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‘The Studhorse Man’: A Prairie Novel

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Abstract

The paper examines the significance of the prairie in Canadian literature especially with reference to Canadian writer Robert Kroetsch’s novel *The Studhorse Man*. The prairie is both a metaphor and an experience and it is also the story. The prairie is also the alien and hostile land unrelenting to human footsteps; a land without history and the echoing warmth of myths told and re-told across generations. This paper argues that Robert Kroetsch’s novel *The Studhorse Man* is an exemplification of the prairie and that it is through its interrupted self-conscious narration that Kroetsch completes the act of naming and re-telling, thus claiming the prairie both as a source as well as a perpetrator of history and myth.

Keywords

Canadian Literature, Prairie, The Studhorse Man, Robert Kroetsch.

The significance of the prairie in Canadian literature coincides with the emergence of the articulation of the Canadian West. The prairie is the experience and the prairie is the story. The prairie is also the alien and hostile land unrelenting to human footsteps; a land without history and the echoing warmth of myths told and re-told across generations. In *Labyrinths of Voice*, Robert Kroetsch explains his predicament of being born into the "vacuum" of such a land: "By accident of history I was born into a gap in [the] narrative world. As a child I had that really strong feeling that I was living in a place that had no story to explain it and so I suppose one of the things I wanted to do was to tell that story of nothing to tell" (186-87). The prairie was a place "that had no story to explain it" and the prairie writer's mission was "to tell that story of nothing to tell".

In *Unnamed Country: A Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction*, Dick Harrison describes the prairie in Canadian fiction not only as a strange and hostile land, but as a land that is not entirely real. "The prairie, in effect, lacked the fictions which make a place entirely real" (Harrison, ix). The lack of fictions makes the land in need of being named and claimed which are acts of humanization as much as acts of triumph over nature's hostility. The prairie also becomes the ultimate site for struggle, survival and conquest. "The central symbol for Canada... is undoubtedly Survival a Survivance...Canadians are forever taking the national pulse like doctors at a sickbed: the aim is not to see whether the patient will live well but simply

whether he will live at all" (Atwood, 31). The struggle for survival recalls the need for introspection and finally for evaluation of what is most essential and indispensable to life.

Survival is not the cautious course of action picked out of a plethora of determinate choices, but a gamble of efforts in which loss is almost a certainty. "The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival; he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life" (Atwood, 32-33). It is this fact of "grim survival" that Kroetsch self-consciously draws upon and undermines in his novel *The Studhorse Man*. Furthermore, because of the dearth of historical literary traditions in Canada, fiction has been preoccupied with the simplicity of confessional or domestic presentation, a fact also clearly seen in the long poem tradition of Canada. Survival themes introduced minimalistic symbols in literature while the writer assumed the task of rearranging and labelling these minimalistic images. It is in this context that the prairie becomes the site for generating a form of Canadian prairie manners. "Kroetsch's half-ironic heroes of the western soul are remarkable not so much because they come to life but because they are made up of the interchange in prairie fairgrounds, railway yards, cafes and beer parlours. They attend the rodeos, auctions and weddings which were and to some extent still are the social substance of the rural and small town west" (Harrison, 167).

In this paper, I contend that *The Studhorse Man* is an exemplification of the prairie and that it is through its interrupted self-conscious narration that Kroetsch completes the act of naming and re-telling, thus claiming the prairie both

as a source as well as a perpetrator of history and myth. Kroetsch achieves this act of naming through what John Moss describes as "a mode of fictional realism: realism that will not exist outside the narrative but has convincing vitality within" (Moss, 148). The concern of the postmodern prairie writers has been "to imagine and create the place where they stand physically, where they have stood, identifying themselves publicly by reading the wilderness landscape, mountains, rivers, and Manitoba limestone, not as offering places for objective outdoor adventure but as texts of the subjective self" (McKay, 538). The prairie embraces within its own virtuality, a conflation of fiction and reality that the writer conjures and creates in the act of narration.

Each narration, each self-conscious turn in speech, each correction and re-telling becomes a means to people the vast and empty spaces of the prairie with characters and stories and myths so that the symbol of fertility in *The Studhorse Man* attains significance. The writer wanders among these imaginary conjurations even as the protagonist wanders in the search of self and identity in relation to place and time. This wandering becomes a recurring motif in *The Studhorse Man* as Hazard Lepage travels from town to town without a destination in mind. He is a wanderer in pursuit of a lost cause, but it is his journey, rather than his destination if any, that can mean something in the end. The futility of Hazard's quest is apparent with the start of the journey itself as Hazard lives in a fool's paradise. His excessive sense of urgency to find a mare for his stallion is contrasted with the indifference of all the other characters in the narrative, which ridicule and undermine what he uniquely cherishes.

Hazard's efforts to preserve the line of the blue stud are discredited by his neighbor, the law which fines him, Maria Eshpeter, the Proudfoots, even Martha herself who refuses to give him her mares in the beginning. In the end, it is the stallion itself which turns against him and kills him. But the futility of this journey into the prairie, which Hazard undertakes in spite of his "most preposterous fear of death" (14), represents "the story of nothing to tell"; it is motivated not by the excitement and sense of adventure or danger but by an almost intolerable anxiety. It is the anxiety of isolation or loneliness, a theme which is so recurrent in the novel; an anxiety which inspires the need to chart or map the prairie, to give it the configuration of human habitation and thus to claim it. The protagonist is then also the cartographer, driven from place to place with a restlessness that he cannot explain or define.

The cartographic instinct of the prairie writer stems from the need to name. "Unlike the American Adam he stands not at the beginning of a new history but in the midst, carrying the weight of an imperfectly understood past history and uncomfortably aware of his own implication in its sins." (Harrison, 161). In this act of naming, the writer as well as the protagonist assume mythic proportions as they become the scribes of history, noting both the present and constructing a past to found it on. Their task is driven by "an uncomfortable sense of the need of human redemption, [their] despair at setting the universe in order even for [themselves], [their] frequent ambiguity and failure, and final passivity" (Harrison, 164) which results in insanity in Demeter's case. Hazard, in a more complex way, takes on the role of the Adamic figure as

he is devoted to fertility. Like Odysseus, Hazard is in search for home to return to Martha after thirteen years of engagement. His stoppages along the way only intensify his longing to continue with his journey even as he finds women who can detain him.

The sea becomes the prairie and the blind poet Homer becomes Demeter. Circe turns Odysseus' men into swine and Hazard is made to participate in the slaughtering of Mrs. Lank's pigs. But the reference to myth is soon displaced completely as Odysseus' story is not the same as Hazard's life, and Demeter's version of Hazard's life is hardly a biography any more than an account of his own madness. However, Demeter's story and Hazard's life intersect in gaps and spaces that can be covered only by re-telling as the truth of history is as inaccessible as history itself. The narration of a borrowed myth adapted to a prairie context is clearly the reiteration of a historical bankruptcy but it is also an escape into the formulation of cultural idiosyncrasy. This double act is characteristic of Kroetsch's narrative devices which at first draw from familiar and established resources and undermine and distort them to suit the Canadian landscape and predicament. Thus "the story of nothing to tell" like the Canadian prairie is full of gaps. The Canadian prairie is decidedly not the Mediterranean Sea, Hazard is not Odysseus and Demeter is not Homer. The prairie is, ironically, wholly marked by the empty spaces these intersections leave.

The act of naming operates even at the level of story where a male is given the name Demeter and the gelding is called Girl. In both cases there is a reversal of conventional imagery. Demeter being the goddess of harvest and thus of bounty is

inappropriately conferred on a male character who, completely lacks the dynamism of Hazard's agency and resorts to the role of the biographer. His purpose is jeopardized by a madness that increasingly confounds his roles as narrator and character. The gelding is ironically called Girl in an attempt to name or "fill absences." Irony serves as a conscious device not only to highlight disparities but to combine complementary elements in order to achieve integrity. Thus, the narrative that is strewn with ironical acts of naming is finally set right in the end as Martha calls her daughter Demeter.

But even this sense of stability is undermined as Kroetsch leaves questions of legitimacy unresolved. The prairie is also composed of the violence inherent in the act of naming or uttering the name. The violence of articulation describes the predicament of the writer whose experience is native although the language he speaks is not entirely his. "The world Kroetsch writes is the world of the prairie, of the Canadian Midwest, and yet it is wholly informed by two and a half millennia of Western literary history and criticism" (Henry, 260). This disruption between experience and speech is clearly exemplified in the Hazard-Demeter duality as one is an agent and the other the scribe, while the credibility of both is undermined. The disjunction is made all the worse with the terrifying possibility that events can be decontextualized and remade with every time that they are retold. "The experience and the story are fraught with deformities and dysfunctions" (Henry, 289-294).

While Hazard is the doer, Demeter is the sayer, and as the novel culminates we increasingly find that the rupture between the two is too great and they cannot coexist. The

possibility of re-telling acquires significance only in the absence of a centre that allows the endless series of duplications of events and characters in the novel. This doubling is everywhere in the novel, and culminates when Demeter moves more and more into the world of doing, until Demeter assumes Hazard's place as owner of the blue stud horse and of the mansion and kidnaps Martha. But in this culmination, madness is an inevitable product of this endless doubling even as it is a result of the great rupture between the story and its telling. The prairie is then the stuff on which stories are made on, the field that bears the echoes of every telling and re-telling, the boundary where things happen and histories are forged. The writer faces the void of his past and the predicament of the present in the light of an uncertain future. His goal becomes "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" (Kroetsch, 61).

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