



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

Kunapipi

Volume 2 | Issue 2

Article 16

1980

Interview

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Recommended Citation

Kroetsch, Robert, Interview, *Kunapipi*, 2(2), 1980.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol2/iss2/16>

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Interview

Abstract

Flemming Brahm interviewed Robert Kroetsch in Calgary on 6 October 1979.

Robert Kroetsch

INTERVIEW

Flemming Brahms interviewed Robert Kroetsch in Calgary on 6 October 1979.

After several years of teaching and writing in the States you have returned to your native province and now call Calgary your home. You've been writing about Alberta for many years: why is it important for you to come back right now? Is this a new phase in your writing?

Yes, I do feel that I'm entering a new stage. I wrote from outside my material for years, and at this point I want to try writing about a place while I'm living in it. It has been a very traumatic experience for me coming back and trying to combine art and life.

What are the difficulties?

A sense of complication, for one thing. You know, you get so close to the material that the sense of design vanishes a little bit. So I have the sense of a large amount of material and no controlling shape.

Has your coming back got anything to do with developments in the Canadian literary scene: is it more attractive to be back in Canada?

Yes, I think it's a much more attractive place to live for a writer, in that you have a community. On the other hand I think that we're at a point where Canadian writing is going to start looking out toward the world much more. I think there was a period of consolidation that took place, and that's over.

*How do you view that phase of nationalism now? You've been attacked, for instance by Robin Mathews, for writing 'American' novels. The one he mentions is *Gone Indian*. Were you exploring the national differences*

between Americans and Canadians when you had this 'U.S. anarchist individualist' coming up to Edmonton looking for Grey Owl?

Yes, I was interested in different mythologies, if you will, at that point in my life. And also, the way we read each other's mythologies is important. I think nationalism is a very significant factor in our lives at this point. But I think that it's how you deal with it that matters. Robin Mathews is very narrow and insecure in his way of approaching it.

Do you feel that the emphasis in Robin Mathews's essays on community as a defining factor in the Canadian identity is a useful thing?

Yes, I think that's one of the very basic dichotomies in Canadian life and fiction. It's that terrible tension between community and self. In American culture often the individual comes out as being ultimately superior to the community. Whereas I think that in Canada there's more of a draw, in the sense that one is just about as important as the other.

Is there any other term that you would suggest as a key to a definition of national identity?

Well, that's what we're busy looking for. I believe it comes back finally to storytelling and what stories we tell and re-tell in a culture. Every telling demands another telling, there gets to be a web, a connected group of stories, and you look for patterns inside that. I certainly wouldn't want to over-stress that community/self notion. I think there are others that may turn out to be every bit as important.

There's something else that I've been wondering about: we get all these terms thrown around, like 'survival' and 'garrison mentality'; isn't that kind of fixed definition ultimately an improper thing to use in connection with something that is essentially dynamic?

Exactly. And you see, that's why I think that new cities like Saskatoon and Calgary are exciting and important. In a sense those cities are texts that you can read, and often it's this whole disregard for the past, the sense of a kind of wild optimism, a sense of vulgarity, a sense of self-seeking, that make them fascinating cities to read.

You're concerned with formulating authentic or indigenous myths for your own community. But it seems to me that maybe there is a kind of stasis built into the myth itself.

Yes, I certainly think you have to avoid that stasis. Any myth that makes you complacent is in a sense a bad story. I think that can happen in a culture. That's why you have to re-tell stories all the time, in a sense to keep opening them up. That's why we need new writers. The critical act, at its best, is an opening up rather than a closing.

There are quite a few echoes of Greek myths in your writing. In The Studhorse Man, for instance. The narrator/biographer in that novel tries to impose mythical identities and patterns on his protagonist and his experiences. You call him Demeter Proudfoot: why is that sexual inversion important there?

Well, first of all, I think Greek myth gave us certain paradigms, certain models, that we keep playing with over and over: the wandering hero, the father-son-family relationship, and so on. And then the Demeter thing: I think one of the characteristics of the prairie culture has been an incredibly sharp definition of male and female, almost to the exclusion of each other; and I have in the figure of Demeter somebody who's androgynous.

You've talked before about the pressure of the past, the literary Tradition with a capital T, on the writer, and you once said, 'Much as I admire The Odyssey, I want to get free of it. I want to get loose, and to do it I re-tell the story, I re-enact it in my own way.' That's more or less what you've been saying now. But why do you still have to re-tell that story? It seems to me that you are in a way caught within the premises there. Perhaps you would be better off outside those premises?

Well, even Homer was just telling his story to a particular audience in a particular place. The fact that we're reading it hundreds or thousands of years later is an accident that really didn't interest him, I suppose. It's the problem of beginnings, isn't it? You both have to recognize a beginning, a place, and be free of it. It's that paradox. So I use Greek mythology, and Homer especially, as a beginning place. But if I stop there, I become static again. I can only both honour it and free myself by a re-telling.

Another of the important ingredients in your writing is the tall tale. Could you say something about that?

Yes, the tall tale is very much a part of our local tradition, and I do believe that you work out of a local, too, you see. You use Homer on one hand, but on the other hand you're using a very local sense of storytelling. And in any kind of frontier world, or semi-frontier, you get a great use of the tall tale.

You said once, talking about the first-person narrative, that 'we're reduced to private visions in our time, and there's no longer a trust in the shared, the community vision'. Isn't the tall tale often a kind of community vision?

Yes, I think I would back down a little bit on that. I think the tall tale is very much a shared tradition, because you distort the individual away from anything particular towards a universalized notion. And I also think the stories themselves are often going back into the body of stories that we have. The giant of the past is related to the great hunter of the present.

So the tall tale, you could say, is one of the tools that you employ in order to break up a literary form that is more or less fixed. Would you agree with that?

Absolutely, including a deconstruction of notions of realism, I think.

But it seems to me that the tall tale is also very often a repository of very prejudiced and narrow-minded responses to reality.

Oh, absolutely. And that's why, you see, that you have to treat them in such a way that the reader sees both sides of them. The tool, too, has to be broken up while you're using it.

There's a sense of 'back to basics' in your work. One of your collections of poetry is called The Ledger, and another one is Seed Catalogue. Could you comment upon that listing or cataloguing instinct?

Sure. You know, I'm very much interested in that 'back to basics' thing you talk about. Again, where do we begin from? Obviously one of the

places is the catalogue, in the listing of names or objects. But then it's the interrelationship that starts to produce the poem, isn't it? There's always a sub-text, I think. Beneath a text is a sub-text, and often it's another literary text, like Homer; but often it *isn't* a literary text: often it's a very sub-literary text — the tall tale that's told locally...

Eaton's catalogue?

Eaton's catalogue! In Canadian literature I'm sure you can do a thesis on the mail-order catalogue as a sub-text in terms of fantasy, of hope, of education — and depiction.

We've used the term de-construction. You're very fond of such terms: 'de-creating', 'de-composing', 'de-mythologizing', 'un-naming', 'un-inventing', 'un-writing', and 'dis-covering'. Can you elaborate a bit further on why they are so absolutely essential?

Well, I guess that I feel that in a new world, such as we have here on the prairies, we encounter a pattern of naming that doesn't quite fit. The names don't fit the experiences. So one of the things we have to do is, at least temporarily, let go of the names, you see. So that we have a chance to examine the relationship between the name and what is named. 'Signifier and signified', as we like to say nowadays. And how do you do that? Again, by hearing that space, by hearing how it doesn't fit, you create room to write again. It's that destructive element of creativity, isn't it?

You once talked about the danger of de-construction, of writing 'the essential novel'. And you called it 'the final victory of form itself. A platonic form emerging as the quidditas'. And then you went on to say, 'One is tempted to rush out of the garden and into the bush.' What did you mean by that?

Well, I think one of the dangers of de-construction, of getting back to a structuralist notion, is that there is a pattern there; and if there's simply a pattern, then the pattern takes over. So you have to go back into the chaos again. If you take a garden as a pattern, it seems to me the idea of garden always has to emerge from the wilderness that surrounds it. And then you have to go back to the wilderness to refresh it. That's a form of un-naming, isn't it? In Canada we have that curious use of the English kind of garden that you see in public places, whether it's Niagara Falls or

wherever. The kind of garden they make, as if they had never seen North America, is a kind of grotesque mis-naming. They suit a European highly urbanized landscape beautifully where the garden is set against an urban world, the squares in London or whatever. But here the garden is kind of grotesque.

Can we talk about the question of literary perception and literary realism as conventions? You've moved away from conventional realism in your novels. How do you go beyond these conventions without losing contact with the 'ordinary reader' which is where the tall tale came from? There seems almost to be an element of betrayal there.

I'm not really interested in straight fantasy. I want a tension to exist between what we call realistic detail and the ways of perceiving. The tall tale is *one* way of perceiving. The sonnet is another. The function of literary form is neglected sometimes, or made too simple. The experimental novel, for instance, Ondaatje's work, has a very fragmented form because it's a distrust of that overpowering form, that complete form.

Let's go back to the question of male and female. Most of your protagonists are male, and talking about Dick Harrison's book on prairie literature, Unnamed Country, you have said, 'The world does not end. It's hard to make a literature out of that realization. But at least the father disappears. And that, out west (as opposed to down east), makes everything possible.' In Badlands there's a female protagonist who goes searching for her father. Why is this disappearing father so important?

Well, 'the father' is really a metonymy, or whatever. It represents the whole tradition in a sense, the past literary tradition, the systems of value. And I just noticed that in Canadian writing, I think actually Harrison makes that observation himself, the father somehow has to disappear. The child has to be orphaned, in a sense, to be able to recover the world. *The Diviners* by Margaret Laurence would be a great example of this. Morag is an orphan. There's that curious powerful sense of her being orphaned early, so she can make the discoveries.

But why not 'the mother', or why not 'the parent'? In terms of socializing functions, certainly, the woman is often regarded as perhaps the major influence.

I never thought about that, really. That's a good question. Because the mother, say in *As For Me and My House*, is really a pretty terrible figure. The boy remembers her almost as a prostitute, doesn't he? But she's there, she doesn't vanish. I don't know: maybe that ties back, finally, to the notion of muse. You know, that you have to confront the female. Maybe to kill off the mother is to be annihilated. Maybe it's even more in that sense.

Is that the kind of thing you're talking about when you talk about the 'erotics of space'?

Well, I was also talking about that fear of going into the house, in a sense, where the woman is. Where she *is* the power. The male staying out on the edge so much, thinking of himself as an outlaw or an orphan, a cowboy, or whatever — where he doesn't have to enter into feminine space.

What of space itself: can you say something about the importance you attach to that? It's certainly something that haunts prairie writers, and in a book like Laurie Ricou's Vertical Man/ Horizontal World it is almost the sole important fact.

Again, I think it's a problem of tradition. Our literature comes often from an urbanized world, or from a forested world even, so that the prairie space was something that European writing hadn't dealt with. There's very little writing that deals with something like that. — Unless you take sea literature, and that's quite a different thing because you get the microcosm of the boat right away. In a sense we're talking about a grammar of fiction, you know, the kind of basic elements you use to write, and we don't have those elements, quite often, for dealing with *this* kind of space. The first writers into the culture have to deal with that. I think some of them just pretend it isn't a problem, but good ones have, somebody like Suknaski inventing his Wood Mountain, anchoring himself by insisting on the validity of a place in space.

But then it's not just a place — it's a peopled place. And sometimes we lose track of the fact that, actually, there are people out there, not only looking at that space, but living in it, and going about the business of constructing their own life.

Yes, but you see, I think the writers born here now are not so appalled by that space. I think the first generation, often from Ontario or England, were sort of appalled. You still meet tourists who say that across the prairies there was nothing to see. And I'm so busy looking, I see so much crossing the prairies that I hate to hurry. We tend to close spaces, don't we? So that we can understand them. And this space is so much without boundary — *that's* one of the things that made people so appalled.

Something that interested me when I read Harrison's book were all the examples he had of the early people who came out, explorers and so on, who didn't really notice it. It was only later that it really struck.

You know, I think the first explorers literally couldn't see the space. Mackenzie, for instance. I suppose some of the people who were surveyors began to see it, but they saw it in terms of a problem of surveying. The problem of the homesteaders is an interesting one, because they often dealt with it by this marvellous thing of dividing the land into quarter-sections. You had a very manageable plot which you began to manipulate. Again, a kind of garden form, wasn't it, inside a space? It must have been a very difficult act on their parts to begin to perceive that it is beautiful. Some of them obviously did. Compare the Ontario landscape: the notion of beauty there, of trees and ponds and streams and so on, is incredibly different.

That brings us back to 'out west' in contrast to 'down east': It seems that we're moving away from nationalism into regionalism as a key issue in Canadian criticism.

It is a key issue in a certain sense, because patterns of perception are determined; for example in the Maritimes the community is often very small in terms of geography. Here you've come from Saskatoon to Calgary, and that is hundreds of miles, and we don't really stop and say, 'That's a long way.' You know, we have a very different sense of distance, and that makes a lot of difference. I think it makes prairie people open to the world in a different way. There are economic factors too: if you have to sell wheat in China you get interested in China.

How do you relate the importance of regionalism to what you were saying earlier about Canadian literature opening up and being much more open to a larger world? Is it paradoxical?

It is, and I'm not so sure that regional is going to work as a unit finally. You might have to go to smaller units on one hand, to where people literally live together. Saskatoon is a culture; Winnipeg is a culture; even the small towns are cultures. I wonder sometimes if 'regional' isn't a kind of arbitrary invention based pretty much on economic needs. But then you can go from that very local thing to a much larger landscape, because of television, film, because of travel. I wouldn't because I'm more interested in the local.

Could you say a few words about your latest book, What the Crow Said?

Well, I suppose in *What the Crow Said* — to relate back to what we've been saying — on the one hand I took the tall tale about as far as I think I can take it. In a sense, to use that word, I de-constructed the tall tale for myself. I really see nowhere to go with the tall tale beyond that. And maybe that's one of the reasons why I'm back in Calgary, sort of to re-confront the material. The second thing is that in *What the Crow Said* I was really pushing that dream of origins as far as I could go. And I think there's a kind of cliché notion in Canadian culture that we have a dream of origins in Europe. But in fact most people know very little about their European origins. Their dream of origins has been an oral tradition, and it goes back, you know, maybe only two generations. You know your grandparents, but there is a pretty slim chance of knowing your great-grandparents. Now, on the prairies the dream has become of that pioneering generation, people who went out to homesteads, to small towns. And they will always be there in a sense.

They're the Adams and Eves of the prairies?

Exactly. And I think I played with that very much in *What the Crow Said*.



Prairie scene, Canada. Photo: John de Visser.



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