

HOW THE POSTMODERN SHOULD REALLY HAVE BEEN EXPLAINED: A CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT KROETSCH

By Georgia Simone Fakiolas

ON TRADITION

GSF: *In “Unhiding the Hidden” you talk about un-naming as a sort of deconstructive or demystifying process. So I’d like to begin, if you’ll allow me, by un-naming the significance of your own name, “Robert Kroetsch.” Hutcheon has called you “Mr. Canadian Postmodern” and you’re also referred to as the “Father” of Canadian Postmodernism. It seems you have attained iconic status—but “iconic” is just one letter away from “ironic.” Is there a certain irony in the fact that your work is associated with the foundation of a specific theory and poetics of identity? In other words, were you hoping to start a new tradition in your refusal to blindly accept traditions and literary metanarrative—and narratives about Canadian identity?*

RK: Well, I like your play between iconic and ironic. The *eirōn* in Greek drama was [. . .] in a kind of battle between two forces, wasn’t he? And I hear a battle going on between two forces in my own experience and in theory. In my own life, I’m kind of a private, withdrawn person, and yet I have to—and want to—play a public role. So you have this kind of war within yourself that seems pretty strange at times. And then, in terms of theory, I want to change the tradition but continue the tradition. So I’m at war there too.

GSF: *Are you referring to British and American literary traditions, or just to creat[ing] a new act, or a new way of writing in Canada we could bring to future generations?*

RK: Well, I think a new way is necessary because our experience is so new and our geography is so new. And at the same time, we are writing poetry. The word “poetry” includes British and American traditions, and many others. That’s why I say I’m in kind of an *eirōn* position—I’m resisting the tradition but I need the tradition!

GSF: *On the one hand, you’re rejecting things that have already been formed. But on the other hand, I think you need to have a knowledge of, for example, the literary canon or different types of poetry. You need to have that formal education. Do you think that’s necessary now?*

RK: I do. Like you, I spent years studying, I spent years as a graduate student...in fact, I would have gone on being a graduate student forever if I had been allowed.

GSF: *Like Jeremy Sadness!*

RK: [Laughter] That’s right. But I want to learn that tradition, I have to know it. People like Keats are important in my thinking about poetry...Chaucer...but I also want to make it new, somehow or another. Because for us, we *have* to make it new. We have to retell a love story, or whatever.

GSF: *It's almost as if we're now talking about childhood and a certain innocence before structure comes into ... play. Do you think that's what poetry can do?*

RK: So much of our belief about poetry goes to the transcendental—to the overriding, overarching platonic or Christian whatever—but really, the truth is, it comes from babble. We start out making sounds as little children—and slowly, or very rapidly, actually—we develop senses and meanings of words, and finally, poetry.

GSF: *Why do you think that so many people find poetry more difficult to decipher than fiction?*

RK: Well, partly because we have this notion—the “hidden meaning”—that intimidates readers. They feel stupid reading it! [laughter]. And poetry doesn't intend to do that. It's the other way around. Poetry is helping you discover that babble world, not the transcendental one, “Meaning.” So just playing with sounds, watching a child learn language, is an intriguing experience because they're all on their way to becoming poets in a way!

GSF: *It's true. And it almost seems that we should develop a new approach to reading poetry, instead of looking to decipher and find that kernel of meaning. Maybe look at the way that play is occurring...*

RK: That's just right on. You have to let poetry be sophisticated play.

ON IDENTITY

GSF: *You demonstrate that there's a strong relationship between postmodern poetics and oral tradition, especially in prairie writing. And you've said in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, “[t]he great subtext of prairie literature is our oral tradition.”² Now, I think Johnnie Backstrom in *The Words of my Roaring* sort of epitomizes this desire to rhetorically create one's universe—to produce something like a verbal “rain,” or a logorrhea, in a world characterized by lack (lack of food, lack of crops, lack of rain). Is there, in your opinion, more of a need for spontaneous, paratactic, “in the moment” self-fashioning on the prairies than there is elsewhere in Canada? And if so, [. . .] is it still the case today?*

RK: It was the case in my formative years because there was no literature about us—no films, no TV programs—none of those things that help you visualize yourself. So the oral tradition was one place where we created ourselves. And the oral tradition is in many ways postmodern. It works in fragments, and unlikely jumps, and word association, and so on. Now, its situation on the prairies was more extreme, because we were cut off from the East by the Precambrian Shield, and we were cut off historically because of the Great Depression and so on, because it was so

² Robert Kroetsch, “The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues,” *The Lovely Treachery of Words* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1989) 6.

extreme there. We were a place of many languages because of the immigrants who were speaking all kinds of languages, and language itself was quite fluid in that sense.

GSF: *Are you referring to Eastern European settlers?*

RK: Eastern European—mostly Eastern European, but the Native people were still speaking their languages. There were a lot of languages floating around, in a way. Now, that's changed in your generation [. . .] there was so much silence when I was there, in a certain way. The only thing that broke the silence was the oral tradition.

GSF: *Storytelling.*

RK: Storytelling, and bullshitting, and things like that, you know? And now we have such an active scene of young writers and film makers and TV producers.

GSF: *And you've written a bit on minority writing. What role do you think that non-native (and by that I mean non-Canadian-born, or immigrant) experiences play, specifically in prairie writing, but also in Canadian writing generally? Because now there are new "voices" in the beer parlour—there's new stories, perspectives, accents, languages. And you've put forth what strikes me as a radical idea in "The Grammar of Silence"...the idea that there is a "narrative of ethnicity" (and for "ethnicity" I also read "immigrant" or "minority"), and that this narrative is essentially one of death and rebirth—"the death out of one culture, with the hope that it will lead to rebirth in another." My question is: Can this model of the "ethnic narrative"—the death and rebirth—also allow for a more dialogical relationship between ancestral and adopted cultures, where the former uncannily haunts and redefines the latter?*

RK: Well, I think the minority experience has changed in the last couple of decades. The 747 makes it possible for you to go back, whereas when my ancestors came in the 19th century, it was a one-way trip. Nobody was going to go back; there was no way to go back, you didn't have the money, or there was no leads available. And then Internet has changed it too, where you can talk to people on a daily basis. But I still think you're going through a kind of death-rebirth thing, but it's...it's for your generation to describe it, not for me to describe it. It's a different, much more complex experience, in a way.

GSF: *There's this constant presence of the absent motherland or fatherland [. . .] this constant communication with those groups—relatives coming to visit, going back for the summer, e-mailing, sending letters, speaking over the phone—and also just the constant presence of wanting to maintain one's heritage in a country that claims to be a mosaic rather than a melting pot.*

RK: [. . .] Where is home for these people?

GSF: *I think one view is that home will remain that, you know, mythologized, romanticized motherland or fatherland, and that it's always going to be superior to where we are now. [. . .] And then the other view of home is not necessarily the American view, where you cut off all ties and make America home, but it's that sort of non-geographical community that exists within the*

diaspora. I think that's maybe one way of defining home. I don't know if you maybe agree with that...

RK: Well, I'm interested because in my generation, we didn't have much travel; we had no internet, no telephones, no long-distance calls. Home for me was a very geographical place—it was a farm in Alberta. It was really a little community. That was my home. And it still is in a way; I've been homeless ever since I left, in a curious way. But I think for you, the notion of home is so complicated. You don't feel homeless; you seem very at home in the world!

GSF: *I'm going to quote from a novel by Gabrielle Roy: "home is an elastic word." When you move a lot, it becomes an elastic word. It means many geographical places, but also many notions of place and space.*

RK: See, I think postmodern came out of a sense of not-at-homeness.

GSF: *In modernity?*

RK: Yeah. [. . .] And for that period that we call postmodern, that not-at-homeness was very central to our experience. I think for your generation, that's why we need a new word. You've redefined "home."

GSF: *Have we succeeded in the task of the postmodernists, in that way?*

RK: No!

GSF: *OK. [Laughter] Too ambitious?*

RK: It was too ambitious. I think the postmodern is kind of giving up. Guess I'll say that. But I *feel* that. I think postmodern...well, a lot of it has been absorbed into the culture. But a lot of it is just kind of a surrender, finally. But I think a very positive response is coming out of it; at this conference, it's been interesting to hear that attempt at renaming our experience.

GSF: *You were saying postmodernism comes out of a "not feeling at home" in modernity [. . .] and there seems to be now this sense of acceptance with that which is unfamiliar, unhomey, uncanny. I think we're at a point where we're used to the perpetual haunting.*

RK: Right on, right on. We *like* it.

GSF: *We like it?*

RK: Even *I* like it right now; I've become a convert. [Laughter]

GSF: *Do you think we've become almost too comfortable with this play of signifiers, and never being settled in anything?*

RK: Well, that's a question for you to answer. What do you think? You think it's become too comfortable?

GSF: *I don't know. I think one outcome, a negative outcome—the Jamesonian outcome!—would be that we end up in a material world where we cannot distinguish that which is real from that which is commercially packaged. And we learn the alphabet through brand names. And then perhaps the other way is just where we're overly aware of the constructedness and the arbitrary nature of everything, and we're hyper-conscious of that, and maybe that's where freeplay can come into...place.*

RK: Well, in postmodernism, we argue that we construct meaning, and—we can hoist [with] our own petard here—we are really in a world that's constructed. And it's very hard to say...maybe it's even irrelevant to ask now whether there's a real world.

GSF: *Perhaps.*

RK: Because it's all just a—I won't say *charade*, but...[laughter]

GSF: *So in a sense are we're decentring God?*

RK: Oh, very much so.

GSF: *Not removing but decentring.*

RK: Yeah, that's right.

ON GEOGRAPHY

GSF: *Now, I asked about the prairies, I suppose, because it seems to me that when you grow up in that particular part of the country with that particular type of geography, your experience is very visually informed. I mean, I grew up in an urban context, but I never felt this intense connection with my environment to the extent, I think, you do in the prairies.*

RK: Ok. No, I felt just incredibly connected to my environment. Especially being on a farm, where you have the four seasons [. . .] this sense of planting and being in the dirt [. . .] going out hunting or whatever—shoot gophers. For you, I suppose reality was more what they call “virtual reality.”

GSF: *Yes. Especially in an urban context.*

RK: Yeah. I think that's a big difference. I don't know how at home I am in the city. I've spent most of my life in the city but I think I'm homeless in the city, in a certain way. I still write about the country.

GSF: *Well, this is the case for so many writers, regional writers...there's always this push and pull between home and having to leave home in order to write about it.*

RK: That's good, yeah. And I mean, I like the urban world, I enjoy bookstores and coffee shops, and theatres and so on, and people...but I still have this longing I guess, which I fight.

GSF: *So I guess the experience of living on the prairies and leaving is not so much unlike that of the immigrant who sort of leaves...it seems we're back to that place!*

RK: That's right! I think in North America we keep migrating. That's how we make that crossing from the Atlantic or now the Pacific...we kind of like the experience. Promise, hope, illusion...so we have to keep re-reading our landscapes.

GSF: *Re-reading—what do you mean by that?*

RK: Well, I think the prairie, it went through a period of nostalgia...Grove was an example. Now we have to distrust our own memories of “was it really like that?”

GSF: *Avoid the romanticizing and the mythologizing.*

RK: ‘Cause you raised that question, am I a romantic, here, at one point. And of course I would say ferociously, NO! [Laughter]

GSF: *Yesterday, in one of the panels, we were talking about geography and geographical determinism. Alexander Macleod, who presented, argues that in [Wayne] Johnston, there's a postmodern treatment of time at the expense of a postmodern treatment of geography. He argues (and he's drawing on Edward Soja) that history can be treated, for example, in different historiographies—you know, one narrative versus another narrative, and therefore the dominant one being subverted. However, the rock is always the rock, the ocean is always the ocean, and it will determine experience and it will determine identity. And so I'm wondering now, when we talk about the prairies or any region in Canada in writing, is there a way to talk about these regions and their way of shaping identity without being geographically deterministic?*

RK: Well for me, it was geographically deterministic in a way, because it was so important in my life, including the isolation and so on. But now I think it's up for grabs, isn't it?

GSF: *Up for grabs?*

RK: You can do with it what you like, in a certain way. You can be visiting as a tourist, might suddenly be driving from Winnipeg to Calgary. Well, you know more about this than I do: what is urban geography?

GSF: *Well, that's a relatively new concept. I'm not an expert on it, but I think it refers to the experience of place in the city. I know that de Certeau writes a little bit about the experience of moving and navigating the city streets.*

RK: OK, so what how does the space-time relationship develop in the city?

GSF: *In the city? It seems almost as if the space in the city is more conducive to being fragmented and to being represented—experienced in a postmodern way, in a way that’s not consistent, not coherent with a single experience, and very much fragmented, and that it almost fragments the individual body (one minute I’m cycling and then I’m walking there; one minute I’m wearing a business suit and the next I’m in bicycle shorts)*

RK: Geography interests me. You see, we can take a text now and re-read it, in a way [. . .] ‘Cause there are assumptions working in a text written at a certain period, and then we read the assumptions later on.

GSF: *We turn them around. Do you think there’s a lot of regional writing that subverts the myths associated with space and with landscape?*

RK: Oh, I think so. We’re a very urban population in a way.

GSF: *Canadians are?*

RK: Yeah. And moving around—the moving around you described about Montreal on your bicycle or on the subway wearing your suit of whatever—you have to have poetry of the city.

GSF: Poetry of the city? Why do you use the word “poetry?”

RK: Well, you have to have the intensity of poetry, and I think urban life is language-based in a different way than it is in the country. You speak a different language in the city.

GSF: *What does that language sound like, vis-à-vis the language of the country or the prairies?*

RK: Well, in the country, you’re still using the old mythology in the sense of the seasons. Your language is about landscape and about long periods of time. When you get to the city (this is interesting, isn’t it?) you have to speak a different language. Maybe that’s why I was uneasy in the city!

GSF: *Maybe that’s why I was uneasy in the prairies! [laughs]*

CODA—ON LOVE

RK: What is the love story after postmodern, or even *in* postmodern?

GSF: *What is the love story?*

RK: Yeah. Because the love story has such a metanarrative. You know, you look at each other, and fall in love, and get married and live happily ever after. Whereas you read the newspaper and find out that half the marriages—

RK & GSF [in unison]: end in divorce!

RK: But it's more than that. It's like the kind of love life that you would live as a young person in this psychological city. Is love possible even?

GSF: *Well, the thing is, I think now we're in a postmodern, deconstructive mode. Certainly those of us who've been educated in the humanities are, whether we know the term or not. And now that we look back, when we analyze things like marriage and even romantic love, I don't think we even believe in the transcendental thing—we're looking at it in terms of "oh well, it was an economical arrangement and the woman had to, and the man had to, and they had to procreate et cetera..." so it makes us wonder, "well, was there a core at the heart of that?"*

RK: Because even, we love our children, but we love them for animal reasons—keeping them alive and making the generation survive into the next. [. . .] Those are primal things, yes. But romantic love... Is it there? Is the emperor wearing any clothes?

GSF: *Well, much as we want to deconstruct love and to subvert notions of romantic love, the truth of the matter is, it's still happening...and we're still writing about it.*

RK: Oh, we're still attracted to each other, in very powerful ways in our culture, which for obvious reasons encourages it as we want to reproduce the species. But maybe we need new... new stories?

GSF: *A new grammar of love, so to speak?*

RK: Yeah. That's right. That's a great place to stop. Let's stop right there.

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