

KREISEL'S BROKEN GLOBES

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ONE OF THE FEW "TRADITIONS" in North American fiction — by definition, by necessity — is the constellation of tensions between Old and New World conceptions of culture and character, history and memory, landscape and worldview, language and voice. The most important turn-of-the-century writer in this tradition is Henry James; more recently and closer to home, Mavis Gallant has been especially alert to North American misapprehensions of Europe and Europeans in the postwar period. Of course postwar literature — again, by definition — has also been forced to engage the agonies of postwar memory, violently superimposed on the longer tradition. The holocaust in particular has seared the literary imagination, has burned not only bodies, but also words, leaving the language tasting like ashes in writers' mouths: I think in this context of novelists like Elie Wiesel, or the Israeli writer Aharon Appelfeld (*Badenheim 1939, The Age of Wonders*), or of critics like George Steiner. In Canadian writing, I think of Henry Kreisel. Kreisel brings an adopted language and a doubled vision to Canadian fiction and criticism. His imagination is at once pulled back to, and appalled at the breakup of Europe; it is also an immigrant's imagination, inspiring a voice to speak out of necessity in a new language, one that refers both ways across the Atlantic.

Kreisel's forced exile from Europe was bound up from the beginning with his chosen exile from his home language. His family fled from Austria and the Anschluss to England in 1938; from there, Kreisel was interned as an "enemy alien" first on the Isle of Man and then in Canadian camps in New Brunswick.¹ Looking to Conrad as a "patron saint," Kreisel decided in the camps to write in English, to relegate his native German to second-language status.² But he did not make the decision to adopt English unaware of the vital, primal links between language and identity. He did not go as far — perhaps he recognized that a writer could not — as other refugees in the camps who, Kreisel remembers,

had been emotionally and physically so bruised by the Hitler experience that they wanted to shed the language which he spoke, and which they felt he had corrupted. . . . They would thus forcibly suppress part of their innermost selves, and cast it off with the language of their mothers, the language of their childhood memories. It was the expression of a rage so furious, of a despair so profound that they were willing to tear out the very roots of their psychic being, to obliterate the

very core of consciousness of which language is the prime instrument. As if one could create a new identity for oneself by denying and destroying the old. Here I learned at once, and in a very practical way, how closely linked identity is to language, how intertwined are the emotional and psychological centres with the language in which that personality expresses itself.³

In choosing to write in English, Kreisel recognized that he risked losing his native intimacy with his past, a loss of language and so of experience, a displacement which would have offset any gains realized by adopting a new (if not an innocent) language. The choice he made, as well as the consciousness with which he made it, reflect in the painfully doubled vision informing all of his writing. Kreisel's work recurringly suggests a powerful impulse to reconstruct as well as to project, to return to and interrogate European experience as well as to articulate the new identity of an adopted language.

The strength of this double pull also helps to explain the second and most important Canadian influence on Kreisel's work, A. M. Klein. Conrad first, Klein later: first, the greatest example in English literature of a writer's adoption of the language; then a Canadian (but also an "ethnic") writer to show Kreisel the possibilities of preserving ethnicity, which always exerts a strong pull pastwards, while at the same time writing in a new language.

READING KREISEL'S WORK in this context, it becomes clear that *The Rich Man* is his earliest depiction of the immigrant's New World nostalgic impulse to return, in language as much as in vision, to a European world imagined whole, before its second modern breakup. In Jacob Grossman Kreisel presents an immigrant whose memories of Europe, of Vienna, have been made over by New World distortions and mystifications. The most obvious of these delusions is that stately but carefree Vienna Jacob imagines as the home-ground of the Blue Danube Waltz. Grossman wants to return to his family as a New World success, a prodigal decked out in a white alpaca suit. Of course the Vienna to which he returns is neither the Vienna of the Blue Danube nor the promised land prefigured in the first song Jacob hears on the radio as he wakes up in Toronto at the opening of the novel — *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*. Kreisel's treatment of Jacob's self-deception and delusion is unambiguously ironic but also compassionate, and his evocation of the Viennese (and European) atmosphere of the late 1930's creates a palpable sense of the approaching conflagration. On this level, *The Rich Man* is a solid accomplishment, deserving more than the scant attention it has received; but read in the context of Kreisel's whole body of work, *The Rich Man* takes on added significance as his earliest exploration of how loss of language is related to loss of identity.

As Kreisel has always been very much aware, a major problem for ethnic writers is how to transcribe, transmit, or translate their native languages. The problem becomes most acute with dialogue, and *The Rich Man*, like all of Kreisel's work, is particularly dependent on dialogue. Should the writer translate word for word? The results will be stilted at best. Render in colloquial English, attempting a rough equivalence of tone? The risk of losing the flavour of the original utterance remains. Leave dialogue in the original language? (Kreisel does this sparingly, and then usually follows with a translation from the Yiddish or German.) The work would become inaccessible to the very readers it was directed at. In his first novel, Kreisel's solution was to render Yiddish dialogue in English — to return, as closely as possible, to Jacob's native tongue, to render its nuances as accurately as possible in English. In *The Rich Man*, Yiddish dialogue is closely bound up with Jacob's intimacy with his family in Vienna. It is a spoken and a sensuous language, bringing life and warmth to the novel's scenes of reunion, which are most often focused on meals at Jacob's mother's table. It is the language of return, the complement of the language of projected dispersion which also runs through the heart of the novel — the confusing, misapprehended, menacing and veiled language which announces the impending breakup.⁴

Jacob's return to Yiddish is the articulation of the novel's pull pastwards towards an imagined coherence in memory — part of the consistent double-pull in Kreisel's work. In Yiddish, Jacob feels comfortable, expansive, articulate, at home. On the way from the train station in Vienna to his mother's apartment, Jacob "revel[s] in the fact that he could speak his own language again." This is the most intimate of the senses in which Jacob returns, and also the locus of the novel's success as a rendition of warmly imagined, carefully transcribed dialogue. Within the family, dialogue resounds with Yiddish intonations — with the cautionary, wry and resigned tones of a self-conscious minority — intonations conserved and rendered as English. So Manya, Jacob's eldest sister, passes judgement on what she sees as Jacob's perilous sea voyage; in her speech, Kreisel brings out the grain of Yiddish as English, both syntactically and atmospherically:

"Don't laugh, don't laugh," Manya protested. "It is dangerous to go on the water. Now I can tell you because Yankel is here with us and nothing happened. But all last week I was praying that nothing should happen to him, and that he should come here safe. Always I remember the Titanic. Such a big ship. And did all the bigness help her? Go fight with icebergs."

If this were the whole story — if this kind of language were the novel's only strength — then *The Rich Man* would have been a tender documentary rendition of Yiddish as English. But everywhere, beginning in the family and radiating outwards in the conversations Jacob had in the streets, in his brother-in-law

Albert's bookshop, with his brother-in-law Reuben in the steam-baths, Jacob's return to the home language is double-edged, because the many idioms and dialects he hears cut towards fragmentation in the present as well as towards coherence in the past. Even as Jacob revels in the warmth and coherence of his return to a whole, sophisticated linguistic world — to a language sufficiently flexible and nuanced to allow for the wry rhythms of Manyá's voice — this world begins to break: Shaendl's husband Albert begins to describe the political climate and the events leading up to Dolfuss' murder, looking out to the world beyond the immediate celebratory scene of reunion at the dinner table. Jacob begins to realize that this is a different, a foreign account; he "notice[s] the quality of his language" as Albert talks. Principally through Albert and his friend Koch, a journalist turned clown to escape the authorities, Kreisel introduces the wider historical perspective on Vienna just before the Anschluss. At the same time, Kreisel uses Albert and Shaendl's children, Herman and Bernhard, to draw Jacob towards the novel's central image of a safe return to the sanctuary of childhood — the children's secret cave. Inevitably, given the novel's pattern of broken returns, of disrupted retreats to refuges imagined as coherent, as whole, the children's cave is invaded by a trio of anti-Semitic toughs, thus confronting Jacob with the immediate threat of violence and persecution precisely at the novel's ostensible centre of refuge.

In *The Rich Man*, the interplay of idiom and dialect, of linguistic gesture and nuance, is the chief method of presenting Jacob's impulse to return to a whole world and its inevitable corollary — his departure towards a broken one. It is appropriate, therefore, that Jacob's final, tellingly ambiguous gesture should be linguistic. As Jacob flees Vienna, he takes up a painting he had bought on ship-board from Tassigny, a French artist. The painting, "L'Entrepreneur," depicts an Orwellian demagogue blaring hollow New World promises from a megaphone head. It has accrued symbolic force throughout the novel, appearing in Jacob's dreams, posed ironically above his father's portrait in his mother's living room, referring variously to Hitlerian propaganda and to Big Brother, as well as to Jacob's own hollow rhetoric of New World success. Now Jacob looks for the last time at the picture, thinking of his sister Shaendl, whom he has been unable to help because he really has no money after all, and of Albert, who has been senselessly killed in an accident, and of Koch, the existentialist philosopher-clown:

"Noo?" he said in bitter exasperation, glaring at the picture. And in final despair, "Noo?"

A tremor went through his body, and then quickly, and with a sharp twist of his hand, he flung the torn painting out of the window into the darkness of the night.

Early in the novel, the narrator explains how virtuously Jacob can play on this most expressive of Yiddish expressions:

The word *Noo* was the richest and most expressive in his vocabulary. He could play with this little word like a virtuoso. He could thunder it in a loud bass, and he could whisper it softly, drawing it out gently. He could pronounce it sharply, almost threateningly, like a stab, and he could speak it lightly and playfully, modulating his sing-song, his voice wavering and trembling until it died away like the closing notes of a sad aria. In the mouth of Jacob Grossman this little sound was capable of expressing the profoundest emotions and the most delicate shades of meaning.

Now readers are left to interpret Jacob's closing utterance. Dismayed self-recognition? Ironic self-deprecation? An angry, uncomprehending recognition of the painting's statement? A baffled question flung out at the painting and then at the night? Jacob's last word is not transparent, not a virtuoso's final rhetorical flourish, a demonstration of finely tuned eloquence. It is opaque, clouded; reflexively, it interrogates itself and Jacob as much as Tassigny's painting. It is the final and most significant failure of Yiddish, the home language, to account for Jacob's breaking world, to name it, to render a precise shade of feeling, to refer articulately to internal or external realities. Jacob does not know any longer — in the hollowed-out world suggested in Tassigny's painting, as both victim of and witness to the pre-war atmosphere, with his picture-postcard image of Vienna torn up — what he feels, where he belongs, who he is, what language he speaks. His home language fails him: "Noo?" becomes a cipher, flung out in desperation at the inchoate European world he is fleeing just as it is about to break up, to fragment time for Old and New World alike.

Kreisel denies Jacob the fulfilment of his naive but understandable desire to return to a whole world, a world fully articulated in language and so in experience, a fully explicable world. The warmth and pull of a home language are powerfully imagined, powerfully rendered, and powerfully smashed. Jacob's compulsion to return is greeted by history's powerful projections; the return imagined in *The Rich Man* is the most innocent, least ambiguous, and therefore the most ironic of Kreisel's looks pastward. Most innocent and least ambiguous, in that Jacob's return approaches an allegorical statement, teaching a transparent lesson about New World delusions of the Old World's stability. Most ironic, because the narrator is sure about what so confuses Jacob in this novel: a return on Jacob's terms, in Jacob's language, is impossible.

JACOB'S LAST WORD, interrogating world, speaker, and language itself, anticipates the suffusion of Mark Lerner's world in ambiguity in

The Betrayal. Jacob's longing for an immediate and sensuous return to Old World coherence through a home language modulates in *The Betrayal* into Mark Lerner's reluctant, carefully distanced, radically ambiguous return, through an explicitly *literary* home language, to the questions posed in Theodore Stappler's story about betrayal and responsibility in the postwar moral desert that Kreisel creates.⁵ Kreisel has remarked that in *The Rich Man* he "tried to relate the Canadian experience to the European experience by taking an immigrant back to Europe and thus gaining a double view"; in *The Betrayal*, he "brought a European to this country and particularly to Edmonton."⁶ This second, more ambitious recreation of a broken globe, this return in the opposite direction, asks more radical and more difficult questions than those of *The Rich Man*, questions which are charged with more complex issues. To address these issues, Kreisel adapts his use of language and his perspective on landscape. First, the language of *The Betrayal* signifies most importantly through its reference to a common Western *literary* universe; second, the Canada which was a mere point of departure for Jacob has now become at once the local and particular Western Canadian landscape, *and* the vehicle for a complex structure of meanings, all entangled under the frozen winter landscape that Mark Lerner broods over from his Edmonton apartment.

After reading *The Betrayal*, it comes as no surprise to learn that Kreisel wrote his Ph.D. thesis in 1954 on alienation in modern literature: the language of *The Betrayal* is *the* home language of alienation in the West. Its two most important voices map both a landscape and a narrative structure: Eliot's Wasteland idiom of alienation, which is transformed into the idiom of a postwar moral desert, provides the narrative ground or baseline, gaining in intensity and desolation from its spatial projection onto the Canadian West in midwinter and from its temporal projection onto the postwar period. In this landscape, which is also Stappler's and becomes Lerner's shared psychic landscape, Kreisel has adapted Conrad's confessional narrative structure to accommodate Stappler's telling of his story to Mark Lerner, and Lerner's retelling of Stappler's story to *his* audience. Echoing between these major voices are fragments from Yeats, Auden, Wordsworth, Shakespeare, and Dante; and the one weakness of *The Betrayal* is that these secondary echoes form too self-conscious a literary backdrop, the air becoming too thick with voices, quotations, allusions. But the generally successful effect of these literary resonances is to allegorize character and landscape and so to extend the novel's range of reference, to make Kreisel's adopted language allude more powerfully to what has by this time become an inherited vision. With *The Betrayal*, Kreisel brings the modern European imagination, grappling with its historical nightmares, its anxieties and its sense of permanent dislocation, to the Canadian West, to Canadian consciousness. He

relinquishes the careful ironic control he exercised over Jacob's return, letting Mark Lerner tell the story in order to bring out the uneasy moral ambiguities that narrators must suffer in trying to discern what, in less disturbed pre-Prufrockian universes, was more confidently assumed to be the truth about men's actions and responsibilities. And Lerner's last words — "It is strange" — speak directly to the troubling ambiguity, for a Canadian auditor, of Stappler's European tale. Lerner is not quite ready to engage postwar history in person, to live with it and in it, any more than Stappler can fully engage the questions at the heart of the novel. Who has betrayed whom? Is Held's betrayal of Stappler of a different order than Stappler's betrayal of his mother? Is Lerner guilty of betraying Stappler by not giving him a fully responsive and responsible hearing? Does Stappler finally betray himself — betray the hope of ever coming to terms with his actions — by retreating to the pure and glacial North which figures as the landscape most innocent of history, most distant from Eliot's hollow men or Conrad's secret sharers? Kreisel has said that he sees Stappler's final action as an evasion, an "exotical romantic escape";⁷ it is certainly Lerner who occupies the reader at the end of the novel, because he, like the reader, is left with Stappler's strange story. It *is* strange, the sense of postwar history incarnate which Lerner must deal with through Stappler's story; and the novel's title, on several levels, suggest that Canada's stance (like Lerner's) toward postwar history is neither so straightforward nor so disinterested as her "honest broker" public posture would indicate.

T*he Betrayal* EXTENDS THE reach of Kreisel's adopted language Westward, bringing the postwar European imagination to fitful life in Mark Lerner's troubled narration. In *The Betrayal*, Kreisel's prairie is frozen, stilled, a-historical: in these respects the Western Canadian landscape of *The Betrayal* develops from the landscape Kreisel has already mapped out in "The Prairie: A State of Mind," by extending the metaphysics of the prairie both inward and outward — inward into the tangled roots of Lerner's suppressed emotional landscape (figured most vividly in the Carr painting in his apartment), outward toward the encounter with the troubling European consciousness Stappler brings with him to the Canadian West.⁸ Kreisel's essay is finally most suggestive in its anticipation of his own fiction's propensities — even if in his essay Kreisel also conceives a framework within which to study writers like Grove, Ostenson, or Ross, to approach figures like Abe Spalding, Caleb Gare, or the Bentleys.

The intersections between Kreisel's fiction, criticism, and experience are clearest, in fact, in the connections between his best-known essay and his finest short story, "The Broken Globe." It is worth recalling that Kreisel opens the essay with a recollection of the story's genesis in a letter to the *Edmonton Journal* that so fascinated Kreisel that he carried it around in his wallet for years. The letter-writer insisted in the geography of the flat world he saw with his own eyes as he looked out onto the prairie: this obdurate amalgam of empiricism and Old World faith in a still, pre-scientific world and worldview animates the giant "lord of the land" who broods over his geophysicist son's apostasy in Kreisel's story. The letter which compelled Kreisel to write the story asserts a monolithic faith. The farmer is as unmoveable as his flat prairie, and yet he "almost meets," is almost reconciled to his son, from whom the narrator, another of Kreisel's "objective" academics, brings greetings. The opposing worldviews in this story separate father and son, religion and science, faith and reason; and yet it has been the disposition of Kreisel's imagination to envision both broken worldviews *and* their always possible, always necessary reunification. That is why so much of Kreisel's fiction depends upon the figure of the mediator — the narrator of "The Broken Globe," the history professor of *The Betrayal*, the history student of "Two Sisters in Geneva."

When Kreisel collected his eight short stories under one cover in 1981, he called the book *The Almost Meeting*. The title story is the only new story in the book; it is also Kreisel's oldest story, acknowledging the shape of his own imagination's development in Canada, an imagination through which old and new worlds always meet and always just fail to meet. That the story should be a warm tribute to A. M. Klein, Kreisel's Canadian/Old World mentor, is only fitting. As Kreisel has remarked more than once, it was Klein who showed him how to lay claim to both halves of the immigrant's experience. Kreisel has laid this claim over the last forty years. His fiction as much as his criticism claims two worlds, speaks two languages, and imagines the double-pull of two worldviews across a broken globe. Commenting on one of George Faludy's poems, Kreisel describes the conflict in it between father and son, a struggle which "becomes finally a conflict between two opposing worldviews."⁹ In Faludy's poem, the conflict is between the father exulting in the material, demonstrable triumphs of science, the son dreaming of the ethereal, insubstantial triumphs of poetry. Neither can surrender his vision, but the son, a "conjurer," still makes poems summoning up the father's "frayed being." Kreisel's fictional worlds, like their all too real historical counterparts, cannot surrender their geographies, their histories or their voices, but he imagines them speaking together for a time.

NOTES

- ¹ See Kreisel's account of this period in his life in his "Diary of an Internment," *White Pelican*, 4, No. 3 (Summer 1974), 4-35.
- ² Kreisel discusses this decision both in his introduction to "Diary of an Internment" and in his essay "The 'Ethnic' Writer in Canada," *NeWest Review*, 5, No. 3 (November 1979), 7, 16, and 5, No. 4 (December 1979), 7, 14.
- ³ "The 'Ethnic' Writer in Canada," Part 1, pp. 7, 16.
- ⁴ Michael Greenstein discusses this aspect of language in *The Rich Man* in his essay "The Language of the Holocaust in *The Rich Man*," *Etudes Canadiennes*, No. 4 (1978), pp. 85-96. Greenstein also discusses the holocaust in Kreisel's second novel in "Perspectives on the Holocaust in Henry Kreisel's *The Betrayal*," *Essays in Canadian Writing*, No. 23 (Spring 1982), pp. 97-106.
- ⁵ Sidney Warhaft's introduction to the New Canadian Library edition of *The Betrayal* (1971) provides the fullest and most sensitive analysis of the novel.
- ⁶ See Felix Cherniavsky, "Certain Worldly Experiences: An Interview with Henry Kreisel," *The Sphinx*, 2, No. 3 (Winter 1977), 15.
- ⁷ "Certain Worldly Experiences," p. 20.
- ⁸ Robert Lecker discusses the connections between "The Prairie: A State of Mind" and Kreisel's novels in "States of Mind: Henry Kreisel's Novels," *Canadian Literature*, No. 77 (Summer 1978), pp. 82-93.
- ⁹ "The Humanism of Faludy," *Canadian Forum*, 58, No. 687 (March 1979), 27.

INVENTION OF THE WORLD

Linda Rogers

Did we invent
ourselves, some leather
wounds, all corners, the double
jointed boxes of mouth, where shadows
gossip in incandescent
tongues, the babble of prayer,
or are we victims
tied to the forehead of God,
absorbing magic
incantations, the naked
voices of angel holocausts.