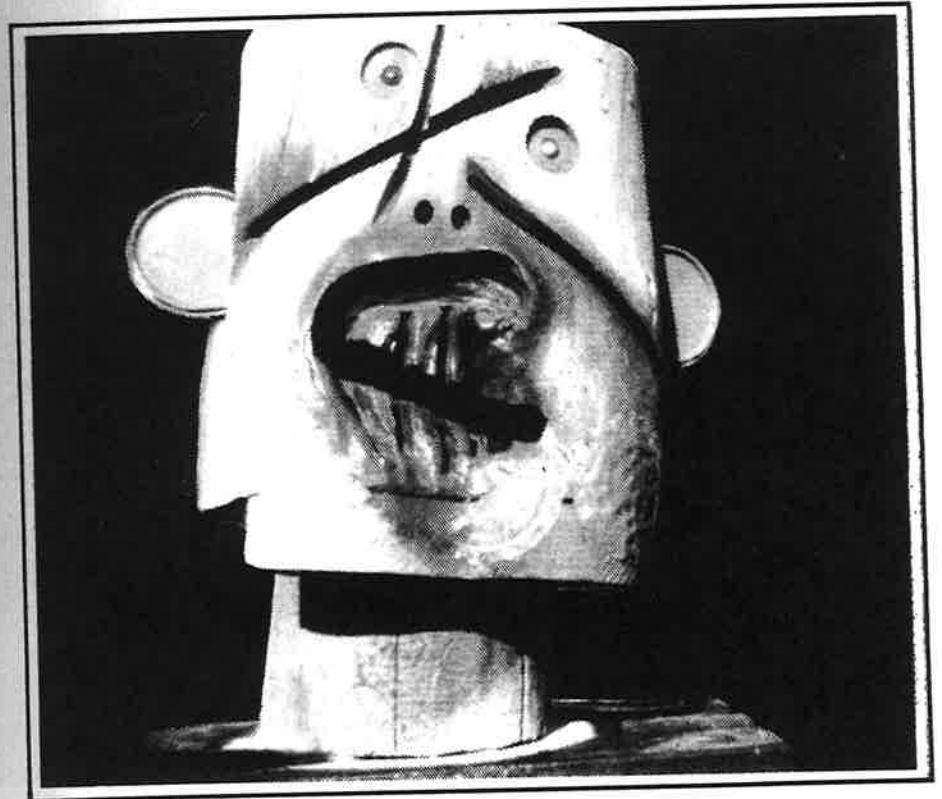


australian-canadian studies

australian ~ canadian studies

- a journal for the humanities & the social sciences -



vol. 5, no. 2
1987

vol. 5, no. 2 1987

Textual Erotics, the Meta-Perspective and Reading Instruction in Robert Kroetsch's Later Fiction

brian edwards

All the capital letters in his collection of wood type were set in neat rows, arranged alphabetically. He couldn't bear that either. In terror at the domestication of those free - beautiful letters - no, it was the absurdity of their recited order that afflicted him: ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ - he opened a twenty-six of rye and, with immense effort, tried to disentangle himself from the tyranny of rote [Kroetsch, 1978, p.69].

Yesterday was my birthday, I was forty-six; I decided, yes, I'm going to keep a journal, I'm going to love two women, I'm going to tell the truth. Life is unendurable. The trouble is, I enjoy it [Kroetsch, 1983a, p.39].

Robert Kroetsch seems always to have known that the search for new futures involves returns, that new directions are most discoverable in old things, and that to ignore where we have been (were that possible) would produce not prelapsarian Adam and Eve, shining bright in innocence and wonder and with no need of fig leaves, but the Emperor, and Empress, without any clothes. I take this to be what Kroetsch means when he says he needs to rehear Alberta in new ways (Neuman & Wilson, 1982, p.39). Kroetsch emphasises (after Foucault) the archaeological site as a preferable figure to official history (Kroetsch, 1983b, p.71); he seeks an oral tradition (even though Derrida reminds us that 'speech' is always already 'writing', presence always crossed by absence); he contemplates the great Canadian 'silence' (knowing that even snowfall is loud with noise) and engages in those processes of uninventing (Kroetsch, 1983c), decreating and demythologising which his texts acknowledge to be simultaneously processes of inventing, creating and remythologising. What results is a body of anti-mimetic texts, or, in Linda Hutcheon's (1984) terminology, self-reflexive texts which provide a mimesis of 'process' rather than 'product'. These texts tacitly question not so much reality, but realism as a literary convention that would reveal reality, and may be said to be Canadian, although resisting 'Canadianness' as a descriptive category in the exploratory manner of their attention to identity and to processes of representation. It is by exploring the limit and challenging the simplicity of conventional binaries, by bringing to bear upon ideas of the Canadian 'present' the other of the past and of international aesthetics, that his

fiction, by example, opens the discourse of Canadianness to international influences.

Literature offers innumerable examples of back-tracking as they way ahead. Aristophanes sends Dionysus, as God of drama, to the underworld in quest of a poet to save the city.² The symbolic journey to Hades, synonymously back in time, had been popularised already by Orpheus³ and Odysseus,⁴ tracked again by Aeneas,⁵ and trodden well enough ever after by travellers as various as Cervantes' Quixote and Pynchon's Slothrop, Bowering's George Vancouver, Findley's Mauberley and Kroetsch's Jeremy Sadness, William Dawe and Bill Dorfen.⁶ When the journey back is equated with the journey within (that is into the psyche), both conscious replay and the unconscious as each individual's little reservoir of significant 'history', that which might be repressed returns not only via conscious attempts at dream analysis, archival research or archaeological digs, but also in the processes of 'influence',⁷ 'anxiety' (Bloom, 1973, 1975), 'erotics'⁸ and 'trace'⁹ by which the dialectics of past and present are played, and out of which all possibilities for the future are shaped. When it is acknowledged that we are not cursed but *blessed* with awareness, it can be demonstrated readily enough that just as the individual is not person alone, but situated within multiple 'discursive formations' to use Foucault's (1972, pp.31-9) term, so too ideas of national identity and action are influenced by perceptions of difference, or the other, against which they are defined but also by which they are infiltrated. Texts too, in all disciplines, are intertextual - if not designedly in their composition by aware authors, then certainly in their reception by aware readers.

Kroetsch has suggested: 'Where I had learned the idea of absence, I was beginning to learn the idea of trace. There is always something left behind. That is the essential paradox.' Derrida's deconstructive assault on what he terms the logocentric tradition of Western metaphysics and his dismantling of the idea and authority of presence, together with the traditional priority accorded speech (in its alliance with presence) over writing (and its association with absence), constitutes a powerful reminder and affirmation of 'trace' or 'supplement'. At different but related levels, those operations of trace which deny full or fixed meaning in the communication acts of speech as well as writing, may be likened to intertextual processes in the construction and reception of texts. The trace returns, and not as a function of the definitively other, past, secondary or inessential, relegated thus by a centre of authority, but rather as an essential component of the centre, that which shakes our systems of representation and reminds us of the provisionality of meanings and the opportunities for theoretically endless supplementation.

It is my argument here that Robert Kroetsch's texts, in their self-reflexiveness, meta-perspectives and postmodernism, signify 'awareness' and that their national/'Canadian' identity is necessarily influenced, challenged and refocused by the internationalism of literary processes, such as linguistics, theories and practices of writing, and the ways of reception. This identity is not so much undone as redefined and redirected in acknowledgement of the artifice of texts as constructs and the excitement of gaps, of what can occur between signifiers. Exploring

possibilities of place, identity and textuality, the texts offer a play which, as writer, Kroetsch sets up but which, with the 'death of the author', must then be played between text and reader. Noting the focus upon essential things, sexuality as well as textuality, I wish to concentrate on what I shall call the erotics of signifiers in *What the Crow Said* (Kroetsch, 1978)¹⁰ and *Alibi* (Kroetsch, 1983a)¹¹ and, specifically, to consider an erotics of reading practice.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

When John Barth (1967) switched metaphors and redefined the literature of 'exhaustion' as the literature of 'replenishment',¹² he acknowledged not only the answer implicit in the exhaustion rhetoric itself, perceptions of the used-upness of stories and forms and such demonstration pieces as his own *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), *Chimera* (1977) and *Letters* (1980a),¹³ but also the capacity of literature to be companionable, inviting, seductive, even limitlessly libidinal in its striptease appeal to our basic and variable but finely-trained appetites. Far from being stultified into silence by either the anxiety of influence or the inadequacies of language to express all, writers chat on, their texts existing not in masturbatory silence but promiscuous with invitations in that babble/Babel of plenty. The literary text, in its appeal by suggestion, which is a function of its fragmentariness (the whole story can never be told) and of ambiguities in the nature of language as a signifying system, is the scene not of solitary lament but erotic possibility - and this 'textual interruptus', postponing always the 'little death' of completion, promises further enticement beyond each revelation. Desire, we are assured, is prompted by lack; it is the beckoning figure of the text's incompleteness, its masked display, that Roland Barthes describes in defining the text of pleasure:

... it is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve): it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance [Barthes, 1975, p.10].

While the nature of this withholding necessarily varies from text to text and from one text-reader relationship to another, it is the interplay that brings a text to life. The text (as Barthes says) reads the reader as the reader reads the text: 'The text is a fetish object, and *this fetish desires me*. The text chooses me, by a whole disposition of invisible screens, selective baffles: vocabulary, references, readability, etc... [Barthes, 1975, p.27].' Amongst different formulations of the dialectic (structuralist, phenomenological, formalist, hermeneutic and so on), reception and reader-response theorists agree that the texts invite this interplay.¹⁴ Inseparable from their reception, becoming rather than fixed, they may be said to exist in terms of an erotics of reading practice in which not all the tricks can be played, not all the mystique laid bare.

With the volatile text supplanting the determinate text, what erotics of signification do *What the Crow Said* and *Alibi* offer? How may this erotics of signification and reading practice summon readers as active agents, as co-creative

participants in an unfinished act of desire? In *Labyrinths of Voice* (1982, pp. 24-5), the book-length triangular conversation between Robert Kroetsch, Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, Kroetsch discusses erotics in terms of ambiguity, influence and intertextuality, thereby acknowledging the sensual possibility of allusion and textual commingling, the text as a site for bliss¹⁵ and reading (particularly of the writerly¹⁶ or open text) as an explicitly regenerative activity. He recognises that this sensual possibility at the meeting between text and reader may be heightened by the striptease of duplicity, by satisfaction deferred rather than surrendered:

I can almost visualize the labyrinth that I have to make, both for myself and for a reader, because that traditional linear thing - whether it's the picaresque or the quest - is boring. If nothing else it's boring.

The labyrinth is so much more exciting because it is life or death. The wrong turn ... you throw it all away. So it all comes back to the notion of gambling, to chance, to carnival, and why deny that to the reader? And it is curious how many of our texts in the past, it seems to me, did deny that to the reader. The whole end was to guarantee safe passage for the reader. Why guarantee safe passage for the reader? [Neuman & Wilson, 1982, p. 180].

It is not that sex is best on paper or that real-life lack produces a special edge in reading preparation, for what sharp readers some of us would be, but that the play emphasises language itself, treating it not - as Kroetsch says - 'like a heap of fresh bear shit [Hancock, 1977, p.38],'¹⁷ but as a means of infinite suggestion.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

What the Crow Said is a border text in many more ways than by virtue of its notional Bigknife location on the border between Alberta and Saskatchewan. Dealing in fragments and challenging through its magic realist strategies not only the constraints of narrative realism but the limitations of fixed identity, it explores myths and the mythopoeic imagination, invokes Latin American fabulism (in particular the writings of García Márquez¹⁷), and establishes a playground for an erotics of reading.

Desire, and the fundamental matters of love, birth and death are conventional subjects for fiction. But in *What the Crow Said* it is the self-reflexive, metafictional and essentially ludic nature of their telling that really establish the basis for erotics by teasingly representing the familiar as strange, challenging conventional perceptions of time and reality, and drawing attention to processes of representation and to the nature of the text as construct.

People, years later, blamed everything on the bees; it was the bees, they said, seducing Vera Lang, that started everything [Crow, p.7].

The marvellous bee swarm that seduces Vera Lang and provokes her orgasmic cry, her pregnancy and ever after her passion for bees and dissatisfaction with men - 'Men are a bunch of useless bastards [Crow, p.19]' - sets a pattern not only for sexual desire as a subject of attention but fabulism as its mode of representation. Besieged by suitors, watched over the Old Lady Lang with her

refrain, [i]t's too sad. I don't want to think about it', and mournful Liebhaber who can remember the future, the female Lang household is focal point of desire. This is evident in its succession of fabulous pregnancies, including Rose's (to the absent phallus of Mick O'Holleran) and Gladys's (to 'Everybody'), in Earth Mother Tiddy Lang's ambiguous restraint of a small army of suitors, and in Rita Lang's erotic letters to imprisoned men:

Rita, writing. She gave the promise of her words. To her faithful men. And all the while, all her life, she had not opened one letter that came in reply. She arranged the shoe boxes, full of unopened letters, upstairs under her bed. She imagined them all, her faithful men, ripping open the scented envelopes that she so carefully slipped into the mail: Rita, bent at the table, slowly unbuttoning her blouse, furtive and wanton, lifting a nipple to her mouth. The quick flash of her tongue against the rising nipple, the motion of her pen. On and on she wrote, driving her imprisoned lovers to the edge of a terrible dream, a terrible flying [Crow, p.213].

This play of language, Rita's special erotics of signifiers and her studied absence, is a meta-textual indicator of the provocative play of language, uncertainty of connections and the absence of transparent meaning in the text in general.

At the centre is Liebhaber, printer and 'having lover', whose struggle with type-face and words is crossed by desire for Tiddy Lang, his double lack accentuated nightly by the squeaking of Zike's bed below - 'Zike, downstairs in his basement room, fucking his head off [Crow, p.68],'¹⁸ - and by the impossibility of truth. Caught between a past, memory of which is made irrelevant by Gutenberg, and a future he remembers only improperly; resisting the tyranny of rote; taunted by the talking crow as sceptical philosopher and wise-cracking bird of death, Liebhaber is the text's figure for the radically ambiguous workings of desire in language. He is an erotomaniac who might be nearly normal and who may be finally united in desire with Tiddy Lang, male and female, with the aphrodisiac of rain falling and an Edenic dream, 'in the night he was the inventor of the world's words [Crow, p.215].'¹⁹

But the multiple play of voices includes Vera Lang's unreliable reporting as gossip columnist for the 'Big Indian Signal'; John Skandl's plans as ironic knight errant; Isador Heck's world view as the-man-shot-from-a-cannon; Old Lady Lang's dark muttering; the yips of Vera's Boy's coyote speech; the crow's black humour; JG's terrible silence; and myopic priest Father Basil's pulpit pronouncement on the cause of such strange happenings in Bigknife:

The world ... lacks sufficient centrifugal force to maintain its roundness ... The world is out of motion. We inhabit a strangled universe ... It's the lack of centrifugal force ... that enables the wolves to range this far south. Like the blue snow. Like my square wheels ... We've got to bust her loose! ... The sprocket wheel of being is jammed ... The bull pinion of existence has jumped the heifer gear of eternity [Crow, pp.52-3].

Although in the inventiveness of its detail, *What the Crow Said* may suggest the combination of strange events, eccentric characters and story-telling capacities often associated with rural communities, it also resists this reductive explanation.

Like García Márquez's *Macondo*, *Bigknife* cannot be neatly confined in time and place because of the self-reflexive emphasis in each text on story-making, the gamesome possibilities of language as both referential and self-delighting, itself a subject for sport, and the elaborate intertextual possibilities that situate these texts in the company of others. As the ordinary (by conventional standards) is made fabulous and the fabulous (by conventional standards) is made ordinary, *What the Crow Said* proceeds against ending, its meanings discoverable in text-reader dialectics shaped by the text's tantalising erotics of limited revelation and the paraphernalia each reader brings to the process. As Barthes suggests, 'the text passes: it is a nomination in the course of becoming, a tireless approximation, a metonymic labor [1974, p.11],' and 'the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving [1975, p.64].'

Characters struggle with meaning: male overreachers flying and plummeting absurdly in their attempts to be 'crow', to see earth from heaven; Liebhaber reenacting some primal fertility rite in firing volleys of Vera's bees into the barren sky, while the female earth and the Lang women perpetuate a life cycle of regenerative possibility. Although the existential meeting of Tiddy, 'with no imagination at all, dreaming the world [Crow, p.216],' and Liebhaber, 'happy. He cannot remember anything [Crow, p.217],' might seem to offer a resolution of oppositions, linear progression and final things are undone by retrospection and the supplement. Amongst so many self-reflexive reminders of the deceptive authority of the printed word and the propensity of writers to play Coyote (Neuman & Wilson, 1982, p.x) is the image of Liebhaber setting type for the 'Big Indian Signal', surrounded by floodwaters that he refuses to mention, referring instead to spring rains and the possibility that 'boating excursions might become a regular Saturday night event along the banks of the Bigknife [Crow, p.204].' The playfulness of this figure turns us back to the text as game, in awareness that, while its uninventing is also recreative, a magical trip in Canadian mythology, it slips away from attempts to pin it down. There is a temptation to read metaphorically, as Kroetsch suggests,¹⁸ to discover and explain meanings - and *What the Crow Said* teases us with significances. But, at the same time, there is much to be said for 'allowing the game to happen' in this erotics of reading where old patterns are interfused with such inventive representations.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Whereas *What the Crow Said* simultaneously invents and univents a rural Alberta in the magic realism of its processes, *Alibi* signals its artifice immediately in the parodic manner of an 'on the road' narration and a mock eighteenth-century arrangement of chapter divisions and headings. As characters and events in the earlier work declare themselves inventions, not reports, by the exuberant language play and the use and subversion of traditional patterns of meaning,¹⁹ Dorf's first-person narrative mixes the appearance of jokey documentary with self-reflexive analyses of language and the uncertain relationship between signifiers and signifieds, words and world. As Karen Strike says in a meta-textual comment

to journal-keeping Dorf: 'You're fascinated. You invent yourself each time you sit down to make an entry, and I feel envy [Alibi, p.61].' Keeping the simple level of erotics warm, she also says 'I'm horny [Alibi, p.43].' Since the text is presented as Dorf's journal reconstructed by Karen Strike, she being responsible for chapter divisions and headings, and, it is implied, for further editing of his notes, questions are foregrounded about authority, responsibility and narrative processes. Reflecting on the blank sheets in his journal-of-a-Dorf year, and on possibilities of publication, Dorf muses: 'Let Karen put in some headings, some chapter titles to trap the unwary eye and lure the customer: she with her gift for compromise [Alibi, p.231].' We know that Karen Strike, documentary filmmaker, fakes the end of her film and, in this novel about a film and a journal and forms of representing or inventing the world, we are as constantly reminded about faking as fucking and the splendid artifice of the notionally real.

Again, there is energy in the anarchic nature of the performance. As Robert Lecker (1984) points out in a very fine article exploring *Alibi* in terms of Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*, the mock-Fielding chapter headings point up not continuities but discontinuity, not order but fragmentation. Lecker (1984, p.93) suggests: 'The individual headings must be seen in deconstructive and ironic lights; they "play" with Dorf's journal which itself is a "play" on the journal form'. The analysis is, I believe, accurate although there is more than a little irony in Henry Fielding's headings; like Karen Strike's insertions, they tempt and tease. Lecker notes the preponderance of *absence* (ah, read 'lack' and 'desire') from Chapter 1: DORF'S PRESENTIMENT (A CHAPTER IN WHICH MUCH IS FORETOLD, BUT -) to Chapter 5: NEGATIVE NO. 1 : AND BREAKFAST AFTER; but he stops short of 6: DORF FINDS A LAUNDROMAT INSTEAD OF A SPA AND IS NEVERTHELESS PLEASED WITH HIS PROGRESS AND CLAIMS TO MAKE REMARKABLE DISCOVERIES ABOUT HIS EMPLOYER AND FINDS HIMSELF ALSO VITALLY ATTRACTED TO THE WOMAN WHO HAS PROMISED HIM AN EARLY DEATH. Estuary in a mink coat folding panties, golden, lime green, sky blue and fire red, 'the left side over the middle, the right side over, the crotch up [Alibi, p.33]' watched by Dorf, that watching watched by us - this textual invitation to a displaced fetishism and voyeurism ... we may refuse!; revelations from a busdriver named Fish; Dorf's developing obsessions with Julie Magnusson encountered in a hot spa in Chapter 2: (OR, IN WHICH DORF CLAIMS TO HAVE GOT LAID) ...

Constituting a compelling textual erotics, both in the zest of their coupling and this teasing deconstruction of documentary realism, the Dorf-Karen Strike play is a complex narrative arrangement reminiscent of the double plays of earlier Kroetsch fiction: Demeter Proudfoot's purported reconstruction of Hazard Lepage's activities in *The Studhouse Man* (1977), the competing narratives of Jeremy Sadness and Professor Mark Madham in *Gone Indian* (1973) and Anna Dawe's mediation of William Dawe's story in *Badlands* (1975). Oral anecdotes, tapes and transcripts, field notes, a journal, and their incorporation and reconstruction in prose narrative. In the varieties of their self-reflexive play upon

notions of source, authenticity, transformation and story-making, these highly entertaining narratives include, as a major part of their attention, an exploration of narrative processes, and of re-inventing while un-inventing the world. Subversive of conventions, including the text-reader contracts of descriptive realism, they invite reconsideration of language as an instrument of entertainment as well as a duplicitous medium of understanding. Dorf's idiosyncratic voice is another in a succession of Kroetsch 'hellers', but these 'hellers' are also pretty smart cookies, interesting not only for the energy of their hell-raising but for its freedom-seeking in face of the claustrophobia of traditional history and narrative realism.

As in *What the Crow Said*, desire and uncertainty, played between characters in the text and between the text and the reader, characterise the fabrications of *Alibi* too.

Yesterday was my birthday. I was forty-six; I decided, yes, I'm going to keep a journal. I'm going to love two women, I'm going to tell the truth. Life is unendurable. The trouble is, I enjoy it! [p.39].

Dealing with the uncertainties of understanding, recording, sexual relationships, truth, life's random possibilities - design and intervention, motivations and connections, chance or pattern - Dorf (mock Hamlet - his name means 'hamlet' in German), extraordinary collector, lover and journal keeper, is another odd quest figure whose search is for meaning and significance, as in the best traditions. Complicated by radical uncertainties about purpose, particularly the absence of God-figure Deemer imagined 'there, alone at night, in the four corners of his warehoused universe, acting out reality [*Alibi*, p.109]' and ambiguous helpers (bewitching Julie Magnusson, Manny de Medeiros and the athleticism of their *ménages-à-trois* with Dorf), and crossed by such distractions as Estuary's panties or Dorf's underwear fetishism, primal experiences in black mud, and more and more stories, the search (like the text) implicitly declares that it be read for its parts not for resolution. In a world devoid of God, in a text just devoid of Deemer, in the simultaneous promise but absence of finalities, in a postmodernist literature beset by 'différance', it is in the energy of parts and their provisionality itself that meanings beckon. 'Approach and avoid [Pynchon, 1975, p.55],' as Pynchon's Stencil says. In the words of *Gravity's Rainbow*, we 'must go on blundering inside our front-brain faith in Kute Korrespondences [Pynchon, 1973, p.590],' making connections but (hopefully) not losing delight in parts for want of the design. In comments neatly self-reflexive of the beguiling text, Karen Strike tells Dorf 'You're remarkable. You work in circles, in tangents, in loops, in triangles', adding 'But you always get to the centre [*Alibi*, p.99].' Not *the* centre, as the text's circuitry shows, but then, pleasures of the periphery may, in the manner of Derrida's close reading practice, displace or decentre the centre. Dorf notes, 'It's a plotted world we live in [*Alibi*, p.97].' It is, the text is, and caught in the erotics of reading practice, writerly readers connive willingly enough in that plotting.

Why a spa? Why should Dorf be searching for a spa for Deemer?

'He's getting old, that's it, isn't it?' says Dorf. 'He's old and he can't get it up; he wants to get it up and he has half of us, all of us, goddammit, wearing ourselves out, killing ourselves, trying to find a goddammed spa that will give him back his stiff prick [*Alibi*, pp.125-6].

Ah, ... the phallogocentric obsession! Dorf, sexual signifier: Dorf, mock Freudian. The text makes concessions, and not only via spa specialist de Medeiros, to 'acceptance of desire [*Alibi*, p.125].' Beyond the explicitly sexual, spa and desire are linked with source and regeneration: 'we all ... desire our way back to the source of all desire, the sun itself [*Alibi*, p.137].' A confluence of the two, concessions to sexuality as a source and to communication as the way to meanings, is represented in Dorf's observation, 'To touch is to talk ... Intimacy is, finally, an intimacy of telling. Therefore we must be together [*Alibi*, p.136].' Person and person, text and reader, sexuality and textuality.

Linking the ways of sexuality and creativity, sex and text within a framework of search and returns, *Alibi* might express scepticism about the availability of final answers but, like Kroetsch's earlier fiction, it also presents a deconstructive erotics of signification which calls for participation in discourse.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The following exchange occurs in the middle of Barth's (1977) 'Dunyazadiad':

'Making love and telling stories both take more than good technique - but it's only the technique we can talk about'.

The Genie agreed: 'Heartfelt ineptitude has its appeal, Dunyazade; so does heartless skill.

But what you want is passionate virtuosity [pp.23-4].'

In an excellent essay on recent Canadian fiction, George Bowering (1985) suggests 'art speaks to the listeners of art. You do not have to spend a lifetime of winters with snow up to your buttocks to understand Canadian books [p.51].'²⁰

There is a great deal of passionate virtuosity in Canadian fiction and, as I have argued in this paper, this virtuosity opens the way to uninventing Canadiana, to subjecting text-book closures to deconstructive shakings which invite readers (as writerly co-explorers) to the fray.

This is not necessarily to lift one's head clear out of the snow-bound ways (for Australians the bush-bound) of local realism in its historical moments as the supposed definitive article of national identity. It does not deny the history of these 'histories', the heritage, but it shall, it does - as the fiction of Robert Kroetsch and others²¹ indicate - involve rehearing the plainsong as a multitude of voices. If an erotics of reading practice depends upon the tantalising striptease of uncertainty and incompleteness then the new futures of Canadian writing seem not only enticing but vigorous with the promise of companionable possibility.

Notes

1. 'Silence' is an evocative and elusive metaphor in Kroetsch's writings. It is variously associated with the Canadian landscape, the idea of return to a source out of which sound then comes, and with a gap or potential that can be (partly) filled by writing. The idea recurs in discussions in Neuman and Wilson (1982).
2. Aristophanes, *The Frogs*. Dionysus' weighing of the 'dead' poets' works (Aeschylus and Euripides) is a revaluation, part in seriousness, part in jest.
3. Orpheus seeks Eurydice in Hades, charming Persephone with his music, persuading her to release Eurydice. But the bringing-back-out-of does not succeed.
4. See Homer (1962), *The Odyssey*, Book X.
5. See Virgil (1956), *The Aeneid*, Book VI.
6. These later examples do not, of course, involve treks into the underworld. They do involve a variety of journeys into history, or the past, in either a literal or metaphoric sense.
7. The question of influence has been addressed by writers in different ways and with different conclusions. Eliot (1919) provides a positive view of tradition, whereas Barth (1967) and Bloom (1973) provide accounts of the difficulties for some writers aware of their strong predecessors.
8. See Hutcheon (1984), pp. 33, 85. She points to the 'essentially erotic' relationship between text and reader, with texts 'seducing' readers. A more detailed and discursive consideration is provided by Barthes (1975).
9. 'Trace' and 'supplement' are central concepts in Derrida's deconstructive writings. See Derrida (1974). While 'trace' might be used archaeologically, Derrida refers to it in specifically linguistic terms.
10. All subsequent references are to this edition and page numbers will be given with *Crow* in the text.
11. All subsequent references are to this edition and page numbers will be given with *Alibi* in the text.
12. See Barth (1980b). The essay is a concentration on postmodernism; Barth decides, in retrospect, that the 'Exhaustion' essay was on the aesthetic of high modernism.
13. In *Lost in the Funhouse* and *Chimera*, Barth returns to classical sources to 're-tell' them in new and inventive ways; in *Letters* there is the heightened audacity of Barth recycling as it partly concerns a replay of his earlier works of fiction - including the four which precede *Lost in the Funhouse*.
14. See Suleiman & Crosman (1980) and Tompkins (1980).
15. Barthes (1975) distinguishes between 'pleasure' and 'bliss' in terms, basically, of contentment on the one hand and disorientation and excitement on the other.
16. I am using the term in Barthes' (1974) sense where he distinguishes the 'writerly' text as open and inviting work from the 'readerly' text as closed and less 'inviting'. But,

following Derrida and Barthes' own deconstructive practice, all texts may be seen as, more or less, writerly.

17. See Edwards (1987).
18. Neuman and Wilson (1982) p.15. The discussion turns upon distinctions between metaphor (as a fixed displacement or substitution) and metonymy (as more flexible and open-ended).
19. I am thinking of Kroetsch's deployment of ideas of natural cycle and standard binary oppositions (with their baggage) such as male/female, nature/culture, order/chaos.
20. In this essay, Bowering discusses Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* and Kroetsch's fiction as examples of a movement against the restrictiveness of conventional notions of history. It is a postmodernist enterprise to which his own fiction also contributes.
21. I have writers such as George Bowering, Timothy Findley, Jack Hodgins and Michael Ondaatje in mind.

References

- Aristophanes, 1964 *The Frogs*. Trans. David Barrett. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Barth, John 1967 'The Literature of Exhaustion', *Atlantic Monthly*, 220, No. 2 (August).
- Barth, John 1968 *Lost in the Funhouse*. New York: Doubleday.
- Barth, John 1977 *Chimera*. London: Quartet Books.
- Barth, John 1980a *Letters*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- Barth, John 1980b 'The Literature of Replenishment', *Atlantic* (January).
- Barthes, R. 1974 *S/Z*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill & Wang.
- Barthes, R. 1975 *The Pleasure of the Text*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill & Wang.
- Bloom, H. 1973 *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bowering, George 1980 *Burning Water*. Toronto: General Publishing.
- Bowering, George 1985 'A Great Northward Darkness: The Attack on History in Recent Canadian Fiction', *Cine*, No. 5 (Spring).
- Cervantes, M. 1949 *Don Quixote*. Trans. Samuel Putman. New York: Viking Press.
- Derrida, J. 1976 *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Ballimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Edwards, B. 1987 'Novelist as Trickster: The Magical Presence of Gabriel García Márquez in Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*', *Essays on Canadian Writing*, No. 34 (Spring).
- Eliot, T.S. 1919 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in F. Kermode (Ed.), *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. London: Faber, 1975.

brian edwards

- Findley, Timothy 1982 *Famous Last Words*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. 1976 *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Harper & Row.
- García Márquez, Gabriel 1970 *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Trans. Gregory Rubassa. London: Cape.
- Hancock, G. 1977 'An Interview with Robert Kroetsch', *Canadian Fiction Magazine* (Spring/Summer).
- Homer 1962 *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. London: Heinemann.
- Hutcheon, L. 1984 *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. London: Methuen.
- Kroetsch, Robert 1973 *Gone Indian*. Toronto: New Press.
- Kroetsch, Robert 1975 *Badlands*. Toronto: New Press.
- Kroetsch, Robert 1977 *The Studhorse Man*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Kroetsch, Robert 1978 *What the Crow Said*. Don Mills: General Publishing.
- Kroetsch, Robert 1983a *Alibi*. Don Mills: General Publishing.
- Kroetsch, Robert 1983b 'On Being An Alberta Writer', *Open Letter*, Fifth Series, No. 4 (Spring).
- Kroetsch, Robert 1983c 'Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction', *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, III, 3, 1974; reprinted in *Open Letter*, (Spring).
- Lecker, R. 1984 'Con/Texts of Desire: Robert Kroetsch's *Alibi*', *Open Letter*, Fifth Series, Nos. 8-9 (Summer-Fall).
- Neuman, S. & R. Wilson 1982 *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch*. Edmonton: NeWest Press.
- Pynchon, T. 1973 *Gravity's Rainbow*. London: Picador.
- Pynchon, T. 1975 *V.* London: Picador.
- Suleiman, Susan R. & I. Crosman (Eds.) 1980 *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tompkins, J., (Ed.) 1980 *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. Ballimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Virgil 1956 *The Aeneid*. Trans. W.F. Jackson Knight. Harmondsworth: Penguin.