

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF SOLITUDE

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THIS ESSAY WILL STUDY Robert Kroetsch's novel *What the Crow Said* as an example of a new novelistic form that follows the post-modernist "novel of exhaustion" and that seems to be, at least partly, a reaction to it. Two of its most famous representative works have been international bestsellers: *Cien años de Soledad* by Gabriel García Márquez and *The World According to Garp* by John Irving. Márquez's decisive influence on this new form in the context of recent Canadian literature seems to be beyond doubt: Kroetsch and Jack Hodgins read *Cien años* while they were working on *What the Crow Said* and *The Invention of the World*, respectively. It is probably also not a coincidence that these three novels have their roots in explicitly oral cultures: Márquez's South America, Kroetsch's prairies with its indigenous tall tales, and Hodgins's Vancouver Island (in Hodgins's case there is also the influence of the Gaelic oral tradition).

The difference between this new type and the "old" post-modern novel becomes clearer when we compare the narrative aridity of the *nouveau roman* and the *nouveau nouveau roman* with the abundance of life in *Cien años*. In the earlier novels following Kafka, Camus, and other writers of the "degré zéro de l'écriture," the plot has all but disappeared, covered up by descriptions or generated by word-play. Márquez, Irving, and others like John Barth do the opposite: they fill every nook with plots, subplots, stories, bits of gossip. Their novels carry the seeds for a hundred potential novels and this makes them narcissistic: just as overt linguistic self-consciousness is thematized by introducing either the inadequacy of language or its overwhelming power, overt narrative self-consciousness can be conveyed by the absence or the over-abundance of plot. The consequences of this characteristic for the theory of the novel have (as far as I know) not yet been critically analyzed.

The second major difference from "traditional" post-modernism is the domain of another science: folklore. Since modernism, the novel has concerned itself mainly with subjective, urban experience: from *Ulysses* and *Der Prozess* to *La Nausée*, *Les Gammes* and *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter*, the novel's

scope was restricted to the description of an alienated and alienating existence in the city, separated from nature and other people. The new novels seem to have answered Kurt Vonnegut's plea for the reintroduction of the extended family by describing communities such as Macondo and families such as Garp's. At the same time, the action moves out of the city and into the village or smaller rural community (Irving and Barth have used the campus as a neutral ground between the two).

A third difference is one of tone: while the earlier post-modern novel was predominantly intellectual, this new form describes the earthy and bodily life; while the former is self-conscious about its written quality, the latter is often explicitly rooted in oral narration. This last element is the most difficult to define: all these novels have in common that they are written from the point of view of a third-person narrator. This new narrator differs from the earlier post-modernist one in that he does not personalize himself either as writer of the fiction (as in some of the early works of Barth and the *nouveau roman*) or as first-person participant in the narrative; he differs also from the nineteenth-century realist or naturalist narrator who, tacitly or not, presupposes in his readers a shared set of beliefs and a moral value system, and who governs his fiction from beginning to end without accepting alternative points of view.¹ The most important difference from earlier third-person narratives is the self-contained nature of the novel which becomes clear in its apocalyptic ending: in one self-conscious, magisterial gesture, the author closes his story and dissolves the world he has created: in *Cien años* the end of the reading of Melquiades's manuscripts coincides with the end of Macondo:

Before reaching the final line, however, he had already understood that he would never leave that room, for it was foreseen that the city of mirrors (or mirages) would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when Aureliano Babilonia would finish deciphering the parchments, and that everything written on them was unrepeatable since time immemorial and forever more, because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth.²

At the end of *The World According to Garp* the narrator connects all the loose ends and finishes the novel with: "But, in the world according to Garp, we are all terminal cases."

It is possible to apply the typology proposed by Linda Hutcheon to these oral aspects of the novel.³ Overt auto-representation can work on the narrative and the linguistic level, in the former case the act and the conventions of oral narration are thematized and in the latter the novel incorporates references to speaking, telling, listening. In narrative narcissism the text shows that it is the result of oral telling; in linguistic narcissism it displays the materiality of the oral narrative. It should be stressed here that this does not entail a revisionist

move back towards the myths of the authenticity of the spoken word that have been explored by Derrida. These novelists are well aware of the written nature of their fiction, but they reintroduce into their works the dialectic relation between the two.

Covert narcissism also works on two levels: on the level of the story it internalizes a number of structural models that are essentially oral: legend, myth and fairy tale. One example of this is John Barth's "Dunyazadiad" in *Chimera* which uses the frame-story as its model and thereby partakes both of the plenitude of stories and of the explicit link between Eros/Thanatos and the narrative. The frame-story is by its very nature self-conscious: the actual situation of storyteller and listener is built into the different frames. The last category (covert linguistic narcissism) is the most difficult to describe: I include here all non-thematized references to spoken language, to sounds, etc., and to oral/aural equivalents of the pun and the anagram: misunderstanding, double entendre, and specifically oral phenomena such as curses and litanies.

It seems clear then, that we can really talk about a new post-modernism when we deal with the works of some very recent writers. They share with "traditional" post-modernism the narcissistic quality; they differ from it by thematizing or actualizing the oral origins of the narrative.

I AM NOT AWARE OF ANY STUDIES linking *Cien años de Soledad* with *What the Crow Said*, although Kroetsch himself has made it clear in *The Crow Journals* that he was aware of García Márquez's importance for his book from the first months of its genesis. The entry for May 3, 1974 has:

John Barth visiting campus today. His saying about Márquez what I recognized, felt in my blood — that he, Márquez, is at the centre of postmodern in this last half of the 20th century. The coming down from high art while including it.

The journal also makes it clear that the oral element of Kroetsch's experience was and remained central to his project. This is already apparent in the first mention of the book:

novel: HOME/PARKLANDS/COUSINS — dishonest, idealistic, drinking (Bob Edwards?) printer — itinerant prairie printer, as center, as ultimate story center/teller: my own (rural) experience, basically, expanded towards the tall tale, the mythological; but always the hard core of detail.⁴

When we compare this note with the finished form of the book we can immediately see a shift: Liebhaber is no longer "ultimate story center/teller" and this leads us to a consideration of the role of the narrator. Again Kroetsch is candid about where the influence comes from:

Márquez — has cracked the problem of how to tell a story in third person again. Voice: a calm distancing that enables him to forget the conventions of realism.

The opening lines of the book illustrate this point: "People, years later, blamed everything on the bees; it was the bees, they said, seducing Vera Lang, that started everything."⁵ The anonymous narrator does not give his own evaluation of the events and their relative importance: he offers the explanation that "people" gave retrospectively. This becomes the basic perspective of the book. The novel is punctuated with these theories: "perhaps" is a very common word. Other constructions are "why she took off her clothes, no one explained that either; nor why she . . ."; "For how long she lay transfixed there was never a way to tell"; "Years later, they would claim. . . ." The narrator, then, is not so much an autonomous individual as the mouthpiece of an entire community: he writes down, years after the events, his version of a story, basing himself on the gossip, the memory, and the fantasy of the people. The stylistic form of the first sentence is also interesting because it comes so close to the repetition that is typical of oral narration and oral discourse in general.

The difference between memory and fantasy, between logical cause-result relationships and fanciful theories, is thematized both in this book and in *Cien años*. Liebhaver's loss of memory and the amnesia epidemic in Macondo are symptomatic of that. Fantasy and imagination enable the people to cope with reality: the inhabitants of Macondo fight the loss of memory by placing signs all over the village:

But the system demanded so much vigilance and moral strength that many succumbed to the spell of an imaginary reality, one invented by themselves, which was less practical for them but more comforting.⁶

This, and José Arcadio Buendía's inventions, have an equivalent in *What the Crow Said* in Father Basil's cosmological speculations and Isador Heck's radical philosophy. Both books are also circular: in *Cien años* time is limited to one hundred years and when these are over, the town and its inhabitants return to dust. In Kroetsch's *Big Indian*, it is twenty-five years that have gone by; Old Lady Lang is again in the cellar breaking the sprouts off the potatoes as she did 25 years earlier, and even the bees have come back. Liebhaver has just repeated his trip with Martin Lang by bringing back the drunken Darryl Dish. The daughters all remember their husbands; Liebhaver "cannot remember anything" and is dying, Tiddy dreams. The two lovers, united at last, "lay . . . together, in the naked circle of everything." If the circle is closed, it is not as clear as in *Cien años* who accomplished it: the narrator is still there. Liebhaver does not qualify, if only because his moment of understanding coincides with his death. Kroetsch has clearly abandoned his original plan and only made Liebhaver into the axis around which the story turns. At the end of the novel different possibilities are

offered: Tiddy could be the narrator, although "She'd meant to make a few notes, but hadn't." (On p. 216, the narrative voice shifts: "And people, years later; years later they will say: against all knowledge, he fired the cannon." The normal narrative pattern is evoked and foregrounded by repetition and deviation: "would" becomes "will," which actualizes for the first time the moment of narration. This paragraph is, not unambiguously, presented as Tiddy's thoughts before falling asleep and dreaming the world.) Another pretender is Rita, who has been writing all through the book and now writes again: "She flings the words across the page: he is dying, she writes. He is dying in the next room. He is always dying in the next room." Even the crow could be the narrator; after all the book is called *What the Crow Said* and this hypothesis would give an ironic dimension to the formula "people years later" (as opposed to birds). But a formal identification of the narrator is ultimately not relevant: he transcends personal experience and should be seen in collective terms, much like the traditional story-teller, who interprets and preserves local history and legend. His performance is limited by the presence of an audience that has a first-hand knowledge of some of the history and that has internalized the traditional legends and myths. This controlling function of the audience makes it possible to preserve myths and stories virtually unchanged over many centuries, even when the reality or the ideology in which they originated has disappeared.

In oral narrative the difference between overt and covert linguistic narcissism is not always easy to discern, especially in a rich book like *What the Crow Said*. Thematized or overt instances can be found in the characters of the Ellen Jamesians in *The World According to Garp*, in Garp's lost ear, and his mouth injury. Actualized or covert narcissism should start from the — admittedly vague — qualification by Vargas Llosa about the "incantational value" of *Cien años*.

In *What the Crow Said* the overt instances can be divided into three groups. The first one brings together all the moments in the book where talking or story-telling is described: from Old Lady Lang's story, through the pig-Latin of Vera's boy, to the master of language in the story, Father Basil, and his hour-long sermons in which he tries to come to grips with the world. The central instance is the moment when every man in the Big Indian beer parlours "spoke continually for two hours and fourteen minutes, not once pausing to hear what another had to say." This is an exaggerated example of a collective instance of immediate individual history, the raw material for the story-teller. A second group deals with hearing, speaking, and breathing: Alfonse Martz claims he is "deaf in one ear . . . and I can't hear out the other." Skandl's ears have been eaten, and again and again people have difficulty hearing one another — Liebhaber and Lang in the snowstorm, Liebhaber and Tiddy in bed. The opposite condition is also frequent in Big Indian: Liebhaber calls Lang "a dumb bugger" and Darryl "dumb little bugger"; JG does not speak at all, the crow calls Heck "dummy"

and Straw all but loses his voice when he meets Vera. A large number of people die of suffocation: although Jerry Lapanne's hanging is postponed, O'Holleran drowns in the dust, Joe Lightning in the ladies' outhouse, the Adams boy under the ice, and Liebhaber, almost, under his boat. The third and probably most important overt linguistic thematization of the oral element consists of the three cries that frame the novel: Vera's love cry, the men's roar, and Joe's laugh. These are carefully juxtaposed: Vera's represents a female orgasm; the card players' is a reaction to death; Joe's is a male orgasm "of . . . absolute obscenity." Vera's happens on the earth among the flowers, the men's under the earth in the church cellar, and Joe's in the sky. The three cries also have in common that they are extremely unsettling and that they are repressed immediately by the people who hear them, because they cannot face their pure animality. This, in its turn, leads to mythification or denegation. These cries are also important because they qualify the circular structure I posited earlier. In reality the book is divided into two parts of almost equal length and thus it forms a figure eight or lemniscate (like JG's walk). This structure also functions in *Cien años* where chapter ten begins with the phrase:

"Years later on his deathbed Aureliano Segunda would remember the rainy afternoon when he went into the bedroom to meet his son."

This echoes the first sentence of chapter one and introduces the second cycle. In *What the Crow Said*, the story begins with Vera's cry and reaches its deepest point in the horror of the discovery of Lang's body. The fall of Joe Lightning brings on the final stage of the book, which ends with Cathy looking up at the sky "hoping that Joe Lightning will fall into her arms." The three cries are also connected to Liebhaber's three memories of the future: his first premonition predicts Martin Lang's death; Joe's marriage breaks up the schmier game temporarily but in the end leads to the discovery of Lang's body. The game ends with Liebhaber's prediction that Skandl will return. The scenes in the church are also central because of the reference to the Last Supper, the three days, the thirteen players, the food and the wine.

The non-thematized self-consciousness consists in the greater part of the book in Liebhaber's litanies where only the sound of the words seems to be important: for example, "The world is a double hernia . . . A cracked pot. A boiled lemon. A scab and a carbuncle. A mole on a mole's ear. A mouthful of maggots." These litanies have in common that they occur at moments of extreme exasperation and that all of them have the form of definitions, with in most cases "the world" as subject and once "the crow." One way to approach this phenomenon is in terms of "D'une identité l'autre" by Julia Kristeva.⁷ In this seminal article Kristeva analyses the role a conception of subject plays in the philosophy of language, and she applies her findings to poetic discourse and in particular to the work of

Céline. In the process, she distinguishes between the semiotic and the symbolic. The symbolic belongs to the homogenous forces of language, the semiotic to “un *hétérogène* au sens et à la signification”: it shows itself genetically in the first echolalias of infants, is reactivated in the rhythms, intonations, and glossolalias of psychotic discourse, and finally in poetic discourse in:

les effets dits musicaux mais aussi de non-sens qui détruisent non seulement les croyances et les significations reçues mais, dans les expériences radicales, la syntaxe elle-même, garante de la conscience théorique.

Further on she links this to the period before the mirror-stage, which makes these semiotic processes both instinctual and maternal. This makes JG a good example of the semiotic: although he sang in the womb (according to Tiddy), he never reaches the symbolic stage but remains tied to the semiotic practice of farts and excrement. This also explains Martin Straw's madness: it is made very clear that he could have been saved from the devastating influence of seeing Vera's face. He is confronted with the absolute Other, who annihilates his own individuality and it is interesting to note that this process is described in terms of reading (“In the glacial blue of her scornful eyes, he read a summons . . .”) and writing (“She wrote her face upon his sorrow,” while the antidote is aural:

had he heard the call, had he been told the story, he might have saved himself. One telling of the story might have saved him.

It is only natural that he all but loses the ability to speak. Kristeva selects two phenomena in Celine's writing that are functions of the semiotic: sentential rhythms and obscene words. Both can be seen to be at work in *What the Crow Said* as markers of covert linguistic narcissism: they make us aware, when we read some of Liebhaver's litanies, of the heterogenous nature of language. This aspect of the book can be related to the “pantogruelismo” of Márquez⁸ and the carnivalesque in Bakhtin's book on Rabelais. These observations make it necessary to challenge Peter Thomas's conclusions about this novel.

Liebhaver's humiliation and the abundance of shit in the novel are reductive in a way that is new in Kroetsch's fiction: compounded of terror and contempt for humanity they exceed any misgivings about the validity of tragedy. It is not that human dignity need stand very high. But to bring the quest for love down to a pitiful crawl back to the womb and a matter of shit and silence makes enormous demands upon the aesthetic virtues of the novel.⁹

Thomas fails to see the enormous importance of the last chapter and of the link that is established between language and excrement. The rhythms of the sexual act coincide with the rhythms of the environment, of the past; the black horse on the bridge, the thump of the cards on the table, the thumps of the ball against the wall, the memories of JG, Joe Lightning. Only at this point do the instinctual and maternal drives become integrated. (I will deal with sexual difference later.)

What the Crow Said borrows a lot of elements of the fairytale and this is already apparent in the insistence on moments of transition: wakes, marriages, courting, burial. This is also the case in *Cien años*. In this context, first of all, we see the importance of nature: in Márquez, the sudden fertility of the animals and the plague of the birds; in Kroetsch, the salamanders. Secondly, there are the rains, the flood and the wind in both books, and the complete dependency of the people on nature. And thirdly, we find the talking crow and the fact that all things come in threes: the premonitions, the cries, Vera's husbands, etc. The most important fairy-tale characteristic the books have in common is the treatment of time. Although they both describe a definite time-span (100 or 25 years), this is only rarely apparent: first, because the novels seem to exist outside of time and, except for casual references to trains, telephones and television, could have happened at any moment of history. A second reason is the day-to-day existence which, in a rural community, is more obviously punctuated by such events as marriages and deaths. Another reason is the age of people: the cyclical structure of the book and the repetition of narrative occurrences obscure the fact that only children seem to grow older in *Big Indian*: none of the adults age, not even Old Lady Lang. At the same time, and just as in *Cien años*, the passage of time is well documented: the exact number of days or years it rains or snows, even the thirty-three minutes of Liebhaber's love-making. Also, sometimes time accelerates: when the salamander "plague" only lasts one afternoon, for example.

I HAVE DESCRIBED HOW *What the Crow Said* is narcissistic on three levels. Covertly, it adopts fairy-tale elements (one could also point to the mythic dimensions and the legendary quality of some of the scenes: the fact that Vera's boy is raised by wolves, for example). On the linguistic level, the curses and litanies seem to make us aware of the semiotic nature of language. On the overt level we saw how Kroetsch thematizes oral language by stressing the importance of the ear and mouth and by the references to breath and suffocation. The last paradigm of this typology concerns overt narrative narcissism: this book thematizes the basic dialectic that supports it.

Even a cursory reading of *The Crow Journals* reveals how much Kroetsch was aware of recent critical discussions about the nature of writing and language: his involvement with deconstruction as editor of *Boundary 2*, the influence of McLuhan, the actual editing work for the journal and his despair at the limitations of the form, and a general philosophical concern with Heidegger, shared by his co-editor William Spanos. *What the Crow Said* can be read on one level as a Heideggerian parable: as a note in *The Crow Journals* suggests, Tiddy is *Dasein*, Being-in-the-world; Vera, with her interest in bees, is Being (another note on p.

55 suggests that she is immortal). Vera's rape is a radical experience that suggests Hölderlin's fate and it makes her the keeper of bees (if not of Being). This reading would also explain the book's concern with origins, with time, with language. On the first page of Hölderlin's only novel, Hyperion compares his soul to bees and in "What Are Poets For?" Heidegger quotes one of Rilke's letters: "*We are the bees of the invisible. Nous butinons éperdument le miel du visible, pour l'accumuler dans la grande ruche d'or de l'Invisible.*"¹⁰

The traditional attitude of students of the oral epic tradition is expressed in *Studies in Oral Epic Tradition* by Janos Honti in a comparison of folktale and literature where he opposes the oral form, the peasant origin and the conservatism of the first to the written form, the urban situation and the progressiveness of the latter.¹¹ Only recently have anthropologists (not accidentally working in Africa) challenged the self-evident nature of this juxtaposition and stressed the problems inherent in writing down an oral tradition: Jacques Fedry stresses the importance of the collection of stories for the preservation of a vanishing tradition: "Mais la question est de savoir si nous recueillons autre chose que les cendres, disséminées sur le papier blanc."¹²

This dialectic of the oral and the written is central to *What the Crow Said*, although not in the way suggested by the schematic reading that Peter Thomas imposes on it. According to Thomas, Kroetsch sees external space as male, inner space as female, and therefore the spoken word as male and the (closed) book as female. This may be true in the unpublished essay he quotes from, but it is an over-simplification of this novel's complex dialectic. Before discussing the attitude of individual characters, I must deal with a general characteristic of the oral tale and of language in general that involves a dichotomy related to one I touched upon earlier: that between, on the one hand, memory, and on the other, fantasy, imagination, creation. Since the studies of Milman Parry and Albert Lord,¹³ folklorists have been obliged to abandon the idea that the rendering of the oral epic is based entirely on the phenomenal memory of the teller. Lord and Parry discovered that the storyteller creates his epic on the spot by means of recurring epithets, phrases, sentences, which constitute up to 90 per cent of the whole work. At the same time the memory of the members of his audience, who share the knowledge of the epic, regulates and controls his fancy and makes sudden changes impossible.¹⁴ Kroetsch was aware of this problem since he quotes in his *The Crow Journals* from *Folktale, Fiction and Saga in the Homeric Epic* by Rhys Carpenter who takes Parry's work as a starting point.¹⁵ In a further comment it becomes clear that Kroetsch has made the link between this and the proverbial and formulaic discourse of rural people, following a revision of the formulaic theory that was initiated by Ruth Finnegan.¹⁶ When somebody doubts the presence of a tradition in Alberta, he writes:

My asserting against his statement a belief in the text beneath the text, an everlasting grope into the shape of that darkness. As with rural people, the complexities and patterns beneath the formulaic speech. Almost the opposite of urban, where the surface is sometimes more complicated than what lies beneath it.

This refers to the well-documented function of language to protect the subject from outside influences: the "other" is appropriated by a proverb or a familiar phrase that divests it of its otherness. Julia Kristeva observes, in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, an elaboration of some of the ideas in "D'une identité l'autre," that the phobic child is always verbally very active:

Mais justement le langage n'est-il pas notre ultime et inséparable fétiche? Lui qui précisément repose sur le déni fétichiste ("je sais bien mais quand même", "le signe n'est pas la chose mais quand même", "la mère est innommable mais quand même je parle", etc.) nous définit dans notre essence d'être parlant.¹⁷

Old Lady Lang is the prototype of this formulaic element in language. She represents the conservative memory-element," in her endless mourning not at any particular death but at the inevitable absence," which makes her the opposite of her Shakespearian name-sake: Gertrude. She also reacts to everything with the same protective formula: "It's too sad. I don't want to think about it," thereby dismissing reality in the same way as she breaks off the phallic sprouts of the potatoes. All this seems to confirm Thomas's rigidly dualistic vision — the town is divided into two groups: the conservative, earthbound women, concerned with mourning (Tiddy, Rose) and memory; the progressive and creative men who have impossible dreams of conquering the sky and who die or get wounded. (Except for Vera, not a single woman dies or suffers any physical pain, while all men are maimed.) This dualism also exists on the level of language: the men tell stories, jokes, and tall tales, while the women speak in formulas: "It is snowing," "Somebody must take a wife." But the reality of the book is more complicated than that: Martin Lang expresses himself almost exclusively in formulaic language: "Even the gophers can't make a living," "This weather. Freeze the nuts off an iron bridge," a fact which causes one of Liebhaver's outbreaks. Also, the most radical experience happens to a woman, Vera (in Latin, at least, the true heroine of the book). Her rape results in the first "semiotic" outburst in the novel ("lament and song in one," "her body singing"). Although the town survives this radical experience because of different defence mechanisms (the stories, the drink), Vera herself changes dramatically: she dismisses both men and their language (based on the two meanings of "drone," her son has a "buzz" in his voice). She actively combines the male and the female worlds: she drives a car and leaves the house but remains the "Final Virgin," insisting on cleanliness, a whiteness that covers the whole region "like myriad white bees." She is the only woman who has any dealings with the sky, and her spectacular death combines

sky, water, and earth. At the same time, she has the power to silence men (a power her mother lacks: see the scene in the bar): Straw, Ebbie Else, who, after the elopement, "listened as if every rustle of leaf, every drip of a tap, contained a message." The missing term between the oral tale and the bees is "mellifluous," denoting both honey or the (semiotic) quality of a voice.

But the two central characters are Tiddy and Liebhaber. (Their relationship resembles the one between Ursula and the different male characters in *Cien años*.) Liebhaber is confronted with the problems facing the community when he remembers the future and is unable to adapt what he wants to say to the stylistics of journalese. Instead he acts, tries to *talk* Lang into spending a more meaningful last day, and helps to get him home. As a result the newspaper is printed with a blank, just as the village is covered with snow. After his recovery the rivalry with Skandl brings him to tamper with truth in order to influence the future. Skandl builds a beacon, a tower of Babel, and Liebhaber, as usual, gets drunk and fights with the signifying power of letters, trying to un-write a word, and fails. When he tries to form a word with the letters of his initials, he finds GLOT, which should have given him the clue for a way out of his dilemma (glottis). When Skandl has been defeated and flees, Liebhaber takes his place and assumes the role of patriarch. He now hits upon the notion that he can evade death by telling the truth and he starts his autobiography and begins to breed cattle. All of these activities can be explained by referring to Lacan's *nom-du-père*: the locus of the law (Liebhaber as hockey-referee), which at the same time regulates procreation and controls the signifying function of language. He breaks down and gets drunk again when somebody has disturbed his arbitrary rule by ordering his letters alphabetically. When somebody (or everybody) betrays him by challenging his authority over the distribution of women, at the hockey game, the result is the lowest point in the whole book: the schmier game. Here, the men act out the insults of Vera as spokesperson of the women and they behave as "useless bastards." The game invites a Freudian interpretation: during it, they drink and become filthy and regress to a very early stage of child development. The maternal Tiddy first chases them out of the house, her own territory in which she is the master of language ("watch your language in this house"), but in the end she convinces them to give it up. The men have reached their lowest point when they give up language and start to caw. After the end of the game Liebhaber repeats a number of the actions in the first part of the book: the fire built to dig the Adams boy's grave "became a kind of beacon"; his rivalry with Vera's boy parallels his earlier one with Skandl. In the end he is the one who wins the war by giving back to the sky what had been the cause of all the trouble: the bees. At that moment Liebhaber and Tiddy meet because they finally live in the same time: before, Tiddy with her insistence on mourning lived in the past, and Liebhaber, with his preoccupation with immortality, in the future. Now both live for

the moment: Tiddy still remembering everything, but with a growing confusion between memory and the present, and Liebhaber dying and in this way gaining the immortality he looked for by being included in the tales of the people of the municipality of Bigknife.

NOTES

- ¹ When I write "earlier post-modern" I do not mean this in a strict historical sense: some writers such as Nabokov have used a similar voice before.
- ² Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 422.
- ³ The typology was first developed in an article in *Poétique*, 29 (February 1977), 90-106, and then published as the first chapter of *Narcissistic Narrative. The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 17-35.
- ⁴ *The Crow Journals* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1980), pp. 18, 11.
- ⁵ Robert Kroetsch, *What the Crow Said* (Don Mills: General, 1978), p. 7. Further references are to this edition.
- ⁶ García Márquez, p. 49.
- ⁷ Julia Kristeva, "D'une identité l'autre," *Tel Quel*, 62 (Summer 1976), 10-27.
- ⁸ Olga C. Gonzalez, *El Mundo de Macondo* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1974), pp. 109-13.
- ⁹ P. Thomas, *Robert Kroetsch* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1980), p. 115.
- ¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 130.
- ¹¹ *Studies in Oral Epic Tradition* (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1975).
- ¹² "L'Afrique entre l'écriture et l'oralité," in *Herméneutique de la littérature orale* (Donala: College Libermann, 1976), p. 93.
- ¹³ Parry was a classical scholar who discovered in his study of the formulaic phrases in the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* that they were orally composed. In the 1930's he and a student, Albert Lord, collected oral epics in Yugoslavia where they found the same principles at work. Their findings were collected and published by Lord in *The Singer of Tales* (1960).
- ¹⁴ "This involvement of the audience — even when the audience is primarily separate rather than participatory — sometimes extends to verbal prompting or objections by individual listeners. In Yoruba hunters' songs (*ijala*) for instance, other expert *ijala* performers are often present. If they think the performer is not singing properly, they will cut in with a correction, beginning with a formula like:
 You have told a lie, you are a hawkling loaves of lies.
 You have mistaken a seller of *abari* for a seller of *egbo*.
 Listen to the correct version now.
 Your version is wrong.
 For the sake of the future, that it may be good."
 Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977), p. 232.
- ¹⁵ *Folktale, Fiction and Saga in the Homeric Epic* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1946), p. 6 ff.

- ¹⁶ Parry and Lord's discovery that memory was not very important resulted in the idea that it never was. Lord even defined oral poetry in a way that actively excluded texts that are preserved word-for-word. Ruth Finnegan shows how this goes too far and suggests a reevaluation of its relative importance. Similar conclusions are drawn by G. S. Kirk in relation to the Homeric question in *Homer and the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976).
- ¹⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), p. 49.

WHAT TO SAY TO A DYING MAN

Richard Hornsey

I told him it was May
and the lakes had all turned over.
Asparagus was growing up along the roadside;
that the black families and snowy egrets
were fishing the marshes together again.

I told him no windows in his house were broken
and the pepper field in front was planted;
that I had seen his neighbor on the beach
searching for water-sculpture washed ashore
down where the old blue sailboat waited.

I told him that someone had cut his lawn
and the swallows had returned to the eaves;
that friends at the roadhouse still drank cold beer
in the shade of the awning on Friday afternoon
but spoke of him less and less often.

I told him that it was time for me to leave
and that I would walk out along the pier
to watch the graceful gulls respond,
allies with me,
soaring flakes of light.

(I told him it was May.
No windows in his house were broken.
Someone had cut his lawn.
It was time for me to leave.)