

STATES OF MIND

Henry Kreisel's Novels

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I N HIS ESSAY ENTITLED "The Prairie: A State of Mind," Henry Kreisel examines the relation between the prairie environment and the prairie consciousness as it is manifested in writing. Significantly, the essay takes as its point of departure Kreisel's own response to a landscape which he came gradually to know in the first years he spent in the Canadian west. Kreisel is at pains to point out that the assimilation of the prairie consciousness frequently precedes the objective recognition of the forms that consciousness can take and their deliberate expression in writing. For example, a short story Kreisel published in 1966, "The Broken Globe," is full of the images of prairie man that he only later recognized as recurrent in prairie literature: "These were in fact the images that came to me and I should myself have regarded them as purely subjective, if I had not afterward in reading encountered similar images in the work of other writers who write about the appearance of men on the prairie at certain times." As the essay makes clear, Kreisel had come under the prairie influence almost immediately upon going west prior to 1948. Even then, he was "awed" by a letter to the *Edmonton Journal* "in which the writer . . . asserted with passionate conviction that the earth was flat." In the 1968 essay, Kreisel notes that "even as I write these lines, the emotion evoked in me by that letter that appeared in a newspaper more than twenty years ago comes back to me, tangible and palpable."

The prairie which has had so potent an effect upon Kreisel is of course real, but it is also the author's metaphor. He is more concerned with a state of mind than he is with a specific place. He implies that we are all prairie men who carry within us the prairie consciousness. Above all, it is Kreisel who displays that consciousness — the men he writes about in his essay are very much a part of himself. The critique is as much a "romance" as his novels, a theoretical formulation of his own quest fictionalized in his work. Thus the essay functions as a displaced example of his deepest themes imaged in terms of the prairie landscape. As he studies other prairie fiction, Kreisel finds the symbols of his own sense of self. In turn, he transforms the prairie into a field of symbolic images which comes to represent the landscape of the modern mind. Thus the essay actually serves as a

key to Kreisel's own novels, for it provides us with a statement of the images, themes, and archetypes that reappear in *The Rich Man* and *The Betrayal*.

Kreisel likens the prairie to a sea: "Only the other kind of landscape gives us the same skeleton requirements, the same vacancy and stillness, the same movement of wind through space — and that is the sea." In actual fact, Kreisel connects not one but three landscapes with the prairie. He refers to Ross's Philip Bentley drawing scenes of the prairie as a desert, "scenes that mirror his own frustration." The "barren sea" which Philip Grove's horses hurl themselves against is synonymous with "those drifts of snow" characteristic of Arctic desolation. The prairie, the sea, the desert, the arctic — for Kreisel these "lonely and forbidden spaces" combine to form a metaphorical modern wasteland, a moral wilderness devoid of signposts and heedless of individual identity.

Kreisel also sees man's response to the wasteland in metaphorical terms. He becomes the archetypal wanderer "driven to follow a dream," or the mythical frontiersman "pitted against a vast and frequently hostile natural environment that threatens to dwarf him." Man the conqueror-explorer is frequently a victim, both of the elements and of loneliness. Again, the "extraordinary sense of confinement" which plagues the prairie settler takes on universal significance; "the theme of the imprisoned spirit" is the theme of modern literature.

Kreisel reminds us that the fate of the individual usually represents the fate of society at large. In its search for security, the prairie community often shuts out the world, but in so doing shuts itself in. The settlements become "islands in that land-sea, areas of relatively safe refuge from the great and lonely spaces." Ideals and dreams are constantly thwarted by the presence of the real: "Man, the giant-conqueror, and man, the insignificant dwarf always threatened by defeat, from the two polarities of the state of mind produced by the sheer physical fact of the prairie." As Kreisel says, "there are moments when the two images coalesce." The result may be a *doppelgänger* motif, the ultimate expression of alienation. Or the divided spirit may be confused and self-deceiving, an escapist living in a private dream and pretending that the outer world is absent. Another may be an actor performing on a private stage — his artificial interior reality. A third may venture boldly into the wilderness to defeat the ambiguity of fate. Clearly, these are all attempts to deal in some way with the surrounding sea. Kreisel is writing about a quest for order, stability, and reason. He is describing the tactics men employ to guarantee their very existence. Kreisel presents the same themes and characters in his novels.

The Rich Man tells the story of Jacob Grossman, an older Jewish man confined for thirty-three years to the routine job of a clothes factory presser. In order to visit the family he has left behind in Europe, Jacob decides to leave work and the daughter he lives with for a six week trip to Vienna. Squandering his meagre savings, Jacob manages to impress his relatives as a wealthy man by their stan-

dards. But when a desperate situation forces the family to ask Jacob for financial help, the truth comes out. Jacob returns to Toronto shaken, unhappy, and exposed for the poor man he really is.

From the beginning of the novel, it is clear that Jacob remains an imprisoned spirit, an alien in his adopted homeland. The Toronto which Jacob has lived in for more than three decades is presented as an essentially barren urban wilderness. The more we follow Jacob in his movements at home or overseas, the more we realize the extent to which he has either denied his environment, or coloured his view of it so as to reinforce a contrived sense of security. The first scenes of the novel are interesting in this respect. We are introduced to Jacob as he emerges from the cocoon-like safety of his bed. Before the first line of the book is completed Jacob is not only awake but already seeking out the clock which will assure him that events are still well organized and proceeding on time as planned. In the first paragraph Kreisel is careful to emphasize the extent to which Jacob's survival depends upon organizing the day to come. Repeatedly we are told that Jacob's existence is a matter of what "should have been," what "he would say," how he "would go on," how he "would get down to the factory." The obsession with maintaining a sense of time and place continues throughout Jacob's day, magnifying the significance of his need for an almost hermetic isolation. Leaving his own room, Jacob makes his habitual moves from the kitchen, to the tramcar, and into the factory. Although Jacob has decided to upset the order of the day by speaking to the factory manager, he reassures himself by entering through the workers' side entrance. Before the door has even closed Jacob begins to look for the familiar symbols of stability: "He swung open the door. There, against the walls, were the time clocks, and instinctively, his eyes wandered to the rack where his own time card was. It was there, No. 1003, standing lonely in the left-hand rack beside one of the clocks." Clearly, Jacob is firmly entrenched in that neo-Calvinist "work ethic" framework that Kreisel refers to in his essay. Having laboured for more than half his life in the same building, Jacob has managed to insulate himself completely from life in the open. It is important to note that Jacob's alienation is chosen as much as it is imposed — it is essentially a means of defence.

When Jacob moves from the safety of Canadian enclosures to a European setting, absolutely nothing changes in terms of the exterior landscape. Overseas, as in Toronto, Jacob is equally at odds with everything outside. He (as well as every other character) does all he can to block out the surrounding world. After leaving the ship, Jacob completes the route to Vienna by train. Later, when he "tried to recall what the Belgian countryside looked like, he found that his memory was blurred and hazy." In actual fact, Kreisel informs us, "he paid no heed to the beautiful scenery. . . . Jacob saw nothing." Indeed, Jacob sees little during his entire visit. Retreating with his family from the atmosphere of anti-semitism and

political repression which surrounds them in the European city, Jacob's stay in Vienna becomes a series of interior adventures designed to deny the real hostility of the environment beyond the doorway. Correspondingly, spatial structures generally describe hidden, withdrawn, or highly enclosed areas. Upon his arrival, Jacob hustles the family into a taxi which in turn moves swiftly to their meagre rooms. The next day, Jacob visits the public bath. The image of the tomb is obvious here, for "the semi-darkness in which it was shrouded and the beckoning couches gave the atmosphere an extraordinary degree of restfulness and peace." Another excursion brings Jacob to Albert's book shop, "wedged in between a grocery on one side and a butcher shop on the other." The culminating enclosure scene, and the novel's finest representation of the attempt to retreat from a disordered world occurs when Jacob accompanies his nephews to the "cave" they have discovered in a nearby area. In their naiveté, the children give voice to what Jacob is reluctant to admit:

when you're in the cave you can see everything that's going on outside, but anybody that's walking around outside can't see you at all when you're hidden inside.

JACOB'S IDEAL WORLD is described in the child's words about the cave. Throughout the novel Jacob is concerned with establishing a selective vision, one which will enable him to recognize the "outside" only when he chooses to, and even then, only from a governing perspective. At the same time, the cave metaphor is appropriate to Jacob because it represents his own need to hide from the outside at will, simultaneously substituting for exterior reality an artificial interior milieu. Kreisel underlines the negative qualities of such a synthetic existence. No sooner has man framed himself within protective boundaries than those boundaries begin to weigh him down. What was to be a zone of freedom is transformed into a narrow cell. Jacob's sensations at the close of the cave scene make this view explicit. He felt that "all the air seemed to have been cut off. It was almost like being in a small, windowless room, pressed against a narrow corner."

Life in *The Rich Man* may be generally described as windowless. Here, man is not interested in the true picture so much as in imposing his own picture upon the landscape, altering it to suit his needs, and refusing to recognize it except within the framework he himself has chosen. It is for this reason that Jacob's rare glimpses of Vienna tell us much more about Jacob and what he refuses to see than they do about the city itself. His first impressions, caught from the security of the taxi, are revealing:

The streets were alive with people; old men and women promenading slowly up and down, sitting on benches in the mellow evening air, young couples walking arm

in arm. The cafés were full of patrons, some sitting outside in the improvised gardens and vine-hung terraces, chattering and drinking coffee.

This is the romantic Vienna that Jacob has always dreamed of. Only later do we realize the extent of Jacob's self-deception. The streets are full of people, Reuben explains, because in a city of two million, three hundred thousand are unemployed. The men sit drinking coffee because "as long as they have a few groschen left they would rather do this. This way at least they save their shoes." Even the music performed by the street singers "is only another way of begging."

It is appropriate that the most important pages of *The Rich Man* should be those devoted to the actual voyage from Canada to the Old World. The sea Jacob crosses is metaphorically that "vast land-sea" which Kreisel spoke of. Upon this featureless expanse, Jacob sets himself as the explorer in search of his past and the innocent values associated with childhood. He has yet to learn that the age of innocence is irrevocably lost. In his own eyes, and in the white alpaca suit he has purchased for the occasion, Jacob becomes the mythical rich man of stature and strength — a transformed conqueror, the physical sign of his country's growth and prosperity. Jacob finds himself in pursuit of a dream, but he is repeatedly forced to confront the futility of his ideal and the reality of his own spiritual isolation. In an interesting way, this dichotomy has been foreshadowed from the first scene in Jacob's bedroom. As he shaves, "The Blue Danube Waltz" plays over the radio, but the waltz is preceded by a recording of a Negro quartet singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Throughout the novel, we find Jacob searching after the lost ideal of the waltz: "He wanted a lot of violins, hundreds of them, the way it was always done in movies about gay Vienna." Again and again Jacob asks to hear the piece, but never does he hear it properly. The music is always disrupted by some intrusion of the real. The Negro song is in fact much more suited to Jacob than the waltz — the never-changing form of his employment amidst "the steam of the Hoffman presses and the sweat of hundreds of workers" marks him as enslaved to a system that reduces men to strictly mechanical activities.

The ironies of Jacob's position are readily apparent: while he may be a big man in his own eyes, and perhaps a giant in the eyes of his European relatives, he is in fact a dwarf, a victim, not a victor. To survive, Jacob must involve himself in a dangerous game of role-playing. He can maintain himself only by assuming a false front that gives him a controlling sense of power. As Kreisel tells us, "there was indeed a great deal of the showman in Jacob Grossman." However, there is a very serious aspect to Jacob's acting, one which is crucial to the sea experience in general, for Jacob's quest for an appropriate identity coincides with his search for values, for an acceptable frame of reference through which he can see an unexplored world. Repeatedly in *The Rich Man* Jacob tries to find or purchase

physical objects which act as co-ordinates in relation to which he can place himself and his attitudes. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the meeting on board the ship between Jacob and the French artist Tassigny. Tassigny has completed an abstract painting entitled *L'Entrepreneur*, "remotely suggesting a human figure, though this was not at first easily apparent because a geometric construction built up of spheres and rectangular planes obscured it. The figure had a long fleshless neck, but no face. Where the head should have been, there was a thick, cylindrical, megaphone-like contraption, painted jet-black, and pointing sideways." The picture suggests Jacob's own adopted role as the entrepreneurial gross man. As his exaggerated stories and countless lies make clear, Jacob is all voice, but faceless.

In contrast to Jacob, Tassigny maintains that whether or not his expressions are understood is inconsequential, "so long as I have always told the truth, the way I see the truth." Tassigny's reasons for creating the painting are therefore diametrically opposed to Jacob's reasons for purchasing it. The canvas gives Jacob a false sense of power and wealth. He almost begins to like the painting, "not because he came to appreciate Tassigny's art, but because he fancied that with the purchase of the painting he had become, not only Tassigny's equal, but even his superior. He felt his ego grow, and become inflated like a balloon. For was he not now a patron of the arts?"

When at the story's end Jacob comes face to face with the futility of his own self-deception, it is appropriately Tassigny's painting which is angrily discarded; for in casting away the image of the entrepreneur, Jacob symbolically kills the myriad impressions which have governed his overseas life. Although the novel may seem to describe a progression from innocence to experience, or from falsity to truth, it is clear that in the end, by rejecting the painting, Jacob symbolically rejects any truths he has discovered in his journey through the external world. Having experienced the hostility of the wilderness around him, Jacob retreats to the safety of a framed lifestyle—he returns to that windowless complacency which blocks out the violence of the real. We are left with the nagging sensation that for Jacob, very little has changed.

KREISEL'S SECOND NOVEL, *The Betrayal*, also deals with a man who attempts to deny the threat of external experience by entrenching himself and his perceptions in a well-ordered but narrow sense of place. From the comfort of his high-rise apartment living room in Edmonton, Mark Lerner, a Canadian-born professor of history, recalls the story of Theodore Stappler, who has relentlessly pursued to Canada Joseph Held, the man responsible for his mother's death ten years earlier in Auschwitz. Through their mutual interest in

Held's daughter Katherine, Lerner finds himself involved with Stappler and playing the role of his confidant, constantly asked to judge and identify with Stappler's need for revenge and the potential guilt arising from Stappler's own inactivity in the face of Held's betrayal of his family.

Like Jacob, Lerner is confined within a punctual routine and imprisoned by his lifestyle. The habitual reading of essays merely replaces the endless pressing of garments that Jacob devotes his life to — both duties are the rituals around which these men structure their daily experiences. Lerner is a bachelor living alone two thousand miles from "familial love." Daily, he moves from his snug apartment ("though the sound-proofing could be somewhat improved") to a university office equally removed from life in the streets. Outside, there is always snow, or the frozen river, or "a light wind which made it seem much colder than it was." Lerner himself is antiseptically intellectual, as cold and sterile as the environment he shies away from. But he is not immune to the sense of prairie loneliness described in Kreisel's essay. Emerging from the Victoria Hotel towards the end of the novel, the landscape presents itself to him thus:

Whiteness in darkness. It had very nearly stopped snowing. Only a few perfunctory flakes were still drifting down from the black invisible sky. . . .

For a moment I felt as if I had stepped out onto a strange and unknown street. The landscape seemed curiously unfamiliar, like a landscape in a dream. The buildings were sombre, forbidding shapes, rising from the white pavement into the darkness above. There was very little traffic on the road. I did not know what time it was. It seemed the dead end of night.

The disorienting landscape which Lerner confronts reflects his own inner confusion. Lost in a timeless foreign world devoid of human fellowship, Lerner experiences the dead end vision of existential despair which marks him as a modern man. In his response to this metaphorical glimpse of the desert Lerner is identical to Jacob. He reveals his desperate need for stability and control by becoming a collector of paintings, seeing himself as one who can frame experience by purchasing it pre-framed and pre-packaged. Considering the three "distinguished" oils in his possession, particularly a scene by Emily Carr, Lerner boasts proudly that "I rather fancy myself a patron of the arts." The painting is indeed valuable, for it provides us with a key to Lerner's personality. By using the painting we can open those doors that Lerner has tried so firmly to bolt. Lerner's approach to the canvas is similar to his appreciation of history — what the professor wants is an intellectualized existence, the vitality and dynamism of life without its pain, its involvements, or its crises. Repeatedly he returns to the question of Charlotte Corday's potential guilt, presenting it as a universal example of the need for moral choice. But never does Lerner apply the problem to his own very questionable acts. He admits that he is "prepared to grant . . . a certain validity" to his colleague's suggestion that "I like the study of history because it involves me in the acts of suf-

fering humanity but at the same time allows me to keep involvements at arm's length." Although Lerner might try to convince himself that in the course of his encounter with Stappler he manages to shed this protective intellectualism, it is clear that he remains forever preoccupied with rendering the fluid static and with containing the shifting sea. We need only observe Lerner at the end of his story, as he continues to sit behind that ever-present living-room window which acts as his frame around the world. There, in silent isolation, he can "look down on the magnificent river winding its way through the city, and watch the changes of the seasons." Instead of participating in the exterior flow of nature, Lerner remains content merely to view life from a distanced and controlled perspective.

In keeping with this attitude, it is only natural that for Lerner, human action itself is denigrated to the status of an *objet d'art*, something to be toyed with and forgotten. The "meaning" of Joseph Held's life can therefore be consigned by Lerner to some dingy corner, out of the way, but available should the occasional need for it arise:

Sometimes, wrestling with some intractable moral problem that history raised for me, I thought of Joseph Held and tried once more to come to terms with his action, but I could never settle the matter in my own mind, and it remained one of those loose ends which dangle somewhere in the attic of one's mind, untidy and uncomfortable, but fortunately out of the way, safely hidden amid the bric-à-brac that gathers dust there.

Just as *L'Entrepreneur* in *The Rich Man* was an abstract representation of Jacob, so in *The Betrayal* the Carr painting describes the real Mark Lerner who hides within a deceptively stable frame — a violent, terror-stricken individual torn by moral ambiguity and fear of an irrational universe. When Stappler comments that the work "expresses tangled emotions," he speaks unconsciously about Lerner's essence. Yet Stappler must still grasp the fact that those emotions are skilfully hidden. Within a page, he understands the relationship between surface and content characteristic of the book at large:

"Everything seems quiet," Theodore Stappler said. "But that is only on the surface. Below, everything is in motion. The landscape is static, but the colours are dynamic. So everything is still, and yet everything moves."

In stressing the fact that everything *seems* quiet, Stappler touches upon what is perhaps the most important feature of the painting: it is deceiving, and it demands a second viewing. Again, the emphasis upon deception must be applied to Lerner as well, and we find, not surprisingly, that he is in another way very much like Jacob Grossman — he is an actor, and the classroom is but one of his many stages. From the very first page of the novel, Kreisel asserts this fact. "There is something in me, I think, of the actor," Lerner confesses. He complains when "the high dramatic moments" of his lectures fail to excite the entire student audience. Later,

speaking in his role as narrator, Lerner makes it plain that given the chance, he would cast himself as the hero of his play: "We are all heroes in our mirrors, or think at least that, when our moment of testing comes, we would not miss the chance to give a true, perhaps even heroic account of ourselves." Lerner's mention of the mirror is interesting on another level. His inability to effectively isolate himself from his surroundings is signalled by the fact that regardless of his will, he begins to take on and reflect the qualities of everything that is put in front of him. Thus he tries in futility to stop the "tangled roots" of Carr's painting from "coming out of the canvas and spreading into his brain." In a similar manner he attempts to detach himself from the events of Stappler's life, but is eventually forced to admit that "the more I tried to detach myself, the more involved, the more entangled I became." The "entanglement" metaphor begins on the canvas and spreads right through the theme of the story. Both Lerner and Stappler are caught between the image of what they should be and the image of what they are.

IN THIS RESPECT, PERHAPS THE MOST INTERESTING feature of the novel centres on the way in which Lerner and Stappler subtly exchange roles as the narrative progresses. Stappler, the encyclopaedia salesman, becomes the giver of knowledge, ironically replacing the professor, who in time becomes a true learner, the recipient of Stappler's "lesson of life." Early in the story, Stappler's own words anticipate the *doppelgänger* motif. Realizing that he and Lerner were fated to meet, Stappler cries out Baudelaire's phrase, "Mon semblable! Mon frère!" It is primarily in their approach to existential responsibility that Lerner and Stappler are twins. For Lerner has consistently refused to act for the benefit of anyone but himself; he is guilty of complacency and apathy. His selfishness and lack of commitment make him a fine example of Sartre's *mauvaise foi*. Stappler's story attracts him because it is so like his own. Lerner would prefer to resist the truth, yet he is perversely fascinated by what is essentially the story of his own acts of betrayal:

For he had involved me, subtly and in a sense against my will. He had disturbed the order of my life, and I found myself once again resenting his intrusion. Then, too, a part of my consciousness whispered to me that the events of the past had perhaps best be forgotten. . . . Yet there he was, this stranger who had suddenly burst in on me, and he wouldn't allow it. He dug it all up, like a dog suddenly uncovering a mouldering bone.

Lerner's academic study of "intellectual cross currents" in European history represents his own attempt to place his life in a rational well-defined context. He is fearful of the chaos implied by any form of ambiguity. In this respect, Stappler's tale appears terrifying:

I found myself reflecting that the most terrible thing about the kind of situation he was describing — complete social upheaval and the tearing away of all moral sanctions, a situation not unfamiliar to me from my own study of European revolutionary history — the most terrible thing about such a situation was that simple, black and white distinctions between good and evil were all blurred. There was just a grey range of evils, all of them morally corrupting.

Stappler's "situation" forces him to flee from a twentieth century reign of terror in search of a more tranquil place. In the Arctic wilderness he eventually finds "a kind of peace and a sense of unity with elemental forces." His descriptions of the Arctic makes it clear that he found Kreisel's prairie. Stappler was "struck by the immensity of the landscape, by its great silence, by its timelessness." In his letters to Lerner he noted that "it takes some time before you become aware of any variation in the landscape at all," and he added that "time does not exist. Particularly here, in the great silence, in the great stillness." For Stappler, the frozen wilderness represented an ideal freedom because it existed beyond time — only in timelessness could he liberate himself from his past. However, Stappler's ultimate "freedom" led him only to death. As the victim of an Arctic avalanche he surrendered to an environment whose desolation overcame him. This final encounter with external reality cannot help but remind us of similar confrontations described by Kreisel in his discussion of the prairie man as the conqueror and the conquered. Stappler has always been the uprooted wanderer of Kreisel's essay. Throughout the novel he follows the dream of an ideal community secure from exterior threats. Soon after we meet him, he relates to Lerner a dream which effectively restates many of the images which Kreisel mentions in his critique. The dream itself is such a potent metaphor for Kreisel's view of the human condition that it deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

The landscape was always the same, strange and yet familiar. It was evening, always evening, and there was something baleful about the evening. A deep red sun poured heat down upon a barren landscape. There were rocks like massive obelisks, and dried-up cactus plants, but also, scattered about here and there, a few green trees, like weeping willows. Suddenly huge black clouds appeared in the sky, like the outstretched fingers of a gigantic hand, and advanced towards the sun and threatened to engulf it. In this desolate landscape the figure of a man with a knapsack on his back and an alpenstock in his hand was stumbling from rock to rock. And as if, like Moses in the wilderness, he were looking for water, he struck each rock with his alpenstock and turned away again each time, for there was no water. He looked up into the sky and was terrorized by the cloud that was moving slowly towards the sun, and in his terror he sought refuge in the shadow of a red rock, but the rock threw no shadow, and so, stumbling on, at last he found a cave and crawled into the darkness of its black, gaping hole, and there squatted on the ground, his knapsack still on his back, his alpenstock still in his hand. Thus squatting, he pondered, but without any real hope, how he might ever get out of this desert, live again like a human being in a rational society, stop being agitated and

terrorized by weird manifestations, cease to flee from rock to rock, grow roots anew, like the willow tree, and have his place again among men, in a universe that was not entirely unfriendly.

Stappler sees Eliot's symbolic wasteland, and it is this "desolate landscape" which he must traverse in search of permanent values. He becomes the mythical explorer in search of the promised land, just as he is the original settler seeking out shelter and food. Like a primitive, but also like Jacob, the man of Stappler's dream is drawn towards the safety offered by the cave. Most important is the profound sense of isolation which permeates Stappler's dream. To "live again like a human being in a rational society" would be to construct amidst the wilderness the social domain of the prairie community or homestead, it would be to find "a little schoolhouse standing lonely and defiant in a landscape that is like a desert."

The vision which appears to dominate Stappler's life also affects Lerner. He consistently looks for signposts which will direct his journey into the unfamiliar territory of Stappler's tale, and in response to the perils of that journey, he too hides in a series of well-structured cultural retreats. Eight years after his first contact with Stappler, Lerner is still collecting art. Of his recent acquisitions, the most valuable is a Lawren Harris, "one of those silent peaks, all white, rising out of a blue sea, all still, serene, and yet curiously tense, as if at any time the white mass would shatter and break itself." The Arctic which Stappler managed to confront in the raw is imported by Lerner in the form of a painting. Again, the canvas reflects Lerner's personality, also "curiously tense" and close to its breaking point. He admits that "in a way which I find hard to express, the painting seems to go together with my Emily Carr." Accordingly, he hangs them side by side facing the bed, so that they can be seen in the morning and just before sleep. The final position of these paintings signifies the fact that for Lerner, nothing at all has changed — the original vision is fundamentally the same as the vision which completes the book, and so the two paintings, like the novel's beginning and end, can be put side by side. Lerner remains in his rooms, trying to convince himself that life can be purchased and the real world denied. He tells us that "the walls of the apartment are glowing and alive" with art. But we know that these walls are the barriers which he has erected to shield himself from the universe beyond the high-rise. Although he hides in a kind of paralysis from life, when it comes to his paintings Lerner believes that he "responded to them immediately, spontaneously." Unlike Jacob, he cannot cast away the art which enables him to feel secure, yet the fate of all these paintings makes it clear that life in *The Betrayal* is no less futile than it is in *The Rich Man*. Both novels describe a failed quest for freedom. In the end, the actors return to the physical and mental fortresses they have been building all along.

Kreisel maintains in his essay on the prairie that "the knowledge of the vast space outside brings to the surface anxieties that have their roots elsewhere and

this sharpens and crystallizes a state of mind." The critical statement reflects upon Kreisel himself and also upon his fiction. His characters are filled with a deep sense of *angst* and worry about the irrational world around them. They are intensely conscious of their loneliness and their need for a genuine friend. The question is not so much whether they are prairie men, salesmen, or professors, but how they are human in every modern sense of the word.

MEDUSAS

Irving Layton

Flourishing nature's oriflamme
her gonfalon of hurt
medusas drop from wavecrest and white foam

In cities they wear fawning smiles
speak only to deceive
and possess two eyes
out of which look cruelty and lust

Observe: among them only poets and saints
are kind, having been born cross-eyed

Listen to the feral cries
of the wild-eyed medusas:
I'm a christian, I'm a maoist,
fascist, marxist, nationalist
I believe in progress and the rights of man

Foamblobs
time's ever-ready spike deflates
and smears like the brown scum
on the rocks below my feet

In Greece jellyfish are called medusas.