The Home Triptych via Modernism and Post-Modernism: Naipaul and Kroetsch

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Abstract
A major theme in discussion of Commonwealth Literature is that of its defining characteristics. Everyone (or almost everyone) agrees that politically there is such a group of national or regional literatures (Caribbean, Canadian, etc.) produced in former British dependencies and colonies, but there is considerable dispute about the degree to which they can be defined in formal terms which distinguish them from works in the older European tradition. The strength of the argument of those who support the notion of a single literary tradition would seem to lie particularly in the inherent conservatism of language and forms: it seems undeniable that to use English or (for example) to write novels is de facto to embrace continuities, no matter what an author's intention. But the strength of those who see ruptures and new beginnings lies in their awareness of differences in basic experience (of climates, histories, and the like), and their perception of an artistic self-definition which is, if not determined, at least conditioned by these. This essay is intended as a contribution to the second position, and argues the case for one major formal departure of the ‘new’ literatures from the old. It is not, I believe, the only such departure, but it is frequent and significant.
A major theme in discussion of Commonwealth Literature is that of its defining characteristics. Everyone (or almost everyone) agrees that politically there is such a group of national or regional literatures (Caribbean, Canadian, etc.) produced in former British dependencies and colonies, but there is considerable dispute about the degree to which they can be defined in formal terms which distinguish them from works in the older European tradition. The strength of the argument of those who support the notion of a single literary tradition would seem to lie particularly in the inherent conservatism of language and forms: it seems undeniable that to use English or (for example) to write novels is de facto to embrace continuities, no matter what an author's intention. But the strength of those who see ruptures and new beginnings lies in their awareness of differences in basic experience (of climates, histories, and the like), and their perception of an artistic self-definition which is, if not determined, at least conditioned by these. This essay is intended as a contribution to the second position, and argues the case for one major formal departure of the 'new' literatures from the old. It is not, I believe, the only such departure, but it is frequent and significant.

Home and its environs — the 'home place' in the phrase of Canadian writer Robert Kroetsch — have traditionally featured in literature as emblems of security and identity for author or characters. We may easily refer to works whose titles drawn from place — George Eliot's The Mill on the Floss, Dickens's Bleak House, or Forster's Howard's End — underline its centrality and make this point, or we may cite others, Wordsworth's Prelude, Trollope's Barsetshire novels, or Lawrence's Rainbow, which establish it with almost equal force. Home is, of course, not always
harmonious in such works, for various reasons: amorous in *Wuthering Heights'* titular place, marital in *Middlemarch*'s Lowick Manor, or social at the Forge in *Great Expectations*. It may be an ideal, but it is scarcely idealized.

In Commonwealth literature, in works like V.S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas*, Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Fragments* or Randolph Stow’s *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, we find the home place similarly represented as ideal and less-than-ideal, and in this broad sense there is little departure from continuities. From the ‘less-than-ideal’ spectrum, however, I would like to draw attention to a specific and distinctly Commonwealth phenomenon. It derives from a source of cultural disquiet which scarcely has an European equivalent: the home place here represents an abandonment of one culture, usually that of the ‘Old World’, and an imposition on another, often (though misleadingly) deemed that of a ‘New World’. It compels writers to sense problematics in the concepts of ‘belonging’ and place. As Andrew Gurr puts it, for them home may be ‘neither here nor there’.

Two texts which bring out this feature very powerfully are Trinidadian V.S. Naipaul’s prose collection *In A Free State* and the first three poems in Robert Kroetsch’s ‘continuing poem’ *Field Notes*. Naipaul’s work gathers two short stories (‘One Out of Many’, ‘Tell Me Who To Kill’) and a novella (‘In A Free State’) between a frame of two autobiographical travel sketches, while Kroetsch’s poems are explorations in extended form, with the first, ‘Stone Hammer Poem’, notably shorter than the two succeeding, ‘The Ledger’ and ‘Seed Catalogue’. Naipaul’s three main narratives take as their subjects an economically marginal East Indian immigrant to the United States, two West Indian brothers leaving home as immigrants to England, and, finally, an expatriate English man and woman in a post-independence unnamed African state at a time of civil war. Kroetsch’s three poems are concerned with the associations attached to an Amerindian stone hammer originally found in a field on his grandfather’s farm, with his family’s establishing itself in the ‘new land’ in Bruce County, Ontario, and with his homesteading childhood in East-Central Alberta. Naipaul’s modernist narratives follow a classic realistic pattern of enigma, quest and closure, yet leave an image of appalling disorder on the reader, while Kroetsch’s post-modernist work, with its anti-formalism undermining order, paradoxically leaves a bracing and even cheering effect.

Despite obvious surface differences between the works of the two authors, there are strong affinities in their treatment of home. For both it may be seen as represented through a triptych-like structure, with its
centre the actual dwelling-place of the speaker or characters, and the flanking panels the home place as imaged elsewhere or in an earlier time. 'Elsewhere' is usually but not always an Imperial centre, while the earlier time is normally the period prior to European conquest. (The only works to which this model does not fully apply are 'Stone Hammer Poem', lacking the 'elsewhere' panel because of its preoccupation with the other two, and 'Tell Me Who To Kill', whose uneducated narrator is unaware of the vanished native peoples of the Caribbean islands). The triptych model has the advantage of underlining the fact that the 'home place' is seen in comparative terms, with constant reference being made to the other loci, but it is, of course, a metaphor and provisional only. In particular its static associations sit uneasily with the more dynamic reality of its referent, as should become evident further in this study.

The centre of the triptych reveals above all minimality, with place one of poverty, always spiritual and usually material as well, with little to provide continuity, security, and nourishment for the self. 'Stone Hammer Poem' underlines the insignificance of settlement activity vis-à-vis the antiquity of the maul, while in 'The Ledger' the everyday business of providing basic shelter and humble amenities allows only materially marginal conditions and ensures the spiritually void. Henry Kroetsch speaks to brother John:

    Have another glass, John.
    Ja, ja. What the hell.

    What's the matter, John?
    My bones ache.

    Take a day off, John
    No time. ²

'Seed Catalogue' speaks of the Western homestead, barren of trees, buffeted by wind, weathering January snow, summer sun: 'the home place:/ a terrible symmetry' (p. 49). In 'One Out of Many' the central character, Santosh, faces a bewildering urban environment in Washington, D.C., and finds refuge only in his room, a cupboard in his employer's apartment. Home in 'Tell Me Who To Kill' is exemplified in the West Indian family dwelling of the unnamed brother and Dayo, obsessively present in the narrator's consciousness, with 'the old galvanize roof', a muddy yard, smokey kitchen, bare rooms, and, somehow very movingly, a donkey at the back in the rain (pp. 60-61). In 'In A Free State' Bobby and Linda live in a compound set aside for Euro-
peans, guarded and clearly out of place in Africa, its destiny fore-
shadowed in the colonel's rundown hotel at the abandoned European
suburban-style settlement at the lake where the two stop for the night.

The flanking panels enhance, by contrast, our impression of depriva-
tion at the centre, for while they refer to outside and indigenous cultures
in terms suggesting absence, the absences are, so to speak, resonant with
suggestions of unattainable plenitude. The first panel may represent
cultures of personal or family origin (often those of colonizing powers),
presenting images of grandeur in various forms to which the 'home place'
stands as inadequate, impoverished, or failed. They may be shown as lost
forever to the central character, as is the India in 'One Out of Many', its
warm though humble street culture in Bombay seen in bitter retrospect
by a Santosh now an American immigrant, married miserably and
feeling his life is over. In 'Seed Catalogue' the largely European models
function similarly: in contrast to the utilitarian artifacts and dreary
surroundings of the rural community stand the splendours of the Old
World as contexts for the development of the artist. 'How do you grow a
past?' Kroetch asks in one of the series of growth and garden questions
that form the book, in the absence of 'Lord Nelson', 'the Parthenon, not
to mention the Cathedrale of Chartres', 'the Seine, the Rhine, the
Danube, the Tiber and the Thames' — and the like (p. 54). The
European models may be monumental like these, but even in lesser utili-
tarian forms such as 'silver serving spoons' stand as elegant contrasts to
the local equivalents (p. 53). In 'The Ledger' Europe is less a nostalgic
presence, more a ghostly phenomenon, gradually fading, as Kroetsch's
German forbearers in Ontario, losing contact with the old language com-

The representation may not be of cultures of personal or family origin,
but rather of simple colonial dominance, with, however, virtually
identical effect. When Kroetsch's mother is buried in 'Seed Catalogue'
the boy puzzles over the relation between this event with its powerful
subjective impact and the coincidental one of public import: the playing
of the American world series. In Naipaul external models are frequently
provided by images from advertising and British and American movies.
In 'Tell Me Who To Kill' the cinema provides a major source for the
first-person narrator's knowledge of the outside world (and, presumably,
a similar source for his community at large). Rebecca, Jesse James, Waterloo
Bridge and especially Hitchcock’s Rope all run through his consciousness, as do (misspelled and mispronounced) the names of such actors as Farley Grainger and Tyrone Power. Related to and obviously fed by such images of worlds of action, glamour and high life is the community folklore about opportunities opened through emigration and education abroad. In an image from Waterloo Bridge the narrator thinks of his cousin, sent off to Montreal for ‘higher studies’. ‘He is wearing an overcoat to keep out the cold and he have a briefcase under his arm. That is how I think of him in Montreal, furthering his studies, and happy among the maple leaves.’

The second flanking panel represents the displaced indigenous cultures, and, as the first, offers them as lost alternative places, with significances not found in actual home. Whether absent, in retreat, surviving vestigially, or otherwise marginalized, they perform a resonant function in relation to the ‘home’ culture, speaking of appropriateness and legitimacy. ‘Stone Hammer Poem’ subtly impugns the Eurocentric concept of ownership in contrast to a native disregard for such possession, even as the hammer, its original provenances and functions lost, survives as a mere trace of that once viable Amerindian culture. Such a trace is again represented in ‘Seed Catalogue’ in a tribal battle site on the Oldman River visited with Rudy Wiebe. In ‘One Out Of Many’ native Amerindians are not present at all, but urban American blacks, to the fascination of Santosh, have a vitality, energy and folk togetherness not found in the whites and perform, in this respect, the functions of the indigenous. In ‘In A Free State’ native people are shown in a defeat which seems irrevocable, as the King’s people of the bush (valorized as the true Africans) are conquered by the President’s troops with Western weapons and representing Western economic interests.

The awareness of a native culture displaced or under pressure of displacement may be doubled in the awareness of the nature of which it is so frequently the metonym. In ‘In A Free State’, bush and folk are closely associated through the dominant narrative voice, and linked with timelessness, unconscious biological existence and ‘the immemorial life of the forest’ (p. 205). Thus, hauntingly, towards the narrative’s conclusion, in implicit analogy to the forest people, emerges a Nature fecund and profligate, in butterflies: ‘like flakes of snow ... white, on the asphalt, on the grass, on tree trunks, in the air, millions and millions of white butterflies, fluttering out of the forest’ (pp. 234-35). And dying with equal extravagance. In Kroetsch there are traces of the natural world (a magpie, a badger, gophers in ‘Seed Catalogue’, for example), but the emphasis is less on what has persisted than on what has been lost through
European intervention, with the buffalo of ‘Stone Hammer Poem’ an obvious example and the brome grass of ‘Seed Catalogue’ a less foreseeable one. In ‘The Ledger’s’ brilliant register of gains and losses a plentiful natural world is prominent among the losses:

To raise cattle and hogs;

- kill the bear
- kill the mink
- kill the marten
- kill the lynx
- kill the fisher
- kill the beaver
- kill the moose (p. 26)

Attempts to identify with either the outside or the ‘native’ culture are underlined as usually futile, at best painfully incomplete. Santosh in the United States recognizes the third-world person’s alienation from first-world culture: comically seeing the U.S. through its television images, he poignantly reflects ‘No television life awaited me’ (p. 56), and though he marries a black woman, he knows he cannot be one of her people, a ‘Soul Brother’ (p. 57). No more can the brother and Dayo find niches in the English society that has fed their dreams: even Dayo’s marriage to an English woman hints emphatically, with its inauspicious beginnings, at a marital destiny parallel to Santosh’s. In Kroetsch the stone hammer may inspire poems, but this is scarcely its original function, while at the Oldman site in ‘Seed Catalogue’ the author with good-humoured irony addresses Rudy Wiebe, writing of native people but in novels modelled on the nineteenth-century Russian: ‘Rudy: Nature thou art’ (p. 59). In the same poem the alienation from place of family origin is ironically underlined in the account of the first member to return to the homeland doing so with a planeload of bombs in World War II. In ‘In A Free State’ westernized Africans dressed in suits, their hair ‘parted low on the left and piled up on the right ... English style’ are strikingly inauthentic (p. 104), while, virtually their mirror image, the liberal Bobby expresses his futile repudiation of his objective link with the dominant Europe by wearing a bright ‘native’ shirt in ludicrous taste.

As one would expect, personal identity is threatened: a sense of subjective annihilation runs through all the works, and suicide, murder, and madness are leading themes. Associative memory, traditionally a source of solace and even joy, is woefully impoverished: for Kroetsch an impoverishment expressed in fragmentary recall and the breakdown of
sustained narrative, for Naipaul in details of nervous collapse and of rundown, disputatious, or monotonous domestic and often working life. Sexual love is similarly beleaguered. In ‘Seed Catalogue’ the innocent and unitary sex play between the narrator and Germaine with its underlined link to Eden is ‘named ... out of existence’ by a moralizing priest and becomes a source of guilt and humiliation (p. 52). In ‘The Ledger’ the chief representative of sexual union is the poet’s great grandmother, who ‘married three Bavarians .../ buried three Bavarians’ and is dubbed, in a scarcely reassuring way, ‘the terror’ (pp. 37; 39). For Naipaul sexual love is a grotesque travesty. Santosh in ‘One Out of Many’ engages in a terrifying coupling with a large black woman whose race is sexually taboo for his people; Bobby in ‘In A Free State’ indulges in exploitive exchanges with young black boys, or, more sustainedly in the narrative, engaged in a bitter, marriage-parodic relation across the African state with a promiscuous Linda who is his equally sterile alter ego. ‘Tell Me Who To Kill’, of course, concludes with Dayo’s joyless wedding.

The images in the central panel are fluid. Self is put in a place, but it is a transient one, with no stability in relation to imperial splendours or native resonances. For Kroetsch the transience is largely temporal, as in all three works he concentrates on historical process, though with a different concept of history in each poem. Though ‘Stone Hammer Poem’ is the shortest of the works, its historical reach is the longest, going back through three generations of family association with the hammer to generations of native use down to the ice age. The historical concept is closer to those of archaeology or geology than to that of conventional history. ‘The Ledger’ spans the shorter period between the coming of the Europeans to North America and the establishment of Kroetsch’s family in Ontario and (more briefly) their move to Alberta, and comes closest to history in the usual sense. ‘Seed Catalogue’, dealing with the poet’s childhood experience on the prairies, with some adult experience also incorporated, covers the briefest time, representing history as autobiography. But though models from history are encouraged by these works, they are equally discouraged, or, to put the matter more precisely, they are raised for the purpose of their dismantling and denial. History, after all, implies a recovery of the past, the sustenance of chronicle and the plenitude of restoration, whereas Kroetsch’s work presents a record of discontinuities and loss. Hence his dominant figurations of it in relation to place are in terms of breaks and absences.

Perhaps the most subtle rendering comes in ‘Stone Hammer Poem’, which treats the hammer as a ‘trace’ of occasions and uses, barely discernible and hardly verifiable, whether as possibilities (‘a squaw left it
in the brain of a buffalo or' (p. 14)) or illusions (the young owner of the land 'who did not/ notice that the land/ did not belong' (p. 17)). Elsewhere in Kroetsch the transience of 'home place' is particularly expressed in other kinds of reduction: above all reduction to the ultimate abstractions of mathematics, in such forms as mileage directions, the straight line of a road, or upright fence posts. The very organization of 'The Ledger' is arithmetical, its bi-columnar structure (used less formally in 'Seed Catalogue') that of the bookkeeper's entries, and within that structure there is frequent play with the lucid stripped structures of geometry.

the poet: finding
in the torn ledger
the column straight
the column broken (p. 25)

'How do you grow a prairie town?' Kroetsch asks in 'Seed Catalogue', and gives the answer again with a vertical, but an evanescent one: 'The gopher was the model', rising erect on hind legs one moment, vanishing underground the next. So the 'telephone poles/ grain elevators/ church steeples' and the Heisler hotel, burned to the ground on 21 June 1919, and rebuilt 'Bigger' (pp. 53; 55). Or place may be represented in records, bare and scanty: in 'Seed Catalogue' by the survey description of the homestead; in 'The Ledger' by the bookkeeping ledger that is the source of the poem, or by names on documents of birth, marriage, and death. When one figure, the poet's great-grandmother, 'the terror', moves into larger-than-life, legendary status, it is in no contradiction to the prevailing reductiveness, for she serves as a symbol of that great zero, death.

Transience in space rather than time is the motif in Naipaul's stories of the uprooted, who find the 'home place' neither in country of origin or country of desire and exile. If in Kroetsch the movement through time is seen through historical models, in Naipaul the movement through space is seen in paradigms of contemporary travel, for purposes of tourism, immigration, education or employment. In 'One Out of Many' Santosh journeys to the United States in the service of his employer, an agent of the Indian government, while in 'Tell Me Who To Kill' the unnamed brother joins Dayo, in England, ostensibly pursuing his studies. In 'In A Free State' two movements dominate: the first, anterior to the narrative proper, brings Bobby and Linda to Africa as civil servant and the wife of one, and the second, largely comprising it, takes them in a car across country from the capital to the government compound for Europeans. The situation of all, embodied in extremis, is exemplified in the tramp on
the steamer from Piraeus in the 'Prologue', self-styled 'citizen of the world', always on the move, belonging nowhere, tormented and rejected by fellow-passengers.

Though the spatial movement is seen in terms of travel, its traditional plenitudes are denied as systematically as those of history in Kroetsch. Self emerges from the alleged stimuli of culture and landscape unenlightened and unenlarged. As in Kroetsch, the visual effects are reductionist, though the reduction is not to the austerities of mathematical unit but rather to particular deprivations of desuetude, decay, or defunctiveness, which may be numerically abundant, but are collectively poor, like a starving multitude. In Washington Santosh views the aftermath of race riots: 'every signboard on every shop was burned or stained with smoke ... the shops themselves were black and broken ... flames had burst through some of the upper windows and scorched the red bricks. For mile after mile it was like that' (pp. 40-41). Or Bobby and Linda arrive at the post-liberation European town: 'The drives of villas were overgrown, disgorging glaciers of sand and dirt through open gateways. The park was overgrown. The globes and imitation coach-lamps in walls had been smashed and were empty. Metal was everywhere rusty' (p. 166). A dominant figuration of transient and unnourishing place is an ironic metonym of home: that of a cramped confine. In 'Tell Me Who To Kill' the brother and Dayo in England live in a series of squalid rooms. And in 'One Out of Many' Santosh, in a parody of Horatio Alger upward mobility, lives in a large cupboard, then in a small room, before moving into an inner city house with his black wife. The transience is equally underlined by frequent actual transit within such confines: passage from Greece to Egypt in a steamer, an airplane en route to the United States, Santosh bewildered by an apartment elevator, a liner to England, and, most strikingly, the automobile in which Bobby and Linda drive through most of the narrative.

I now turn to a second stage in this essay. The first has concerned a formal feature of Commonwealth literature, the representation of home and the tropal emissions from that representation. One of its implicit points has been the commonality of these despite wide differences in artistic and aesthetic assumptions, that the differences between Kroetsch as post-modernist and Naipaul as modernist have been found to be superficial in relation to this shared cultural figuration. I want now to pursue those differences somewhat further, and to enquire whether they at least encourage modifications in the commonality. In this discussion I
shall be setting to one side the triptych model (like a ladder that has served its purpose), and turning to one more appropriate at this stage.

Self is put in a place. So far I have discussed place in terms of representations within the work, both literal and figurative. But place, or home, may be also seen as the work of art as well as elements within it. In that work dwell not only the selves of characters but also the image those selves and other elements make of their creator, the figure that Wayne Booth in an inspired phrase described as the ‘implied author’. Looked at from this perspective, the works may yield several impressionistic comments based on Naipaul’s modernist and Kroetsch’s post-modernist practices. Naipaul’s dwellings are superbly constructed and finished, while Kroetsch’s are characterized by disorder and incompleteness. Naipaul’s are made of harmonized materials, with theme, character, and point of view blending flawlessly, while Kroetsch’s seem to be improvised from disparate materials at hand, undermining any suggestion of integral form. Naipaul’s places are superbly insulated, the prose seamlessly stitched, while in Kroetsch’s, moving from fragment to fragment, we note the wind blowing dust between the chinks in the wall, the gap at the base of the ill-fitted door, the leaking roof. The light of intelligence burns brightly inside Naipaul’s places, though the fixtures lack shades, while in Kroetsch’s it is sporadic, uncertain, though not without warmth: kerosene lamps in a drafty place. Yet the internal furnishings do not differ that much. They are shabby, second-hand, in poor taste, an offence to the eye and sometimes the nose. But in one place there is no way of escape (or entry); the doors are all sealed, they have been locked and the key lost, while in the other one sits, apparently trapped, but unaware of the broken latch on the main floor window, the grass growing between the grey shrunken floorboards through which the moisture has penetrated, and the visitors approaching, with refreshments.

To put these matters somewhat more analytically: form in Naipaul is more radically at odds with content than in Kroetsch. Naipaul himself has recognized this, speaking of his uneasiness in using European forms for non-European experience, while Kroetsch has similarly spoken of the discontinuities of Canadian history making modernism an alien medium for its writers.\(^5\) Content in both draws on a nihilism which may in part be traced to the acknowledged influence of Conrad’s work,\(^6\) denying ultimate significances in concepts of origin, destiny, and ‘presence’, denials represented in narratives of home place reduced, shrivelled, stripped, and gutted. But Naipaul writes of this disorder in an ordered form: classic realism as refined by the modernism of such as James, the early Joyce, and Hemingway. In such narrative the emphasis is on linear
time sequence (however modified by foreflashes and flashbacks) with a beginning in enigma, a middle marked by gradual revelation, and an end in formal closure. In character there is stress on deep psychological significances as part of that revelation, while in overall form there is a striving for unity and wholeness. Though Kroetsch cannot help being touched by this tradition (which perhaps embodies inescapable elements) he strives to avoid it. Time sequences in ‘The Ledger’ and ‘Seed Catalogue’ are scrambled rather than ordered (though there is a method in the madness of the scrambling). There are no formal enigmas or closures preceding and concluding revelations, but rather a mosaic of apparent fragments leading to a gestalt-like perception. Character, where it is given identity at all, is flat (though at times the suggestion of mythic counterparts somewhat undermines this effect). Unity is, of course, exploded, particularly in ‘Seed Catalogue’ and ‘The Ledger’, where multiple tonalities, points of view and emphases are created by multiple texts from diverse sources or from diverse aspects of self.\(^7\)

Analysis of two passages from ‘Tell Me Who To Kill’ and ‘Seed Catalogue’ respectively should illustrate most of these points. The passage from Naipaul tells of a crucial event in the narrator’s retrospective account of his life: the knifing and probable murder of one of a group of British youths who have been tormenting him in his attempts in London to run a roti and curry shop purchased out of his hard-earned money.

The glasses and the plates are breaking. The words and the laugh are everywhere. Let everything break. I will take Dayo on that ship with me, and his face will not be sad, his mouth will not open to scream. I am walking out, I will go now, the knife is in my hand. But then at the door I feel I want to bawl. I see Dayo’s face again. I feel the strength run right out of me, my bones turning to wire in my arms. (p. 96)

The passage provides an excellent example of modernist unity: the impression of madness dominates in the clipped clauses and sentences, the rapid change of focus and image, the intense magnification of detail (‘The words and that laugh are everywhere’). The impression is reinforced by the reader’s awareness of the origins of several of its images elsewhere in the text, that this present is subjectively filtered through details of past experience. ‘That ship’ is the immigrant ship that brought the narrator to England, now seen in a fantasy of a return journey; the breaking of plates, ‘everything’, is also the breaking of every significant hope that the work chronicles.

Most salient of these details is the face of the brother Dayo, visualized twice, once trying but unable to scream, just as it is frequently visualized in the larger narrative, also sometimes trying but unable to scream.
Because the narrative deals with the brother’s obsession with Dayo, an obsession with homoerotic overtones, characterized by admiration of his movie actor beauty (‘Errol Flim’ (p. 61)), identification with and financial support for his quest for education, and hatred of his failure, the image of the face is clearly a powerfully overdetermined one. It is an image of fear and guilt, but the feelings are not entirely Dayo’s though so attributed. The fear and guilt are also the narrator’s homoeroticism denied, as well as of his own failure. Such projections are further distorted in recall: at one point it is Dayo who is being stabbed, at another it is Dayo, not the narrator, who is guilty of the stabbing, and at several there are versions of another kind of re-run of the episode, from cinema. The faces of the narrator and Dayo merge with those of the thrill killers of Hitchcock’s Rope, the two wealthy young men in the Manhattan apartment, convinced that their Übermenschen status puts them above the law. But in the re-run there are changes: a knife, not a rope, is the weapon, and the setting is not the apartment, but a dream of a home place, the opulent English mansion in the movie Rebecca, with details of jalousies and fretwork drawn from the house of a hated uncle in the West Indies (p. 77). Clearly we have here classic psychological depth, but there is resolution and closure as well. For to the enigma with which the work begins — how did the West Indian narrator come to be where and what he is, mad, in the care of a keeper, in England? — it provides the necessary answers.

The frustrations that lead to the outcome described are those growing out of an underlined impossibility of ambition: the ambition to rise, to achieve, to belong. The passage from Kroetsch similarly deals with impossible ambition.

_How do you grow a poet?_

This is a prairie road.
This road is the shortest distance
between nowhere and nowhere.
This road is a poem.

Just two miles up the road
you’ll find a porcupine
dead in the ditch. It was
trying to cross the road.

As for the poet himself
we can find no record
of his having traversed
the land/in either direction
no trace of his coming
or going/only a scarred
page, a spoor of wording
a reduction to mere black

and white/a pile of rabbit
turds that tells us
all spring long
where the track was

poet ... say uncle.

*How?* (p. 58)

There are no enigmas behind this passage, no accretion of clues to which it provides a culminating final answer. Rather what you see is what you get, or, more precisely, what you get again and again. The mode is post-modern, that of the mosaic repeating the message in variant forms, but even post-modernism must carry its Derridean traces, and the major one here is that of Renaissance rhetoric: amplification. There is amplification in the catechismic interrogations of the opening and close, for, as mentioned earlier, they are of several playing on the idea of growth and making up a structuring principle in the work, others being *How do you grow a gardener?* *How do you grow a lover?* *How do you grow a garden?* and (earlier cited) *How do you grow a past?* *How do you grow a prairie town?* Amplification too is characteristic of the imagery: the failure to become a poet is also the failure to cross the road, traverse the landscape, or leave a significant mark, just as it is elsewhere failure to become a postman, to grow melons or to realize love.

Failure in identity is, if anything, more extreme than in Naipaul, for we find none of the deep psychological significance he is able to offer the reader in compensation, as it were, for the characters' suffering. Self scarcely gets a start, does not become established enough to experience the devastation of disillusionment or tragedy. Comic absurdity is the dominant effect, that created by the image of a dead porcupine, or of a spoor of words like rabbit turds. Elsewhere this effect is reinforced by contrasting with real-life equivalents, incidents and situations from myth and folklore which suggest plenitude and significance: as opposed to the cowboy Pete Knight, legendary conquerer of the bucking bronc, we have the boy who not only falls off a horse but off one *standing still*; as opposed to the 'Shono-Haku-u' print from Hiroshige we have a catalogue listing of a Japanese morning glory. Multiple textuality and abruptly shifting tonalities undercut formal consolation in unity (such as in the theme of
failure): the formality of the italicized catechismic questions contrasting with the colloquialism of the Roman ‘Poet — say uncle’, the matter-of-factness of the right-hand column quatrains contrasting with the analytic, faintly lyric qualities of the left.

Without being deterministic, for any artist may overcome the tendencies towards which form drives his vision, one could say that Naipaul’s closed and Kroetsch’s open forms have encouraged major differences in the directions which their respective nihilisms have taken. In Naipaul’s end-stopped world there is little room for alternatives to a totalizing vision of failure, that ‘incendiary’ vision, to use Jack Healy’s telling adjective. The exhaustiveness and unity of that vision would be compromised and undermined if within it there were openness, loose ends, redemptive possibilities. Two related passages strike me as relevant here. In the first Bobby speaks to Linda of a dream of ‘driving through a cold and rainy night, driving endless miles, until I came to a cottage at the top of a hill. There would be a fire there, and it would be warm and I would be perfectly safe’ (p. 153). There are echoes elsewhere: we have already seen how for Santosh an India abandoned and for Dayo’s brother an image of an English mansion perform similar functions. But the most significant echo comes in the ‘Epilogue’ where the artist contemplates an Egyptian tomb painting, finding in it something like the solace denied to Bobby and the others, thinking that it might represent ‘the only pure time’, or that the vision ‘had always been a fabrication, a cause for yearning, something for the tomb’ (p. 246). Home for characters in Naipaul becomes finally dream or fantasy of a resting place they can never reach, but for the artist building his out of their loss this is not the case. Whether as evocation of a paradise lost or as decoration for a tomb his work speaks of the price paid for the perfectly finished home which he may contemplate and they must endure.

Kroetsch’s works, on the other hand, with their perpetual subversion of authority, encourage self-subversion as well. Though they deny the consolation of place as thoroughly as Naipaul’s, it is nevertheless present in latencies. Out of the multiple voices, perhaps through them, may be heard undertones which partake of qualities which the sceptical postmodern credo denies. It denies linearity, yet story emerges nonetheless, and associated with place in the hyperbolic absurdities of the prairie tall tale, such as that of the drinking session with Al Purdy in Edmonton’s Chateau Lacombe in ‘Seed Catalogue’: ‘Twice, Purdy galloped a Cariboo horse/ right straight through the dining area’ (p. 60). It rejects depth, yet in a manner whose subtle and almost covert insinuation demands further study, depth is present in the works in lyrical moments
which speak of passion, passion again associated with place. Here is the father, retired, in ‘Stone Hammer Poem’:

He was lonesome for the
hot wind on his face, the smell
of horses, the distant
hum of a threshing machine,
the oilcan he carried, the weight
of a crescent wrench in his hind pocket (p. 18)

One of the dominant features of post-modern thought is a resistance to closure. This resistance, in these poems of Kroetsch, may be seen not only in such formal elements as abrupt shifts of subject and style and the absence of a ‘rounded’ ending, but also in the large contradiction sketched above. Narrative and lyric undermine the prevailing rhetoric of despair, deny its once-and-for-all closure. In so doing they ultimately recover the home place in Commonwealth literature as a possibility based on our deep-seated powers of adaption, however much it may — perhaps must — be haunted by the ghosts of cultures abandoned, absentee, displaced and disrupted, so strikingly found in his work and Naipaul’s.  

NOTES


4. Historically, of course, American blacks are a native people uprooted and brought to the United States to serve as slaves in place of an Amerindian population incapacitated for such work by mass extermination.


7. The multiple textuality is even more evident in the first editions of these two works. In *The Ledger* (London, Ont.: Applegarth Follies, 1975) two copies of original ledger entries flank the double-page title page. That page reproduces a survey map of the Bruce County family home area, with a holograph encircling of its precise location (in broad black) and a holograph note adjoining this: ‘Yes, that’s the place. RK’ (in thin red). On the left side of the page the title information is superimposed in red on map area which remains visible, palimpsest-like. The General Publishing edition contains none of this, and while it attempts to duplicate the exciting typographical juxtapositions of the original text proper, it barely succeeds in merely suggesting them. In *Seed Catalogue* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1977) the poem proper, printed in green, is superimposed on a palimpsest-like still visible copy of pages from a seed catalogue, complete with illustrations, reproduced in gold, and suggesting a recessive prairie intertextuality. The colour of the paper is light blue, and the three colours suggest spring and autumn wheat fields and a prairie sky respectively. Green and gold are also the official colours of Kroetsch’s *alma mater*, the University of Alberta. All these effects are lost in the General Publishing edition. The considerable impoverishment from the originals of the most readily available edition of these works is regrettable, and not only on aesthetic grounds.


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KUSUM BHAMBRI

One Hot Summer Day...

It was hot and sticky, humid was a better word to describe the weather, with the sun sending down wave after wave of unrelentless sweltering heat. The sizzling temperatures made movement a problem, and laziness descended on Leila, along with a heaviness that made it difficult to think clearly. ‘These must come off,’ she said to herself crossly; the layer upon layer of clothing that covered her body, making it impossible to discern any visible shape, made her feel unattractive and nondescript. At first she had struggled valiantly against the imposition of another form, this strange covering, like another being hanging upon herself. It was an