THE NAKED NARRATOR

"The Studhorse Man" & the Structuralist Imagination

Brian L. Ross

DEMETER PROUDFOOT'S NAKEDNESS describes not only his physical condition as he sits writing in his bathtub, but also his role as the narrator of Robert Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man.* Throughout the novel, Demeter so distracts himself with laying bare literary devices and conventional techniques of narration, with taking the dressing of the narrator and his relation to his narrative, that he turns what starts out to be a "biography of Hazard Lepage" into a book about the man trying to write the "biography."

His nakedness is neither fortuitous nor careless, but studied and deliberate. "In a chapter that was seized by one of my doctors," writes Demeter,

> I discussed at some length my theory of nakedness. If we are ever to achieve the ideals to which the more enlightened among us pay lip service, it strikes me we must first rid ourselves of an impulse toward hypocrisy and deceit and vanity and pretension and false pride. To achieve this end we must begin by freeing ourselves from clothing. I have surely done my bit, and yet I wish to avoid the kind of vanity that comes of being freed from vanity.[1]

Applied to his role as narrator, this is the self-conscious nakedness of the structuralist imagination, an imagination that has so stripped itself down to the knowledge of its possible functions that it cannot escape awareness of their exercise. Ironically, Demeter does anything but avoid vanity; the biographical moves toward the autobiographical and, as Louis K. MacKendrick has shown, *The Studhorse Man* moves toward the narcissistic indulgence characteristic of the literature of exhaustion, of "fiction whose subject is fiction in the making, the creative process in action."[2] In this paper I wish to show how Demeter's narrative of Hazard Lepage's quest to breed the "perfect horse" can be seen as an allegory of the search of the structuralist imagination for the future of its literature. Before considering *The Studhorse Man*, however, it is instructive to look briefly at the effect which structuralist criticism has had on the movement of contemporary fiction.

IN THE LIGHT OF FORMALIST and structuralist poetics, the creative writer has been shown the dissociation between the world of language and that of experience, and as he has become increasingly aware of such separation, the more difficult he has found the task of reassociation. "Structuralism," writes Robert Scholes,

> is giving to literature with one hand and taking away from it with the other. . . . Every aspect of literature that can be reduced to rules threatens to sink, as Coleridge said, "into a mechanical art." It follows from this that to the extent that criticism, especially general literary theory or poetics, is successful, it diminishes certain poetic possibilities precisely by making them mechanically available. As long as poetics merely codifies the prejudices of a certain age, it feeds creative art by providing rules to break, occasions for originality. But to the extent that poetics can reach and explain the true and permanent features of literary construction, it removes territory from the creative writer though leaving it for the hack . . . [S]ome of the most aware and intelligent writers of our time see the problem of exhaustion of fictional possibilities as a real problem — and it is certainly a problem to which the poetics of structuralism contributes.[3]

The response of fiction has been to write this problem into itself — to make awareness of the construction of literary convention an integral part of its narrative consciousness — in search of new possibilities and forms; to create, as it is called, a literature of exhaustion. Such fictions have as their subject primarily fictional technique and, as such, they become critical statements of sorts, pondering the present state of the art while exemplifying it. Robert Coover, an American writer in this (young) tradition, writes, for example, in an address to Miguel de Cervantes:

> But, *don* Miguel, the optimism, the innocence, the aura of possibility you experienced have been largely drained away, and the universe is closing in on us again. Like you, we, too, seem to be standing at the end of one age and on the threshold of another. We, too, have been brought into a blind alley by the critics and analysts; we, too, suffer from a "literature of exhaustion." . . . The return to Being has returned us to Design, to microcosmic images of the macrocosm, to the creation of Beauty within the confines of cosmic or human necessity, to the use of the fabulous to probe beyond the phenomenological, beyond appearances, beyond randomly perceived events, beyond mere history.[4]

The emphasis on design, the creation of beauty and the use of the fabulous which Coover mentions are characteristic of the whole movement of the literature of exhaustion, and the term "fabulation" has been introduced to describe the "delight in design and . . . concurrent emphasis on the art of the designer"[5] which distinguishes fiction of this approach from the conventional novel or satire. The tales being told are usually simple stories reminiscent of fables, but they tend to become caught in arabesques of the possibilities of how they are to be told. Such

designs use language not so much as a vehicle for communication but more for its own sake, for the simple beauty possible in its very use.

What of the tales, though? Are they tales for the sake of tales, there simply because there must be something to be designed? Or do they have, like the fable, possibilities of allegorical meaning?

Scholes has suggested that "the state of fiction as practiced by our best writers from Joyce and Faulkner to Barth and Hawkes" can be described as allegorical,[6] and it is within just this state that the fiction of Robert Kroetsch has been repeatedly located.[7] Here I wish to suggest that it takes only gentle prodding to find in Hazard Lepage's quest an allegory of the writer's search for the future of his art and that *The Studhorse Man* can be ranked with other works of similar enterprise which Scholes has characterized as "almost textbook illustrations of the writer as formalist/structuralist surveying with excessively acute awareness his shrinking sphere of activity."[8]

BEFORE TREATING THE SUBJECT of allegory directly, we need to establish the evidence of structuralist thinking that exists in *The Studhorse Man*. I believe that Demeter Proudfoot's sensibility can be seen as fundamentally structuralist. While he yearns to present a "biography" of Hazard Lepage, a "reliable account" which won't stray "from the mere facts," he constantly struggles with the incommensurability of language and experience. Looking over his notes, he asks despairingly, "What have we captured? what saved?" and later, in an attempt to give a "true to life" description of Hazard's horse, Poseidon, "Why is 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?"

His concern in his narrative, he says, is to pursue "naked truth," but he soon realizes that truth, to be comprehensible and to be "its own reward," must be ordered. He realizes, too, as he sits, "pencil in hand, notebook on my lap," that to make Hazard's "present into history," to have a biography "inscribed on the insufferable blank pages of time," he, as a writer, must be the one to provide this order. He explains as he looks over his notecards, "I have arranged the next three cards so as to suggest an order that was not necessarily present in Hazard's rambling conversation." His realization is precisely that upon which structuralism is based; that man has ordered, according to certain conventions of consciousness, the world around him which, in truth, is random and chaotic, and that he has expressed this order through conventional arrangements of the units of his language. Demeter sees little order in Hazard's life, the future of which, he says, rests upon "the white and black dink of that stallion." Hazard is guided, he believes, by

> A treacherous fate, a treacherous fate indeed. . . . A preposterous fate to be at the mercy of something so rash, so reckless and fickle, so willful, unpredictable, stubborn — and so without morality.

and he sees Hazard's life as being directionless: "Hazard was on the road again; the road leads to those long straight parallel tracks that go, it would appear, from nowhere to the blank horizon." He contrasts such a life with his own preference for order. "I myself prefer an ordered world," he says, "even if I must order it through a posture of madness. It is the only sane answer to prevailing circumstances."

As a writer, he sees himself as a person "afflicted with sanity," a harbinger of order. The biographer, he says,

> is a man who must first of all be sound of mind, and in the clarity of his own vision he must ride out the dark night, ride on while all about him falls into chaos. The man of the cold eye and the steady hand, he faces for all of humanity the ravishments and the terrors of existence.

His own clarity of vision is based on a notion about consciousness which is analogous to that which underlies formalist and structuralist poetics, the identification of recurrent patterns in life and literature. Says Demeter:

> The very process of recurrence is what enables us to learn, to improve, to correct past errors, to understand the present, to guide the generations that are to come. Yet it is precisely this same characteristic of life that makes life unendurable. Men of more experience than I have lamented at the repetitious nature of the ultimate creative act itself. It is only by a mastery of the process of repetition . . . that we can learn to endure; yet we can only master the process by a lifetime of repetition. Many, I suspect, are tempted to despair. But I have sought other solutions and, I might add, with no little success. The path that would appear to lead to madness is surely the highroad to art. If someone chooses to do a study of my life, he will proffer an exemplum to mankind.

Such a highroad has indeed led to the sort of art that *The Studhorse Man* is. Fiction has not despaired in the face of structuralist baring of repeated patterns. By the very act of incorporating the knowledge of recurrence and convention into their fictions, writers of the literature of exhaustion are making, as Coover puts it, "challenges to the assumptions of a dying age" and taking "exemplary adventures of the Poetic Imagination, high-minded journeys toward the New World and never mind that the nag's a pile of bones."[9]

In the final analysis, however, it is not Demeter but Kroetsch who is taking the "high-minded journey" here, and much of the humour in *The Studhorse Man* is a result of Demeter's seeming ignorance of what it is he is doing with his narrative. As MacKendrick has suggested, "Kroetsch recognizes that in postmodern practice literature becomes its own metaphor; in effect, Demeter is both the butt and the articulator of Kroetsch's technique."[10] Demeter tells us, for instance, that

> I made no secret of the fact that I had just recently conceived the notion that I would write a few years hence a novel; Hazard was, I believe, flattered at the prospect of becoming a fictitious character. I at the time imagined I would write a wonderfully eloquent love story; indeed, anything but a biography.

The irony is, of course, that *The Studhorse Man*, Demeter's "portentous volume" of "naked truth," *is* anything but a biography. It *is* a novel and, while perhaps not a love story, it is, in places, wonderfully eloquent pornography. Moreover, with Demeter to spell out how he reconstructs "truth," we see all too clearly just how fictitious Hazard really is.

At the end of Chapter 7, Demeter asks, "We who assemble fragments long for a whole image of the vanished past. We seekers after truth, what do we find?" and he answers this for us (and himself) in Chapter 9. He presents a set of these "fragments" recorded on notecards, and then proceeds to "reconstruct the event." The result *is* a whole image, but one which bears only spinal correspondence to what is recorded on the cards, notes from "the vanished past." The detail of the reconstruction, such as the colourful exchange of phallic crudities on Edmonton's High Level Bridge, is all supplied by Demeter's imagination. Any certainty which he establishes through "extensive investigations," such as the fact that it was "exactly 8:44 a.m.," contributes negligibly to the whole image this "seeker after truth" ends up producing. The reconstruction stands by itself with only cursory reference to Demeter's notes, and the only real truth produced in the reconstruction process is an overstated reassertion of the impossibility of capturing experience in language. Language, we are shown in no uncertain terms, creates its own experience.

The poetics of formalism and structuralism insists that the way in which language creates the effects of an experience is through various arrangements of literary conventions, and much of the energy of this poetics has been directed at identifying these conventions and the rules which govern their construction. However, as literary conventions become identified as such and not as imitations of experience, they become ineffective means of communication. What is attended to and reacted to is the convention and not what it seeks to describe; the mould and not the jelly, colourful as it may be, that is poured into it. When such conventions are revealed, they are usually applied to material which is opposite in nature to that with which the convention is usually associated, and parody is produced. The danger of structuralism is that it threatens to reduce all of literature to a matter of convention and, by doing so, lay our whole literary tradition open to parody. Thus, as Scholes points out, the writer writing in the shadow of structuralism has become acutely aware of "his shrinking sphere of activity."

Whether Demeter is fully aware of his structuralist consciousness or not, he seems to be aware of rules and conventions to follow in the construction of a biographical narrative. His too ardent attempts at strict adherence to these con-

ventions, however, backfire, producing parody and laying bare the various conventions, devices, and techniques which he is trying to employ. His structuralist consciousness has discerned in the events of Hazard's life the archetypal pattern of the quest, and in his attempts to give expression to this "true story," Demeter experiments with a microcosm of narrative history. Hazard's episodic search for a mare to breed "the perfect horse" rings of the Homeric epic and the picaresque tale, and Demeter's self-proclaimed stance as "biographer" wanting to produce a "history," his insistence upon the "certainty" of the tale which he presents, and his desire to reconstruct events exactly how and where they happened and to adhere to Hazard's vulgar dialogue (with which Demeter is somewhat "enthralled") all ally him with mimetic realism and naturalism, the conventional styles of creating the illusion of truth.

Demeter's attempt to produce the Great Albertan Epic is, however, ill-fated. His application of epic conventions to Hazard's quest leads only to mock-epic.[11] "Our hero" is a morally dubious "man of inordinate lust" whose wanderings around Alberta lead him not to overcoming insurmountable odds with superhuman deed, but rather to fighting a war of bones beneath a sign reading "BONES FOR WAR," to volleying penile vernaculars with a trucker on a bridge in Edmonton and to getting wounded in such a fashion that, in Hazard's own words, his "arse looked like a colander." Here the epic degenerates into the picaresque which, parodic itself, is parodied by its exploitation *in extremis*.

Demeter's notions of literary realism and naturalism seem to have come from textbook descriptions of the trends. He believes, evidently, that to be realistic is to have an exaggerated obsession with minute detail. The narrative is densely punctuated with the results of this belief. He painstakingly measures railway ties, checks timetables, locates places on the map of Alberta, and through "extensive investigations," "many years' study" and "fruitful research" he adds documentation of ludicrously irrelevant fact to his narrative. We learn, for example, not only that Hazard urinated beside the skating rink, but that three witnesses agreed upon how he did so. Here, as with Demeter's overplayed enthrallment with Hazard's crude language and the descriptions of various exploits of human and equine sexual endeavour, naturalistic detail is so obtrusively and regularly introduced into the narrative that the whole enterprise of naturalism is mocked, and we are left only with Demeter's often hilarious obsession with bodily function.

Encapsulating this detail is always Demeter's self-conscious prose. He evidently believes that the written word is of a different nature than the spoken one and, try as he might, he cannot control his "certain penchant for gentleness and beauty"; however, he confuses "wonderful eloquence" with distracting elevation. He describes, for example, the "night of Martha's debauchery":

> Martha was champion against our promised end. Death was a nightmare presence bent on snuffling Hazard into a longer darkness; it was the crone and the suc-

> cubus, the ancient fiend turned female that in the night of dream has intercourse with men. Yes, and the moon was a cold bright disc on the sky: Mare Frigoris, Mare Hiemis, Mare Incognito. But Martha strove against those seas of dust like Heracles against the hate of Diomedes and his man-eating mares.

and we see the playful, high-spirited delight in language for its own sake which is characteristic of fabulation.

The description of Martha's resurrection of Hazard also illustrates Demeter's cockeyed notions about chapter division. While Demeter believes that chapters should contain only what is "both relevant and accurate," he is also aware that the episodic conventions of chapter division are used to create tension and suspense leading to climax and realization. The string of short chapters 33-36, which MacKendrick has called a "studied alternation of rhapsody and plain style,"[12] shows Demeter at work. He attempts suspense by interrupting the flow of events with Chapters 34 and 36 which are nothing more than his own lyrical musings on what might be going on in the icehouse. Demeter is trying to create, it seems, a crescendo effect which leads not so much to Hazard's resurrection, but to Demeter's realization that "It was decreed there that I, in the final analysis, through my devotion and concern, should save the Lepage horse from extinction." Again he is foiled, however, for what we attend to is not a climactic crescendo, but rather an intrusive staccato of tiny chapters. In an even more ill-fated attempt at creating tension through chapter division, he interrupts the heated dialogue between Martha and himself at the end of Chapter 40 with the sudden appearance of Chapter 41:

> "Kill him!" she cried, "Please, please, for God's sake, kill him!"
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> 41
>
> "No," I said.
> But I took the gun.
> "No," I said, "No."

In Demeter's search for effective means to capture Hazard's experience in language, Kroetsch creates an insightful parody of how the structuralist writer's awareness of the conventions of literary construction and their applications interferes with his creative output. Demeter's "portentous volume" ends up being more about himself and his problems of writing, his quest for an ideal mode of expression, than about Hazard Lepage's quest to breed the perfect horse. These quests, however, are quite similar in nature and, primarily through naming, an allegorical relationship is suggested throughout the novel.

FROM THE BEGINNING OF *The Studhorse Man* the horse is overtly associated with literature. That *The General Stud Book* is Hazard's "poetry and his philosophy" his "history of man and his theology" labels the book

as a mythology and, indeed, its opening chapters parody those of our own mythology, the Bible. The lengthy lists of "begats" in Genesis 5-11 are transformed into horse genealogy: "got by Regulus . . . dam by Allworthy . . . great grandam, Dairy Maid, by Bloody Buttocks. . . . " We learn, too, that Hazard "dearly loved to read"; but *The General Stud Book* is surrounded not by any other books but rather by a "chaos" of horse paraphernalia on his bookshelves. The atmosphere in Hazard's "library" is decidedly equine.

We learn next that the horse with which the narrative is to be concerned is nicknamed "Poesy." Symbolically, then, the quest in the novel becomes one to save Poesy, literature, from extinction; to breed it, to give it a future to revitalize it. Indeed, while we follow Hazard's roamings around Alberta after World War II and his problems of finding a future for his line of horse, we are taken with Demeter on a journey through the problems of finding an ideal mode of literary expression. The landscape of this journey is that of narrative history in the aftermath of its own twentieth-century tumultuous upheaval under the onslaught of structuralism. As we have seen, Demeter's essays in epic, picaresque, realistic and naturalistic techniques are all ill-fated, as are Hazard's attempts to find the appropriate mare for Poesy.

The two quests are eventually brought tightly together when Demeter sees that he, himself, must "save the Lepage horse from extinction." He takes over Hazard's quest and becomes the "Studhorse Man"; it is now Demeter, the writer, seeking the means of Poesy's survival.

What of the end of the quest, then? Kroetsch, through Demeter, has "surveyed his shrinking sphere of activity" and what is his final vision of the future of his art? The horse is saved and does become "the busiest creature in all of Alberta," but he is busy for reasons of anti-fertility; the pregnant mare's urine which he readily makes available is used as birth control for man. "Scurrilous, barbarous, stinking man," says Demeter, "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."

Is this the future of literature, too, the large-scale production of sterility followed by self-annihilation? With formalist and structuralist poetics busy sterilizing the writer's imagination, will there truly be an exhaustion of fictional possibilities, an end of literature?

Kroetsch's vision looks somewhat bleak at first: Hazard is left "crushed and flayed and formless," literally trampled to death by Poesy in the library where *The General Stud Book* was found ominously opened at the obituaries. But Demeter's volume is not quite as "portentous" as it might seem. As with Coover's vision of the literature of exhaustion taking "high-minded journeys toward the New World," and as with Scholes' belief that "New forms will arise, must arise,

if man is to continue,"[13] there is a glimmer of hope at the end of *The Studhorse Man.*

While on the brink of death in the icehouse, Hazard, it seems, impregnated Martha during her "debauchery." After his later demise, then, his name survives him in the form of a "beautiful daughter" christened Demeter. Beyond any gluey, anti-equine connotations, the name Lepage, as Eli Mandel has pointed out, can be taken to mean "the page that is written upon."[14] *The Studhorse Man* closes with the information that his name has been passed from Hazard, which denotes chance and arbitrary rules (OED), to Demeter, the goddess of fertility and fruitfulness.

NOTES

[1] Robert Kroetsch, *The Studhorse Man* (Richmond Hill, Ont.: Pocket Books, 1971), p. 98. Subsequent references are to this edition.

[2] Louis K. MacKendrick, "Robert Kroetsch and the Modern Canadian Novel of Exhaustion," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 11 (1978), p. 10.

[3] Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* (New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 168-69.

[4] Robert Coover, *Pricksongs and Descants* (New York: 1969), p. 78. Quoted in Scholes, p. 191.

[5] Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 3.

[6] Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature*, p. 138.

[7] MacKendrick finds for Kroetsch's work a "meaningful perspective" in which he cites both Joyce and Barth. Similarly, Eli Mandel locates Kroetsch in a tradition which includes Faulkner, Barth, Borges and Nabokov. See "Romance and Realism in Western Canadian Fiction" in A. W. Rasporich and H. C. Klassen, eds., *Prairie Perspectives 2* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, Limited, 1973), p. 210. See also P. L. Surette, "The Fabular Fiction of Robert Kroetsch," *Canadian Literature*, no. 77 (Summer 1978), pp. 6-19.

[8] Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature*, p. 169.

[9] Coover, p. 78, in Scholes, p. 193.

[10] MacKendrick, p. 21.

[11] For an interesting analysis, see W. H. New, "The Studhorse Quests" in his *Articulating West* (Toronto: New Press, 1972), p. 180. With little procrustean manipulation he finds in *The Studhorse Man* a "freewheeling adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey*."

[12] MacKendrick, p. 19.

[13] Scholes, p. 200.

[14] Mandel, p. 208.