

# PRIAPUS IN THE DANSE MACABRE

*Peter Thomas*

**R**OBERT KROETSCH's three novels, *But We Are Exiles* (1965), *The Words of My Roaring* (1966), and *The Studhorse Man* (1970) reveal an increasingly confident literary personality. Talking to Peter Sypnowich of the practice of fiction, Kroetsch insisted upon total dedication through act of will:

I do agree you have to give your life to it. That's what Canadians shy away from — the act. This surrender of the will — the Americans did it to us, the weather did it, the English did it — is a good old Canadian characteristic.

This assertive view shows itself in the novels as a species of vitalism: Kroetsch's heroes are compulsive actors, doers, drawn into the paradoxes of apocalyptic romanticism, especially in sexual terms. Reviewing *The Words of My Roaring*, Clark Blaise quoted Blake — “the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom” — a view which he found “happily confirmed” in that novel. Despite the pretension of its title, the anthology *Creation*, recently edited by Kroetsch, illustrates this central obsession with the creative and self-destructive aspects of the assertive ego. But Kroetsch has been aware from his first novel of the duality in his romance of the extreme situation. The drive to freedom is also a quest for death. Whatever the egotistical assertion achieves, it is an ambiguous triumph. This is extended, furthermore, into the artist's relations with his created world. In his Introduction to *Creation*, Kroetsch quotes Heinrich Zimmer in *The King and the Corpse*:

The involvement of the gods in the web of their own creation, so that they become . . . the harried victims of their creatures, entangled in nets of not quite voluntary self-manifestation, and then mocked by the knowing laughter of their own externally reflected inner judge: this is the miracle of the universe. This is the tragicomic romance of the world.

The “harried victim” of his own “creatures”, the artist is mocked by what he makes. The act of creation is a tragicomic revelation. The “externally reflected inner judge” refers directly to what Kroetsch calls in an interview with Margaret

Laurence “this *doppelgänger* thing”; the romance of assertion, and the grandeur of defiance, are always mocked by the “inner judge”. In the same interview with Margaret Laurence, he reiterated the theme:

Tragedy looks a bit pretentious now. At least to laugh is . . . absurd? A ferocious hope, maybe?

Further, and with direct reference to *The Studhorse Man*, he set the terms of his fictional mode:

Comedy tells you that there is no cause and effect, that chance operates against it. The studhorse — it’s not moral or immoral.

What is surprising, in view of the assurance of these remarks, is that Kroetsch has evolved so rapidly from the manner of *But We Are Exiles*, where “this *doppelgänger* thing” was a grim wrestling-match indeed. Kroetsch’s priapic hero has been transformed from the principal in a claustrophobic, inward-turning personal catastrophe, to the fool in a cosmic comedy.

THE THEME of *But We Are Exiles*, is drawn, as the epigraph suggests, from the myth of Narcissus. In the opening scene, Peter Guy, pilot of the *Nahanni Jane*, a Mackenzie River working-boat, is peering over the bows into the water. He seeks the body of Mike Hornyak, the boat’s owner, drowned when he leaped overboard, burning, after an explosion. At first, Guy imagines something emerging to “entangle him”, apparently “his own face” which offers to “kiss” him. This implicit identification of Hornyak with the image of Guy’s self-love becomes clear as the novel progresses, with the *doppelgänger* theme given one of its familiar variants as the narcissistic mirror-reflection.

The action of the novel covers two journeys. Forced to abandon the search for Hornyak, the *Nahanni Jane* proceeds down-river to the sea with its cargo before turning to make the home-run to Yellowknife. This return is complicated by worsening weather conditions, since the delay of the search has taken the boat into the dangerous late fall. Unexpectedly, Hornyak’s faceless body is discovered on an island by two Indians, who tow it in a canoe to the *Nahanni Jane*. Rather than take the corpse aboard, the crew place it, still in the canoe, on an empty barge they are pulling. Thus Guy is “tied” to Hornyak as he contrives to pilot his boat through crisis to safety.

Even in outline, Conradian analogues suggest themselves, particularly *The Secret Sharer*. The quest for the Other, the river journey motif, and, in the pilot

role, the typical Conradian theme of freedom-through-mastery may be noted. These structural analogues do not, however, end here. Guy is implicated in Hornyak's death (he handed an unmasked light to the latter as he went below to inspect the boat), and the pattern of crime, guilt, and expiation is self-evident. Moreover, the crew are at first quietly pleased by Hornyak's death (they despised him), but as the boat experiences more and more difficulties they turn on Guy and lay blame. This, with the pilot-role, the "tying" of the corpse, and the Everyman symbolism of Guy's name, inescapably recalls "The Ancient Mariner". Hornyak also has "a tattoo of a ship in full sail" on his arm. With the presence of Kettle Fraser, Hornyak's wife on board, one crew member complains of her "showing up like some kind of a haunting spirit that won't let us alone".

It is not Kroetsch's indebtedness here which concerns me. It is possible that *But We Are Exiles* was his personal Battle of the Books, but, more generally speaking, it is the *moral* opposition the analogues suggest which throws most light on his development to *The Studhorse Man*. For the third analogue is with Kerouac's *On The Road* or even, perhaps, the frenzied car-drives of *All The King's Men*. The Conrad/Kerouac opposition is between disciplined self-mastery and the ultra-romantic dream of total Experience — that other myth of "freedom" which consists of the repudiation of all law save the egotistical assertion.

Hornyak's appeal is emphatic:

"Chaos, boy. Stay young and hang loose." And Mike fed more gas to the wild horses under the hood of that black Rolls.

And the flat country then. Dusty and dry. Dry and dusty and hot. Wheat country. And the first elevator. There at Dufresne, alone and reaching, like a great damned phallus, like one perpetual hard-on.

This assertion, the willed chaos, finds in Sex its field of metaphor. As Kettle says of Hornyak: "He consumed me the way he consumed everything. You lived for him, Peter. Either you lived for him or you stopped living." Kettle speaks as Echo, fading in the self-sufficing fire of ego. The phallus is, of course, Hornyak's emblem (as his name implies): an instrument, the adage insists, without a conscience.

But to "kill" the ego-drive, as Guy seems to do, is too simple a solution. For Hornyak also poses the question of freedom which surfaces throughout the novel. The energy and vitalism of self-love retain their attraction, since they repudiate guilt. Guy's "freedom" is freedom to endure ("Running and searching. That was it.") and to find in the pilot's role the release of mastery. Even this, however, may be seen as a form of masochism, or at least puritanical self-indulgence, and

another kind of egotism. The ambiguity of this yearning to be free and alone in Guy's terms is expressed by Kettle's father, who refuses ever to leave the North. "A man is free here. You ever heard the word? He is so free that nothing else in the world is ever as good again. Never. But it's like a screwing jail, this place." The return of Hornyak makes Guy "burst back to life" — only to recognize his own form of self-love: the puritan's tight-lipped pride. Kettle clarifies the dilemma in her plea to him (revealing, as Echo, that in loving both Hornyak and Guy she recognizes the two faces of Narcissus) "Break the mirror for me. Break it, break it please, smash it, Peter. Listen to me, smash it." Guy must accept oneness with Hornyak, and the conclusion of the novel symbolizes this paradoxical fusion of identities. Racing against time, the *Nahanni Jane* loses headway in a blizzard on the Great Slave Lake and the crew decide to cut-away the barge carrying Hornyak's corpse. In the worsening conditions, Guy is pitched on to the barge and cannot return to the *Nahanni Jane*. Thus Narcissus challenges Tiresias's prophecy in the novel's epigraph ("so that himself . . . he know") by approaching the canoe and Hornyak. The faceless condition of the body (echoing *The Secret Sharer*) is a revelation to Guy of his own emptiness; he climbs into the canoe, under the blanket which provides the only warmth on the barge, and thereby "joins" with the image he has tried to reject. Narcissus dies in the knowledge of his own sterile infatuation; the egotistical assertion, for all its dynamism, is a kind of death. The vitalist is acknowledged as a frozen, headless corpse.

THIS LAST IMAGE permits a leap forward to Hazard Lepage, the Studhorse Man himself lying frozen on the slab in the Coulee Hill beer parlour, for Kroetsch has remained faithful to his obsessions. But the shift in tone, from introspective agony to comic picaresque, is also indicative of increased control and confidence as Kroetsch defines his mode.

*The Words of My Roaring* offers few easy literary analogues. The questing hero undergoes a significant revision, however, as the scene is shifted from the Mackenzie to rural Alberta. While the mythic structure of *But We Are Exiles* and the large natural symbols of river, sea, and annihilating snow can hardly be ignored, the texture of the prose, even the frequent thought-stream passages, is essentially realistic. But the prose is itself a product of Guy's consciousness: being repressed, cryptic, and unable to respond adequately to the power of the Mackenzie setting. Almost as if he sensed the lost opportunity of his first novel, Kroetsch expressed the expansive, potentially poetic Hornyak-consciousness in

*The Words of My Roaring*, abandoning Guy's taut limitations. In Johnnie Backstrom, undertaker of Coulee Hill, the priapic hero is now comic:

My name, let me say once and for all, is Johnnie Backstrom, and I am six-four in my stocking feet, or nearly so, a man consumed by high ambitions, pretty well hung, and famed as a heller with women.

Against Hornyak's consuming triumphs we may now measure Narcissus as anti-hero. The death-lust of the ego is expressed, comically, by Backstrom's profession (at which, as the novel opens, he is failing). The paradox of will-to-live as drive-to-death is symbolized by Backstrom's big black hearse (itself a version of Hornyak's arrogant Rolls). It is this hearse which Backstrom uses for drunken, randy excesses, and for the purposes of the election campaign — providing the main action of the novel — in which he is a candidate. The *doppelgänger* theme is here reversed in its operations. Driving home from a beer parlour in the hearse, Backstrom injures his friend, Jonah Bledd. Industrious, a model of consistency and responsibility, a good family man of few words, Jonah embodies the life of disciplined self-control — being a weaker, less dramatic shadow of Guy. Losing his job because of the injury, Jonah's sense of order and justice is shattered; his anxieties lead him to suicide, by drowning in a lake. Backstrom's guilt is explicit: "In a way it seemed to me that I had killed Jonah," while at the same time, "I was feeling as if I had drowned." "Hornyak", then, has killed "Guy" — the moral register which controlled, at least somewhat, his apocalyptic yearnings. The motif of death by water persists in Kroetsch's fiction to become central in the symbolism of *The Studhorse Man*.

Free of Jonah's restraint, only one figure stands between Backstrom and Hornyak's "chaos". This is Doc Murdoch, his rival candidate, who officiated at his birth, loved his mother, and tells the people, "only maturity can serve our needs." The ego-conflict of *But We Are Exiles* is now extended to the struggle of the prodigal against the just father. Backstrom's "platform" consists of the single, absurd promise that he will bring rain to the drought-stricken prairies and save the crop. Reason, the slow unfolding of human trust, and patience, are opposed by a kind of magic-man in cap and bells. The clown and his magic — are these truer to the nature of Backstrom's profession, death, than the physician's faith in human intellect and measured experience? Backstrom again echoes Hornyak: "Sometimes I think that chaos is the only order. The only real order."

Probably the most definitive single scene in the novel (and one of Kroetsch's

finest to date) shows Backstrom attending a rodeo and witnessing the death of a clown in the arena:

The body mangled and ripped by those gouging horns, the innocent figure mutilated, rolled and trampled in the stinking dust. The spirit struck into frantic despair; I saw it all right.

The image of the broken clown converts Backstrom, for the first time, into a figure of eloquence and power. He has his text in the absurd violence of the scene which, by extension, becomes the justification for his own clownish defiance of all order. Jonah Bledd's name suggests only too clearly the bleeding victim with his faith in moral design. When rain *does* fall on the eve of the election, the clown appears confirmed in his "wisdom".

But Backstrom's relations with Murdoch work against a simplistic conclusion in the triumph of chaos. On election-eve Murdoch is called out to the complicated labour of an outlying farmer's wife. Her child is still-born, and Backstrom must bring a coffin. As Backstrom and Murdoch ride together, the former implicitly accepts the subservience of his role (the dealer in death) to the latter's. Murdoch has always represented moral authority to Backstrom: "All my life when things got tough I went running to Murdoch" — but the egotistical assertion denies Doc's kind of love. Backstrom leaves, "driving hard for the old chaos." Though he is capable of guilt, and at first wishes to concede victory to Murdoch, the last scene of the novel shows Backstrom driving towards an election-eve meeting under a compulsion to go on competing. In *The Studhorse Man* there is reference to John Backstrom, MLA.

As in *But We Are Exiles*, the sexual theme expresses the life-forcer's will to assert most explicitly. But while Kettle Fraser's role as Echo only emphasized her essential insubstantiality, Helen Murdoch, daughter of the Doc, is given depth. She is the virgin-queen Backstrom must possess ("I hated her innocence"); as they make love repeatedly and nightly in the Doc's much admired garden the symbolism is clear: the desecration of beauty by primitive energy. Caliban has enraptured Miranda under the eyes of the good and wise father. Yet Backstrom, unlike Hornyak, is dignified by guilt and by insight into his own desperate course. It is Helen who makes fitting comment on his condition — for Woman must preside over Priapus's defeat, as she has served his triumph:

I've watched you, Johnnie. You talk. You hunger and thirst. You strike and thunder and roar. You're never still a moment. But in the end you smash.

The virgin and the clown, Priapus mocked by death, the drive to freedom as

drive to oblivion — Kroetsch's themes clarified in *The Words of My Roaring*, enriched by the comic mode which dispelled the neurotic intensities of his first novel.

It is impossible to escape the impression, too, that *The Studhorse Man* was not recognized, lying like a chrysalis in the shadows of its antecedents. At first, the note is supercilious, when Backstrom admits: "I'm not ashamed to say that somehow or other I enjoy the smell of horse-shit once in a while." But as he drives "for the old chaos" along Route 313, he is permitted a glimpse of "his" fictional evolution:

I saw two horses in a yard, a gelding, its tail putting up a vague resigned resistance to all the swarms of flies, and a stallion: a big stallion, pale blue, ignoring the flies, pawing at the post to which it was chained.

The mighty blue stallion, Poseidon, which Hazard Lepage, hero of *The Studhorse Man*, leads about the country (with a gelding), is in a natural line of progression towards the ultimate, simple, mastering phallus — symbolic of creative mastery. The transition from Guy (with the implication of a tethering rope) to Hazard, the "free" victim of chance, is clear.

IT IS SELF-EVIDENT that Kroetsch is fascinated by the sheer license of fiction — not only in accepting the "tall story" tradition, for which Backstrom is a natural subject, but also as release from the puritan prose of the Guy-consciousness. The limitations of the roaring-boy hero within a realistic frame are, at the same time, themselves obvious. There is just so much to be found in that surrogate rebellion (inoculated by comedy) which the picaresque offers, unless it accepts its own anarchic logic. Within the realistic frame (however flimsy) the picaresque hero is confronted by the representatives of *social* order in due succession. But there is no progression, no expansion, of the terms by which he is defined. He is, indeed, restricted by the very custom and social convention against which we see him. The picaresque is limited by the laws of chance, not "probability". Furthermore, the "pure" picaresque hero is truly heroic in so far as he carries the total moral burden. He is not a representative of society (and therefore "obligated"); his only order is his quest for purpose or his flight from persecution. Yet he exposes the irrationality of his context by revealing its frenzy to destroy him or its inability to do so. "Society", in these terms, is bound by its own causality and structure. The improbable, the untethered, unrealistic picaresque is its unadmitted dream of release.

Hazard Lepage, the hero of *The Studhorse Man*, takes Kroetsch far from the repressed prose of his first novel to what might be called, using Robert Schole's term, the "fabulating" mode. The fabulator "asserts the authority of the shaper, the fabulator behind the tale" and "delight in design, and its concurrent emphasis on the art of the designer, will serve in part to distinguish the art of the fabulator from the work of the novelist or satirist. Of all the narrative forms, fabulation puts the highest premium on art and joy." Furthermore:

... The really perceptive writer is not merely conscious that he is using mythic materials: he is conscious that he is using them consciously. He *knows*, finally, that he is allegorizing. Such a writer, aware of the nature of categories, is not likely to believe that his own mythic lenses really capture the truth. Thus his use of myth will inevitably partake of the comic.

It is this last point which distinguishes, I believe, the mode of Kroetsch's most recent novel from his first. Self-conscious use of myth is one thing; self-conscious self-parody in the use of myth is another. In this Kroetsch has moved from the dramatic fable to the complex and essentially comic "fabulation".

*The Studhorse Man* is narrated by Demeter Proudfoot, a madman who chooses to spend his time in the asylum seated in his bath-tub. His name, and the device of the "tale told by an idiot", proclaim the assault on realism which persists throughout. "This portentous volume" (as its own last words describe it) is strewn with a kind of haphazard (the pun is intentional and functional) allusiveness, so that an air of intellectual activity, if not of cohesiveness, is established very quickly. While the Narcissus myth provides the central thematic thread of *But We Are Exiles*, the myths of Demeter and Poseidon (the name of Hazard's fabulous blue stallion) are fragmented and distorted schemes of reference in *The Studhorse Man*. Their order is mocked as it is utilized. What is consistent is a wholesale pattern of recurrence, an unabashed use of coincidence and analogy so that a *sense* of order is implied despite the lack of a binding metaphor. The texture of *The Studhorse Man* is rich and various; what may be suggested here (selectively, for the novel deserves fuller treatment) is the manner in which Kroetsch gathers up the threads of his past fiction in this most recent work.

Hazard Lepage has one aim: "I am breeding the perfect horse"; his quest is for mares for Poseidon to serve. But Hazard has a "preposterous fear of death . . . especially death at sea" as a result of the warning given to him by an old woman in a flooded farmhouse in France during the fighting at Passchendaele Ridge (his father was killed at Dieppe). Substantially, the novel turns on the pun of *mare* (sea), which Hazard fears as death while seeking compulsively for the "mare"



of his need. The Rolls, the black hearse, and now the stallion that is both death and life. At the end of the novel, Poseidon kicks Hazard to death. In a brilliant late scene, Hazard is literally brought back from the dead by Martha Proudfoot, his long intended, in the refrigeration-room of the Coulee Hill beer-parlour. The central thematic pun is made explicit:

Martha was champion against our promised end. Death was a nightmare presence bent on snuffing Hazard into a longer darkness; it was the crone and succubus, the ancient fiend turned female that in the night of dream has fatal intercourse with men. Yes, and the moon was a cold bright disc on the sky: Mare Frigoris, Mare Hiemis, Mare Incognito.

Where Hornyak and Backstrom had served the priapic authority of their own egos, Hazard achieves a kind of grandeur (despite his own formidable bedding) by leading everywhere on foot the animal whose phallic majesty so diminishes his own. Hazard bows before “the huge and penetrating rage of the stallion’s passion to possess”; his own condition, part-parodied as it is, is potentially tragic:

He was the man from whom each farm must have its visits; yet he must eat alone, travel alone, work alone, suffer alone, laugh alone, bitch alone, bleed alone, piss alone, sing alone, dream alone . . .

Caught between “the stallion’s passion to possess” and Mare Incognito, Hazard is fated to flee the sea and seek the mare and find they are the same thing.

Everywhere Hazard goes, the ambiguous dream “mare” calls him. Fleeing from pursuers, he collapses in a railroad car upon a shipment of bones:

And he was embracing the bones, gently, blindly, embracing the hard bones, dreaming the flesh, embracing already a dreamed woman, the soft large breasts that no man could drive from his dreaming.

Breasts and bones: the doubleness of existence in hazard — and between Hazard and Martha (and her mares) stands Tad Proudfoot, her uncle. Tad’s function throughout (as the name implies) is to be Adversary, the authority who must deny Hazard’s quest:

That old son of a bitch of a Tad . . . he told me he’d give the mare for nothing if I promised never to have it bred. Figure that one out.

Mocked by the father-figure, Hazard himself expresses the eternal creative rebellion. Advanced on his quest, he takes up with Eugene Utter, the image of “old chaos” itself, whose most significant act is to burn down to the ground a school-house in which he and Hazard intend to shelter, naked and frozen from crossing

an ice-strewn river. Utter has no "quest" except the revelation of chaos, the act of denial, the repudiation of reason. "We are free men at last", he can say, standing by the smouldering ruin. Doomed, as he seems to be, to live *in extremis* with Utter at his side, Hazard's search has itself caricatured the social images of permanence and ordered rule. By a process too complicated to summarize briefly, he adopts an RCMP uniform while himself fleeing from the law — and in this condition finds temporary sanctuary in a Home for Incurables, where he meets an assortment of aged decrepits, including Torbay Proudfoot, the "oldest surviving member" of the clan. Expressing by his uniform "the eternal violence of law and order" Hazard plays cards with the assembly and wins every trick, until he realizes that Torbay will not try to win. "I goddamned well want to live for ever too," the latter insists. The Incurables are those who hold on to life as minimal existence. Their degradation is expressed by the activities of Stiff and Hole, fornicating publicly, a wrestling heap of filth and wasted flesh. The sexual motive must be the drive to master and to seek, "to breed the perfect horse," if it is not to be a perverse expression of horror of life.

Hazard flees from the Incurables in a clergyman's dress, no more effective against the true chaos than the police uniform, as Kroetsch "fabulates" a complex fictional world in which History and "Society" are mocked by chance and irony. In a very funny early scene, Hazard takes refuge in the provincial museum, housed in the Legislative Building in Edmonton. Just before he enters he comes across the spectacle of Poseidon rising in splendid anger against a bronze statue of a rearing horse. The spectators insist on Art's triumph over life: "The artist has done it. In bronze. Forever." Art, too, mocks Hazard's search for perfection in the living flesh. It is, however, an artist who comes to Poseidon's defence. Ludicrous though the whole scene is (Kroetsch has a genuine flair for farce), the import of P. Cockburn, curator of the provincial museum, and an artist herself, choosing Poseidon and Hazard before the bronze, is clearly another repudiation of formal law. Taking Hazard within, P. Cockburn succours him upon an antique bed upon which three wax figures stare: an Indian chief, a buckskinned early explorer, and a red-coated Mounted Policeman. Canadian History? Hazard repudiates this encapsulated order, too — this mummifying of the living truth. Characteristically, his response to the brooding stare of History is crude and emphatic: "I screwed the ass off her."

Hazard's concern is with the *source*, not with the structures of time. It is significant that Poseidon came to him as a gift from an unknown Indian, whom Hazard saved from drowning. Out of the original land, a gift from the original

men, and, in the drowning motif, a reminder that the fabulous stallion must himself lead Hazard to death in the unknown waters. His clergyman role parodies Hazard's religious meaning, ministering to the great horse. It is here that Kroetsch most expresses the fabulator's disbelief in "his own mythic lenses": for Hazard remains *in service*, the clown who serves the king, finally destroyed by Poseidon's hoofs. Hazard has no vision of the creation myth in which he acts:

'The stallion Eternity  
Mounted the mare of Time,  
'Gat the foal of the world.'

(W. B. Yeats, "Tom at Cruachan")

Hazard's fall from mythic pretensions (even such as farce and parody allow him) comes before his death. "Saved" by Martha from Mare Incognito, he is repudiated by his chronicler, Demeter Proudfoot, for compromising his quest. "You have betrayed your own cause." In the last scenes of the novel, Demeter steals both Poseidon and Martha's five mares and attempts to hold out against all comers in Hazard's farmhouse. The madman preserves the dream — the "uttermost" of them all. In the final irony of the book, Eugene Utter and Martha take up together and Poseidon becomes "the busiest creature in all of Alberta" in the new industry of PMU (pregnant mare's urine) used in the production of oral contraceptives. The creation myth concludes not with a bang but a whinny.

In tracing Kroetsch's progress from fable to fabulation certain conflicts appear. They are embodied — and there is some self-mockery here — in the person of Demeter Proudfoot. The observer sitting in his bath is surely derived from the famous example of Diogenes the Cynic, who took up residence in a Tub best to display his contempt for luxury and the sensual world. For Kroetsch's priapic heroes are seen (after he broke the mirror of Hornyak) as essentially absurd questers compelled by the sensual itch yet denied the consummation they so passionately wish. For all the energy and joy of Kroetsch's fictional world, it is realized by a mind which distrusts its own compulsions. As the name Demeter suggests, furthermore, the goddess of fertility and growth becomes, in *The Stud-horse Man*, the cause of Hazard's death and, by extension, the reducer of Poseidon's myth to prophylactic technology. It is a "cynical" conclusion.