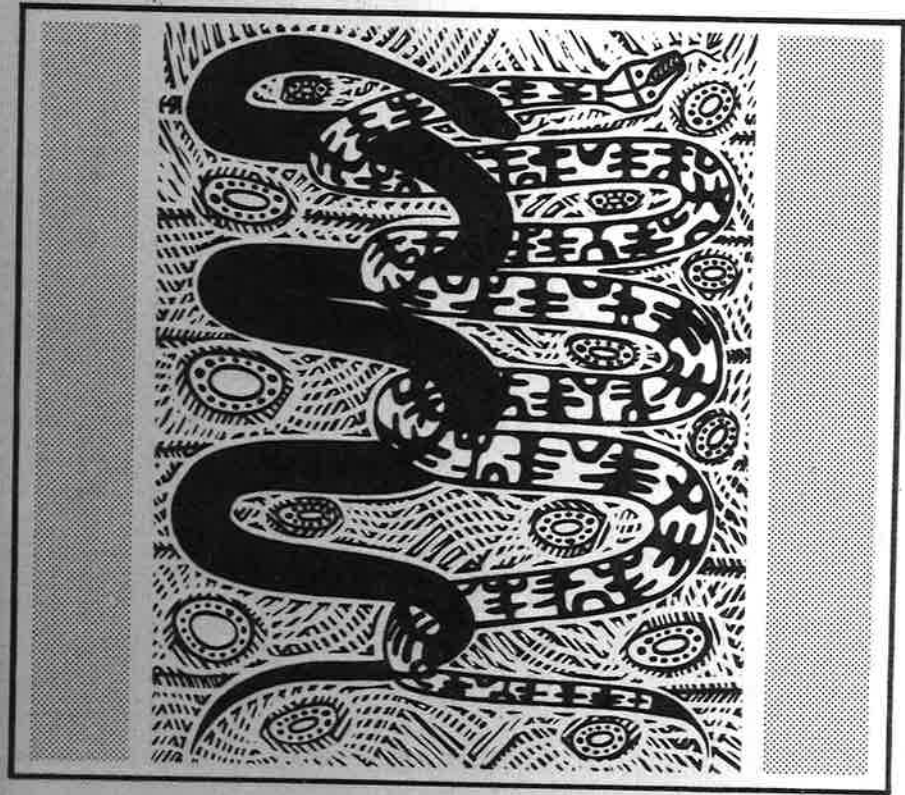


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Border Work in a Canadian Context — Brian Edwards

Robert Lecker, *Robert Kroetsch*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986.

Robert Kroetsch has transformed our perception of Canadian literature. As a novelist and poet he has articulated new visions of Canadian experience that are distinctly at odds with those held by any of his predecessors. And as a critic he has posed vital, challenging questions about Canadian writing that have initiated a reexamination of the standards and perspectives from which Canadian literature is judged. While Kroetsch is an innovator, however, he writes with a full knowledge of literary and critical tradition, and he insists that this tradition be recognised though the creative act, even as he celebrates contemporary theory and practice.

This prefatory tribute indicates not only the author's respect for Robert Kroetsch's work but also the central thesis for this study. Presenting Kroetsch as the 'borderman', one whose writing is innovative but not at the expense of tradition, Robert Lecker elaborates carefully the intersecting oppositions at play in Kroetsch's fiction, poetry and criticism. The place *between* is the place of action, of alternatives, ambivalence, uncertainty, duplicity, possibilities... It is the open site. This is postmodernist rhetoric, these its metaphors, and Kroetsch is now commonly represented as a leading Canadian postmodernist. Informed with markers of contemporary discourse and closely attentive to the texts, Lecker's book is a valuable contribution to critical analysis of Kroetsch's work. Productively comparative, it makes very effective use of Kroetsch's writings on critical theory and practice both for what these indicate about his fiction and poetry and for their observations on Canadian literature and culture.

'Bordering on', Lecker's title for the first chapter, points to two interrelated perspectives on Kroetsch's work - border positions and the refusal of closure. Quoting Kroetsch in interview, on distinctions between game theory and picture theory in language and his fascination with 'the place right between the two', Lecker develops an image of the writer as tightrope-walker or risk-taker or trickster, as the one who confronts self-consciously the border territory between extremes and locates his work in the confrontation of oppositions. Pynchon's Oedipa Maas 'has heard all about excluded middles; they were bad shit, to be avoided; and how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity?' [Pynchon, 1974, p. 138]. Addressing the middle ground in its pluralism in the poststructuralist, postmodernist imperative and it is the case, as Lecker demonstrates, that Kroetsch's emphasis upon uninventing, uncreating and un naming avoids resolution by holding the binaries in suspension, by deconstructing the systems. To do this is to work in paradox, of course. It is duplicitous practice. But if form is given to the world by language, sceptical self-awareness of the process and continual confrontation of the problematics of representation and meaning work against stasis. It is because Kroetsch would speak the local (and have Canadian writing re-address its 'local') but with

reference to the other, that he is Canadian *and* international, one who acknowledges tradition and convention while pursuing difference. In this opening chapter, Lecker concentrates on Kroetsch's essays, defining the interplay between theory and practice as one elaboration of the border metaphor. If Kroetsch 'persistently refers to those borders which for him express the position of the contemporary Canadian writer caught between private, geographic, and archetypal extremes [p. 5]', the fertile place between includes the intersection of theoretical pronouncements with creative practice, each of which supports the other in resisting finality. As Frank Davey writes, in his introduction to the special issue of *Open Letter* that presents the major essays, Kroetsch 'declines system, avoids completion' and the essays 'insist on their discontinuity [Davey and Nichol, 1983, p. 8]'. Formally then, as well as thematically, they are exploratory, offering a form of writing that is multi-dimensional and works by provocative fragment. Through close comparative analysis of the essays, together with judicious attention to critical commentaries on them and to Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson's (1982) excellent *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch*, Lecker provides an astute 'construction' of Kroetsch's 'aesthetic', one that is well aware of its deconstructive energies. Kroetsch's valuation of the oral tradition is aligned with improvisation, re-telling and co-creative reception, each of which supports irresolution and his interrogation of traditional cultural markers, and Lecker emphasises the link between deferral and desire: 'In one way or another all of Kroetsch's theoretical tactics are tactics of delay that support a poetics of desire [p. 15]'. This is a particularly provocative chapter since Kroetsch's aesthetics provide ideas whose application is not limited to his own work and Canadian literature.

Using the tension between tradition and innovation as his guiding problematic, Lecker suggests that the novels work in pairs, with *Alibi* (1983) still awaiting publication of its 'mate'. *But We Are Exiles* (1965) and *The Words of My Roaring* (1966) present oppositional forces in their paired characters and the motif of journey as quest, the first into the Canadian North and against restrictions of tradition and cultural definition, the second West where 'the pursuit of an identity freed from mimesis becomes the search for an identity founded in myth and narrativity [p. 37]'. In *But We Are Exiles*, Peter Guy becomes a quester caught between the extremes of his cultural origins and opportunities for change represented in Michael Hornyak's energetic disorderliness, the one associated with the mirror and mimetic theory and the other with the lamp and expressive freedom. In *The Words of My Roaring*, Doc Murdoch is the surrogate father of tradition and determinism and Johnnie Backstrom the heller (and teller) whose energy favours desire, fertility and creation, or innovation against convention. Lecker emphasises the parallels and notes the shift from 'the collective and national *we* of *Exiles* to the individual and regional focus of *The Words of My Roaring* [p. 35]'. His analysis of this first 'pairing' concentrates on particularities in Kroetsch's oppositional strategies while re-emphasising the larger framework of change and the cultural inheritance. *The Studhorse Man* (1969) and *Gone Indian*

(1973) are held to mark a watershed in Kroetsch's fiction, indicating his 'growing preoccupation with postmodern thought [p. 47]'. In particular, there is renewed attention to the act of narration itself and, in their self-reflexive explorations, the texts address more complexly relationships between tradition and innovation and, therefore, the construction and status of meanings. Although Kroetsch again presents oppositional pairings of character, the novels emphasise the struggle itself to make order from fragments that resist resolution. Hazard Lepage and Jeremy Sadness, wanderers and tricksters, defy their conservative others in Demeter Proudfoot and Mark Madham. In their intertextuality and the representation of conflicting perspectives, the texts hold tradition and change in a dialectic favouring activity above ending.

Badlands (1975) has received more critical attention than any other of Kroetsch's novels. In this discussion, Lecker concentrates on narrative strategies, and particularly on Anna Dawe as woman become trickster, creator of the multi-levelled text and the unteller (and teller) of the father's 'master' narrative. Whereas woman has been associated traditionally, in patriarchal discourse, with hearth and home, closure and endings, in *Badlands* Kroetsch transfers the storytelling to her. Lecker suggests that, in mythologising the past, creating the story, Anna Dawe acts out the stereotype she claims to repudiate in symbolic return to the father's story at its source and her scattering of his field notes. But whether we read Anna Dawe's double narrative as enslavement to or liberation from paternal authority and story, this is another text that emphasises narrative as process and truth (and history) as problematic by concentrating upon the making of a story. Reading Anna's account of Dawe's expedition as a parody of the quest motif. Lecker also interprets Anna as the self-aware voice:

... of the tall-tale tradition that Kroetsch himself is beginning to pursue - a tradition that defies tradition by using forms that contradict each other and produce an 'end' that is a 'non-end' in terms of its paratactic impulses [p. 95].

Thus truth is deconstructed as Anna creates rather than reports the past. While noting how different *What the Crow Said* (1978) is from *Badlands* in style and structure, Lecker suggests that Kroetsch returns to theoretical questions important in the earlier work - particularly to ways of breaking with mimesis into new forms of expression. He sees this as 'Kroetsch's most sustained effort to escape the shackles of realistic fiction [p. 97]' and notes the tendency towards the fantastic in the style of Latin American magic realism. Thus, the fabulist mode reminds readers of the self-conscious narrative, characteristics of the tall tale appear and desire is newly linked with an erotic textual metaphor. Although he considers Liebhaver's struggle with time and language, naming games, exaggeration and the 'spirit of play', Lecker might make more of both the instances and the effects of Kroetsch's adaptation of strategies of magic realism associated most notably with García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In this respect, *What the Crow Said* can be seen as not a departure from earlier oppositional components in Kroetsch's fiction but, rather, as a further exploration of story-making that looks to tradition and innovation in allowing the local different voices.

Lecker titles his discussion of *Alibi* (1983) 'Con/Texts of Desire', locating Kroetsch's 'theory of desire' as the outcome of his interest in South American fiction, the trickster, the oral poet, the Ovidian storyteller and, above all, the writings of Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes. It is in Barthes's work, particularly in *The Pleasure of the Text*, that there is theorised an erotics based in difference and deferral, or the double plays of hiding/revealing, offering/withdrawing, and other forms of textual teasing. This discussion provides a close reading of strategies in *Alibi* with attention to the operations of difference in language, operations of which Kroetsch is well aware. Lecker's reading of the ambiguities in Karen Strike's role emphasises the text's confusions of narrative status and the movement against resolution:

Although *Alibi* first appears to be a relatively conventional narrative presented by Dorf, it is in fact a highly contrived story presented via Karen, whose role as editor and editorializer is only revealed at the end... [p. 115].

So the uncertainties of this interplay contribute to the text's resistance to synthesis or closure. Dorf's travels as a collector convince him that 'the collection itself only confirms the discontinuity of this scattered world'. There are modes of formal and thematic play in *Alibi* that refocus our attention upon the fiction - making process in terms of the tradition/innovation intersections that Lecker uses for this study in general.

In a chapter on Kroetsch's poetry, Lecker notes the attention it is receiving and the extent to which this criticism is influenced by Kroetsch's own critical statements. He suggests that, like the fiction, the poetry turns about relationships between tradition and innovation. Points of continuing concern in Kroetsch's fiction and essays reappear in the poetry - establishing a Canadian and western sense of place, dualities in Canadian experience, reinventions of the past, relationships between words and culture. Kroetsch's contributions to the long poem are well known and Lecker analyses these with attention to the essay 'For Play and Entrance: The Canadian Long Poem'.¹ Storytelling, strategies of narration, delay, irresolution as theme and as technique - these are important in the poetry and they are well considered in this discussion.

In concluding, Lecker notes the paradox:

More than any other Canadian writer, Kroetsch teaches us to question endings, to refuse summation, to open meaning up. At the same time, he is a writer who invites contradiction in any terms: his protests against closure emerge through highly structured forms that resonate with convention, myth, pattern, and writerly control. Kroetsch concludes that he will not conclude. He keeps writing on [p. 148].

And the publications continue beyond Lecker's selected bibliography: a new edition of *Seed Catalogue* including 'Spending the Morning at the Beach', *Advice to My Friends, Excerpts From the Real World*, a book of essays about to appear and novel number eight close to completion. Australian readers who have not read Kroetsch will find his writing worth their attention, and serious students who wish to delve into the criticism will find Robert Lecker's study particularly well-informed and astute. It is an important contribution to critical appreciation of the

work of one of Canada's best known contemporary writers.

Notes

1. Reprinted in *Robert Kroetsch: Essays* (Davey and Nichol, 1983, pp.91-110).

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