THE FABULAR FICTION OF ROBERT KROETSCH

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"The fiction makes us real." ROBERT KROETSCH

IN SPEAKING TO DONALD CAMERON of his now-completed *Out West* trilogy Robert Kroetsch said of the last novel of the series:

> I'm fascinated right now by the effects of moving away from realism — the kinds of freedom you get, and the kinds of truth you get at, by departing from the sterner varieties of realism. I'm not sure anyone has a "realistic" experience; it's a literary convention to begin with, the notion of realism.[1]

I wish to explore the nature of that literary convention and the manner in which Kroetsch is moving away from it. He had earlier confessed to an impatience "with certain traditional kinds of realism, because," he said, "I think there is a more profound kind available to us."[2] It would seem that he wishes to distinguish his own writing from the tradition of realism, but wishes also to retain some of the connotations of honest-to-god truthfulness that cling irremovably to the term.

Kroetsch's *Out West* trilogy — or triptych, as he prefers to call it — is an elaborate creation of the "fiction" of the West. The three novels, *The Words of My Roaring* (1966), *The Studhorse Man* (1969), and *Gone Indian* (1973) share a common setting, but are independent stories. It is for this reason that Kroetsch prefers the term, "triptych." As he has said, the "connections are not narrative ones, they are of another sort: juxtaposition, repetition, contrast. The first volume is set in the 1930's, the depression, the second is at the end of the war, and the third will be contemporary."[3]

The Words of My Roaring is the first person narrative of Johnnie Backstrom, Notikeewin undertaker, "a heller with women," and Social Credit candidate in the provincial election. Challenged at an election rally to top the promises of his opponent, Doc Murdoch (who brought Johnnie into the world thirty-three years before), Johnnie asks his challenger how he would like some rain. That careless reply dominates the rest of the campaign, finally assuring the undertaker's election when the rain does fall on election eve.

The Studhorse Man is a novel of the road, but it begins and ends in the vicinity of Notikeewin and Coulee Hill. Its protagonist is Hazard Lepage, a studhorse man

of Acadian origin, squatting in an abandoned mansion overlooking Wildfire Lake. None of the characters from the previous novel has any role in this one, but the election of Backstrom is mentioned. The story is retrospectively narrated by Demeter Proudfoot, cousin to Martha, Hazard's fiancee. He is confined to an insane asylum as a result of his role in Hazard's death. The time of the story is some ten years later than the first novel, but Demeter's telling of it is still later.

Gone Indian is set in Notikeewin and Edmonton with the ghostly persistence of Binghamton, New York: whence the protagonist, Jeremy Sadness, an American graduate student, had come in search of a position in the University of Alberta English department. Jeremy becomes involved in the Notikeewin Winter Festival, replacing the grievously injured Roger Dorck. The story is narrated through the device of a long letter from Mark Madham, Jeremy's professor at Binghamton, to Jill Sunderman of Notikeewin. The letter quotes liberally from cassette tapes Jeremy had mailed to Madham before his mysterious disappearance in a blinding snow storm. This novel is set in the late 1960's or early 1970's.

Clearly these three novels do not form a trilogy in the usual sense of the term, for there are no narrative connections between them, nor even any persistence of characters. Johnnie Backstrom does put in a cameo appearance in *Gone Indian*, but the only real persistence is the setting. Of course the three novels are also related thematically, but not more strikingly to one another than to Kroetsch's first novel, *But We Are Exiles* (1965). Indeed, Morton Ross has written an excellent study of Kroetsch's first three novels demonstrating a consistency of thematic interest and of the device of pairing opposed figures.[4] The absence of narrative links in the triptych is, I believe, an important dimension of the "more profound kind of realism" Kroetsch is reaching toward.

Efforts to define realism in fiction are dauntingly numerous and disappointingly inconclusive. I shall not attempt to resolve the issue here, but some clarification of my understanding of it is necessary if I am to be understood myself. It would appear to me that much of the difficulty with the term "realism" stems from the fact that its meaning when applied to fiction arises from three quite different grounds of classification. One might conveniently classify virtually all narratives on the basis of four distinct grounds: their reference, their form, their manner of presentation, and the matter presented.

History, for example, is best defined on referential grounds, since it refers to past and witnessed event. Whatever the form adopted by an historical narrative, whatever its manner of presentation, and whatever the matter presented, it remains history if it refers to past witnessed events. Fiction is similarly definable referentially, since it refers to invented event. Realistic fiction, by the same token, is distinguished from fantasy on the grounds of references, since it refers to possible and probable events and persons, while fantasy refers to improbable or even impossible events and persons.

But fictions which deal with perfectly possible and probable events (such as lost children, shipwrecks, chance meetings and positive identification of long-lost children and parents) are commonly excluded from the category of realism, and labelled romance. Realism is distinguished from romance, then, on formal, not referential grounds. Romance narratives do not possess a sufficiently rational and unified plot to qualify for entry into the category of realistic fiction. In other words, it is not the events in romance that are implausible (as is the case with fantasy), but the manner in which the events are formally inter-connected.

Since manner of presentation is a rhetorical category it does not provide grounds for distinguishing between the traditional types of narrative. Any narrative theoretically has access to any or all of the rhetorical devices available to writers of narrative. However, if an historian were to write an historical narrative in the manner of stream-of-consciousness, he would probably find a larger audience among people with literary interests than among those with historical interests. Manner of presentation, then, permits classification *within* the major narrative types of history, novel, and romance.[5]

The last grounds, of matter presented, is a little more difficult to define precisely, but is essential to an understanding of the way in which we apply a term such as "realistic." For example, mythical narratives are defined by their matter, which is sacred event. Again, epic is defined essentially by its matter, which is great public event. A narrative about a little girl's outing into the country would not be labelled epic however many elements of epic form and manner it employed — such as invocation, epic simile, beginning *in medias res*, unity of action, etc. It could never be other than a mock epic.

The novel itself is distinguished from other forms of fictional narrative primarily on grounds of matter. The characteristic matter of the novel is domestic event. Those novels which depart from the matter of domestic event are distinguished from the novel proper by some qualifying epithet — as with the detective novel, the adventure novel, the pornographic novel, science fiction, and so forth. Ian Watt's notion of "formal realism" ("a full and authentic report of human experience"), applies the grounds of matter and reference rather than formal grounds in my sense.[6] The epithet, "realistic," when applied to the novel, stresses the characteristic domestic matter of the novel.

The mode of character definition is also a dimension of the matter. Mythical characters, for example, are defined by their function in the mythical story. The characters in heroic narrative and in romance are defined by ethical or religious ideals. The characters in the novel, whose matter is domestic event, are defined in terms of sociological and psychological types. Readers invariably complain that characters defined by function or ethical ideal are "unrealistic."

A further dimension of matter is the setting in which the events and actions of the narrative take place. A narrative whose setting is an imaginary country or

planet would have a difficult time being accepted as realistic however possible and probable were the events of which it was composed, and however "realistic" were the formal interconnections between those events. Novels with an exotic setting (novels of adventure and romance), or with a setting located in the past (historical novels), are seldom considered realistic even if they possess the appropriate elements of form and reference. It must be admitted, though, that one of the difficulties with the historical novel is that it confuses the issue of reference, since it commonly refers to both actual events and invented ones. It is perhaps on this ground more than grounds of matter that it is rejected from the ranks of realistic fiction.

THE PRIMARY PURPOSE of the foregoing discussion has been to explore the notion of realism when applied to narrative fiction. However, I have introduced a comprehensive scheme for the categorization of narrative, and have referred a number of times to the elusive category of romance.

Like "realism," "romance" is a term that is applied to all forms of art from the graphic arts, through literature, to music. There is also a particular narrative type commonly labelled romance. My interest here is in the term "romance" only when applied to narrative as a qualifying epithet on a parallel with "realism." That is to say, one wishes to know what elements of a narrative lead one to label it a romance.

As with realistic narartive, one identifies romance narrative primarily on grounds of form and matter. The romance can tolerate improbable event, but characteristically relates probable events whose interconnections follow the dictates of human wishes rather than the Aristotelian probability and necessity. Romance matter may be domestic and familiar or exotic and strange, but not public or sacred event. Romance character definition is based on generalized human type (for example, a young man, an old woman, etc.) rather than ethical, religious, sociological or psychological type.

But the crucial element of romance is setting. In romance narratives the setting functions metaphorically rather than representationally. Deserts, seas, fertile valleys, storms, droughts, etc. are introduced as needed to advance the story, set a mood, or express the theme. It is for this reason that romance narratives tend to be tales of journeys. A journey is the least question-begging means of altering setting.

Romance, then, is distinguished from other narrative modes primarily by the metamorphic and metaphorical character of its setting. This feature also makes romance peculiarly hospitable to allegorical expression, since allegory is essentially the transposition of one kind of event to another kind of setting — for example, a

political struggle transposed onto a barnyard, or a moral struggle transposed onto a jousting field.

The grounds of matter is the only important one for the realist movement of the nineteenth century in France, which is the progenitor of modern realism. The realists insisted upon certain types of subject matter in art. They declared that the unusual person and the extraordinary action (acts of heroism or sacrifice) were no longer suitable matter for serious fiction and confused the issue by asserting that the particular domestic and unheroic matter which interested them was referentially true, that is to say, real. But, of course, the realistic novelists wrote fiction. Hence their persons and actions were not referentially true or real. Indeed, an actual person, and an actual extraordinary human action — the story of Joan of Arc, for example—would be unsuitable matter for realistic fiction. The realistic writer might choose heroic matter as his subject, but would endeavour to make the agent of an heroic action conform to psychological or sociological type rather than ethical or religious type, as would be proper to an heroic action.

The fact that the realists declared certain kinds of matter to be true-to-life has seriously confused the discussion of realism ever since. Referentially defined, realism means a narrative of possible and probable events, and one can accept this definition without settling the philosophic issue of appearance and reality. Formally defined, realism means a rational and unified plot with a main action to which incident and chance event are rationally subordinated. It is only when one comes to the grounds of matter that the issue of appearance and reality becomes relevant. But even here the issue is a false one, because the realists do not so much insist that heroic action is unreal or illusory as that it is atypical. Such a belief finds its root in psychology, sociology, or even theology rather than in ontology. In other words, the realists assert explicitly that certain propositions about human nature and human conduct are true, and others false. The *real* is that which conforms to those propositions they assert to be true. Change the propositions and you change the reality. Thus the new propositions about human nature in this century, emanating from Freud and Jung, internalized the action of the realistic novel to the point where its reference was no longer fictional and plausible event, but the fictional perception of event, or even the implausible event of dream, as in *Finnegan's Wake.*

Kroetsch's fiction in the *Out West* triptych is realistic on referential grounds for the most part — although he introduces some rather implausible events in *The Studhorse Man* and *Gone Indian.* He obviously feels the referential criterion of realism to be a restraint, and seeks to escape it in *Studhorse Man* by inventing the insane narrator, Demeter Proudfoot, and by the device of dream in *Gone Indian.* Plausibility of event, then, is one of the conventions of realism that Kroetsch is moving away from.

On the grounds of matter, *Out West* is both realistic and unrealistic. The set-

ting of all three novels is primarily Alberta (with some recollection of exotic settings like Ontario, France, and Binghamton, New York), and it is described in verisimilitudinous detail. The types of events which form the matter of the narratives, however, tend to be somewhat exotic and unusual removing them from the category of realism. Nonetheless the persons involved in the actions are fully identifiable sociological and psychological types — as in realistic fiction. But because they are involved in exotic and unusual actions, they take on exotic and unusual attributes, thus moving them away from sociological type toward the exaggerated and grotesque satirical type. Clearly, once again, Kroetsch is straining against the realistic convention of character definition in terms of sociological and psychological type.

Finally, and most significantly, the *Out West* novels lack the Aristotelian plot, or unified and rational action. Although Aristotle does not draw the inference, a unified and rational action implies a single agent for the action of which the plot is composed. But the agent itself must be both stable and rationally comprehensible. One such agent is Aristotle's consistent and rational character (that is, obeying the rules of probability and necessity). Fiction which lacks an Aristotelian plot generally also lacks a stable and rational agent. The picaresque novel is one subtype of the novel which lacks both unified plot and stable character.

Stuart Miller, in his book *The Picaresque Novel*, is distressed by the disunity of action and the instability of character in picaresque fiction:

> The hero of the picaresque novel differs from characters in other types of fiction. His origins are uncertain. He becomes a rogue in a world full of roguery. His roguery differs from comic roguery in being gratuitous. He cannot love or feel strong emotion; he is incapable of anchoring his personality to some idea or ideal of conduct. His internal chaos is externally reflected in his protean roles. This instability of personality is seen in the picaresque novel as a reflection of the outer chaos discovered by the plot patterns. The picaresque character is not merely a rogue, and his chaos of personality is greater than any purely moral chaos. It reflects a total lack of structure in the world, not merely lack of ethical or social structure.[7]

Miller's assumption that an irrational plot and an unstable character in a work of fiction imply a chaotic universe reveals his expectation that the organization of a fictional narrative should perform an explanatory role. Rational plot and stable character tell the reader that God's in his heaven and all's right with the world, while an irrational plot and unstable character tell him that all Hell's broke loose. Miller's expectation is one that realistic fiction has fostered in him, for the matter and form of realistic fiction are designed to fit certain propositions about the nature of the world which are believed to be true. But not all narrative (nor all fiction) is designed to fulfil such explanatory expectations. Picaresque is one type of narrative not designed in its form or matter to fulfil an explanatory role.

The picaresque novel is not so much an anomaly in the history of the novel, as

the survival of an older narrative form alongside the novel. The realistic novel, from its earliest beginnings, has had a didactic function rather similar to that of epic. It has both articulated and preached the bourgeois world view just as Homer and Virgil articulated and promulgated the Greek and Roman *paideia*. But there has always existed an unofficial narrative art alongside the official, public forms of the epic and the novel. That unofficial art has never been fundamentally concerned with plot or stable character, because it has not been concerned to articulate a coherent world view. Its sources tend to be popular rather than learned, legendary rather than mythical. This other narrative tradition might be called fabular,[8] because it is basically a story-telling tradition. Its *raison d'être* is the story or fable conceived as a narrative metaphor unattached to time or place, to character or narrative causality. It seeks rationality and coherence elsewhere than in plot and character.

KROETSCH TELLS US that the connections between the three novels of *Out West* are to be found in "juxtaposition, repetition, [and] contrast," but he does not say what is to be juxtaposed, repeated and contrasted. In fact, it is not at all difficult to identify the major elements so treated. Each of the three novels possesses a roving figure (Johnnie Backstrom, Hazard Lepage, and Jeremy Sadness) and a static figure (Jonah Bledd, Demeter Proudfoot, and Professor Mark Madham). In each case the roving figure has affinities with the picaro figure in that he does rove, is morally irresponsible, and chaotic of personality. He is also, in each case, sexually active. Jonah Bledd of *The Words of My Roaring* is morally responsible, of clear and consistent personality, and happily married. The other static figures tend to be parodies rather than exemplars of the Jonah Bledd paradigm.[9] There are many more recurring figures in the three novels, in particular pairs of predatory and nurturing women, but it would occupy many pages to pursue them.

The recurring figures and situations — albeit recurring with alterations, reformulations and even inversions — provide a thematic coherence which is the hallmark of fabular narrative when it moves to larger forms, the kind of coherence which the framing device of the pilgrimage to Canterbury provides for Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The point of the Chaucerian frame is not, of course, to *justify* a collection of unrelated tales. His audience would not have expected or desired any such justification. Its function is, rather, to provide his readers with some guidance to aid them in *interpreting* his tales. For in the fabular tradition, the tale is a vehicle of significance, and it is the artist's function to articulate that significance. A tale is not a record of an event, as history, epic, and novella purport to be, but a parable of the human condition, and the parable requires a rubric or contextual frame to reveal its significance.

Kroetsch, then, achieves thematic coherence and provides his readers with some guidance in the interpretation of his tales or episodes, by means of recurring patterns and recurring figures. His patterns are formal or reflexive rather than narrative or progressive. Such patterns give coherence, not only to the *Out West* triptych, but also to each of the novels within it. Each novel is itself without stable character or unified plot. The following pages will illustrate the fabular form from *The Words of My Roaring.*

The writer of fabular fiction may clothe his take in the mousseline of romantic fantasy, the shrouds of gothic horror, or the tweed of everyday experience, but is in every case fundamentally unconcerned about either narrative plausibility or narrative coherence. Kroetsch chooses the tweed of everyday experience in *The Words of My Roaring*, but presents his readers with an inherently implausible story. Backstrom is a hard-drinking, philandering undertaker. "Six-four in my stocking feet, or nearly so," he says, "a man consumed by high ambitions, pretty well hung, and famed as a heller with women. Or at least I was, until the eldest unmarried daughter of the Burkhardt clan proved marvelously fertile on the strength of an awkward and hurried trial." He decides to run for election to the Alberta legislature behind the leadership of John George Applecart, a bible-thumping, teetotal, evangelizing preacher constantly inveighing against the Eastern "who-er of Babylon." His motives are entirely selfish and pecuniary. He hopes to sit

> up there in the Parliament buildings, gawking out a window at the streetcars crossing the High Level Bridge. The micks and bohunks be damned; let the krauts and the crazy Swedes bury their own dead. Tough titty, boys. No more digging the grave myself to make the extra two bucks. Not for John B. MLA. Indemnity they call it; nothing so crass as salary. Compensation for money that was never yours to lose. Five solid years of good green indemnification.

He shortly promises rain to his electorate in a moment of not-quite-sober embarrassment, as we have already heard. As the election nears, Johnnie encounters less and less derisive scorn, and more and more desperate hopefulness from the drought-stricken farmers; until the rain miraculously arrives on election eve, and his victory is assured. As if this sin against plausibility of plot were not enough, Kroetsch has the cynical, self-serving Backstrom suddenly turn into a reflective moralist. As the din of the rain mounts on the leaky roof of his hearse, he is seized by a "terrible doubt":

> The more I confronted the facts, the more I was overwhelmed by a terrible realization.
>
> I had nothing to do with the rain.
>
> I had not a thing to do with the coming of the rain. That realization came to me in the form of an emotion. I don't trust emotions. I have a goddamned good reason for not trusting them, they tend to run riot over my mind and body night and day.

> The rain had just happened. By sheer accident. And here I was, about to cash in on an accident.

One can see in the narrative device and Backstrom's reaction to his undeserved good fortune, the unstable personality of the picaro reflecting the outer chaos of the world — which Miller identifies as the essence of the picaresque novel. The difficulty with this reading is that the rain — far from being an instance of a chaotic universe — is evidence of a totally unexpected providential pattern in the universe. Backstrom's remorse — if it is explicable at all — is occasioned by his awareness that he has no connection whatever, in body, mind or spirit, with that providence. Moreover, Backstrom's keen awareness of his own instability of personality would suggest that it is not so much a device of the novel as its subject.

The main action — prairie politician gains seat in parliament on strength of promise of rain — is little more than a wire-copy Alberta joke, but it is an echo of the facts of Alberta political history. As Kroetsch himself puts it:

> In the rhetoric of prairie politics — the voices of Riel, Tommy Douglas, Aberhart, Diefenbaker — we go from Eden to the apocalypse in one easy leap. They never quite know whether it's the end or the beginning. I was playing with it a little bit in *The Words of My Roaring*. There's very little credence given to the notion that we exist in history, in time.[10]

And in Alberta political history itself, Kroetsch hears an echo of the historical and social thinking of evangelical Christianity. The story, in other words, is neither a plausible sequence of rationally related events, nor an implausible sequence of unrelated events, but a metaphorical pattern of event. In its generic form, it is the quest for the comfort and prosperity of the promised land.

It may seem tedious to belabour this point, but the orthodoxy of realistic fiction, with its insistence upon stability of character and plotted sequence of events, frequently prevents the perception of what would otherwise be obvious and apparent. The following review from the *University of Toronto Quarterly* demonstrates how thoroughly realistic expectations can interfere with the proper perception of a fabular narrative:

> Robert Kroetsch . . . does try, though perhaps a little too hard, to inject some humour into his Alberta novel, *The Words of My Roaring*, a story of one political campaign in the first Aberhart (Applecart in the novel) election in the mid-1930's. However, the time and place are largely irrelevant — regrettably so, since Alberta politics of that era would seem to offer prime material for the fiction writer. There is some significance in the fact that the anti-heroic narrator, an undertaker, is running against the old doctor who brought him into the world, and concurrently carrying on an extra-marital affair with the doctor's daughter, but the point is by no means clear. Incidents such as the suicide of the narrator's friend, Jonah, and the goring of a clown at a rodeo, seem gratuitous, though they may be intended to add appropriately modern dark elements to the robust comic scenes. The narrator's

election promise of rain for the parched farms, a promise which ironically comes true in the nick of time, also has little apparent narrative meaning.[11]

It is, of course, entirely unfair to cite, some eight years after the event, the hastily formed opinions of a man reviewing a book. But the spontaneous misapprehensions of a learned and intelligent reader most clearly reveal the kinds of expectations such a reader brings to a work of fiction. This reader attempts to stabilize the character of the protagonist by labelling him an "anti-hero," and expresses his displeasure at the absence of a rationally related sequence of events by the epithet, "gratuitous," and the phrase, "little apparent narrative meaning." The coming of the rain is part of the fable, and it makes no more sense to complain of its lack of "narrative meaning" than it does to register a similar complaint about Hamlet's death at the end of the celebrated play.

A MUCH MORE SERIOUS misapprehension, however, is the reviewer's assertion that "time and place are largely irrelevant." I assume that he misses the detail of social observation which is so central to nineteenth-century British fiction, and early twentieth-century American fiction. These expectations apparently blind him to Kroetsch's absolutely brilliant evocation of time and place. There is nothing in George Eliot or even Dickens to surpass the following recreation of Alberta in the dry thirties:

> We drove through the cooling night, and we felt pretty good, I can tell you. The crows had stopped knocking around the sky. All day they were boss, but now it was ours. A dozen bottles of beer were ours. It was all listed under our names, we were certain, and we drove and stopped and we had to stop again.
>
> Man, it felt good, just to be half-loaded and the pressure easing up in your bladder and the old tool held firmly in the right hand. For that one beautiful moment you feel you've spent a lifetime looking for a place to pee, and here you've found it. We watered the parched earth. You could hear water running, and that was a mighty pleasant change. Oh show me the way to go home. That clear sky above all rashing over with millions of stars and the baked earth letting out the breath it had held all day; the cowshit and buck-brush and a dying slough hole scenting the air; a little rank yet fertile with hope. It felt good.

Not only is this perhaps the greatest passage on peeing in literature (better than Rabelais or Swift), it is also attached intimately and significantly to its time and place. But the reviewer is blind to this evocation of place and others like it because they do nothing to advance the plot or develop the character. What they do is articulate the fable, Backstrom's quest for "five solid years of good green indemnification."

The ingestion and evacuation of liquids is a matter of no small concern in a drought-ravaged land — especially when that evacuation is performed by one who

is about to become responsible for his best friend's drowning in Wildfire Lake, and, ultimately, for the return of the fructifying rains. But Johnnie Backstrom's homage to the cowshit and buckbrush looks beyond even this novel to Hazard Lepage of *The Studhorse Man*. Hazard, like his great stallion, Poseidon, is not properly housebroken. We find him, dressed in a stolen Mountie's uniform, saluting the Alberta legislative building:

> Without further ado he aimed his golden stream at a commemorative garden a number of floors below. That moment was resonant with the future held in store; but Hazard, unthinking, fumbled with the historic buttons, resumed his burden then went in his cavalier way down the marble stairways, past the rows of glowering oil portraits, past the battle flags to an exit.
>
> A reluctant spring had come overnight to the city.

The future with which Hazard's golden stream is resonant is PMU, Pregnant Mare's Urine, from which estrogen is extracted in order, in Demeter Proudfoot's words, "to prevent the further multiplication of man upon the face of the earth." PMU proves to be the salvation of the Lepage stallions. However, the urinary vision reaches its apotheosis in *The Studhorse Man*. I cannot recall a single instance of liquid evacuation in *Gone Indian*.

The rigorous critic will observe that neither Johnnie's nor Hazard's evacuation is essential to the plot, and the fastidious will note that their characters are so thinly offensive that such gratuitous bad taste is hardly needed. Those who are neither rigorous nor fastidious may hear the delicate tracery of Kroetsch's prose through the hyperbole and vulgarity of which it is composed. Since event is treated as metaphor in fabular fiction, police court logic (rules of relevance, based on rules of evidence) does not apply. Both Backstrom and Lepage reveal their benighted humanity in simple and humble acts of mere animality that are nonetheless redolent with human imagination and significance.

Johnnie raises the issue of the final relevance of event himself while in contemplation upon the futility of his nightly amorous adventures with Helen Murdoch, daughter of his political opponent:

> You know, the way you half-despise yourself and half-know the boredom has set in already, and how the hell do I bow out without hurting anybody's feelings? How the hell did I get here? How long is it really great: maybe eight seconds. If a man comes for the grand total of six days of his life he will go down in history as a heroic performer. One miserable week of joy, including a day of rest. And to do that you spend seventy years; three score and ten conniving, cheating, betraying your wife, inventing filthy lies, wasting your money, missing sleep, deceiving your best friends, risking the creation of further ridiculous life, wrecking your clothes. My God, a two-week vacation is longer.

Backstrom has an answer for this scepticism, born of reading life as a well-plotted story:

> But out there in that garden with Helen, I wanted to reach up and stop the old world from spinning. I simply wanted to stop time right there and say, "Helen, I regret to say the sun will not come up this morning."

He rejects the inexorable logic of events, and the law of consequence, and embraces a futile desire for the infinite prolongation of the fleeting moment of his bliss. This is the Edenic and nostalgic counterpart of Applecart's apocalyptic preaching which would collapse time in order to hasten punishment of the wicked and reward the virtuous. Applecart, preaching over the radio to a group of voters in Backstrom's funeral parlour, accepts the law of consequence, but is impatient of time's slow chariot:

> Applecart was onto the dirty Easterners who were gouging the West. He had built up to that and now he was onto them. He was talking about the Second Coming and the Last Judgement, the final reckoning of the Fifty Big Shots. Just wait, he said. And he gave them a blanket condemnation. "Just wait, and in short order the wicked will be punished and the suffering good will be rewarded. . . ."
>
> Then it was time to drive home his point and he clinched her tight: "Come hither; I will show unto thee the judgement of the great Who-er that sitteth upon many waters . . . "
>
> I worked on the lakes for a number of years, but the thought had never struck my mind; the Whore, it turned out, was Toronto, and all her high-muckie-muck millionaires.

It is in the light of Applecart's apocalyptic fulminations and Backstrom's Edenic yearnings that his unexpected remorse upon the arrival of the rain must be understood. The coming of the rain has nothing to do with plot or character — and that is precisely the point. Johnnie repeats to himself the terrible realization that he had nothing to do with the coming of the rain. Through the entirely fortuitous coincidence of his prophecy and the event, he is sanctified in the desperate imaginations of the farm folk. The rain unmans him. In a nice inversion of the tragic role of Fortune, Backstrom becomes Fortune's fool through good rather than bad fortune. The coming of the rain forever denies to him the possibility of an honest victory over Dr. Murdoch, his political opponent and surrogate father. The reviewer's complaint, then, that the coming of the rain has little "narrative meaning," rather misses the mark. It has *no* "narrative meaning." It is an untoward intrusion of the desired into the actual; in other words, it has a fabular meaning.

Just as all of the tales in the *Canterbury Tales* must be read in the context of the pilgrimage to the shrine of the martyred saint as an act of Easter-time devotion, so all of the incidents in *The Words of My Roaring* must be read in the context of Backstrom's futile quest for "five solid years of good green indemnification," of Applecart's promise of the final reckoning for the Fifty Big Shots, of the necessity of dreams:

> Christ, you have to dream out here. You've got to be half goofy — just to stay sane.
>
> I'm a great one for paradox. My reading of the Bible, I suppose; dying to be born and all that. But really, it isn't an easy place to live. Like when the wind blows black, when it's dry, you drive all day with your lights on. Great electioneering weather. The fish lose their gills in this country. The gophers come up for a bite to eat, and they crawl right into the air.
>
> I won't swear to that — but it's a God's truth, you have to dream.

Backstrom is well aware of the futility of his quest, and is all the more appalled at its inexplicable success.

The "gratuitous" incident of the clown's goring by a bull is one of the many episodes enclosed by Backstrom's quest. A boy rides a bull in a rodeo for the full time, "making points all the way for style." But when the time was up

> the bull wasn't finished. He kept bucking and turning. And the boy who had been riding so grandly suddenly looked scared. His hat was too new, and that was a bad sign. He had got onto something and he didn't know how to get off, I suppose, and here he was riding the worst animal of the lot, and he wasn't losing. That was his trouble.

A rodeo clown, as tall as Backstrom, steps in between the boy and the bull, after the boy finally falls to the ground, and sticks out his rump.

> The bull saw the clown's red-and-yellow behind and snorted. The crowd roared. The clown started his quick sidestep.
>
> But he was just a split second late. The bull must have tossed him thirty feet in the air.
>
> The funny thing was, the crowd all thought it was part of the act. They roared and applauded. They thought the clown would jump up and run for his barrel. But he didn't. He tried to get up but wasn't moving quite fast enough, and the bull was on him again.

The clown, who was all skin and bones under his baggy costume, later dies in hospital.

Backstrom seizes the opportunity to address the assembled crowd, delivering an impromptu campaign speech, identifying himself with the clown, and the bull with the Fifty Big Shots from Toronto. The speech is phenomenally successful — particularly his repetition of the promise of rain. The point of it all is in Backstrom's ironic misidentification of himself with the clown. It turns out that he, like the boy on the bull, isn't going to lose.

NOTES

[1] Donald Cameron, "Robert Kroetsch: The American Experience and the Canadian Voice," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 1 (Summer 1972), p. 48.

[2] "A Conversation with Margaret Laurence" in *Creation*, ed. Robert Kroetsch (Toronto: New Press, 1970), p. 53.

[3] Russell M. Brown, "An Interview with Robert Kroetsch," *The University of Windsor Review* (Spring 1972), pp. 2-3.

[4] Morton L. Ross, "Robert Kroetsch and His Novels," in *Writers of the Prairies*, ed. D. G. Stephens (Vancouver: U.B.C. Press, 1973), pp. 101-14.

[5] Autobiography, it is true, can be distinguished on grounds of the manner of presentation, since only in autobiography can author, narrator, and the agent of the action be the same person.

[6] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), p. 32.

[7] Stuart Miller, *The Picaresque Novel* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University, 1967), p. 131.

[8] Robert Scholes has anticipated me in this use of fable — in *The Fabulators* (New York: Oxford, 1967). His earlier book in collaboration with Robert Kellogg (*The Nature of Narrative*, New York: Oxford, 1966) is an extremely useful discussion of narrative from Theocritus to Robbe-Grillet.

[9] These patterns are discussed in Morton Ross' article for the first two of the *Out West* novels and *But We Are Exiles*. Kroetsch himself mentions them for *The Studhorse Man* in the interview with Cameron (p. 50).

[10] Cameron interview, p. 49.

[11] J. M. Stedmond, "Letters in Canada: Fiction," *UTQ*, 36 (July 1967), p. 386.