

THE LIMITATIONS OF MEDIA

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MARSHALL MCLUHAN HAS BEEN TELLING US for years now that the medium is the message. Modern Canadian poets and novelists have reacted to his work, and indeed have often used it as a springboard, for their experiments with media have made explicit the theories McLuhan gave us. Most literary critics have reacted against McLuhan's view of them as "Gutenberg men" or "print men" — terms not exactly complimentary but hard to disagree with. Yet the dilemma of Gutenberg man in the electronic age is a real one, for at what point does the book as experience give way to the book as print medium? Do electronic media improve our view of human experience? What are the limitations of the electronic universe? These questions are explored at length in two novels by Robert Kroetsch, *The Studhorse Man* and *Gone Indian*, though the conclusions reached are somewhat ambiguous.

Both these books explore the uses of different media; for both narrators, Demeter of *The Studhorse Man* and Jeremy Sadness of *Gone Indian* are Gutenberg men who are trapped, respectively, by print and tapes. Demeter seems trapped by his attempt to impose a chronological order on the chaos of his own experience. He is writing a biography of Hazard Lepage, the studhorse man, who is obsessed with junk — "scrap iron, rags, bones, and miscellaneous" — and stays alive by gathering stray bones and beer bottles. Hazard's environment is one of furnace rooms, telegraph keys, and bridges such as the High Level Bridge in Edmonton. He leads his horse, Poseidon, by a rein made from a "broken set of snow chains." And at home he has an amazing collection of junk, including rivets, horse liniment, Spanish fly and bones. The historian, Demeter, must take the details, the bones of Hazard's life, and reconstruct the life of a human being. Past events, past lives, and former deaths are pieces which the biographer must assemble like a jigsaw puzzle so the "very beast dismantled" can be put back together again.

The biographer's subject, Hazard, is actually a sort of archetypal Western

frontier hero, a difficult subject for a biographer; for it is difficult to write a good biography of a figure whose exploits are already legendary. How does the biographer tell fact from fiction? Hazard is an eccentric who is driven by his devotion to the Lepage horses; as the novel tells us, "extinction or survival was quite simply to be the fate of the breed of horse he alone had preserved through six generations." As he wanders from place to place in his wish to breed the "perfect horse," he looks for reference to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and to the *General Stud Book*, a set of leather-bound volumes which form, we are told, "Hazard's history of man and his theology." He retreats into his bizarre mansion and pores over breeding lists; he becomes an authority on the attributes of the perfect mare. Every time Poseidon is used as a stud, Hazard pockets three dollars, which he uses to help maintain his quest.

But Hazard's chaotic wandering is a difficult area for his faithful biographer. Artifice and art prove to be an uneasy combination. Unlike the quiet, retiring Demeter, Hazard is a man of extravagant tastes. When the biographer first sees Hazard at a bridal reception, he notices that his subject is consuming huge quantities of food and drink. "In the midst of all that extravagance," Demeter complains, "I would only nibble at a shimmering jelly salad on one corner of my heaped plate."

When the difference between author and subject is so great, the myth changes, for the reconstruction may be incorrect. Sitting in his bathtub, surrounded by papers and notes, Demeter can see only a mirror image of reality: "A mirror is so placed above my sink that I have been able to sit for hours, attempting to imagine what in fact did happen (allowing for the reversal of the image) exactly where I imagine it. It is then *time* I must reconstruct, not space." The Demeter-Hazard relationship is similar to the Professor Madham-Jeremy Sadness one in *Gone Indian*: in both cases a technological medium proves inadequate in capturing experience. But then biography is not life; it is a picture of life.

At the novel's end Demeter's new role as a studhorse man implies his rejection of biography. It is now he who will save the Lepage horses from extinction. Before this sudden shift, however, he is a dull, tedious priest to Hazard's colourful confession. He likes to believe that he and Hazard are "alike in strenuously resisting that distortion of facts by which men delude themselves." But he is still a man of facts, an historian, while Hazard is a man of action. Hazard denies the past and prefers life in the present; Demeter thrives on assembling "fragments" in a vain attempt to capture "a whole image of the vanished past." Hence his notes, carefully taken on three-by-five cards, mean nothing until they are interpreted for "invisible meanings." He must be both relevant and accurate, and much of the detail he recalls is simply relevant. This biography of Hazard Lepage is, finally, an incomplete picture of a man; the fragments of the past remain as they were, and the whole image escapes us.

IT MAY BE THAT GUTENBERG MAN is print-oriented and needs the freedom of electronic technology. If this is so, *Gone Indian* should be the reverse of *The Studhorse Man*, and Jeremy Sadness should be fulfilled where Demeter is frustrated. But this is not the case, for Jeremy Sadness is just as frustrated by his tape recorder as Demeter was by the biographical form. *Gone Indian* is really an anti-novel, a collection of tape recordings sent by an unemployed American graduate student, Jeremy Sadness, to his supervisor, Professor R. Mark Madham, who then plays the tapes and offers comments on them. This structure permits Kroetsch to manipulate the time sequence so that he can offer us miscellaneous events, which can be played back at various times. The novel is informed by a series of reflections and disguises. If Jeremy disguises himself as himself, what is he trying to hide? Is the mysterious Professor Madham a facet of Jeremy's own personality? Is it important that the name "Madham" is a combination of the words "madman" and "madam"? When Jeremy first sees Notikeewin, he notices a mirage at the same time. His own suitcase has disappeared, and the one he is carrying belongs to a mysterious Roger Dorck, the official Winter King of the Notikeewin Winter Carnival. On his arrival at the Edmonton International Airport, Jeremy is met by a beautiful blonde who proceeds to remove her "tattered mink coat," a "tattered red sweat-shirt," her "snowboots," a "patriotic plaid skirt" and, finally, her "tits." She claims to have been a buffalo in a previous existence. No wonder Jeremy asks for the patience of a buffalo, and notes that "illusion is rife."

Now we do not know how accurate Professor Madham's transcripts of Jeremy's tapes are. He is having an affair with Jeremy's wife, Carol, and is certainly not unbiased. As Jeremy tells Professor Madham, "how ironic: you do nothing, I do everything: we arrive at the same predicament." And once Professor Madham has listened to the tapes and has erased them, the record has been destroyed. We actually see Jeremy as Professor Madham wants us to see him, for Jeremy finally jumps off a bridge, leaving his tape recorder hanging from a protruding timber.

But Jeremy does not seem to be any better off with his tape recorder than he would be if he had to write a book. The details of his universe are fragmented and not accessible to him. Lost without his Samsonite suitcase, which contains his beloved "grip developer," sweater, socks, and a few chewed pencils, he complains he is "marooned for want of a Gillette Blue Blade." So he fortifies himself with a toothbrush, shaving set, and a "deodorant that is guaranteed to seal the body against disintegration." He always carries many unnecessary keys, and sees life as a door that might be unlocked, or, perhaps, as an experience he can collect. The three identical princesses at the Notikeewin Winter Carnival might be "Xerox copies," he muses, but he cannot decide which one to crown as the queen. He

notices that the bedroom at the Sunderman house contains many clocks, all of which have stopped. The travelling in the novel occurs in symbols of modern technology: trains, cars, and snowmobiles. Significantly, the railway track Jeremy ultimately follows to his death proves to be merely an antidote, a corrective to the "space of his own drowning" in which he is so totally lost.

The tape recorder becomes Jeremy's friend and companion. It allows him to record not only his notes and feelings, but also his asides, phone calls, and miscellaneous observations; and it is eventually found dangling from a timber in the middle of the Kelchamoot Bridge after Jeremy and Jill Sunderman have jumped to avoid a train which is "off schedule" and on a track "it was not supposed to be on." The recorder is Jeremy's most prized possession and his only real link with the outside world.

Professor Madham's problem in editing the tapes is, he claims, the overwhelming detail. The Professor's original suggestion is that Jeremy take the tape recorder with him to help him finish his dissertation. Since Jeremy is unable to *write* his dissertation, this idea seems logical enough. Jeremy will mail cassettes back to Professor Madham, who will then edit them into a presentable form. But problems arise when Jeremy finds that the tape recorder provides his only link with the real world. Instead of sending the cassettes to Professor Madham, he wants to hear his own voice for reassurance. On many of the tapes, he insults the university traditions of which Professor Madham is so proud. "I needed my tape recorder; given a microphone I could have spoken," he says at one point, and he comes to treat the tape recorder as a trusty weapon, often drawing the microphone as if it were a six-gun. He even uses the microphone to masturbate; and when he wants to test himself, he tests the tape recorder:

Where he had expected to find his suitcase, he found instead his tape recorder.

Consequence: He seized the recorder in his shaking hands. He jerked the microphone out of its leatherette pouch. He pushed the plastic buttons, listened for the first whisper of the turning tape: TESTING, TESTING ONE TWO, TESTING THREE FOUR FIVE SIX SEVEN EIGHT NINE. He talks. He jumps to his feet and falls down on the floor on his toes and fingers and one UP two UP three UP four UP five. He talks some more.

In spite of his tape recorder, Jeremy cannot escape the conditioning of his urban childhood. For he is, in essence, a programmed robot, and he sees all his experience in mechanized terms. A "child of Manhattan" who has "dreamed Northwest" ever since he was very young, he regards himself as a "poor city boy set down by blundering jet among the wicked and the rebellious of the vanished frontier." Innocent and in need of experience, he consoles himself with grip exercises, push ups, and sit ups; he feels a constant need to improve himself. His urban background has hardly prepared him for an adventure in the wilderness. He believes he was named after Jeremy Bentham, the ultimate scholar and professor,

and feels that there was an expectation in his own family that some day he would become a professor. But as Jeremy reviews his own graduate programme in English — the failed dissertation, exhausting teaching, and final oral examination that never came — he realizes that he would have made a poor scholar indeed.

This combination of urban life and scholarly activity has affected Jeremy's love life. He can get an erection when he is standing up, but not when he is lying down. He believes that this perhaps is due to the "OATH OF CHASTITY" he took when he was ten, and he often refers to himself through the sexual metaphor. He recalls his affair with a Miss Cohen at university; surrounded by copies of the *Norton Anthology*, the *Anatomy of Criticism*, and *Notes and Queries*, they had made love while standing up against a bookcase. But Jeremy is impotent in bed with his wife, Carol, even though he suggests she read to him from Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*; as he explains, "maybe I'm so programmed that I have to be in a learning situation." As in *The Studhorse Man*, the penis plays the part of a trickster. When Jeremy is worried he attempts to "flog" his "limp imagination," and when he is cold he worries because his penis may "freeze off." His only real sexual triumph comes when he is able to make love while lying down with Bea Sunderman, but he has already found out this new sexual potency while resting in a *coffin*.

These double symbols of creation and death emphasize Jeremy's need to reject the competitive values of his former urban life. Appropriately, he chooses as his model the mysterious Grey Owl, a man who left his native England in order to live in Canada as an Indian. This "model from the utmost cultivated shores of the civilized world" fascinates Jeremy but also terrifies him. He wants to emulate Grey Owl, but knows that to create Grey Owl another Englishman, the uninteresting Archie Belaney, actually "died into a new life." For although Grey Owl seemed to be a real Indian, he was actually an imposter and an illusion. And when Jeremy decides that he, too, must live as an Indian, he also becomes an illusion. Dressed in levis, moccasins, and a buckskin jacket, he resembles an Indian so much that he is actually arrested and taken for one. But as soon as he speaks to a real Indian, it becomes clear that Jeremy is a fake. In the city he has played at being an Indian, but never before has he attempted to live the experience, and he finds the jump from illusion to reality very difficult.

OTHER CHARACTERS BLUR THE SEPARATION between illusion and reality. One town resident apparently died while playing hockey, but phoned his wife after he died. This couple's house is appropriately called "WORLDS END. Some one had left out the apostrophe." But the character who most concerns Jeremy is the mysterious Roger Dorck, whose suitcase Jeremy has picked up by

mistake. When Jeremy calls Dorck's wife, he finds that Dorck went to the U.S. on business and cannot be located; later, he discovers that Dorck has met with a snowmobile accident and is lying unconscious in a nearby hospital. After a leap of legendary proportions on his snowmobile, Dorck is carried into "Our Lady of Sorrows Hospital" in Notikeewin and there he remains. The Northern "Kingdom of Dorck. Snow. And the cold sun" must put on a winter festival without its ruler in attendance.

Dorck himself is a trickster figure who represents the creative unconscious Jeremy is trying to explore. Usually Dorck is the judge at the Festival, and his absence forces Jeremy to decide whether or not he is capable of being a judge. The records Dorck has kept of previous contests are not available to Jeremy, and since Dorck remains in a coma until the end of the novel he can give Jeremy no guidance. Hence except for Professor Madham's admonishments and unhelpful directions, Jeremy is completely on his own. If he is to judge the contestants at the carnival, the final decision will be his alone.

When Jeremy reverts to his academic mentality for aid, however, he receives little help. Professor Madham is himself the judge of Jeremy, a judge who cannot resist the impulse to evaluate. And since he plays the part of Jeremy's academic alter ego, Professor Madham is often confused with Jeremy himself. As Jeremy says to him, "one false move, Professor, and instead of addressing you, I'll be you." As Jeremy's thesis director, Professor Madham has arranged a job interview for him at the University of Alberta; but we suspect this is really because the Professor is having an affair with Jeremy's wife, Carol. And Professor Madham is the stereotype of the college English professor. A pompous bachelor of forty-seven, he has a social life centred on the faculty club and regular "Friday Night Mead Suppers." The rest of his time is spent grading papers and writing a book on "The Tragic Vision in Modern Prose," which is pretentiously dedicated to "Professors Grunt and Fart for drinking stout with me in London." Since Jeremy looks and sounds like a member of the counter-culture, it is not surprising that Professor Madham's "greying wavy hair," "squash player's perfect figure," and omnipresent "pipe" are anathema to him.

Professor Madham tends to classify the information Jeremy sends him; and while he is editing the tapes, the Professor cannot resist adding sarcastic comments of his own. Although he realizes that the prairies symbolize the "continent interior" in Jeremy's voyage of self-discovery, he thinks the tapes reveal his student to be "avoiding life" and "failing miserably." He is unable to avoid approaching the tapes as if they were a student's term paper, and he complains that Jeremy "simply does not give us adequate motivation, adequate *allowance*, for what happens." Often he inserts marginal comments that indicate he does not really understand Jeremy. And the transcript he produces lacks the total content of the

tape medium, for it omits the speech patterns and inflections which are basic to the form.

Although Jeremy is rejecting this academic approach, he is limited by the academic quality of his own vision. His "stumbling, ossified, PhD-seeking mind" sees everything in metaphors, in symbols; he hates Professor Madham's "go-get-a-job syndrome, publish, head a committee," but cannot escape from seeing all experience in academic terms. When he is asked about women, for instance, he pompously replies that "I think I know something about women. I've done some graduate work in that area of specialization." He "skims" the titles of books in Jill Sunderman's bookcase so he can impress Chairman Balding in his interview. When he is asked to judge the princesses in the Notikeewin Winter Carnival, he cannot avoid "marking" them individually; as he puts it, "something in me wanted to write in the margins of those lives: Awk. Frag. Emph. Cap. Fig." Nine years of graduate school have made him arbitrary as well as submissive.

Jeremy may well be one object in Professor Madham's "collection of beautiful objects." He can compose articulate letters of reference and imaginative epitaphs, but neither of these does him much good in the world of the living, for he cannot finish his dissertation and thus cannot get a job. Titles and dedications become obsessions, for Jeremy loses interest as soon as he begins a particular topic. In fact, he begins to see life itself in terms of his dissertation. During a shoe race, for instance, he begins a dissertation called "Collapse: The Theory and Practice"; after making love to Bea Sunderman, he thinks he may reflect his success by writing one called "The Quest Unquestioned." None of these attempts goes beyond a title, but he has brought along six notebooks in case ideas start to flow quickly, and if he should finish one page he will immediately copy it "lest the original be destroyed in a two-plane crash or a bombing outrage." Yet even in the multiplicity of imaginative experiences in Notikeewin, inspiration does not come to Jeremy's academic mind.

Trained by the urban academic world to judge, to classify, and to evaluate, Jeremy finds himself in a situation where these skills are useless. At the Winter Carnival he is even addressed as "Judge," and people are impressed because he has come all the way from New York. Yet he finds the beauty contest cannot be judged, though his academic conscience tells him he *must* judge the beauty contest and he knows it. As he tries to reach a conclusion, he thinks of "Dissertation Number Eight," which appropriately takes the form of "Colon: Blank" and then, finally, "The Forgery of Distance: Ritual for a Long Night." After futile attempts to classify the contestants as I, II, and III, or as RED, WHITE, and YELLOW, he finally places the crown on the head of the "BUFFALO WOMAN," Miss Jill Sunderman, who is not even running in the contest. And in so doing he symbolically rejects the statistical mind, the academic mentality; he opts out of urban society by refusing to participate in one of its own rituals — the beauty contest.

He proves to be as inept at judging a contest as he was at writing his dissertation; and perhaps the two problems are related, for he is unable to use his facilities to extend his power through the media. This failure is as pathetic in its own way as Demeter's was in *The Studhorse Man*.

In *The Studhorse Man* and *Gone Indian*, Kroetsch's philosophical position is ambiguous. Both Demeter and Jeremy are limited in their power to communicate, and they seem compelled to explore their respective psyches through the media available to them. One novel is a mock biography, the other is a collection of badly edited tape recordings. These are considerable achievements, but they do not really present a unified vision of man in society; for Demeter and Jeremy are isolates, not typical men, and their societies are highly artificial. Kroetsch shows his talents for experimentation in these two novels, and his interest in how the media control us. But we still are, for all that, Gutenberg men, and we will, like Kroetsch's anti-heroes, continue to question and rebel against the media we created to serve our needs.

THE APARTMENT

Dayv James French

My bootheels tapping out the
boundaries of the apartment-to-let
will be the substance of my biography.

Once the carpeting is laid,
minor appliances find counter space,
I'll be only a footnote for reference.

Cocktail conversation will pose a question,
the necessity of annotation, e.g.
"I noticed egg shells in the sink.

Are they symbolic, the dichotomy
of cleanliness and godliness, obvious
Easter mythologies, spirit vs machine?"

I'll remember the rooms as empty,
needing no explanation but
will, strangely, not desire to move.