, he announced, was a shade wrung in the withers, which I take it meant she was showing signs of her age and was therefore older than Martha. But, he went on, her tits were like nothing so much as two great speckled eggs of a rare wild bird. And having said this . . . he fell to musing about eggs of various birds, hoping to find a comparison that might be for me illuminating. (35)

At its first level, a feminist analysis would criticize this passage for its fragmentation of the woman's body, for the male appropriation of power over her through naming. But I find it more intriguing to look at the way the stable, male self is here undermined by his own speaking. In this passage and in the paragraphs that follow, Demeter is attempting to present Hazard as attempting to present an "argument" (36). He (Demeter? Hazard?) proceeds from metaphor to metaphor, searching for a way to make the absent breast present. But to no end. His "reader" does not understand his metaphors, has not seen the "real" signifiers which Hazard/Demeter attempts to fix to the absent signified. The more Hazard speaks, the less Demeter understands. In attempting to speak one always says other than what one means. A later reference to a lover telling his beloved that her breasts are "like great speckled—" (50) reinforces the notion that Kroetsch is parodying the male conventions which fetishize women's body parts by pointing out that the only real fetish is metaphor.

WE CAN ALREADY BEGIN TO SEE the ways in which sexual/textual identity is played with in *The Studhorse Man*. Indeed, this piece of writing argues that it is impossible to fix sexual identity. If the categories of male and female are undermined, it becomes equally impossible to speak simply of a piece of writing as being "sexist." The larger post-feminist issue that the text addresses involves the question, how is sexual identity constituted? As Toril Moi points out,

the attempt to *fix* meaning is always, in part, doomed to failure, for it is of the nature of meaning to be always already elsewhere. As Bertolt Brecht puts it in *Mann ist Mann*: "When you name yourself, you always name another." (160)

To speak of a piece of writing as sexist is to dwell in the realm of essentialist feminism, where it is a given that there is an essential difference between male and female, that the signifier is riveted to the signified, that singular meaning is not only possible, it is inevitable. But the Kroetschian text always undermines such assumptions.

Think of the failed disseminator Hazard Lepage. Like Demeter, who is always searching for, and wondering/wandering over, the "proper name" ("The mind

wanders. What a strange expression" [135], he writes, for example), Hazard too has a "certain flourish with names" (72). As Demeter recognizes, "in the act of naming we distinguish ourselves from the other unfortunate animals with whom we share this planet. They seem under no necessity to deny the fact that we are all, so to speak, one — that each of us is, possibly, everyone else" (119). Like Brecht, Kroetsch is asserting that the self is always already elsewhere; when I say "I," I speak an/other's name.

As I have been arguing then, the struggle in Kroetsch's texts is always a struggle to break down these oppositions between masculinity and femininity, indeed, the opposition between self and other, and so to engage in a post-feminist manoeuvre which questions the notion of identity itself. When, in *The Studhorse Man*, the metaphor of sex "uneasily intrudes" ("The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction," 47), it speaks to both the questions of human-sexual identity and to human-textual identity. When we ask, as Kroetsch does in "Fear of Women," "how do you make love in a new country?" we are also asking "how do you write in a new country?" because "one way to make love is by writing" (Kroetsch, "On Being an Alberta Writer," 70). For Kroetsch, "making love" is a textual occurrence: "without writing, I sometimes suspect, there would be no such thing as love" ("Alberta Writer," 70). The question follows, how does *The Studhorse Man* make love? How is s/he/it written/spoken? What is (not) said?

Although it seems almost too obvious to speak of, we must continue to remind ourselves that all of the sexual encounters described in the book are Demeter's reconstruction of Hazard's narrative accounts. Demeter never lets us forget the writtenness of the book. Phrases like "(I prefer the archaic spelling)" (63), "In a chapter that was seized by one of my doctors, I discuss at some length" (98), or "I too would like the preceding chapter to be more explicit" (144) insist that we recognize the narrative context of the narrative:

I too get dressed up — by taking off my clothes. Sometimes of a morning I fold a three-by-five card into a little triangular hat and set it squarely on my perky fellow's noggin and pirates we sail here together in my bathtub, our cargo the leatherbound books and the yellow scribbles, the crumbling newspaper clippings and the envelopes with their cancelled stamps and the packs of note-cards that make up the booty of our daring. (39)

If this passage does not parody the link between the power of the phallus and the power of the pen I don't know what would. Even Demeter's name undermines the kind of cocksure identity which would have to be posited for the power of the male gaze to be effected.

Initially, it is not Demeter Proudfoot, but an unidentified narrative "I" who introduces our hero, Hazard Lepage. Hazard's name, too, indicates a lack of fixed identity. Although Hazard is (by chance, ha) the man of the "page," by the end of the text, "he" is also the "I" of the voice, of the narrator's voice. Hazard both

is, and is not, himself. The “I” of Demeter Proudfoot assumes Hazard’s identity: “I was D. Proudfoot, Studhorse Man” (156). Demeter/Hazard signifies a slip-page in sexual/textual identity and stands as *the* post-feminist, deconstructive figure: s/he is “one” whose identity is plural, whose occupation it is to disseminate meaning — “I am breeding the perfect horse” (*Studhorse Man*, 20) — in a world where meaning seeks to be fixed: “Whoever thought . . . that screwing would go out of style?” (11).

Demeter Proudfoot is and is not both male and female, writer and hero, present and absent. In *Labyrinths of Voice*, Shirley Neuman argues that

the telling of a particular myth in a Kroetsch novel then must be analogous to the act of deconstructing myth itself. It would not be unlike the turning of a particular myth, say the quest myth, into the activity of the writer: the activity of Demeter, rather than the activity of Hazard Lepage. (96)

But the activity of Demeter is not only the activity of the writer, it is also the activity of the “woman” — both literally (“Forgive my misfortune — my dear mother, pretending to knowledge and believing Demeter to be a masculine name, affixed it to my birth certificate” [64]) and politically (as Luce Irigaray writes, “‘She’ is indefinitely other in herself. That is undoubtedly the reason she is called temperamental, incomprehensible, perturbed, capricious — not to mention her language in which ‘she’ goes off in all directions and in which ‘he’ is unable to discern the coherence of any meaning” [103]).

Like the French feminist concept of the woman as that which is outside the symbolic order, Demeter/Hazard is thus a trickster figure, “He’s very subversive, very carnivalesque. Furthermore,” Kroetsch writes, “the trickster is often tricked. That intrigues me. I suppose there is a kind of sexual origin in the figure of the trickster — the prick and its vagaries — but at the same time this instills a sense of the absurdity of all sexuality” (*Labyrinths*, 100). Like the writer — like the “woman,” metaphorically — the trickster has an irrational, immoral impulse. Like the post-feminist, there is “no logic to his system, only anti-logic” (*Labyrinths*, 99). His/her play is in and of words.

Think of the linguistic battles that are waged in this text around the words pecker/peter/tool/whang/rod/pud. Although they speak of the male organ, the sense is of nonsense, of word-play, of the precariousness of meaning and of its dependence on difference: “You diddly dink. You d—— you d—— you dink. You dick” (43). To attempt to fix meaning is, inevitably, to hesitate, to stutter. Similarly, Hazard’s warning of death is a play on words: “*La mer sera votre meurtrière.*” It is a play on words that both kills him and re/places him: Demeter takes up his identity. The “mare/mer” is present both in and as writing and loving: “posse / poesy / pussy” he calls her (11).

Demeter/Hazard is the mad(wo)man — “I am by profession quite out of my

mind" (61). S/he is reconstructing images: "a mirror is so placed above my sink that I have been able to sit for hours, attempting to imagine what in fact did happen (allowing for the reversal of the image) exactly where I imagine it" (85). S/he is writer/hero/storyteller/deconstructor; the one who speaks, and is spoken by, the book. S/he is, finally, the "daughter" who calls herself by a textual name that is not her father's: "D. Lepage, she now calls herself; and she has grown up to be something of a lover of the horse. To that same girl [who exists, obviously, as a difference from herself] I dedicate this portentous volume" (174).

In the end Demeter speaks himself in (to) the feminine because s/he is the bastard daughter of speech (Utter). S/he is the writing that destroys the logocentric ideal of pure self-presence. As writing, she forces us to ask, as the other Demeter had, "Why is the truth never where it should be? Is the truth of the man in the man or in his biography? Is the truth of the beast in the flesh and confusion or in the few skillfully arranged lines?" (134). With the writing of Derrida and Cixous, *The Studhorse Man* recognizes itself as a deconstruction of binary oppositions. The studhorse man is a woman.

To speak of *The Studhorse Man* as a post-feminist text is to ask how it deconstructs those categories which make sexism possible — the categories of the masculine and the feminine. Because the text insists at every turn that we recognize the writtenness and therefore the instability of sexual identity, we must, like the biographer, interpret: "the biographer must naturally record, he must also be interpretative upon occasion" (28). It is up to the reader to play with *The Studhorse Man*, to let slip the notion of sexual identity, to engage in the self-reflexive play and the endlessness of textuality figured in Hazard/Demeter/D. Lepage.

The Studhorse Man worries over the end of dissemination, the desire for order in a chaotic world, the need for simplicity in the face of complexity — the issue that speech and writing see "I" to "I" on in this text:

Scurrilous, barbarous, stinking man would soon be able, in the sterility of his own lust, to screw himself into oblivion, to erase himself like a rotting pestilence from the face of God's creation: Utter and I surely saw eye to eye on that issue. (174)

Sexual desire, procreation, and birth control become metaphors for textual play, dissemination, and the fixing of meaning. In such an homology, the "pill" arrests the plenitude of meaning and becomes a metaphor for the sterilizing of language. It is not in the sterilizing, but in the "teazing" (63) out of the possibilities of multiple sexual subject positions that *The Studhorse Man's*, and the post-feminist's, hope for the future of human sexual/textual relations lies.

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