

Strange Plantings: Robert Kroetsch's Seed Catalogue

Wanda Campbell

Volume 21, numéro 1, winter 1996

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl21_1art02

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)
1718-7850 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Campbell, W. (1996). Strange Plantings: Robert Kroetsch's Seed Catalogue. *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 21(1), 17–36.

Résumé de l'article

While much has been made of Robert Kroetsch's use in his poetry of an archaeological model derived from sources including Heidegger, Williams, Olson, and Foucault, in his long poem *Seed Catalogue*, the poet makes use of a horticultural model. A close reading of *Seed Catalogue* reveals the poem's central question -- "How do do you grow a poet?" -- serving as a guide to Kroetsch's workings through his own genesis as a prairie writer in a literary landscape dominated by fiction. *Seed Catalogue's* hybrid form is evidence of the beginnings (or seeds) of, the numerous models for, and the various methodologies employed in the service of such development.

STRANGE PLANTINGS: ROBERT KROETSCH'S *SEED CATALOGUE*

Wanda Campbell

My poem *Seed Catalogue* is about a prairie garden. I actually used the McKenzie Seed Catalogue from McKenzie Seeds in Brandon. This was part of my effort to locate the poem in a particular place and then I expanded the poem outward to whatever other models I wanted—the garden of Eden or whatever—so that I could get all those garden echoes working together. We have an experience of particular garden here. There are certain kinds of things we can grow and certain things we can't grow. The garden gives us shape.

(Robert Kroetsch qtd. in MacKinnon 15)

It is my impression that *all* parts of speech suddenly, in composition by field, are fresh for both sound and percussive use, spring up like unknown, unnamed vegetables in the patch, when you work it, come spring.

(Charles Olson, "Projective Verse" 21)

Much has been made of Robert Kroetsch's use of an archaeological model derived from a variety of sources including Martin Heidegger, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, and Michel Foucault, but, in his long poem *Seed Catalogue* at least, Kroetsch makes use of what might be called a horticultural model. As Robert Lecker points out, Kroetsch "continues to wrestle with tradition and innovation" (123) in his poetry. The patterns that grow out of the poem are not merely accidental unearthings on the part of the reader, but the result of intentional plantings on the part of the writer. Influenced by Olson's emphasis on *process* and *kinetics*, Kroetsch seeks a form that emerges directly out of the content rather than one that is artificially imposed, and yet he manages to write "a long work that has some kind of (under erasure) unity," ("For Play

and Entrance," *LTW* 118). He does so by adopting as his central metaphor the seed, which signifies both intentionality and surprise, flight and ground.

As Kroetsch himself suggests, the central model for *Seed Catalogue* is the Garden of Eden, which informs the text from the opening descriptions of planting to the final riddle. The Garden for Kroetsch becomes a kind a sacred middle ground between the male field and the female house, the most fertile ground for the growth of the poet which is the central subject of the poem. The plantings are "strange" and the harvest unexpected, but there is no doubt that a gardener has been at work.

Despite his "distrust of system, of grid, of monisms, of cosmologies perhaps . . ." ("For Play and Entrance" *LTW* 118), Kroetsch writes that he was "much and directly influenced" by *The Secular Scripture* ("Learning the Hero from Northrop Frye" *LTW* 160). He also expresses enthusiasm for Carl Jung; "He is something of a goldmine, especially his works on alchemy" (*LV* 104). In *Psychology and Alchemy*, Jung summarizes the attractions of the horticultural model:

That we are bound to the earth does not mean that we cannot grow; on the contrary it is the *sine qua non* of growth. No noble, well-grown tree ever disowned its dark roots, for it grows not only upward but downward as well. (110)

The energy of Kroetsch's long poem *Seed Catalogue* emerges from the tension between this downward and upward movement, between the seed full of explosive potential and the careful containment of the catalogue (Greek *kata* down + *legein* to select). The "notes" of Kroetsch's poem are not simply the jottings of the archaeologist, or "finding man," but those of a composition that is more carefully orchestrated than we have been led to believe.

The implications of the metaphor of the seed are manifold. By emphasizing "the kind of unwritten poem implicit in the seed" (Marshall 44), Kroetsch carries the image beyond the traditional associations, an enterprise for which he finds a model in the poetry of William Carlos Williams, who refers early in his long poem *Paterson* to "[t]he multiple seed, / packed tight with detail, soured, / . . . lost in the flux and the mind . . ." (12). Kroetsch expands upon his understanding of Williams's use of the image of the seed:

Again it's so different from the metaphoric use of seed that we have, say, in the Bible. I think we are seeing the seed in quite

a different way now as poets. Partly because we resist . . . we resist metaphor. Why the hell use it metaphorically when the-thing-itself is so interesting. (Marshall 25)

The image of the seed is especially attractive to Kroetsch because of its dual potential for upward and downward movement, a “double vision” ingrained in Kroetsch’s imagination during his childhood in Heisler which, as a farming and a mining community, provided both surface and underworld metaphors (MacKinnon 3-4).

Just as the structure of *The Ledger* was determined by an actual ledger kept by Kroetsch’s grandfather and presented to him by his Aunt Mary O’Conner, the particular structure of *Seed Catalogue* was suggested by the document named in the title. Kroetsch reveals that the similarity between the two poems might well have been more pronounced had he not forgotten his notes in Winnipeg when he set about writing the poem (Cooley 25). Responding to a 1917 seed catalogue he found in the Glenbow archives, Kroetsch set about writing a poem that would bring together “the oral tradition and the myth of origins” (“On Being An Alberta Writer” 76), and provide a poetic equivalent to the ‘speech’ of a seed catalogue, which for Kroetsch was not just a random document: “When my mother died I became the family gardener. . . . When I found that seed catalogue my whole self was vulnerable and exposed” (Marshall 50). He reveals that self through a tale of origins expressed, not as chronological autobiography, but as synchronous garden.

Seed — *The ovules of a plant when preserved for the purpose of propagating a new crop.*

Seed Catalogue begins abruptly with a listing from the catalogue for “Copenhagen Market Cabbage” complete with catalogue number. Pamela Banting expresses regret that even those critics most sensitive to textual nuance tend to “privilege the Kroetsch-written sections” over the subtext (qtd. in Brown *Long-liners* 290). The passages from the catalogue merit careful attention, both for what they say and do not say. According to Russell Brown, the lesson implicit in the opening lines of *Seed Catalogue* is that “from the apparently innocent, ‘documentary,’ past we may inherit imported meaning and ways of seeing” (“Seeds and Stones” 158). A cabbage bearing the name of Denmark’s capital is “introduced” into a prairie garden, bringing with it a history and a pedigree. Both the cabbage itself and the language that describes it are in-

herited stories, and throughout his writing, Kroetsch expresses a skepticism about history.

The fact that this peculiar landscape demands new ways of seeing is imaged in the storm windows which are removed from the house and placed on the hotbed. The same windows offer two ways to defeat the weather, keeping the "flurry" of snow out, and keeping the "flurry" of growth in. Like lenses, the windows provide the double vision necessary to cope with the prairie's unpredictable climate: the palimpsestic notion of "under erasure" to which Kroetsch refers in "For Play and Entrance" (LTW 118), also operates: spring is discarded but still faintly visible. In the original Turnstone edition of *Seed Catalogue*, the text of the poem is printed over a palimpsest of actual pages from a seed catalogue, an effect which visually reinforces Kroetsch's intertextual technique. Dominated by the extremes of "January snow" and "summer sun," prairie weather does not offer the temperate transition of spring that is so central to the poetic tradition elsewhere in the world. The absence of spring draws attention to the need for a new mythology to interpret a new landscape.

Following directly upon the heels of the poet's rearticulation of the climate is a letter of response to the producers of the seed catalogue. The inherited vocabulary and cheerful hyperbole of W.W. Lyon's letter resembles the text of the catalogue but stands in sharp contrast to the poet's efforts to be accurate about his environment. The literary formality of the letter, despite the demotic "Cabbage were dandy," also contrasts with the genuine orality of the mother's voice: "Did you wash your ears? / You could grow cabbages / in those ears" (I.17-19). Her assertion at first appears as exaggerated as those of Lyon, but as the poem develops it becomes clear that the young poet's ears are, after all, a garden in which language (both imported and indigenous) is taking root. Kroetsch often refers to his early initiation into the oral culture of the prairies through a multitude of voices ranging from relatives to hired men. He is able to distinguish between the various voices that enter his poem by using a flexible left-hand margin, a technique he learned from Williams and Stevens, and which, according to Kroetsch, reflects the space and silence of the prairies (Cooley 27).

The poet's fall from the horse in the opening section is central to the imagery of the poem in two major ways. First, it establishes the position of the poet in relation to the dominant myths of prairie life and, second, it foreshadows a fall from innocence. The stage is set: "We were harrowing the garden" (I.22). Harrowing, of

course, means the ploughing or loosening of the ground with a farm implement equipped with discs or hooks, but it can also mean "to distress greatly" (*OED*). Since the previous passage establishes the poet's ears as a garden of sorts, the ridicule that follows his fall from the horse may well be a torment to him. According to Kroetsch, the horse in the prairie dialectic signifies the male myth, a designation that corresponds to the traditional associations of the mounted knight, a posture which he himself failed to achieve. So, the young poet falls from the male world of the horse into the ambiguous garden where his mother invites his participation in the acts of creation and naming. Kroetsch re-articulates the fall from grace into nature as a fall into language and "ground." As the hired man points out, "the horse was standing still" (I.32). For the poet, the horse is standing still—the romantic tradition of the male as hero has ground to a halt. But the horse is *still* standing; the male tradition and the tall tales which celebrate it are still available to the poet as fuel for his imagination. Unlike Pete Knight, "the Broncbusting Champion of the World," who falls off a horse into death, the young poet falls off a horse into life, to be rooted in the garden of new possibilities: "Cover him up and see what grows" (I.51).

Much as the mother's gentle whisper intersects the boisterous commentary of the hired man, the blooming of the seed catalogue intersects the winter in which it arrives. Remembering a future season through the magic of language, the catalogue is "a winter proposition" (I.35)—a scheme, an invitation, a truth to be demonstrated. The seed catalogue is itself a kind of tall tale, insisting that "McKenzie's Improved Golden Wax Bean" is "THE MOST PRIZED OF ALL BEANS" (I.38-39). Kroetsch works to undermine this hyperbole through a rhyme which substitutes "virtue" for "toot," thus suggesting that such a notion is the mere passing of wind.

The mother, meanwhile, is ordering her corner of the world with binder twine. Later, it is upon sacks in which binder twine is shipped that the poet and Germaine become "like/one" (III.39). The female presence is binding up the distances and binding up the wounds. In contrast, the father's tools for ordering his world are fenceposts and barbed wire, items to keep things in and out. He is confused by the gentle intimacy of the garden world, "puzzled / by any garden that was smaller than a / quarter-section of wheat and summerfallow" (I.52-54). He commands a home place defined by the points of the compass and surveyor's math: "N.E. 17-42-16-w4th Meridian" (I.55), a place where both absence and presence are defined by extremes.

No trees
 around the house.
 Only the wind.
 Only the January snow.
 Only the summer sun.
 The home place:
 a terrible symmetry. (I.59-65)

However, even in this brief passage describing the prairie as a place of absence, we find allusions to two poetic models, one indigenous and one imported. "Only the wind" echoes the closing lines of Anne Marriott's *The Wind Our Enemy*, a poem about the prairies in which the appearance of absence is revealed to be a powerful source of presence. The phrase "a terrible symmetry" echoes Blake's (and Frye's) "fearful symmetry": the prairie landscape may appear always as "tyger" and never as "lamb," but even the tyger is a result of the creative act, the framing hand, the speaking word. Even absence provides a kind of symmetry. "Even abandonment gives us memory" ("On Being An Alberta Writer" 71). It is in this context that Kroetsch introduces the first of the questions about growth that echo through the poem as a kind of refrain: "How do you grow a gardener?" (I.66) The catalogue of garden varieties that follows reminds the reader that the poet is not only referring to the actual gardener, but also to the poet himself who, like Adam, was both gardener and namer. Listed without context, the names of the various vegetables take on a music of their own. According to Olson, from whom Kroetsch learned some of his poetic craft, "words juxtapose in beauty" through their syllables (17).

The "terrible symmetry" of the home place is mirrored by the terrible symmetry of life and death, garden and grave. The road between these extremes, though "barely / passable" (I.76-77), must be travelled by the poet. Even as the poet remembers the moment in which his mother is planted in the earth, he remembers her invitation to creativity through the newly planted seed: "Bring me / the radish seeds, my mother whispered" (I.77-78). As Kroetsch says elsewhere: "Endings have stems and blossoms" (*Completed Field Notes* 231).

Seed — The germ or latent beginning of some growth or development.

Juxtaposed against the gentle simplicity of the mother's voice that closes Section One is the elaborate mythologizing of the

story-telling father in Section Two. What appears to be a tall tale of the contest between man and badger can also be interpreted as an exploration of the confrontation between “talking father” and “writing son,” the story teller and the poet. Just as the antics of the badger inspire the father’s tale, the father’s challenge inspires the badger to extravagant escapes, which parallel the son’s literary endeavours. In Kroetsch’s poem “The Silent Poet Sequence,” the poet describes his clandestine activity: “I go out at night, with my shovel, I dig deep holes / in the neighbours’ lawns” (*Completed Field Notes* 76). Later in *Seed Catalogue* the father offers labour as an alternative to an activity that he cannot understand: “And the next time you want to / write a poem / we’ll start the haying” (VI.66-68). Similarly, the father cannot understand why “so fine a fellow” as the badger would choose to live under ground. In the opening section, the young poet has fallen off a horse and into the earth: “just / about planted the little bugger” (I.50). The poet, too, looks “like a little man, come out / of the ground” (II.5-6). The poem, like the seed, becomes Kroetsch’s record of his search for the ground from which he came. The poet, like the badger, is attracted by “the cool of roots,” the solace of isolation, and the violence implicit in the act of unearthing. Though the father is puzzled by this downward desire because it contrasts with his own upward desire for building and flight, he cannot, of course, shoot the son. The son, likewise, can never fully escape the father: “They carried on like that all / summer” (II.11-12). The twine that binds the two together despite their differences is love. In love, the father threatens over and over. In love, the son repeatedly stands up to his challenge. In love, the son burrows into the ground that gives rise to the poet. In the end, the father tells a different story, in which a different nuisance (the magpie) is destroyed, while insisting that that was his original intention: “Just call me sure-shot, / my father added” (II.26-27). The story is not the story, Kroetsch reminds his readers, but the process of the story, not the harvest but the planting. There must always be enlargement, re-invention and change.

Seed — Semen, the male fertilizing element.

Love is first introduced as a binding element between man/father and badger/son, and in Section Three the notion of love is expanded to include Eros. This new direction is signalled by the sensual language of the catalogue entry for Hubbard Squash. To this point, the vegetables listed have promised pedigree and vir-

tue, but the Hubbard squash rewards mankind's "particular fondness" with sensual delights. As the catalogue writer points out, where there is a need, nature provides. In this context, the *italicized* phrase: "Love is a leaping up / and down" (III.4-5) describes more than the action of the badger who refuses to get shot and refuses to dig his holes elsewhere. Similarly, "Love / is a break in the warm flesh" (III.6-7) signifies more than the penetration of the father's bullet into the feathers of the magpie. The growth of the sensual squash is described in the seed catalogue, but the young poet must discover the growth of Eros for himself. He must ask: "But how do you grow a lover?" (III.12).

The "winter proposition" offered (with illustrations) by the priest is not, like the seed catalogue, a promise (with illustrations) of coming fertility, but rather an insistence upon chastity and the fires of hell. The difference becomes painfully clear to the children on only the second day of catechism. Here Kroetsch provides an important clue to the structure of the poem as a whole. Catechism, a method of instruction which proceeds by question and answer, may well be the model for the series of questions that give *Seed Catalogue* its shape. Many manuals of catechism deal not only with questions of scripture and doctrine, but also with questions of behaviour and morality such as "How must we express our love to our fellow creatures?"

Against such a backdrop, the poet must consider his own question: "How do you grow a lover?" He had believed that it meant becoming "like/one" as Adam and Eve did in the garden, but he discovers, to his dismay, that Adam and Eve fell out of the garden into sin. Still innocent, and without a name for the union they have dreamed, Germaine and the poet climb into a granary and become "like/one" (III.39). Only after the priest calls it *playing dirty* is the thing they have discovered dis/covered into nakedness and shame. They fall from myth into language, and it is language that transforms a tale of sexual initiation into something more profound.

The fact that Germaine and the poet make love on "smooth sheets" of paper from the gunny sacks reinforces the parallel between the sexual act and the writing act, a connection Kroetsch often makes in essays and interviews. Germaine, "with her dress up and her *bloomers* down" (III.50), becomes a muse for the young poet. She, as her name suggests, is fertile ground in which he plants the seeds of his imagination. But the priest names their world "out of existence" (III.44). Language creates absence as

well as trace. The lovers have fallen from the garden, the boy has fallen from the horse, and the poet's understanding of language has fallen from innocence. Now he must unname it back to the beginning.

In so doing, Kroetsch attempts one more retelling of the Genesis story, "one meta-narrative that has asserted itself persistently in the New World context" ("Disunity as Unity" *LTW* 31). Apparently, this dream of Eden first entered Kroetsch's psyche through the various tellings of his mother and father—his mother who lovingly learned the names of the flowers and birds of her native Alberta, and his father who "had for all his life an intense Edenic recollection of a lost home," the green pastures of Ontario (Thomas, *Robert Kroetsch* 11). Kroetsch is fascinated by the story of the Garden of Eden because it invites a variety of tellings that range from ancient myth to child's riddle. In *Seed Catalogue*, the riddle of "Adam and Eve and Pinch-Me" is given in answer to the poet's question "But how?" How does one become a lover when the priest insists upon abstinence? How does one become a poet when the land insists upon silence? These questions await answers, just as the riddle awaits a solution.

Seed — The ova of the silkworm.

The absences that define Heisler, beginning with the absence of silkworms, are cleverly catalogued in a list that interweaves the cultural and the historical, the public and the private. The wit, however, does not disguise the fact that the books and historical records which might provide models for the re-invention of the self are largely missing. Kroetsch describes the "three or four books" that were in his house while growing up: one about looking after horses, one on wild flowers, and one on threshing machines (Hancock 47). In the absence of the written word, the poet turns to the spoken word as a means of survival.

Mary Hauck arrives in Heisler on a January day, bringing her hope chest, which, like the seed catalogue itself, is full of imported elegance and dreams yet to be fulfilled. Only when the contents of her hope chest are destroyed by fire, and her European and Eastern Canadian inheritance is lost, can she find a place in this new world. The way is now clear for the growth of a prairie town. However, the gopher which provides the model for the prairie town's human structures (telephone pole / grain elevators / church steeple) and the human needs they represent (communication /

physical / spiritual sustenance) is apt to vanish as suddenly as it appeared. In the process of learning how to grow a past, the prairie town is perpetually threatened by absence. Nonetheless, the "Bullshitters" confront the silence with talk that includes both the fanciful and the profane. Even the joke "about the woman who buried / her husband with his ass sticking out of the ground" (IV. 62-63), maintains a continuity with the theme of planting that recurs throughout the poem.

Seed — In glass-making, a minute bubble arising in glass during fusion.

The fusion between imported and indigenous that occurs in the heart of the fire completes the apprenticeship of the poet, which is as arduous as that of the gardener. Just as the gardener's first planting is devoured, his first efforts to "deliver real words / to real people" are ignored (V.5-6). His father wishes him to become a different kind of "postman," driving fenceposts with a crowbar. Meeting with no success or encouragement, the youth gives in to despair: "I don't give a damn if I do die do die . . ." (V.9), but even this apparent submission becomes a kind of song (in contrast to a story), echoing a line from Ervin Rouse's "Orange Blossom Special" popularized by Johnny Cash. In this echo of the rhythm of the train-track, the positive (do) struggles with the negative (die), but the final word of the incantation is "do," which prepares the way for the next question to be posed, "How *do* you grow a poet?" Out of the furnace, and out of the fusion, a seed is born.

Catechism — A summary of the principles of a creed in the form of questions and answers.

In Section Six, at the heart of the poem, Kroetsch lays bare his technique, and his *telos*. His seed catalogue is not just an enumeration, though it certainly incorporates lists of all kinds; it is a catechism designed to instruct and reveal through questions and answers. Having explored the beginnings of his personal apprenticeship, Kroetsch now outlines the struggle for poetry in a prairie literature dominated by fiction. The environment may be hostile, but Kroetsch, for one, is determined to develop a hybrid that is up to the challenge.

The seed catalogue offers information on how cauliflowers should be grown, but not on how poets should be grown. Where does one begin? There are, of course, the classical formulas, the

first of which is the invocation of the muse. The young poet turns to the muses for inspiration, only to be reminded that they are the daughters of Mnemosyne, and on the prairies Memory has been undermined by fire, forgetfulness, and the fearful symmetry of an empty landscape. Instead of Calliope, or Erato, or Polyhymnia, the poet finds only the girls he has "felt up," "necked with" or fondled in the skating rink shack (VI.20-33). Perhaps the prairies offer no adequate muse. (Significantly, Kroetsch dedicates the *Completed Field Notes* to Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love and war he describes as "that undiscoverable and discovered reader towards whom one, always, writes," and to his daughters.) The tender portrait of the mother that appears in the poem's final pages suggests that she may well be his most enduring muse, but in this part of the poem she still represents an absence.

What then of the other opening formula, "Once upon a time . . ."? The poet attempts to apply it to the home place, only to be stopped by the realization that it is a fictional rather than a poetic device: "—Hey, wait a minute. / That's a story" (VI.35-36). In an attempt to explain his observation that "the prairies developed a tradition of fiction before developing a tradition of poetry," Kroetsch suggests that the realistic mode of fiction lent itself to the "harshness" of the prairie experience ("On Being An Alberta Writer" 74-75). Once again, he is faced with the fact that "story" intervenes with the growth of the poetic tradition.

His parents know the formulas for growing a healthy boy (with cod-liver oil and Sunny Boy Cereal) and a competent farmer (with hard labour and haying), but no one has yet devised a way to grow a prairie poet. The father gives form to the land with barbed wire, but clearly this is an inadequate model, as is the prairie road which merely marks "the shortest distance / between nowhere and nowhere" (VI.71-72). If this road is a poem, there is no sign of its maker:

As for the poet himself
we can find no record
of his having traversed
the land/in either direction. (VI.78-81)

The creator has disappeared. He is lost. All that remains is "a scarred / page, a spoor of wording" (VI.83-84). However, like the poet's secret shining from the bottom of the sea in A.M. Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," this humble trace of words,

this mere “pile of rabbit turds,” is enough to reveal “all spring long / where the track was” (VI.88-89). Spring on the prairies, we have been told, is a season that hardly exists. But for that briefest of moments, we can see the poet’s path.

The phrase “poet . . . say uncle” (VI.90) is followed by the italicized question “How?” which both echoes the earlier questions and implies that the poet either does not know how or is unwilling to give up or admit defeat. Also, by making tongue-in-cheek reference to the greeting of the Hollywood Indian, Kroetsch prepares for the poet’s real life encounter with the aboriginal, the truly indigenous, in his environment.

The novelist Rudy Wiebe is now introduced into the poem, insisting that the only way to conquer the vastness of the prairie landscape is to “lay great black steel lines of / fiction” (VI.92-93). In this, Wiebe echoes the desire of the poet’s storytelling father who insists that the only way to give form to the land is “by running / a series of posts and three strands / of barbed wire around a quarter-section” (VI.60-62), and those who believed that the “great black steel lines” of the railway would allow the iron horse to conquer prairie distances. Despite his quarrel with Wiebe’s insistence upon fiction as the preferred prairie genre, Kroetsch acknowledges the gifts Wiebe has bestowed upon his writing friends, including glimpses of indigenous history and inherited language. The word *Lebensglied* which Wiebe points out, appears only once in Rilke’s poetry:

Auf einmal fasst die Rosenpflückerin
die volle Knospe seines Lebensliedes,
und an dem Schreck des Unterschiedes
schwinden die [linden] Gärten in ihr hin

All at once the girl gathering roses seizes
the full bud of his lifelimb,
and at the shock of the difference
the [linden] gardens within her fade away¹

One tribe of Indians is “surprised . . . to death” by another in the “coulee,” a prairie word for a deep ravine or dry stream bed. Similarly, the rose gatherer of Rilke’s poem takes hold of the “lifelimb” or “life’s member” only to be overwhelmed by it. Every garden holds its surprises, and “the shock of the difference” is not to be underestimated. Perhaps the giant “geometry” of prairie geography and prairie fiction is an effort to fulfill humankind’s “blessed rage

for order." Yet, Kroetsch warns against a simple belief in the convention of the unity of signifier and signified, a temptation to meaning he suggests is attractive to Wiebe (*LV* 143). In the sections that follow, Kroetsch posits several alternatives. Kroetsch uses the form of the catechism to achieve a kind of unity, while resisting "the ferocious principles of closure" ("For Play and Entrance," *LTW* 118) by providing many possible answers to each question.

Thus far, many possible models for the prairie poem have been implied, ranging from badger hole to rabbit turd, but the most developed and powerful image of the poet can be found in the description of Brome Grass that opens section seven. Though the passage resembles the previous quotations from the seed catalogue, there are several significant differences. The entry does not begin with the usual catalogue number, nor does it employ the high-flown and hyperbolic language of the earlier entries (with the possible exception of "Flourishes"). In addition, both the common and the Latin names are included, as if to acknowledge the dual heritage of the Canadian poet. Through a factual description which captures the vernacular simplicity of the spoken word, Kroetsch manages to foreground many of the qualities already highlighted as essential to the development of the poet. "No amount of cold will kill it. It / *withstands* the summer suns." The poet both withstands and stands with the terrible symmetry of his home place. "Water may stand on it for several / weeks without apparent injury." Though Adam and Eve are "drowned," the poet remains. "The roots push through the soil, / throwing up new plants continually." Delighting in the duality of the border-place, the poet moves downward into the earth and the buried past, and upward into the glory and grief of flight ". . . continually." The poet is forever involved in the process of story, of language, of strange plantings and unexpected harvests. "*Starts quicker* than other / grasses in the spring." Even before the snow has melted, the poet's track is visible. "*Remains green* longer in the fall." The poet's *fall* from the horse is a fall *into* the garden, not out of it; refusing to surrender to absence and death, the poet retains the desire for greenness and growth. "*Flourishes un- / der absolute neglect.*" Despite the *absence* of "Aeneas" and "clay and wattles" (as in Yeats's "Lake Isle of Innis-free"), and the *presence* of crowbars and mustard plasters, the poet endures his long apprenticeship. He survives the winter to arrive at last at "seeding/ time" (VII.8), a phrase which implies both the time for cultivation and the cultivation of time. In explaining his dual allegiance to fiction and poetry, Kroetsch

writes: "There's something you can do in a poem that you just can't do in a novel—concepts of time and of language" (Cooley 31). Freed from narrative chronology, the poet can allow all of the fragments he uncovers to "juxtapose in beauty," to use Olson's phrase.

For the last time Kroetsch asks the central question of *Seed Catalogue*, "How do you grow a poet?" and again, he provides, not one answer, but many. There is no right answer, no single version. "Even in the Genesis story," Kroetsch reminds us, "one discovers that there are three versions, one on top of the other" (LV 118). The palimpsest of prairie poetry implies a similar multiplicity. In Sections Seven through Ten, Kroetsch explores a variety of muses, models, and methods which add to his understanding of the poetic process and contribute to his apprenticeship as a prairie poet.

Muses — Nine goddesses, the offspring of Zeus and Mnemosyne, who inspire poetry, etc.

One of Kroetsch's guides in learning to respond to life as it is lived around him was Al Purdy. "In abandoning given verse forms for the colloquial, the prosaic, telling yarns in the oral tradition, Purdy was central" (Cooley 28). Purdy and Kroetsch reject the "still point of the turning world" offered by T.S. Eliot in *Burnt Norton*, in favour of the "turning centre in the still world" (VII. 13). The power of poetry allows Purdy to gallop a Cariboo horse through an Edmonton restaurant, to transform a dinner party into a carnival, to surprise an ordered world through language. Through metaphor he becomes a new kind of cowboy, creating a new mythology.

The poet also finds muses among his own relatives, his own memories. The poet remembers the Last Will and Testament of his grandfather who gave "Uncle Freddie" his carpenter tools. This builder who mapped his world with perfect horse-barns endures even when the world has no more use for his artistry. Uncle Freddie refuses to say Uncle. He learns not only to make, but to make do. Although his craft appears to have outstripped its usefulness, its perfection endures. The craft of poetry may also be "archaic like the fletcher's" (Klein), but that does negate its worth or excuse the poet from bringing new forms to life. Uncle Freddie has been bequeathed carpenter tools, but he reminds his nephew that the greatest tool of all is the imagination. Although deeply impoverished, he maintains his rituals and his pride, replacing the coffee he cannot afford with hot water with cream and sugar in it. From him the poet learns how to honour the illusion, how to remember not to forget.

This lesson is reiterated by the cousin who drops bombs on the land of his ancestors. His fall from his plane, reminiscent of the cowboy's fall from his horse, signals a "fatal occasion" (IX.16). He forgets that the land upon which he brings destruction ("It was a strange / planting" [IX.11-12]) is the land where his family first took root. Forgetfulness is a dangerous muse, burying the past and devouring the future. She has "Blood / on her green thumb" (IX. 35-36), resulting in a "terrible symmetry" from which escape is impossible.

The poet finally reveals his ultimate muse in the person of his mother, who is addressed in a passage preceded by the final entry from the seed catalogue. This listing for the *Spencer Sweet Pea* is a price list reminiscent of the passage in William's *Paterson* where the chattels of Cornelius Doremus are appraised (45-6). But Kroetsch's list reveals that the more you purchase the less it costs—the more you invest, the higher the yield. The sweet peas, like all the other plantings in the poem, are at once upward, "climbing the stretched / binder twine," and downward, rooted in a deep and familiar soil. The poet believed himself to be bereft of models in a world of absence, but he now remembers the simple lessons taught to him by his mother and her garden: the grace of living, the beauty of weariness, the strength of place.

Model — A person, or a work, that is proposed or adopted for imitation; an exemplar.

The poet must be open to the experience of life as captured in literature and in art, though these must be defined in the widest possible sense. To illustrate how the seed catalogue is a document as revealing and as valid as any other, Kroetsch shows how the entry for the "Japanese Morning Glory" evokes a variety of possibilities for interpreting the home place. A harsh environment teaches the characters of Sheila Watson's novel a harsh lesson: to catch the glory is also to hook the mourning. "The double hook: / the home-place" (VII.36-37). In the particular Japanese print to which Kroetsch refers—Hiroshige's "Shono-Haku-u"—the surprise that upsets man's careful plans is also a confrontation with an unpredictable climate. The artist Hiroshige belonged to the Ukiyo-E school:

"E" means picture in Japanese, and Ukiyo (literally "floating world") suggests the transitory, shifting, at times treacherous existence to which man is condemned. Ukiyo-e are the genre depiction of people who, although well aware of the snares and

tricks in store for them, still do their best to snatch as much pleasure and enjoyment out of life as they can. (Suzuki 6)

The print entitled "Shono-Haku-u," which portrays "bare-assed travellers, caught in a sudden shower" (*Seed Catalogue* VII.31), perfectly captures the philosophy of the Ukiyo-E. Caught in a storm they could neither predict nor avoid, the men rush forward into the weather with heads bent. For them there is no shelter. Only the rain. Only the wind. A terrible symmetry. Always the double hook, the glory and the mourning, in Japan as on the prairies. The phrase "the stations of the way" (VII.38), which closes this description, refers to the title of the series of Japanese prints, "Fifty-Three Stations on the Tokaido." These depict many of the stations or post-towns on the Tokaido Highway, which stretched a distance of about 300 miles from Kyoto to present-day Tokyo. In the context of what follows, it may also be an allusion to the stations of the cross that lead to "the other garden," Gethsemane. (In a 1976 entry in *The Crow Journals*, Kroetsch's mention of "The Stations of the Cross" on a hill in Qu'Appelle Valley, Saskatchewan, is followed by an elaborate rejection of the tenets of Modernism [58]). For Kroetsch, as for the pioneers who preceded him, ordering an unfamiliar terrain with familiar forms is a double-hook experience. Eden and Gethsemane go hand in hand. Nonetheless, Kroetsch hopes to grow like the brome grass of the prairies, to flourish under neglect, to catch the glory as well as the mourning, to combine the imported and the indigenous into a hybrid that can survive.

"How do you grow a garden?" Mary, Mary, quite contrary, plants her garden with silver bells and cockle shells. Mary Hauck of Bruce County, Ontario plants hers with silver spoons and English china. But the prairie poet cannot afford to be contrary or ecologically ignorant regarding which hybrids will thrive in his home place. He must plant his garden with varieties as strong and sturdy as brome grass, plants that endure drowning and cold to grow as tall as a horse's hips. The intimate tone of the letter describing "the longest brome grass" in one individual's memory contrasts sharply with the distanced and artificial voice of Lyon, whose cabbages were "dandy." This letter, with its combination of the ordinary and the evocative, like the garden itself, suggests a pattern for the prairie poet. It is signed by "Amie," a real person perhaps, but certainly a friend.

Method — A special form of procedure especially in any branch of mental activity; A way of doing things.

The prairie poet must discover new ways to “deliver the pain.” When the Bronc-Busting Champion of the World falls off his horse into death—his own death and the death of the male myth of the conquering hero—the way is cleared for a new hero. Both a real cowboy who achieved international success in rodeo between 1932 and 1936, and one of the last representatives of the chivalric order suggested by his name, Pete *Knight* finds his story coming to an abrupt and unceremonious end. The rock upon which the Western myth is built has eroded. The once epic hero has been diminished out of existence and his myth dismissed as madness (“You some kind of nut / or something?” [VII.20-21]), thus clearing the way for the poet. In his essay “Learning the Hero from Northrop Frye,” Kroetsch draws attention to the following passage from *The Secular Scripture*:

The real hero becomes the poet, not the agent of force or cunning whom the poet may celebrate. In proportion as this happens, the inherently revolutionary quality in romance begins to emerge from all the nostalgia about a vanished past. (LTW 178)

The hero falls off his horse and dies, in contrast to the poet who, in the poem’s opening section, falls off his horse and lives. “Cover him up, see what grows.” The poet is, indeed, as the lady at the end of the bar would have it, “some kind of nut” from which new mythologies will sprout.

The “terrible symmetry” that haunts the entire poem is reflected typographically in the opening of the poem’s final section, in which the double column format that Kroetsch had earlier used in *The Ledger* to “express a dual perception” (Thomas 29) is again in evidence. The use of the slash in the left hand column invites a further multiplicity of readings. In the line, “After the bomb/blossoms,” the slash allows the word “blossoms” to be interpreted as either a verb or a noun, implying both endings and beginnings. Similarly, in “Poet, teach us / to love our dying,” the phrase “our dying” can be interpreted as the process of mortality that we must embrace as a necessary half of the double hook. “Our dying” may also be interpreted as those among us (mother, father, cousins, uncles, great-grandmother . . .) who have succumbed to “the danger of merely living” (IX.1).

"West is a winter place" characterised on the surface by absence, death, the empty page. It is also a "palimpsest." Under the erasure, another text can be read. Under the snow, a seed is burrowing. Into the January darkness, the seed catalogue blooms. The harshness of winter may invite a flight, an escape and evasion, but the model of the garden offers a place to be rooted, and a place to grow.

Does the world of *Seed Catalogue* remain harsh to the end, as some critics have argued? The reprise of the passage in Section One that first established the land as absence appears to confirm that it does. However, the echo of Marriott, "only the wind," is now incorporated into a sentence, as if to suggest that the presence of the wind is sufficient to challenge the absence of trees, to inspire and to animate. The land may suggest absence, but the celebration of that absence results in a poem.

Seed Catalogue closes with one last "method" open to the poet, the riddle, an ironic extension of the catechism which reflects the postmodern resistance to closure and elitism. The riddle, according to Kroetsch, is more than just a "purely verbal game . . . You can start to read a riddle as a great insight into human uncertainty, self-deception and so forth" (LV 81-82). The riddle in *Seed Catalogue* that is begun in Section Three and continued in the final lines is only completed in the mind of the reader:

Adam and Eve and Pinch-Me
 went down to the river to swim—
 Adam and Eve got drowned.
 Who was left?

The poem itself resists closure, but the answer of "Pinch-Me" that arises in the reader's mind establishes a connection of tremendous immediacy between the poet and his audience. For this kind of poem to succeed there must be complicity between actor and audience, poet and reader, a reaching across the spaces between people (as in a pinch). Adam and Eve (the original gardeners, namers, lovers) and the poet's parents may have vanished, but the poet and Pinch-Me remain. Kroetsch accomplishes what he set out to do. Throughout the poem and in its final lines he brings together the oral tradition and the myth of origins. Eden endures, though in accordance with the archeological model, as riddle and repository.

NOTES

I am grateful to D.M.R. Bentley of the University of Western Ontario for his many helpful comments and suggestions.

¹ I am indebted to Angela Esterhammer at the University of Western Ontario for her assistance with the translation of Rilke's poem. The German language allows for the invention of compounds such as *Lebensgliebes*. *Leben* can only mean "life" but *glied* has several implications: its primary meaning is "limb" (both botanical and anatomical), but it can also mean "member, part, organ," which can mean "penis" or "virile." Other less common meanings are "link" as in "the missing link" and the biblical idea of "generation" (*Langenscheidt's*). Such a multiplicity of meanings would certainly have been attractive to Kroetsch. The italicized definitions are from the *OED*.

WORKS CITED

- Brown, Russell. "On Not Saying Uncle: Kroetsch and the Place of Place in the Long Poem." *Long-liners Issue of Open Letter* 6. 2-3 (Summer/ Fall 1985): 257-266.
- . "Seeds and Stones: Unhiding in Kroetsch's Poetry." *Open Letter* 5.8-9 (1984): 154-75.
- Cooley, Dennis, and Robert Enright. "Uncovering Our Dream World: An Interview with Robert Kroetsch." *RePlacing*. Downsview, ON: ECW, 1980. 21-32.
- Hancock, Geoff. "An Interview with Robert Kroetsch." *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 24-25 (Spring/Summer 1977): 33-52.
- Jung, Carl. *Psychology and Alchemy*. Trans. R.F.C. Hull. London: Routledge, 1953.
- Klein, A.M. *The Collected Poems of A.M. Klein*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1974.
- Kroetsch, Robert. *Completed Field Notes: The Long Poems of Robert Kroetsch*. Toronto: McClelland, 1989.
- . *The Crow Journals*. Edmonton: NeWest, 1980.
- . *Labyrinths of Voice*. Eds. Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson. Edmonton: NeWest, 1982.
- . *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1989.
- . "On Being An Alberta Writer." *Robert Kroetsch: Essays in Open Letter* 5.4 (Spring 1983): 69-80.

Lecker, Robert. *Robert Kroetsch*. TWAS 768. Boston: Twayne, 1986.

Marshall, John. "From *The Remembrance Day Tapes*: Interviews with Robert Kroetsch." *Island* 7 (1980): 35-50.

MacKinnon, Brian. "The Writer Has Got to Know where He Lives: An Interview with Robert Kroetsch." *Writers News Manitoba* 4.1 (1982): 3-18.

Suzuki, Takahashi. *Hiroshige*. London: Elek, 1958.

Thomas, Peter. *Robert Kroetsch*. Vancouver: Douglas, 1980.

Williams, William Carlos. *Paterson*. New York: New Classics, 1951.