

REINVENTING THE WORD

Kroetsch's Poetry

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THE HEROES OF ROBERT KROETSCH'S NOVELS stagger hugely into myth, roaring across the West in an endless quest that ends in death, or ironic triumph. The less-than-heroic narrators follow their progress with an analogous search for the words and form to tell the tale of a Hazard Lepage or a William Dawe. In *The Words of My Roaring*, that double search for a meaning and a mode of expression comes together in Johnny Backstrom's narrative, as he reveals the private, accidental and comic story of how he became a public hero. It's no accident that we last see him searching for words, to speak to the voters of Coulee Hill.

The double search recurs in Kroetsch's poetry. In several of the poems written between 1960 and 1975, collected as *The Stone Hammer Poems* (1975), and in the recent long poems *The Ledger* (1973, 1975) and "Seed Catalogue" (1977), he seeks his own roots (which assume national and archetypal significance) and an authentic language appropriate to the reality he discovers. Like Al Purdy holding a book of his ancestors' photographs at the beginning of *In Search of Owen Roblin*, or his own Anna Dawe following her father's field notes in *Badlands*, Kroetsch begins with the artifact, the relic. He evokes the remote Indians who shaped the stone maul, the grandfather who wrote the precise entries in the ledger, as he now shapes the search and writes the poem. Like Newlove in "The Pride" (for whom the search and the poem are also one), like Purdy in "Lament for the Dorsets," Atwood in "For Archeologists," or Bowering in "Grandfather," he achieves an intuitive connection with the past. A grandfather, a tribe of plains Indians; an Ontario mill, a prairie homestead; a dead Indian, a farm and a life abandoned by the now-rootless seeker: it has all become familiar material in contemporary Canadian literature. What transforms it, for Kroetsch as for the other poets, is the same power which transformed the stone into a hammer into a talisman: the power of the imagination. Those poets, like Kroetsch, who can speak to us of the presence of the past have not only achieved a unique, personal sense of its importance in shaping their present lives, but have also found the authentic language to communicate that vision.

"The Canadian writer must uninvent the word. He must destroy the homonymous American and English languages that keep him from hearing his own tongue," Kroetsch wrote in introducing "A Canadian Issue" of *Boundary 2*.¹ What does a given word, denoting a given artifact, mean for Robert Kroetsch, grandson of an Ontario miller and an Alberta homesteader, teacher at SUNY Binghamton, writer returning to Canadian settings in each of his novels? What does "a hammer/ of stone" mean?

1.

This stone
become a hammer
of stone, this maul

is the colour
of bone (no,
bone is the colour
of this stone maul).

The rawhide loops
are gone, the
hand is gone, the
buffalo's skull
is gone;

the stone is
shaped like the skull
of a child.

2.

This paperweight on my desk

where I begin
this poem was
found in a wheatfield
lost (this hammer,
this poem).

Cut to a function,
this stone was
(the hand is gone — ²

The opening lines of "Stone Hammer Poem" announce Kroetsch's methods and preoccupations. In short, incantatory lines he repeats the word to evoke the object in different contexts and thus call up different memories and associations. The "colour of bone," for example, suggests the buffalo skull, and, in section 3, the

squaw who may have "left it in/ the brain of the buffalo." The "retreating" Indians of section 5, in turn, suggest in section 8 the sale of the land (formed by the "retreating" and "recreating" glaciers), to the CPR which sold it to the pioneer grandfather, who "gave it to my father . . . who/ gave it to his son (who sold it.)" The guilt and grief Kroetsch feels, remembering this abandonment, are powerfully suggested in section 10, as he moves closer to his own history, his own feelings. On one level, this section conveys the factual information that the father found and kept the stone maul that broke the grandfather's plough; on another, it provides a clear picture of an old man, "lonesome for death," and "lonesome for his absent/ son and his daughters."

The opening description of the hammer, too, suggests the hand, now bone, which cut the stone to its "function," as the poet's hand shapes his words. Tracing the history of the stone hammer, then, involves Kroetsch in a personal reckoning with his family, with the general Western experience, and with his own craft. At first, he is the observer, seeking the words to describe precisely. Yet the poet's mind, circling round the word, gradually edges closer into the world of the object, and the emotional associations it calls up. By the end of the poem, after accepting the memory of his father, old and alone, he no longer simply observes the stone. Instead, he has only to touch it to live fully, imaginatively in its world, smelling cut grass and buffalo blood. The process of association is weblike. Each separate strand (Indian, German grandfather, father, inheritor-poet) is finally perceived to be part of a pattern, with its centre the inheritance of life represented by the hammer: a tool to kill buffalo; a mere stone impeding another tool, the plough; a relic; now a paperweight and talisman for the modern poet, suited to his function:

Sometimes I write
my poems for that

stone hammer.

This process of incantation, repeating the word to invoke visions of the object, is also central to the ongoing poem *Field Notes*, of which *The Ledger* and "Seed Catalogue" are the first two books. It is enhanced by the visual form of the books themselves. *The Stone Hammer Poems* is attractively designed by Joy Leach and Lilian Harrison, printed by Tim Chisholm in brown ink on sepia paper, to resemble a treasure from the attic. It is illustrated with historic photographs from the Glenbow Foundation: a plains Indian encampment for "Old Man Stories," retellings of the legends of Coyote the Trickster, clearly an ancestor of the comic-sexual Kroetsch hero; and a threshing crew, after "Spring Harvest" and "October Light," vivid farm memories. This extra visual dimension is used even more effectively in *The Ledger*, which extends the central metaphor to our eyes.

the	the ledger survived
ledger	
	because it was neither
itself	human nor useful ³

The ledger is the "book of final entry, in which a record of debits, credits and all money transactions is kept," bought by Henry Hauck, Canadian-born son of a Bruce County pioneer, to hold his sawmill accounts. Grandson Bob found "the green poem," and wove it into another book:

EVERYTHING I WRITE
I SAID, IS A SEARCH
(is debit, is credit)

is a search	for some pages
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remaining

(by accident)

the poet: finding	the column straight
in the torn ledger	the column broken

FINDING

everything you write	
my wife, my daughters, said	<i>the book of final entry</i>
is a search for the dead	<i>in which a record is kept.</i>

As originally published in *Applegarth's Folly* 1 in 1973, the double columns of the poem, first, recall the actual ledger and thus give force to Kroetsch's own accounting. "How much do I owe?" becomes a refrain. How much do I owe to the past? What debts of gratitude or guilt do I owe to these "specimens of the self-made men who have made Canada what it is?"

Shaping the trees.	I'll be damned.
Pushing up daisies.	It balances.

Second, the double columns force their own interpretations and representations, as the lines can be read both across (as in Anglo-Saxon poetry) and down, with the opposite column in ironic counterpoint. Meanings are multiple and interconnected, as are the six meanings of the key word "ledger," each unlocking a different vision of the past. The poet-accountant tallies up his family's past, our past, seeking to balance myths and realities.

THE FINAL, SINGLE-VOLUME FORMAT of the poem, designed by Michael Niederman and Hilary Bates, adds another dimension to this central metaphor. Two pages, flanking the titles, reproduce pages of Henry Hauck's ledger. The columns of figures tell of dead men's work and wages, await balance and interpretation. The title page, a map of Culrose and Carrick townships, Bruce County, 1880, extends the theme. A heavy black circle rings the notation "saw m," a red-ink scrawl proclaims, "Yes, that's the place, R.K." The poet asserts his place as a guide to, and modifier of, the past. Even the paper is heavy buff ledger stock. Finally, all the resources of different type styles, lovingly hand-set, complement the author's resources of language by emphasizing key words, and setting off the historical material (quotations, and entries from the original ledger) from the "green poem" growing around them.

Some accountings are the obvious ones of modern guilt:

	To raise a barn
cut down a forest.	
	To raise oats and hay;
burn the soil.	
	To raise cattle and hogs:
kill the bear	"As to the climate of the district,
kill the mink	Father Holzer cannot praise it
kill the marten	enough. He declares that during
kill the lynx	the first nine months of his
kill the fisher	residence here they had only one
kill the beaver	funeral, and that was of a man
kill the moose	84 years old."

Quickly, the balance becomes more personal. Ledger also means "a resident." Grandfather Henry and John O. Miller, brickmaker, meet:

That they might sit down	to a pitcher of Formosa beer
a forest had fallen.	

Canada Gazette notices of land for sale, census figures, become individual settlers; a national accounting becomes the personal vision of their hopes, and the failure of hopes.

CENSUS, 1861, TOWNSHIP OF CARRICK:

"Indians if any"	Name: Catherine Schneider Year of birth: 1841 Place of birth: Atlantic Ocean
none	Place of birth: Atlantis, the kingdom sought beyond the stone gates beyond the old home, beyond the ceaseless wars of the Rhine Palatinate. The sought continent of fortune lying beyond your father's recurring nightmare of the (forced) march to Moscow (my bones ache), beyond the flight from the burning fields. Beyond the night of terror crossing the closed border. Atlantis: the kingdom dreamed
Gottlieb Haag's only son grew up to be the first man hanged for murder in the County of Bruce	
(I can't believe my eyes.)	
having, on a wintry night, in a sleigh box on the road from Belmore to Formosa, clubbed to death his rival	
(I can't believe my eyes.)	

in love

The term "ledger" also means "a horizontal piece of timber secured to the uprights supporting the putlogs in a scaffolding, or the like." As such, it suggests not only settlers raising barns, but also Kroetsch erecting the scaffolding of a poem on that word. Each meaning becomes the organizing metaphor of a section. As "a large flat stone, esp. one laid over a tomb," the ledger suggests great-grandmother Theresia Tschirhart, who

Married three Bavarians.	
Buried three Bavarians.	it balances
What did most men feel in her presence?	Terror.
What did they do about it?	Proposed.

She embodies the mysterious power of the unknown new land:

The Canadian climate:
 a short summer
 followed by a short winter
 followed by a short summer
 followed by a short winter

She was a ringtailed snorter
 just the same.

(you must marry
 the terror)

Dead of a broken hip, buried in a frozen Alberta grave, she survives in the poem, after every settler has paid in full and Kroetsch has tried to complete his balances. She, grandfather Henry catching fish in the millpond, Joe Hauck mangled by the water wheel, all survive: not literally, as the ledger does, but imaginatively, summoned to the present by Kroetsch's imagination. As timber supporting a scaffolding, as "a book that lies permanently in some place," and especially as "the book of final accounting," the ledger becomes the living poem. As "the nether millstone," Kroetsch's mind too is the ledger, grinding the raw material of names and figures into a living account:

you must see
 the confusion again
 the chaos again
 the original forest

under the turning wheel
 the ripened wheat, the
 razed forest, the wrung
 man: the nether stone

The grandfather's cold figures from the past, the grandson's passionate search for the meaning of the past, move in separate columns, separate typefaces, down the thick buff pages to their final balance:

REST IN PEACE
 You Must Marry the Terror

Kroetsch's immediate past cannot be summed up so neatly. "Seed Catalogue" is a more diffuse poem in form and content, with its central image forming an ironic commentary on the remembered incidents, rather than unifying them. The seed catalogue arrives in "the dark of January," promising spring, promising miraculous crops:

339 — *McKenzie's Pedigreed Early Snowcap Cauliflower:*
 "Of the many *varieties of vegetables in existence, Cauliflower is unquestionably one of the greatest inheritances of the present generation, particularly Western Canadians. There is no place in the world where better cauliflower can be grown than right here in the West. The finest specimens we have ever seen, larger and of better quality, are annually grown here on our prairies. Being particularly a high altitude plant it thrives to a point of perfection here, seldom seen in warmer climes.*"⁴

Mary Hauck, like the catalogue, came West in January, only to find "an absence." Similarly the poet, following the truth of his memories ("This is what happened," "This is a fact,") finds, at first, very little for his imagination. Where Bruce County had trees, fertile soil, history, Heisler Alberta seems to offer no artifacts of civilization, nothing out of which Kroetsch can reconstruct a past.

How do you grow a prairie town?

The gopher was the model.
Stand up straight:
telephone poles
grain elevators
church steeples.
Vanish, suddenly: the
gopher was the model.

*How do you grow a past/
to live in*

the absence of silkworms
the absence of clay and wattles (whatever the hell
they are)
the absence of Lord Nelson
the absence of kings and queens
the absence of a bottle opener, and me with a vicious
attack of the 26-ounce flu
the absence of both Sartre and Heidegger
the absence of pyramids
the absence of lions
the absence of lutes, violas and xylophones
the absence of a condom dispenser in the Lethbridge
Hotel, and me about to screw an old
Blood whore. I was in love.

The question begins to answer itself when Kroetsch begins to remember what *was* there:

the girl who said that if the Edmonton
Eskimos won the Grey Cup she'd let me
kiss her nipples in the foyer of the
Palliser Hotel. I don't know where she got to

or the local hero, the Strauss boy who "could piss right clean over the principal's new car." Here, he seems to be seeking what William Carlos Williams called "a local pride," expressed in its appropriate idiom. In a recent interview, he also acknowledged the debt Prairie poets owe to Al Purdy, who led the way in "abandoning given verse forms for the colloquial, the prosaic, telling yarns in the oral

tradition.”⁵ Thus while “Seed Catalogue” does make use of the double-column structure of *The Ledger*, it is less formal, less consciously “artistic” creation, appropriate to the unromantic reality it portrays. In fact, its primary form is not poetry at all, but anecdote:

How do you grow a prairie town?

Rebuild the hotel when it burns down. Bigger. Fill it full of a lot of A-1 Hard Northern bullshitters.

— You ever hear the one about the woman who buried her husband with his ass sticking out of the ground so that every time she happened to walk by she could give it a swift kick?

— Yeh, I heard it.

Unfortunately here, and in other poems in the *Stone Hammer* and *Seed Catalogue* collections, Kroetsch wavers uneasily between the poetic and the prosaic, unable to come to satisfying terms with either one. Unwilling to transcend the prairie town reality, which he records in its flat colloquial language, he ends by failing to illuminate it either. We’ve “heard it” before; so what’s new? Similarly he seems unable, finally, to find meaning in his less-than-heroic origins. The final product of Heisler seems to be Kenneth MacDonald, the cousin shot down in 1943 over his great-grandmother’s birthplace, Cologne:

He was the first descendant of that family to return to the Old Country. He took with him: a cargo of bombs.

IT’S INHOSPITABLE SOIL for the growing seeds, or for the growing boy who fell off a horse that was standing still, and remembers, from his childhood, the hired man’s jeers. The “home place” to which he returns is just a junction of lines on a map, a union of extremes:

the home place: N.E. 17-42-16-W4th Meridian

the home place: 1½ miles west of Heisler, Alberta,
on the correction line road
and three miles south.

No trees
around the house.
Only the wind.
Only the January snow.
Only the summer sun.

The home place:
a terrible symmetry.

"*How do you grow a lover?*" the poet asks, remembering how he and Germaine, in the barn, "were like / one" — and remembering, too, how the priest taught them that they were "playing dirty." His friend, writer James Bacque, seems to answer the question when he comments to the adult Kroetsch: "You've got to deliver the pain to some woman, don't you?" With the exception of the mother, with her understanding and her sweet peas, the rest of the women in the poem are objects of frustrated lust (the Indian whore, "that girl / you felt up in the school barn,") or uncaring, like the football fan or the woman in the bar who won't listen to his story of the champion bronco-buster killed by his horse, the male destroyed by his pride. The only affirmations of life, in the memories of the past, seem to be the vanishing gophers and the badger that eluded his father's gun all one summer, in a long game.

*Love is a standing up
to the loaded gun.*

Love is a burrowing.

Love is also not much in evidence.

Brome grass is about all that survives, in this climate. "*Flourishes under absolute neglect,*" the catalogue says. "*But how do you grow a poet?*" This is the central question of the poem; and Kroetsch finds no direct answer. His mother gives him cod liver oil, sulphur and molasses. His father, busy giving "form to this land," gives him appropriate tools — a crowbar, a sledge, a roll of barbed wire — and work:

First off I want you to take that
crowbar and drive 1,156 holes
in that gumbo.
And the next time you want to
write a poem
we'll start the haying.

Defeat seems inevitable: the only "poem" is the straight prairie road, "between nowhere and nowhere," with the poet as a porcupine killed trying to cross it; or it is the snow-covered prairie, with the poet as a rabbit leaving behind only "a spoor of wording." Rudy Wiebe shows him the land, and ways to write "great black steel lines of fiction" to give it imaginative shape. He and Al Purdy get drunk, shout poems in an Edmonton restaurant. He re-reads *The Double Hook*; he looks at a Japanese print that shows "How it is," the truth of everyday reality. Yet he still cannot find words for the land, which seems to offer only the alternatives of death or escape:

After the bomb/blossoms
 After the city/falls
 After the rider/falls
 (the horse
 standing still)

*Poet, teach us
 to love our dying.*

*West is a winter place.
 The palimpsest of prairie*

*under the quick erasure
 of snow, invites a flight.*

How/ do you grow a garden?

How *do* you grow a poet? The question is a crucial one. Perhaps the answer lies in the poet's inability to lift the language and the town into some universal illumination. The world of "Seed Catalogue" remains harsh to the end. Nothing grows there:

No trees
 around the house,
 only the wind.
 Only the January snow.
 Only the summer sun.

*Adam and Eve got drowned —
 Who was left?*

Not the poet, certainly, whose escape is confirmed in the third section of *Field Notes*. "How I joined the Seal Herd" is a sustained fantasy in which the narrator, like some Gaelic ballad-hero, learns to swim with his seal-lover in the life-sustaining sea. In "Seed Catalogue," however, there is no final acceptance, as there is in "Stone Hammer Poem" and *The Ledger*, unless it is in the lines: "We silence words / by writing them down."

Kroetsch, like many contemporary Canadian writers, acknowledges in "Stone Hammer Poem" his compulsive need to seek out his past:

?what happened
 I have to/ I want
 to know (not *know*)
 ?WHAT HAPPENED

Yet perhaps his most eloquent contribution to this theme is his acknowledgement that the past may not, in fact, have a positive meaning for us. The Heisler legacy may, in fact, be Kenneth MacDonald's "strange muse: forgetfulness," and his violent destruction of a past which no longer has meaning. The quintessential Kroetsch hero, then, is the reborn man of one of his most eloquent poems: "F. P. Grove: The Finding."⁶ The writer Grove, "dreaming Europe / if only to find

a place to be from," creates a glorious past for himself; but Kroetsch gently mocks his falsehoods. Grove's real journey is a forward one, through the world-burying snows of *Over Prairie Trails* which lift "the taught man into the coyote self." It is a daring journey away from the created past, the civilized self, towards "the sought / and calamitous edge of the white earth," into possibility, and the new life represented by his wife. So Kroetsch seeks out his past, adds up his accounts — "How much do I owe?" — and then goes on to his future, the poet's task of "uninventing" the inherited words in order to tell new stories.

Not to recover but
 simply to face/ force
 the past to discover:

e.g., that time

is

space

e.g., that the language
 itself is a

word

e.g., that the poet
 was the morning of
 man and

the sun setting.⁷

NOTES

¹ 3, no. 1 (Fall 1974), p. 1.

² "Stone Hammer Poem" in *The Stone Hammer Poems* (Nanaimo: Oolichan Press, 1975), pp. 54-59. The poem first appeared in *Creation*, ed. Robert Kroetsch (Toronto: new press, 1970), pp. 44-49.

³ *The Ledger* (London: Applegarth Follies, 1975). The poem was first published in *Applegarth's Folly*, 1 (Summer 1973), pp. 79-97.

⁴ "Seed Catalogue," in *Seed Catalogue* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1977). References here are to the author's typescript. This collection also includes the third section of *Field Notes*, "How I Joined the Seal Herd."

⁵ Robert Enright and Dennis Cooley, "Uncovering Our Dream World: An Interview With Robert Kroetsch," *Arts Manitoba*, 1, no. 1 (January-February 1977), p. 36.

⁶ "F. P. Grove: The Finding," *Stone Hammer Poems*, pp. 46-47.

⁷ "Sentence," *Stone Hammer Poems*, p. 60.