Origin of the Spaces:

A Darwinian Poetics of Identity Transformation

and the Long Prairie Poem

BY

Dougald Lamont

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba

0-612-53171-6

Canada

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
*****
COPYRIGHT PERMISSION PAGE

Origin of the Spaces: A Darwinian Poetics of

Identity Transformation and the Long Prairie Poem

BY

Dougald Lamont

A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University

of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree

of

Master of Arts

DOUGALD LAMONT © 2000

Table of Contents

Thesis Abstract

Dougald F Lamont
Thesis Advisor: Dr. David Arnason

Title: Origin of the Spaces: A Darwinian Poetics of Identity Transformation and the Long Prairie Poem

What we find in the poetry anthology *a/long prairie lines*, the source-book for this analysis— particularly in the "contemporary" poems written in the last 30 years (following Whyte's *Homage: Henry Kelsey*) are the writings of a "movement": Canadian prairie post-modernists. However, the Derridean credentials of these writers have been called into question by Diane Tiefensee in her book *The Old Dualities*.

The "discrepancies" between Derridean theory and Canadian postmodernist practice, including Tiefensee's, can be revealed by examining the ways in which Derrida's own metaphysical presuppositions about language and self serve to conceal and suppress a *material* basis for phenomena usually considered "metaphysical," such as identity, language, meaning and consciousness. I articulate a model for such a strictly material account, namely Darwinian evolution described as an information process.

I then follow with an account of the literary and cultural terrain that necessitated the adoption of post-modern poetic strategies and conclude with an examination of the poetics themselves.

Foreword

This thesis is based on an undergraduate essay I wrote in 1990 for Professor David Arnason's course in Canadian Literature. In that essay I argued that the poets writing in *a/long prairie lines* were creating a mythos and a literary infrastructure for the prairie. My concern then was with what they were doing and how. I was unaware of the niceties of the post-modern theoretical underpinnings that the poets themselves argued were the basis of their academic and creative work. As time passed, I started to wonder why the poetic strategies they chose were necessary. What critical context could adequately account for all of these efforts?

I was not happy with many of the official explanations and started to articulate one of my own. Social constructivists were a strong influence, specifically Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and especially Feyerabend's *Against Method*. Both of these are strongly related to Mill's *On Liberty*. Jeremy Campbell's *Grammatical Man*, which provides an intelligent layman's account of information theory and cybernetics, struck me like a thunderbolt and forever altered they way I thought about the world.

These theoretical works were combined with my own observations of human behaviour as an amateur cultural anthropologist, often in the Arts Lounge of the Fletcher Argue Building. I had long noticed that tribalism seemed to be a stronger influence on behaviour than anyone seemed to notice, and this was something that was very much emphasized in Feyerabend and his discussion of "taboo reactions". During the course of debates I often saw that once the arguments were pared down to principles, they ground to a halt. People would also violently resist perfectly logical arguments that threatened their world view.

I found the connection between tribalism and the social aspects of paradigms as emphasized by Feyerabend and Kuhn intriguing. A good deal of *Against Method* is concerned with the practical aspects of how Galileo brought about the Copernican revolution.

Feyerabend described Galileo imposing his own observation values for his listener's, and in so doing transforming the way they saw the world. Later, in the first year of my Master's, I realized that Feyerabend was describing what Iago does to Othello when he plants the seed of doubt about Desdemona in Othello's mind. Thus Iago engineered the transformation of Othello's identity.

Narratives and plots are defined by just such transformations: we understand stories to be about "character growth", and they ways in which identity is changed is shown in one of three ways: inner transformation through the acquisition of new talents or knowledge (i.e., acquiring and perfecting new strategies); adventures in status – from low to high, or high to low, etc, or through membership or founding of a new tribe. Conventional narratives use all of these, in various combinations, because these are the three elements of identity that matter most to us as human beings.

As I turned to the business of researching my thesis, I came across Diane Tiefensee's book, *The Old Dualities: Deconstructing Robert Kroetsch and his Critics*. It challenged the critical consensus that had more or less been reached amongst Canadian post-modernists of Kroetsch's pre-eminence as "Mr. Canadian Post-Modernism". Tiefensee accused Kroetsch and all Canadian post-modernists of being "un-Derridean", and dressed them down for ever having suggested they might be.

I read her summary of Derridean principles and disagreed with virtually all of them. His entire argument relating to Voice, Presence, and Western Metaphysics seemed beside the point or irrelevant, and I thought that the Saussurian linguistics upon which the binary opposition of signifier and signified was also suspect. Many of his ruminations on the self, hearing and language are dispelled with an understanding of how feedback works.

Under regular circumstances, a Master's Thesis is not expected to present any original work at all, to say nothing of presenting a new critical stance. In order to present the works and the criticism in a context that preserves their significance – and, indeed, that of the

3

prairie poets' assertion of identity, I had to not only articulate my objections to Derrida's claims, but offer a critical context of my own. The rift between Tiefensee and the Prairie Post-Modernists on Derrida made a "he said-she said" presentation of the arguments impossible, but presented me with an opportunity.

One of my objections to post-structuralism was that it did not describe the way the world actually worked, stating instead that the world and self were constructed through language. I realized that life itself, as well as consciousness and its contents are *information* processes – but that while all language is information, not all information is language. But all information processes are physical, and the rules governing information theory have been ably articulated. This information process had to account for the three aspects of individual identity – tribal affiliation, status within the tribe and individual strategies for perceiving and navigating the world. Identity transformation takes place as these aspects of identity are acquired or change through learning – through the acquisition of new information and strategies.

Such an account is provided by Darwinian evolution explained as a cybernetic process. The social aspects of identity – culture, language, and what Feyerabend called the "taboo reaction" that protects fundamental organizing principles, are due to the fact that humans are social animals. Our keen sense of self as individuals conceals our tribal nature. Being social means that the propagation of the group as a whole is a priority, not necessarily specific members. Within a group, we are keenly aware of nuance, difference, and everyone's personality and characteristics are well-defined. Individuals outside the tribe are an Other, interchangeable and uniform. This is more than saying that we know the things we know better than the things we don't: there is no sense of proportion to the way in which we understand our own cultural nuances while those of other cultures are a blank slate.

There is always a temptation, evident in Tiefensee's articulation of Derridean principles, to apply general principles for human behaviour but to say, "present company

excepted." The tribalism that I identified was evident not only in the Canadian political scene during the Meech Lake Crisis, but was always most accentuated in intellectual debates amongst academics, particularly between competing "schools". I was always amazed at the amount of ad hominem cheap shots present in academic writing. The "highest" human pursuits, whether religious or intellectual, are governed by these tribal impulses, just as the lowest – like genocide – are. A loose way of identifying whether an ideology has a tribal component is whether it is an "-ism". Capitalism, Marxism, racism, feminism, post-structuralism – these are all loose tribes founded on ideology.

I understood that narratives were always stories of identity transformation – or a parody or commentary thereon. A story's beginning, middle and end were insisted upon by Aristotle, but exceedingly poorly defined by him. But other kinds of writing had this shape: essays, for example. I further realized that texts written within a "movement" whether political, philosophical, poetical or religious sought to transform the identity of the reader, by communicating tribal codes and values and thus transforming the way they see the world.

This was in fact the effect that the poems in *a/long prairie lines* had on me. It resulted in a kind of conversion experience for me, where I realized that Winnipeg, Manitoba and the Canadian Prairie could be a place worthy of poetry. I remember the experience itself: it occurred as I left Professor Arnason's class on a cold but sunny February day, walking across the snow behind St. John's College to University Centre.

Historians and philosophers sometimes seem to forget that a population consists of people ever being born, growing and learning, living and dying. They speak of cultures hundreds of years old – yet there is nobody around who is five hundred years old. We are born into a culture, and further initiated into it, making discoveries both old and new. Initiation and its rituals are the means we use to make this so. This is why, in Kroetsch's words, the moment of the discovery of America continues. It is also why history is both important and irrelevant.

5

The title of this thesis was in part an acknowledgment of my own identity transformation occasioned by Professor Arnason's class and by the poetry under review. It also refers to the articulation of my critical stance, which (I believe) is a paradigm shift in critical thinking concealed as an appeal to an already accepted belief in Darwinian evolution. I hope that the reader who appreciates what I am saying will be convinced and therefore be transformed themselves.

*   *   *

I would like to thank Professor Arnason, my wife Cecilia Lamont, and Gavin Adamson, who all provided invaluable feedback and help with the preparation of my text. Thanks also to my thesis defense committee, Prof. Daniel Lenoski and Prof. Barry Ferguson.

I dedicate this paper to the memory of my father, Frank Lamont.

Introduction

What we find in the poetry anthology *a/long prairie lines*, the source-book for this analysis– particularly in the "contemporary" poems written in the last 30 years (following Whyte's *Homage: Henry Kelsey*) are the writings of a "movement": Canadian prairie post-modernists. They are characterized (as artistic movements are) in the way that any human group is: by a shared motivation, namely the elevation and assertion of the value of the lives of the citizens of the Canadian prairie provinces, and shared writing strategies and techniques – a poetics, really – for achieving that goal. Since many of the authors whose work is anthologized in *a/long prairie lines* – Kroetsch, Cooley, Arnason, Whyte, and others – are also academics who have written on their own and each other's work, we have available to us what Cooley called "the intellectual basis behind their work."

Buried within the notes, and sometimes within the poems, we see the personal connections between the writers, as a community of poets whose work is being presented[1]. Many of the poets are or were colleagues at the University of Manitoba, and many appear in each other's writings, both literary and critical. From Lenoski's notes we learn that Cooley and Arnason were next-door neighbours; *Seed Catalogue* is dedicated to them; Arnason and Kroetsch make first-person appearances in Cooley's *Fielding;* Dorothy Livesay worked at the University of Manitoba and was part of the literary community there; Cooley bought Livesay's cottage at the lake, and so on. They also appear in one another's critical writings.

These connections are no doubt distasteful to some critics, carrying as they do the taint of historical-biographical fallacies and authorial intent. But there is always an element of boot-strapping and personal connection in any school or movement: that is what defines them, whether Romanticists, (Byron, Shelley & Co.) modernists (Eliot & Pound) or post-structuralists (Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida). Foucault's statement that "the 20th century belongs to Deleuze and Guattari" springs to mind.

We often take it for granted that writing, especially by a "movement" seeks to transmit certain values to readers, to persuade them of those values and thus to "convert" them, for lack of a better word, to a particular world-view. The transformative power of art both as a pedagogical tool and as a medium of propaganda is manifest in long-standing anxieties about the danger art poses to the stability of society. Poets were to be banished from Plato's Republic. The only remaining works to be allowed were hymns to the glory of the state.

In their critical writings and in interviews, the prairie post-modernists themselves argue that the characteristics of the poems in *a/long prairie lines* are derived from a number of influences: both Kroetsch and Cooley cite William Carlos Williams[1] and his poem *Paterson* as a possible model for writing "local pride"; Foucauldian post-modernism is manifest as "archeological fragments" that pepper *Seed Catalogue, Homage: Henry Kelsey, Marsh Burning* and *Fielding*, while Derridean post-modernism finds its expression in ideas of erasure, constructed identities and selves and in the subversion of literary conventions and myths. Polyphony too, the many voices to be found within each poem, is a response against monologism, the one voice, and is found in almost all of the poems.

As literary critics, however, we should know to be skeptical of authorial intentions. Cooley quotes Heidegger at the start of his poem *Fielding*: "What is spoken is never, and in no language, what is said." In *The Old Dualities: Deconstructing Robert Kroetsch and his Critics*, Diane Tiefensee accuses Kroetsch, and Canadian postmodernists in general of not being "in any sense Derridean." "The postmodern theory by which [the simultaneous assertion and subversion of 'the Subject'] is to be accomplished," Tiefensee writes, " is a hodgepodge of bits and pieces derived from thinkers as incompatible as, for example, Foucault, Kristeva, Bloom, and Derrida." Such "Superficial theorizing" she says, "results in lazy and sloppy scholarship in the name of groundbreaking innovation....To put it bluntly, Kroetsch's work is firmly grounded in the very metaphysical presuppositions that have

---

[1] with the exception of Anne Marriott's *The Wind Our Enemy*

governed not only modernism, the movement against which he defines his thinking as different. but all of Western thought." (4)

Tiefensee's book is a corrective assault on the practice of post-modernism in Canada, and I think that it presses the debate to a crucial point. Many of the transgressions of Derridean poetics that Tiefensee complains of in Kroetsch's writings and interviews are also present in the criticism and poetry of the authors in *a/long prairie lines*. How do we account for that Derridean bugbear, the emphasis on writing as oral transcription, which appears in so many of the poems, especially those of Kroetsch, Cooley, & Arnason, and which is indeed the basis of Cooley's collection of critical writings *The Vernacular Muse*? And how too do we account for the persistence of myth figures and forms in so many of the poems – Kroetsch's cowboy, Arnason's Icelandic Gods, and the Quest form of Whyte's *Homage: Henry Kelsey*?

I believe that Tiefensee's argument is substantially correct within the Derridean post-structuralist context, but that it is mistaken for the reason that the Derridean principles themselves – upon which she relies – are wrong. The "discrepancies" between Derridean theory and Canadian postmodernist practice, including Tiefensee's, can be revealed by examining the ways in which Derrida's own metaphysical presuppositions about language and self serve to conceal and suppress a *material* basis for phenomena usually considered "metaphysical," such as identity, language, meaning and consciousness.

There is a model for such a strictly material account, namely Darwinian evolution. Life is an information process that seeks to reproduce itself. Evolution comes about as the result of different strategies elaborated and actualized by life processes in following the fundamental command "COPY SELF." While the phenomena of life and consciousness are incredibly diverse and complex, it is possible to account for them with the articulation of a handful of principles. In particular, it requires an understanding of the way in which information works cybernetically as a life process and survival strategy. This cybernetic

complex is the building block not only of life as an information process, *but of all biological information processes at all levels*: from self-replication to self-healing, constructing and maintaining internal body functions, all the way to "higher" levels of information processing and control; perception, language, consciousness and thought.

A Darwinian, or evolutionary account of human qualities and interactions takes as its central premise that biological phenomena are due to the immanent qualities of the organism, or as Ernst Mayr has it below, "inborn genetic or acquired program." The elucidation of the fundamental principles of natural selection as an information process and the role of evolutionary strategy in generating meaning provide the basis for my critical stance.

Such an account must follow Ernst Mayr's articulation of "the basic principles that Darwin proposed that would stand in total conflict with [the] prevailing ideas of his age" (81) and which would stand as Darwin's enduring legacy:

1.   Darwinism rejects all supernatural phenomena and causations.
2.   Darwinism refutes typology, or essentialism...in which members of each class were thought to be identical, constant and sharply separated from other essences. Variation, in contrast, is nonessential and accidental...Darwin completely rejected typological thinking and introduced instead the entirely different concept called population thinking. All groupings of living organisms, including humanity, are populations that consist of uniquely different individuals.
3.   Natural selection makes any invocation of teleology unnecessary...Processes in living organisms owe their apparent goal-directedness to the operation of inborn genetic or acquired program. (There is no need to invoke a first cause, for example.)
4.   Darwin does away with determinism. The production of variation is a matter of chance...Many biologists and philosophers deny the existence of universal laws in biology and suggest that all regularities be stated in probabilistic terms, as nearly all the so-called biological laws have exceptions.
5.   Darwin developed a new view of humanity and, in turn, a new anthropocentrism.
6.   Darwin provided a scientific foundation for ethics. We now know that in social species not only the individual must be considered – an entire social group can be the target of selection. (SA, 80-83)

Just as the poets in *a/long prairie* lines had to establish a new poetics in order that they could assert the value and identities of the Canadian prairie, I have chosen to articulate a new critical stance that does the same. There have been attempts elsewhere to link evolution and literary theory, notably in Joseph Carroll's *Evolution and Literary Theory*. While Carroll

makes important strides, he fails, partly because he doesn't push his evolutionary argument far enough. In resisting any notions of contructivism, post-structuralist or otherwise, he misses the ways in which the evolutionary strategy that sets humans apart from all other animals – that of being a cultural animal – functions as the very basis not only of meaning but of our human sense of self.

I will acclimate the reader to my argument, as it were, by showing the ways in which the hidden biases of Derrida's metaphysical presuppositions (ironically, biases which are derived from the Western metaphysical tradition) serve to obscure both the materiality of information and the evolutionary bases for meaning, consciousness and language. Rather than just tear down Derrida, I will seek to demonstrate how meaning happens as a function of the fundamental survival strategies that our species has evolved generate meaning.

I will then briefly articulate my critical stance with an explanation of the fundamental principles of information theory and cybernetics; an account of the means by which a cybernetic strategy can assign meaning or value to information, and finally the basis by which meaning is thus generated by the fundamental survival strategies of the human species: tribalism, status, acquired strategies and territoriality.

Finally, I will turn to the central argument of the thesis, what I call the poetics of identity transformation in the contemporary poems in *a/long prairie lines*. I will start with an examination of the Canadian literary "terrain" that made post-modernist poetics such a powerful strategy for these writers, and further examine the appropriated poetic strategies that serve to assert the value and importance of their subject: the myth-form, transcription of the oral, the use of "found" documents in an appropriation of history, and the form of the long poem itself. The result of their collective work is acknowledged in Kroetsch's words: "The telling of the story about that material, the language itself, changes itself in some way to what I call sacred."

Against Derridean Method

From Diane Tiefensee's *The Old Dualities: Deconstructing Robert Kroetsch and his Critics:*

The "unearthing" of the writer that this book attempts is based upon two inseparable premises:
1) that Robert Kroetsch is representative of Canadian post-modernism insofar as his work typifies the way in which post-modernism is expressed in the work of other Canadian theorists and critics; and
2) although Kroetsch claims to resist and subvert the hegemony by which we in the Western world are governed, his writing (in his essays, reviews, and novels) and his published conversations (in interviews) reaffirms not only the modes of thought by which hegemony operates but also the values, prejudices, and violence that are part and parcel of those familiar and largely unexamined patterns of thought." (4)

Tiefensee's argument, I think, puts Canadian post-modernists and post-structuralists in a quandary. A reader who agrees with the strict Derridean principles that she espouses (and insists that we "take seriously") must also find her application of Derridean deconstruction to Kroetsch and his critics substantially correct. Tiefensee's reading of Kroetsch, in which she teases out his predilections for the mythic and the myth-form is perceptive and well written, and her argument was well received: Susan Rudy Dorscht, reviewing Tiefensee, wrote that she was "utterly convinced".

Tiefensee forces Canadian post-modernists to choose between strict Derridean deconstruction and the more epistemologically gregarious post-modernism that has been characteristic of the Canadian scene. As Tiefensee complains, Canadian post-modernism has embraced the critical strategies of disparate critics bound loosely under the rubric of post-structuralism: an incomplete list includes Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva and Bloom. Post-modernism in one of its many forms has become the dominant critical stance in Canada North America and Europe, informing philosophy, sociology, literary analysis, cultural studies, and so on.

Such ubiquity lends itself to critical consensus in which fundamental principles are not questioned. Tiefensee insists that Derridean principles are not being taken seriously. That

Teifensee's argument is correct within Derridean deconstruction is significant, since it marks a turning point of sorts in Canadian criticism: deconstruction changes from being a strategy used for the creation of a Canadian literary space (and in the context of *a/long prairie lines*, for the articulation of Canadian prairie identities) to a strategy which suppresses and questions that very assertion of identity.

What Tiefensee has done, I think entirely unwittingly, is illustrate precisely why the strategy of strict Derridean deconstruction is inimical not only to the interests of the self-described Canadian post-structuralists and post-modernists, but to its own stated aim, which as Tiefensee repeatedly asserts is "the recognition of otherness and difference"(26).

In making statements about the fundamental structure (or non-structure) of knowledge, Derridean deconstruction offers strategies for *reading and navigating the world*. This is despite Derrida's own efforts to avoid "Master" terms: in coining the term *différance*, he asserted that it was neither a word nor a thing; he uses *différance* inconsistently and in many different ways; and he uses other several other terms in the place of *différance*. His attempts have been in vain, because the scattered post-modernists of the world, Tiefensee among them, have nevertheless adopted the terms (sometimes over their own objections) as fundamental principles that act as the basis for the foundation of not one but many intellectual communities.

Derridean fundamental principles serve the same function as fundamental principles in other communities. They are social codes which both inform strategies for apprehending the world (in the post-structuralist context, deconstruction) and govern the behaviour of the group's members. They are not beliefs that are subject to the normal give and take of "rational" discussion or argument. As Tiefensee demonstrates, adherence to Derridean principles has important social consequences for what believers can write or say, and they also provide a means to evaluate whether what has been said is in conformity with the central belief.

To this extent, post-structuralists are no different than any other human community for which belief is criterion of membership or *identity*. Citing the example of scientists, Thomas Kuhn writes: "Though the historian can always find men – Priestly, for instance – who were unreasonable to resist for as long as they did, he will not find a point at which resistance becomes illogical or unscientific. At most, he may wish to say that the man who continues to resist after his whole profession has *converted* has ipso facto *ceased to be a scientist*." (159) [Emphasis mine]

The attachment of a tribe of intellectuals or scientists to its fundamental principles is no different than the attachment of a community based on religious belief to its fundamental principles. For example, even as she asserts that Derridean deconstruction is neither a method, nor a technique, but a strategy, Tiefensee treats it like gospel. The playfulness and uncertainty that is part of Derrida's writings, the institutionalized and continual rebellion, is articulated by Tiefensee instead as a series of *imperatives* of the most conservative kind. From the codes of Derridean principles Tiefensee has constructed a Derridean matrix of morality and poetics, which she then uses to evaluate Kroetsch.

If we read Tiefensee strategically, we see that her argument that Derridean deconstruction is the *only way* to recognize difference is a bid to (re-)assert control over the way in which a critical community writes and thinks. She does so by undermining the *status* of its putative leader, Robert Kroetsch (Bob to some, Mr. Canadian post-modernism to others) and of the group as a whole, whom she accuses of "sloppy scholarship...and of using a hodge-podge of ideas."

These issues of strategy, of the assertion of control and the realignment of status structures, are not incidental to the Derridean strategy as articulated by Tiefensee, they are at its very heart. The propagation of post-modernism and of deconstruction in particular is due to its effectiveness as a strategy by which an oppressed or marginalized group can reject a

value system imposed upon it by an imperial or class hierarchy, and assert its own status and value instead. David Williams writes:

> The relevance of post-modern theory for Western Canadian writing is fairly obvious. It refutes the political authority of the centre; it rejects the binary oppositions of two founding cultures in favour of the whole spectrum of excluded middles. In Bob Kroetsch's terms, we have resisted the temptation of the single for the allure of multiplicity. (277)

Post-modern theory, in Canada and elsewhere was a highly successful strategy for the acquisition of *status*, not only by the communities and groups whose identity could be revalued by casting off or challenging traditional status structures, but the critics themselves whose careers flourished as a result.

Paul Feyerabend noted in *Against Method* that attacks on the central presuppositions that formed the basis of a human community's belief systems evoked the same "taboo" reaction whether the community beliefs were theological, philosophical or scientific in nature.

> According to Horton, the central ideas of myth are regarded as sacred. There is anxiety about threats to them. One 'almost never finds a confession of ignorance' and events 'which seriously defy the established lines of classification where they occur evoke a 'taboo reaction'. Basic beliefs are protected by this reaction as well by the device of 'secondary elaborations' which, in our terms, are a series of *ad hoc* hypotheses. [Horton's view is that] science, on the other hand, is characterized by an 'essential scepticism'; when failures come thick and fast, defence of the theory switches inexorably to attack on it...We can see Horton has read his Popper well. A field study of science itself shows a very different picture.

> Such a study reveals that, while some scientists may proceed as described, the great majority follow a different path. Scepticism is at a minimum; it is directed against the view of the opposition and against minor ramifications of one's own basic ideas, never against the basic ideas themselves. Attacking the basic ideas evokes taboo reactions which are no weaker than are the taboo reactions in so-called primitive societies. Nor is science prepared to make theoretical pluralism the foundation for research...The similarities between science and myth are indeed astonishing. (297-298)

Whether they are philosophical, theological or post-structuralist in nature, the social and tribal significance of fundamental principles are concealed by the approach Derrida takes in his examination of Western metaphysics. The discussion of metaphysics itself, as well as the treatment of language and ideas as "systems" subject to logical analysis in Derridean

deconstruction conceals a transcendentalist strategy that Derrida shares with Plato. The birth of the Ideal took place with the discovery of mathematical forms and formulas whose truths were independent of the contingencies of space, time or human existence. Geometric forms like triangles and circles provided access to eternal truth above the human sphere. The epistemological strategy of treating phenomena as independent of human activity thus became a criterion for access to truth. It also created a realm of philosophical investigation, that of metaphysics, that maintains its "high" status because the very objects of its study are beyond the realm of that unfortunate monkey, the human. At best they may be connected, as per Descartes, via the pineal gland.

Implicit in this strategy is a devaluing of the *material* – in this case, the human – in favour of what is really important and "profound": the metaphysical. The result of this Idealist strategy, whether in its explicit use in theology or in its implicit and concealed use in Derridean deconstruction, is to suppress, devalue, and in fact deny the existence of a material basis to many metaphysical questions — like consciousness, identity and meaning. This strategy also conceals the material significance and value of the theological or post-structuralist beliefs themselves: namely, the ways in which these fundamental beliefs change the way humans live their lives.

The focus on metaphysical questions and of the "high theory" at the expense of a "practical" account is not simply a question of a mistaken priority: it is a practice that denies and conceals the material basis of the ideas themselves. It is not that this theoretical approach doesn't take into account "everyday use" or the give and take of social relations. It is that the practice of philosophy itself requires the separation of metaphysical issues from the muck of humanity. It is derived from the mistaken belief that we can better understand these phenomena by separating them from their social and human context, when in doing so we lose any possibility of understanding them. In treating ideas as separate from humanity, we

cut them off from the context that gives them meaning. Small wonder then, that theorists can find no basis for meaning.

The formal simplicity of logic demands that the complexities and messiness of the world be either reduced or eliminated, for the sake of formal elegance rather than any correspondence with the world. Without these metaphysical presuppositions, we are left with a situation that reduces human communities to groups of rambling apes without any rhetorical advantage or basis for their behaviour other than the Darwinian principles of strategies for survival.

This is in fact the situation at hand. It is because the entire basis of language, meaning and identity are actually informed by tribal and status structures about which these metaphysical notions are based (core beliefs and presuppositions like belief in God, or post-structuralism, or bowling) *not because of the ideas themselves* but for Darwinian reasons – that humans have evolved as social animals whose identity is based on three fundamental aspects: the basic unit of the tribe, position in the status structure of the tribe, and finally the characteristic strategies the individual uses to control others, to interact with others, and in the acquisition of status.

We should follow Wittgenstein's advice about philosophizing: "Look, don't think!" Stop thinking about the ideas and look at the way they affect and constrict people's interactions. What counts is the way these beliefs and principles change the way one lives one's life.

Tiefensee's book is an example of what happens when the rubber of abstract theorizing, whether of the theological or post-structuralist variety, hits the road of social reality: moralizing in the name of philosophical rectitude. Post-structuralism has provided us with a welter of poetic taboos that apply to form, genre and entire media (like painting). Tiefensee illustrates and articulates these taboos as Kroetsch's thought-crimes: a suspect metaphysics of identity; a predilection for the Quest and Myth-forms; use of terms like "sacred" and "Poet as

Hero": all clearly the behaviour of a repressive closet Hegelian, who feigned post-modernism

while using the forms and ideas of The Enemy.

Possibly the best example of the repressive result of Tiefensee's application of Derridean

principles is related to her treatment of Voice. She picks apart Frank Davey writing about

Kroetsch:

> Davey's emphasis on the significance of the speech *act*, with his insistence that
> 'meaning is created in the act of speaking,' does exactly what Kroetsch's emphasis
> on the oral tradition does. It prioritizes Voice, just as "our culture's tendency," our
> traditional mode of thought, has always done. And the "logocentric and phonocentric
> elements in Western culture" are undisturbed. (38)

As a result of post-structuralist wariness about the significance of Voice, Dennis

Cooley, in his hymn of praise to colloquial speech in literary form, *The Vernacular Muse*,

feels obliged to not only parenthesize but italicize, "I would add, however, and hope that

readers will not overlook this point: *Ong does not promote, nor do I promote, oral culture*

above print culture...The point is to reopen some space for orality in the face of a print

culture which, allowing for Derrida's larger argument, has consolidated itself as the measure

of literature, and which in its applications on the prairies works in damaging ways." (196-

197)

And not just on the prairies. Derridean concerns about privileging Voice are related

to the notion of Presence, which he claims is the foundation of Western metaphysics. This

neat bit of theorizing ignores the practical and historical significance of the ways writing has

been valued over speech in cultures the world over for centuries. In almost every social

hierarchy in which literacy existed for the past several thousand years, literacy has been

confined to the top of the status and power structure, often as the basis for secret and

Hermetic knowledge restricted to initiates. Prior to the invention of the printing press, books

were virtually confined to the religious power structure of Europe. And while books cost

money, talk is cheap: so the stories and records that are passed down fail to record the words

of those who are disenfranchised, dispossessed, and of low status. The Derridean association

of Voice with Western Metaphysics and hierarchy, oppression, etc., ignores the social and political reality that the oral tradition is the tradition of those very classes and peoples he, his fellow post-structuralists – and presumably Tiefensee – are seeking to clear a space for.

Aside from the political and social significance of the historical "privileging" of writing and voice, the spoken and written word function differently as media for the transmission of information[ii]. The spoken word contains more information than the written word – literally. In terms of information theory, the "channel capacity" of speech is higher than that of text. We can resolve more of the listener's uncertainty about what the message means because we provide information about *what* we are saying – the information content of the words – in the *way* we are saying it. If we are actually engaged in conversation with someone, we can also engage in feedback – we can ask for something to be repeated, or elaborated, ask whether we can get something "straight". Speech contains inflections and tone that indicate emotional affect – pleading, flatness, delight, despair, and horror that are absent in text.

The written word thus requires either modifiers to express tone, which stylistically makes for weak writing, or the specific choice of the right words. Writing has a permanence that the spoken word does not. It is this permanence that helps lend the written word its value. Text on a page doesn't change and we need not ask it to repeat itself, because and we can go back to look at what has been written. The spoken word contains more information but it is also ephemeral, bound in time, in a way that the written word is not. Until the invention of sound recording, there was no way of "going back to check" to see if something had really been said. So writing, being at least semi-permanent, needs less redundant information than speech does. Cooley notes the characteristics of the written-down-spoken-word, in what he calls "ear poetry" in his *Placing The Vernacular*:

> The audible poem, however, exists in time and it engages or seeks to engage some listener. It tends to be more boisterous, to ramble in loose episodic structure and in

paratactic connections...Less descriptive of setting, it will be more populated by people. So it will be less meditative and more social. (17)

What Cooley identifies as "rambling" is a form of redundancy: even without the "back and forth" of a conversation, when we speak we will often make the same point several times, sometimes in different ways. These redundancies are unnecessary in print because the medium doesn't require it. But those things that are habitually stripped out of language for written purposes are usually the things that give it (and its speakers) character: idiosyncratic use, turns of phrase, low speech, cursing, mispronunciations. Aside from the tonal or emotional content, the spoken word contains a wealth of information about identity. Accents and manner of speech indicate social class, education, ideological affiliation, ethnicity and status. The social correctness of grammar is a matter not only of etiquette but also of fundamental social structure. We are acutely aware of these differences and can readily identify them.

That the applications of Derrida's theory "works in damaging ways... on the prairies," is unlikely to drive diehard Derrideans from their ideological commitment. Being self-defeating in the pursuit of your strategy is ironic without necessarily being fallacious. However, the fundamental fallacy of Derridean reasoning is that he trancendentalizes, or idealizes processes and phenomena like consciousness, meaning, and language and ideas. Langu: ₃e, as per Saussure, is not a logical system of differences based on binary logic. It is an information process and structure that exists and takes place in the meat of a human head, governed by the rules of information theory, cybernetics, and neurology. As such it remains probabilistic and uncertain. It is a social interaction that takes place between members of the primate species *homo sapiens*. Not *Il n'y a pas d'hors texte*, but *Il n'y a pas d'hors tête*. There is nothing outside of the head.

Meaning also occurs as part of an information process in the human head. Discussions of meaning have been hampered because they seem to derive their analysis from the wrong

contraction of the word "significance". They dwell on the term "sign" or on "symbols" and discuss how it is that one piece of information can stand in for another, rather than analysing "meaning" as a synonym for "significance": importance. value. worth. Meaning is simply the result of the process by which we assign a *value* to information through an interpretive code. I will discuss in greater detail how this relatively simple process works in the next chapter, but as literary critics we already very familiar with the ways in which codes – cultural and otherwise – play a role in determining both the expression of meaning and its interpretation. Capital-M "Meaning", of the universal type, is almost impossible to ascertain (or assert) not only because of the diversity of individual humans and of the cultural and individual interpretive codes they have, but also because information depends on immediate social and historical context and experience – on what is actually happening, on what is going to happen.

<div align="center">*   *   ●</div>

The Derridean approach, like that of most of the Western philosophical tradition, has also, however, served to conceal (as metaphysical presuppositions tended to do) its own social function, namely in acting as a fundamental code that both guides social strategies and provides its members with a more or less fixed identity based on those beliefs and strategies. The "real" significance of central codes is in the way they end determining meaning and controlling the way people live their lives.

In appealing to any kind of metaphysics, whether western or otherwise, in accounting for any human process of thought, consciousness or meaning, we might as just well be writing off explanations by attributing phenomena to magic, spirits, demonic possession, fairies, elves, aliens or God. When Tiefensee writes, following Derrida, that "Our thought, our language, and our relations with one another are governed by a metaphysics of identity that cannot be other than repressive, for it is based upon a dialectic that seeks to negate and

conserve the other in the Self,"(26) my reaction to it is ultimately not so much that it is wrong, but that it — and much of the Derridean argument — is beside the point.

A Darwinian or evolutionary approach does not mean that we entirely discard the question of metaphysics or the questions posed by Derrida entirely. Rather, we look at how Derrida's articulation of metaphysics functions *strategically*. As such, a Darwinian view — at least in my articulation of it - subsumes post-structuralism simply in treating it as a particular cultural strategy used by the tribe of post-structuralists that serves as a code both for navigating the world and for the acquisition of status. It has, up to this point, been extraordinarily successful, both as a tool for emancipation for marginalized, low-status groups, and in increasing the status and thus careers of academics. This is not meant as a criticism; it is a statement of fact.

The Darwinian view offers no more concrete answers as to the meaning of life, though I think it does provide us with a better context. Natural selection is a two-stage process: the first stage is a species' random "articulation" of survival strategies in the bid to survive and reproduce. This process is random and driven by chance. The second stage — whether the strategy is effective — is determined by the world. Successful strategies go on to perpetuate themselves. Unsuccessful ones do not.

Despite the fact that evolution has been more or less universally accepted as the account by which humans, and indeed all of life on earth came into being, there is still resistance to using it as a means of accounting for what are usually called the "highest" of human phenomena — art, consciousness, language, and so on. Critics seem to feel that these things are too important and valuable to be accounted for in Darwinian evolutionary terms, when the very reverse is true. Those things that are the most important, that elicit the most violent reactions and taboos — sex, violence, attacking "fundamental" beliefs — are important precisely because they *are* related to survival strategies. The significance of sex in this regard hardly needs to be emphasized: it is the means by which humans perpetuate themselves.

While a materialist, Darwinian, information-based account of meaning and identity differs from post-modernism in its fundamental principles, it should not be mistaken for the Social Darwinism of the early 20th century, which treated evolution as an endorsement for then-current class structures and racist ideology. Explaining an aspect of human existence as an evolutionary survival strategy is not an endorsement of its value, just an account of why it may be significant. That a strategy is both possible and successful are not criteria for its rightness or wrongness: that is why we evolved ethics.

How Meaning Happens: strategy and cybernetics

> And yet, whether in a philosophic sense (Kant's sense), or an empirical and evolutionary sense, judgment is the most important faculty we have. An animal, or a man, may get on very well without 'abstract attitude' but will speedily perish if deprived of judgment. Judgment must be the *first* faculty of higher life or mind – yet it is ignored, or misinterpreted, by classical (computational) neurology."
> Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* (19-20)

The most intransigent mysteries of the universe are mostly due to not understanding the way information works as a physical process[iii]. Life is an information process that seeks to reproduce itself: we know this much thanks to the discovery of genetics. We also understand, and commonly discuss, the way in which cultural and personal interpretive codes work to assign meaning to language. Our bodies maintain themselves by detecting and controlling different levels of chemicals, minerals, water and food in our bodies, and our immune system, too, is clearly an information system.

The difficulty, I think, is threefold: first, in understanding how information works in both biological and non biological systems as a cybernetic process that exercises and adjusts control through *feedback*; second, that the rules governing the way information behaves *are the same in all media and at all levels of existence*, whether at the molecular level of DNA or at the level of human language; and third, that a single cybernetic process, easily described, can be used as a universal "building block" to account for all biological information processes, from life to consciousness to meaning. This may seem improbable, but is in fact part of the way in which information works: Jeremy Campbell writes that "The power of a small number of fixed rules to produce an unpredictable amount of complexity is very striking." (105)

Information Theory: Codes and Communication

Information theory itself, in its dictionary definition, is said *not* to be concerned with

meaning, only with the transmission of a message with a minimum of interference, or

"noise":

> The fact that a message may have a meaning is irrelevant to the engineering problem,
> which is concerned with the ability to encode, transmit, and decode an actual
> message selected from a set of possible messages with which the communication
> system claims to deal.[2]

Claude Shannon articulated information theory in two papers in 1948. His concern was

"dealing with the problem of sending messages from one place to another quickly,

economically, and efficiently." (GM 17) His great achievement was in finding a way of

defining information that allowed for it to be treated formally: "By treating information in

clearly defined but wholly abstract terms, Shannon was able to generalize it, establishing laws

that hold good not for a few types of information, but for all kinds, everywhere."(17) [IV]

The information theory model should be familiar to literary critics as Roman

Jakobson's communications model of literary criticism, which places literary approaches at

different points along the communications transfer: the message, an encoder, a line, and a

decoder. N. Katharine Hayles has also used, and badly misunderstood, information theory in

her book *Chaos and Order*. [V] The way in which she misunderstands it, however, is highly

instructive.

Shannon suggested that there was an "ideal code" for any given channel capacity, but

that the maximum possible messages can be sent by a code that strikes a balance between

order and chaos. Hayles thought that Shannon was discounting the value of chaos, which she

identified with multiplicity and freedom, multiple readings. Her misunderstanding is brought

to light by an example of precisely what Shannon was talking about.

---

[2] The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought

Shannon's theory showed that the greatest possible number of messages occurs when at the mean – when there is a balance of structure and free play. Hayles makes the mistake of thinking that order provides the opportunity for fewer messages and chaos provides more. At the extremes of order and chaos, messages are not coherent or even possible. An example of too much order is a code that only allows you to send one message, like a TV channel that can only broadcast a totally black screen. At the chaotic end of the spectrum, you have a channel that is "white noise" – hissing and snow. This is not a cornucopia of boundless information in which all meanings are possible: it is noise from which no message can be retrieved.

The mean of order and variety is in fact reached by TV channels themselves, where the limits on the information conveyed are imposed by the "channel capacity" of the medium itself: the refresh rate, range of colours and resolution of the screen and the audio range of the speakers. Shannon understood, as Hayles clearly does not, that freedom and flexibility are contingent on order. As Bentham had it, "Freedom for the pike is death for the minnows." Hayles has failed to grasp another point of information theory that relates to both chaos and order, which was Shannon's emphasis on novelty, change and uncertainty as a function of a message. The brain responds to information to which we are continually exposed by treating it as noise, and ultimately ignoring it. The important function of freedom and uncertainty are thus crucial to an understanding of how messages are transmitted.

Codes, too, are a kind of information (GM 256): control information. A "text" may be considered an utterance, or a communication, but a message can include the transmission of control information in the same language as communication. *We can increase the certainty with which a message will be received and correctly interpreted by including in the message the way it should be interpreted.*

The implications for this are obvious when we look at how information functions in literature. "Control" or "interpretive" information provides a work with its form or structure.

This can be done either explicitly or implicitly: in literary terms, control information is what gives a work *form*. Implicit control information relies on literary conventions – on cultural codes that the writer can rely upon the reader to have. Explicit interpretive information can either be diegetic, or explanatory, and is in large part what defines post-modern poetics: it exposes structure by explicitly telling the reader what they mean.

In information theory, codes determine what is and isn't information. Arthur Koestler has a relevant passage explaining codes, matrices, and strategy from his *Act of Creation*:

> "The code is the fixed, invariable factor in a skill or habit; the matrix its variable aspect. The two words do not refer to different entities, they refer to different aspects of the same activity. When you sit in front of the chessboard your code is the rule of the game determining which moves are permitted, your matrix is the total of possible choices before you. Lastly, the choice of the actual move among the variety of permissible moves is a matter of strategy, guided by the lie of the land – the 'environment' of other chessmen on the board.
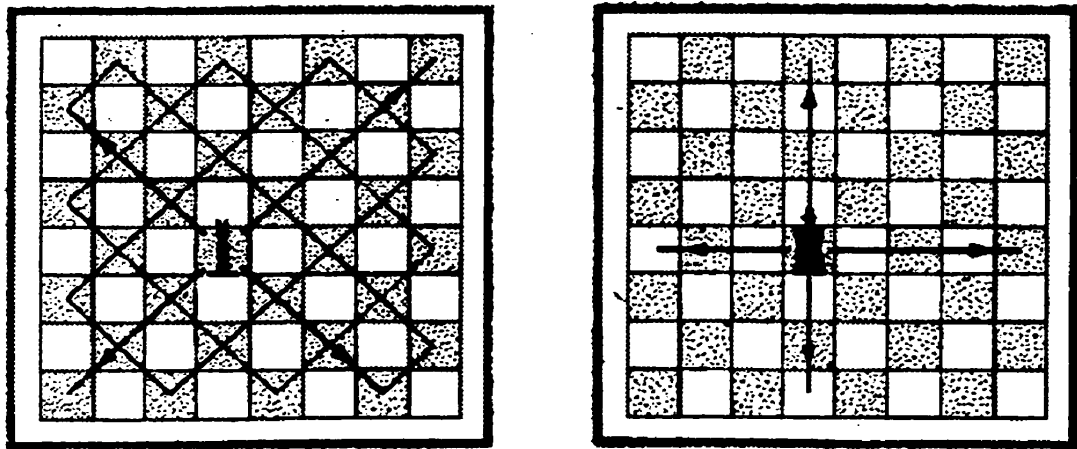
Figure 4

A chess player looking at an empty board with a single bishop on it does not see the board as a uniform mosaic of black and white squares but as a kind of magnetic field with lines of force indicating the bishop's possible moves: the board has become patterned, as in *Fig. 4* shows the pattern of the rook.

When one thinks of "matrices" and "codes" it is sometimes helpful to bear these figures in mind. The matrix is the pattern before you, representing the ensemble of permissible moves. The code which governs the matrix can be put into simple mathematical equations which contain the essence of the pattern in compressed, "coded" form: or it can be expressed by the word 'diagonals'." (41-42)

The matrix and code govern the rules and possible moves of the pieces. But there is

an additional aspect of the code that Koestler has not noticed. He says, "Lastly, the choice of

the actual move among the variety of permissible moves is a matter of strategy, guided by the

lie of the land – the 'environment' of other chessmen on the board." Concealed within this

statement are first of all the *motivation* – the goal to be achieved by the strategy; second, the

means of *interpretation* – being able to "read" the environment of the other chessmen; and

third, a means for *control with feedback* – choosing strategy based on the anticipated and real

response from the other player.

While information theory focuses on communication, this information process is

concerned with control: this is the realm of cybernetics.

Cybernetics: Code, Control and Feedback

While the purpose of information theory is to strive towards the transmission of a

noise-free coherent message[3], cybernetics is "the science of control and communication in the

animal and the machine." Cybernetics states that information has two radically different

aspects to it; that it can both control and communicate. Norbert Weiner makes the distinction

clear:

> In giving the definition of Cybernetics, I classed communication and control together.
> When I control the actions of another person, I communicate a message to him, and
> although this message in the imperative mood, *the technique of communication does
> not differ from that of a message of fact.*" (24) [Emphasis mine]

We can use the same language to control someone or something ("Come here.") as

we do to communicate with them ("It's raining outside.").

The best way to understand how a cybernetic information process works is to

examine it in a simple mechanical form. Old-style thermostats that work using mercury

switches are very simple. They consist of a coiled spring made of metal that readily expands

---

[3] To see it at work, send yourself an e-mail

28

and contracts in response to changes in temperature with a mercury switch attached that turns the furnace on and off. The switch is a glass vial containing mercury and two unconnected wires at one end. When the mercury flows over the wires, electricity flows and it ignites the furnace.

If the house is cold, and we set the thermostat to high, twisting the dial tips the vial, the mercury runs down and makes a connection between two wires, closing the connection and switching on the furnace. As the air heats, the spring extends, tipping the vial until, at the desired temperature, it tips and the mercury flows away from the connection, turning the furnace off.

The code of the thermostat determines everything:

1) Motivation or "goal": keep the temperature at or about X.

2) Interpretation or *meaning*: The motivation, or desired temperature, determines the thermostat's "interpretation" of information: under temperature x is cold, over temperature y is hot;

3) Strategy: These are the instructions of what to do given certain information (If temperature = x, then turn furnace on, if temperature = y then turn furnace off).

4) Control: information that turns the furnace on or off.

5) Feedback: the thermostat adjusts its behaviour because it can evaluate its own control through a *feedback loop*.

The thermostat shows in the simplest possible way that information, interpretation and control can be encoded together as part of a physical process that is *continually active* in taking in information and *continually responsive* to change. It also shows how "meaning" is assigned to information by a *code that governs a goal-oriented process, or strategy*.

Meaning is the process of assigning significance, importance or value to a piece of information within the context of a strategy. It is only within the context of such a strategy

that "mere" information has meaning. The importance that the code plays in assigning

meaning to information led Saussure to erroneously assert that language was merely a system

of differences. A code without "inputs" does not generate any meaning at all – it is only in the

physical act of interpretation, at the moment of interaction of information and code, that

meaning. or significance occurs.

Only in the context of a goal-oriented process – a cybernetic process of control and

communication – is value assigned to meaning. This thermostat is the simplest example of a

code-driven cybernetic process that I could conceive: a spring with a mercury switch that

draws its information from physical changes in air temperature. Yet this simple cybernetic

complex provides a model for *all* cybernetic processes and strategies, living and otherwise: it

is the simple algorithm "if information is x, then issue command y". Codes determine the

"goal-orientedness" of a process. As a thermostat shows, there are processes in the world that

are information processes without being life processes: life is distinguished by the *code*, the

goal of self-propagation. The code will also determine the strategy by which this goal will be

achieved. *Every aspect of life, every evolutionary strategy is governed by this process,*

operating at different levels of scale, from DNA to consciousness.

This goal-oriented, strategic cybernetic complex describes the very first iteration of

life, whose fundamental command code is "COPY SELF". In order to fulfill this command,

the living information complex evolves a strategy for doing so. The feedback as to whether

the strategy is successful or not is supplied by natural selection: if it is a strategy that

corresponds to the world, it will live and pass on its command codes to a new generation of

primordial soup-dwellers. If its is not, it will die. I don't think that I have to overexplain the

extent to which this command code ("COPY SELF") serves as the mechanism for desire in

human beings. But the same code applies for fear, or horror: "IF BEAR, THEN FEAR". This

complex is the information mechanism that makes up what Freud called drives, or what

Deleuze and Guattari called the machines of desiring-production. The same process drives all

strategies. whether those of "desire" or of Kristevan "horror: the command codes determine, as part of a single process. meaning. goal and response.

But the structure of a code also shows that what we normally think of as two opposing forces. chaotic drives or urges on the one hand and the control or suppression of them on the other. are in fact *different aspects of the same cybernetic process*. There has been no small amount of ink spilled on the idea of dynamic tension between opposites, with many philosophical theories of creativity based on it: the Hegelian synthesis of opposites, or the Nietzschean conception of a struggle between the Appolonian and Dionysian, the Heideggerian struggle between "earth" and "the world" – indeed, the struggle between order and chaos.

Theoretically speaking, the algorithm of "if x, then y" could be filled in with anything. But such strategies are constrained by *feedback through interaction with the world*: this is the process of natural selection itself. Varieties of life evolve different strategies randomly and are either "rewarded" with propagation or "pruned" by extinction.

Evolutionary Strategies and Human Meaning

As I asserted above, meaning *happens* as a process of assigning value to information within the context of a strategy governed by a code. The most important strategies humans have are our survival strategies; therefore they generate the greatest significance.

Humans have an evolutionary strategy that sets them apart from all other species: we are cultural animals. There are actually four components to this strategy, only one of which truly sets humans apart. The first component is a strategy we share with many other species, from primates to social insects: we are both tribal and territorial. There is strength in numbers, and as a matter of instinct, we find pleasure in the company of others and experience anxiety or even agony when alienated from the tribe. Adopting tribalism as a survival strategy has resulted in a secondary strategy, namely the acquisition of status within

the tribe. This, too, is a strategy shared with many species among the "higher" animals. There are no termite social climbers. It is only the third strategy that sets humans apart: no other species relies on survival strategies acquired after birth – on learning – to the degree that we do. Together, these strategies comprise identity for the human individual: tribal membership, place in the status structure and the characteristic strategies that they deploy that make up their personality: the way they read and navigate the world, and the strategies they use in their interactions with others.

All survival strategies are contingent on the fact that we are bound by time.[4] There are two aspects to uncertainty about transmitting information: one is the difficulty of maintaining order in a disorderly universe: the other is the inevitable constraint of *time*. As information theory states, a message is a series of events structured in time. Traditional philosophy, and indeed much of science, seeks to find truths that are universally and eternally true perhaps as a way of assuaging that anxiety.

But there is no information from the future: that is what makes it the future. The present is defined by the continual burn of electrochemicals that is our consciousness. As a result, we have information from the past, from the present and from within our own minds. Our consciousness consists of more than a kind of filing cabinet of episodic memories. We arm ourselves against the uncertainty of the future through anticipation. The survival value of a capacity to anticipate future events based on present or past activity – in other words, inductive knowledge – is obvious enough. An organism that can anticipate that another creature is going to eat it will propagate considerably more successfully than one that doesn't.

---

[4] I suspect that there is a more intimate and fundamental relationship between information and time as it exists in the universe than I can discuss with any expertise: however, many of the peculiar effects of Einsteinian relativity are due to the ways in which information (time) remain constant in different frames of reference – moving frames of reference (ie, passengers in spacecraft travelling at high speed) change the rate at which time "burns". Information travelling between frames of references is thus distorted in unexpected ways, resulting in a number of Einsteinian paradoxes.

Our awareness of time engenders deep anxieties about the uncertainty of the future. This is another aspect of our consciousness that set us apart from other animals. At all levels of society we see efforts to conquer the future, using both superstitious and rational means: psychics, prophets, astrologers, and indeed many rationalist systematists (economists among them) seek to find ways in which information from the present and the past can be used to predict the future.

Being cultural makes humans flexible in the way that our "hard-wired" survival strategies end up manifesting themselves: we have to learn strategies that other animals are literally "born knowing" and it accounts for the variations in human culture, like language, status structures and technology. The cultural development of each of these strategies, like any evolutionary strategy, is determined by feedback.

Selection of successful strategies is governed by feedback, but because we have several different survival strategies, they are selected through feedback from several different sources. The most important strategies to us are still "how to do things". Such strategies must still correspond to the world: we have to eat, drink, clothe and shelter ourselves. Survival strategies which do not conform to the world (for the moment I do not include other humans) will speedily result in death. The value of the strategy is to find the best way to X.

However, because humans have evolved the strategy of being social animals for whom acquiring status is also a means of survival, our second source of feedback in evolving strategies relates to *transactions with humans*. The value of a strategy is whether it lets us "get ahead" by acquiring status. (These two strategies are mixed, since coming up with a better way to do things can in itself function as a way to get ahead.) In other words, strategies for the acquisition of status need only correspond to human status structures and hierarchies, and not at all to the world.

The final information strategy relates to consciousness itself: the brain consists of cybernetic complexes and informational structures that are sources of information in

themselves: the control aspect of cybernetics is a message in itself, and the combination of many information structures within the brain means that "informational strategies" need not be limited by information from the world at all, but *feedback and information within the brain itself.* This process is the very nature of consciousness. Informational strategies within the brain are therefore constricted *only by other information strategies and cybernetic complexes,* and not by either the world or social constraints. This allows for our flights of fancy and the generative processes of creativity, and indeed for the formulation of logically coherent information structures that have no correspondence to the way the world or human society works.

Realizing the different ways in which our survival strategies are rewarded has important consequences for the our exploration of the world. As Norbert Weiner writes,

> The scientist is always working to discover the order and organization of the universe, and is thus playing a game against the arch enemy, disorganization. Is this devil Manichaean or Augustinian? The Manichaean devil is an opponent, like any other opponent, who is determined on victory and will use any trick of craftiness or dissimulation to obtain this victory. In particular, he will keep his policy of confusion secret, and if we show any signs of beginning to discover his policy, he will change it to keep us in the dark. On the other hand the Augustinian devil, which is not a power in itself, but a measure of our own weakness, may require our full resources to uncover, but when we have uncovered it, and in a certain sense exorcised it, and it will not alter its policy on a matter already decided with the mere intention of confounding us further…Compared with this Manichean being of refined malice, the Augustinian devil is stupid. He plays a difficult game, but he may be defeated by our intelligence as thoroughly as by a sprinkle of holy water. (50)

The universe is *both* Manichaean and Augustinian. The hard sciences, like physics and chemistry are Augustinian; their laws can be described, formalized, and predictions made which are true independent of time or place. But the "soft" sciences – including some biology and all of those involving human activity, are Manichaean, precisely because they are based on evolutionary and behavioural strategies. Life in many of its forms meets strategy with counter-strategy. This accounts for its complexity, diversity and richness.

"Theories" are the formal articulation of strategies for understanding the world. The validity of a theory is determined through feedback: theories are tested against the world. But

because humans are social animals there is another significant source of feedback in which strategies are not rewarded or pruned on the basis "the way the world works". They are rewarded and reinforced because they are successful survival strategies based on the acquisition of status, all of which is borne out by the speed with which almost any "scientific" theory is co-opted and transformed into a justification for continuing to perpetrate some social wrong.

Our evolutionary strategy of being cultural means that we do not have to concern ourselves with the basic needs of subsistence: more strategic importance is attached to achieving high social status. Our evolutionary strategy of being a social animal means that one of the fundamental generators of meaning is social status itself. High status = high importance and value, low status = low importance and value. The significance is not just a question of snobbery: the division between "low" and "high" is the division that is the underlying basis of the split between the material world and the metaphysical one. It is the hidden basis for idealism: worldliness and humanity are low and debased, heavenliness and transcendence are powerful and good.

Attempts to analyze language or meaning "scientifically" cut it off from the very human strategies and status structures that are the basis of meaning. "Language exists for the communication of ideas," wrote C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards in their *The Meaning of Meaning*, in which they tried to articulate a "science of symbolism". The degree to which their ideas of "importance" "value" and "meaning" are intermingled with our social hierarchies is illustrated nicely, though I think unintentionally, in their preface:

> "The practical importance of a science of Symbolism even in its present undeveloped form needs little emphasis. All the more elaborate forms of social and intellectual life are affected by changes in our attitude towards, and our use of, words. How words work is commonly regarded as a purely theoretical matter, of little interest to practical persons. It is true, that the investigation must at times touch upon somewhat abstruse questions, but its disregard by practical persons is nevertheless short-sighted. *The view that language works well enough as it is can only be held by those who use it merely in such affairs as could be conducted without it – the business of the paper-*

boy or the butcher, for instance, where all that needs to be referred to can equally well be pointed at." [Emphasis mine]

Richards is of course the modernist pioneer of the close reading. Even a peremptory application of his technique quickly shows the way language works in a practical, not a theoretical sense – and not at all the way that Ogden & Richards say it does.

> "The importance (*high status and value*) of a "Science of symbolism" is self-evident (*embedded as a totem of status in our culture*) in order to analyze the "more elaborate forms of *social* and *intellectual* life" (*life as carried on by persons of high social status and value*); how words work is "theoretical" and therefore "of little interest" to "practical persons" (*beyond the intellectual capacity of persons of low status, value and importance*). Finally, the only people who can maintain that "language works well enough as it is" (*persons of no ambition*) don't really need language at all to do what they do, namely "the paper-boy or the butcher" (*tradespeople and therefore persons of low social status and value*)."

What a person of high status does is important, and what a person of low status does is not. It's part of why we have "high art" and "low comedy". Insults or bad words are of two categories: profanity, which debases the sacred, and obscenity, which debases the body. In "elevated" discourse, the language of high status professions and disciplines, we favour latinates, the language not only of ancient empire but of the medieval religious hierarchy, as if they offered some special conduit to Truth. Our vulgarities are those of the Anglo-Saxons conquered by the French aristocracy nearly one thousand years ago.

Language is at once our most malleable and cultural evolutionary strategy. It is the medium we use to assert and communicate all of our other evolutionary strategies: it the means by which we instill tribal and cultural codes in growing minds, the means by which we negotiate, assert and bestow status between fellow members of the tribe. Often, as in the case of national identities, a language serves as the central basis of the identity of the tribe itself. In order to understand the significance of language as an identifier of status and identity, we need only look at variations in accents within a language. An "educated " listener can quickly distinguish nationality, status and (if we know enough to recognize it) and the regional origin of many accents.

Hierarchies and status structures within tribes – and within societies as a whole – are maintained through what I will call the homeostasis of identity. Homeostasis is a term that refers to the body's ability to maintain "internal stability" despite external changes. Our position in a status structure is relative. We define others and are defined ourselves by the "attitudes" of the relationships we have with others: subordinate, dominant, co-operative, combative, friendly, passionate, and so on. These are strategies by which individuals increase, lower, or maintain their status. This makes most people's social position tenuous. The homeostasis of identity – which is arguably our cohesive sense of self – is a response to this, in that it means most humans seek to establish social rigidity by keeping everyone (especially themselves) in their place. This homeostasis of identity creates social pressure to conform in the name of stability, and in fact generates stability itself. It is easy to see how this strategy functions to limit membership in a tribe: non-conformists are spotted and driven out.

The most remarkable aspect of human consciousness is our acquisition of knowledge. It has made us flexible and adaptable, because successful strategies can be acquired through the process of learning. We learn strategies for the purpose both of navigating the world and our own culture, and as such our training is also a period of initiation into both life and the tribe. The actual goal of learning is the acquisition of cultural codes that function not on the basis of slow, conscious evaluation and reason, but instead on quick recognition, or "conditioned reflex".

The pedagogical process has been formalized in all cultures as a rite of initiation and thus of identity transformation. A student begins her studies; she faces a series of tests (literally) of ever increasing difficulty and significance. The process culminates in a crucial test/confrontation which reveals whether she has successfully internalized her lessons (final exam, thesis defense). The outcome of the test determines her status: if successful, her status is elevated. The tribe recognizes the achievement with a ceremony, or ritual of identity transformation (graduation).

The shape of this experience is the shape of myth and of identity transformation in its three manifestations as human survival strategies: personal transformation through the acquisition of new strategies, status elevation (and hence increase in personal worth) and membership in a new tribe. This is also the shape of narrative itself.

The physical process of learning has some paradoxical effects. Strategically speaking, what matters to us is the lesson, not the process of learning or reasoning. Our acquired cultural and perceptual codes are of necessity "invisible" because they are the very codes we use to interpret and navigate the world. It is, in effect, the Freudian process of repression: the means by which we acquire and simultaneously forget our perceptual codes. Repression is a side-effect of the learning process, and need not necessarily be caused by a traumatic or painful event that needs to be forgotten.

It is a truism that our "values" and "codes" define who we are, as individuals and as communities. But just as information of is two kinds, so is experience: transformative and additive, and both can be expressed in the same language. The distinction is illustrated by Mordecai Richler, who in an interview following the publication of *St. Urbain's Horseman*, said that he "wanted to write about experiences that are formative, as opposed to mere events."

Control	Communication
Formative	Events
Transformative	Additive or Cumulative
Code	Content
Paradigmatic	Inductive
Changes our interpretation	Confirms our interpretation
Alters our world view	Builds our world view

Formative and transformative information changes the way you look at the world, while "mere events" add to your knowledge of the world, are cumulative or "inductive". Transformative information changes the values and codes and motivations with which we navigate the world: it alters our worldview, and in so doing, alters ourselves.

Travelling to a new country sometimes results in "culture shock," but the phenomenon is often more acute upon our return. During our travels, our values are incrementally changed as we are immersed in the new culture. We are not aware of the change we have undergone, only to return home and find what we should know best to be both strange and unfamiliar – "to see it again for the first time," as Eliot had it.

Because many of these codes are culturally acquired and shared, we can easily function without being aware of them at all. We tend to be unaware of them precisely because they conceal the degree to which we are tribal and spend time with others of the same cultural background. It is only when we come in intimate contact with someone from another culture that fundamental cultural codes come into relief and we become aware that other people live their lives based on totally different fundamental beliefs.

Such an encounter may be experienced as a kind of moral affront: and while we may remain unaware of the strategic function of our own beliefs, we can quickly see the way in which another culture's belief system uses religious beliefs as a means of maintaining social structure. We will tend to be unaware of the ways in which our own fundamental "irrational" beliefs – myths, transcendental signifiers, what have you – serve the same function: to provide the basis of a single cultural code that is a statement of belief about the world. It is an organizing principle, a fundamental code from which an entire society can spring.

Of the evolutionary strategies that define us, the acquisition of knowledge sets us apart from other animals in interesting and special ways, but it also deceives us. We are set apart from other cultures, past and present by *technology*, which is a cultural survival strategy in itself. This includes all industrial technology, from mechanical to informational, but also includes the technology of writing. These developments, however, also have significant effects on the status structures of our societies, and thus of the way we value the lives of our fellow human beings. So we may suffer progressivist delusions or flatter ourselves with the conviction of our own and our tribe's greatness, despite any personal contribution thereto.

So while we have not changed as a species in tens of thousands of years, we may make the mistake of thinking that human societies in the past somehow knew much less than we do today, or of thinking that the difference in status of another culture that is derived from their lack of technology is due to inherent (ie. genetic) weakness, rather than a cultural difference.

The strategy of being "cultural" – of acquiring information through language and teaching – has a double meaning when we consider the power of art. As I noted above, a message can include instructions for how it is to be interpreted. As a result, art has a long-acknowledged pedagogical function. But the combination of an artist's ability to transmit *codes* in a work paired with the human strategy of learning and acquiring new strategies makes art dangerous: art can change the way you think, and in changing the viewer's strategies, it changes their identity.

The anxiety about the transformative power of information and the danger it poses to the stability of society – or the role it can play in ensuring it - is both great and long-standing. Aristotelian and Horatian poetics are concerned mostly with effective storytelling. Aristotle puts an emphasis on plot and character and on a cohesive narrative with a beginning, a middle and an end. Horace makes further more technical recommendations based on his experience in the theatre, but the twin strategies at the core of his *Ars Poetica* are pedagogy and pleasure: "*aut prodesse aut delectare*, to teach or to delight – or both if possible, because the poet's audience, made up of diverse types, will require both"(67)[5]. For Plato, however, poetry is to serve a different function entirely: recognizing its power and ability to influence the population, Plato bans poets from his ideal Republic. The only permitted use of poetry will be as propaganda, for the creation of "hymns to the gods and praises of famous men."(28)

We take it for granted that writing, especially by a "movement" seeks to transmit certain values to the reader, to persuade them of their values and to "convert" them, for lack

of a better word, to their world-view. This is obviously the case for "earnest" poetic

movements like the Romanticists and Modernists, but is equally true of "ironic' movements

like post-modernists, or of a nihilist like Samuel Beckett. The way in which Beckett's works

break from form and resist convention – the way *Waiting for Godot* goes "nowhere" and is a

story of stasis and unfulfilled expectations – functions in order to transmit Beckett's values

and belief in nihilism and the futility of existence to the audience just as much as a

conventional narrative may convey a message favouring traditional morality, hard work and

so on.

The element of propaganda is even more pronounced in academic or critical writing,

in which an explicit argument aimed at persuading the reader is formulated, and is further

intensified when the *critic* is writing in a "movement" – Neo-Aristotelian, Freudian, Marxist,

post-structuralist, etc. The critic uses propaganda and persuasion both to state their case and

to convert the reader to their point of view – to find another convert to their tribe.

It should be clear that given the rest of my argument, I think that this is literally the

case. Language is a medium for the communication of code, strategies, and thus of values and

meaning. Artistic expression grafts interpretation to communication, combines pedagogy and

propaganda in the very act of communication.

There is, however, another fundamental aspect to communication that we share with

other species: the strategy of territoriality, where communication – whether manifest as

birdsong or a dog's scent on a tree – serves the function of claiming space. Somet:mes the

space is a literal one and connected to a genuine geographical entity: personal property,

provinces, countries. Sometimes the space is a virtual, or rhetorical one.

The prairie post-modernists in *a/long prairie lines* seek to claim the space of the

Canadian Prairie and assert its value as a site of literary discourse. Literature has always

served as a statement of value, in a circular kind of way: places of value are worth writing

---

[5] From the introduction to Horace's *Ars Poetica* in *The Critical Tradition*.

about, and we write about places of value. Thus, writing about a place *is in itself* an assertion of value: it is a strategy for the acquisition or assertion of status. The poems are both pedagogic and propagandistic: they introduce the reader to the history, geography, flora and fauna of the region, while also communicating the cultural codes required to interpret the experience. They act as an initiation into the experience of living on the prairie, using myth-forms as a model to reflect the initiation, immersion, and ascension in status that is part of the transformative power of myth. As Kroetsch wrote, "A lot of my material is profane. But the telling of the story about that material, the language itself, changes itself in some way to what I call sacred."

The prairie post-modernists are, appropriately enough, literary pioneers in that they are seeking to establish a kind of literary infrastructure, a mythos for the prairie. That this is their motivation is not much in doubt, since Cooley, Kroetsch and others make it explicitly clear in their critical writings. Not all writing has this function. What are the conditions that made such writing necessary? The answer is provided by an understanding of the status of Canadian writing within the world, and the prairie within Canada.

> The land should not be called New Land, being composed of stones and horrible rugged rocks ... I did not see one cartload of earth and yet landed in many places ... there is nothing but moss and short, stunted shrub. I am rather inclined to believe that this is the land God gave to Cain.
>> - Jacques Cartier's first impressions of Canada

> Given the region's reputation as flat and empty, "prairie" has accumulated a surprising range of meanings in the Canadian vocabulary.
>> Don Perkins of the University of Alberta reviewing *a/long prairie lines* in the *Journal of Canadian Poetry*

> The centredness of the high modern period – the first half of the twentieth century – made us almost irrelevant to history. I remember the shock, after the Second World War, of reading a popular history of that war and finding Canada mentioned only once – and that in connection with the Dieppe raid. Yet as a high-school student during the war years, I with my community was obsessively concerned with the war. In a high modern world, with its privileged stories, Canada was invisible.
>> Robert Kroetsch, *Disunity as Unity* (22)

> It does not take much boldness to introduce a study dealing with two major Canadian writers such as Margaret Laurence and Robert Kroetsch, and yet they have not received the attention they deserve, at least not outside their native country. *Being Canadian and hence of necessity peripheral*, their work has to force many barriers before reaching the large audiences in the Euro-American metropolitan centres. Again, being Canadian and hence representatives of an ex-colonial settler culture, Laurence and Kroetsch have not been able to command the same interest in the rapidly expanding field of post-colonial criticism as have some Third-World writers.
>> Gunilla Florby – *The Margin Speaks*. [Emphasis mine.]

> So, for others, literature now becomes vigorously rooted – in *our* time and in *our* places, subject to our values, our sense of what is real. It also becomes, for many, vernacularly based in the 'low' and the local, speaking from or for minority groups who have become marginalized (women, the Third World, the poor, the 'uneducated', natives, working people, ethnics, those in 'the hinterland' in short – central to my argument – the disenfranchised). Once the exiled and the shut-out begin to define their own literature, they put the institutions into disrepute...
> Hence the strategy of bringing the oral into the poem. It marks the seeking of a usable discourse in a colonized world. As Robert Kroetsch says, the buggers can't stop us from talking. The strategy here is not so much a finding of the right image, a more correct description, a more fitting version of the colonized world (though it may include that). It means refusing the presented terms or the given boundaries of poetry. Instead, we construct other routes, seek new discourses, which reconstitute the poem beyond any capacity to enforce consent. One major resistance comes through the defiant and joyous sounding of voices which in the past have been considered noisy or sub-literary. Now, celebrated in poetry, they become eminently sub-versive.
>> Dennis Cooley, *The Vernacular Muse in Prairie Poetry* (182-183)

The poetic strategies employed by the prairie post-modernists in *a/long prairie lines* are a function of strategic necessity: the Canadian literary and cultural terrain required it. The statements quoted at the head of this section provide an inkling of the situation. Cooley provides an account for the central impetus of the poems, while the other statements provide an idea of the ways in which other cultural codes – like Jacques Cartier's – value the Canadian landscape and experience differently. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the difficulty in developing a Canadian poetic is bound up in the very things that drive Canada's "Identity Crisis". We are a young country without a long-standing indigenous literary tradition; instead, we have been subject to the literary traditions of the Imperial "mother country" England or the codes of U.S. cultural product. Poetics and conventions are not only rules for writing; they are rules for looking at the world; in the context of other culture's poetics, Canada is not a place that deserves to be the subject of poetry, or indeed of art. Canada is deemed to be of low status, which translates into low value and therefore low meaning. The sense of Canada's own importance is exacerbated by the fact that Canada's cultural invisibility functions regionally within Canada as well as without Canada. Neither does Canada conform to conventional ideas of how national identity works. In both Europe and Asia, we tend to think of nations as the territories occupied by persons of a shared ethnic, linguistic or cultural background.

Writing in an established literary traditions both allows (and often requires) that the codes that provide structure and meaning in the work be *implicit*. When they are implicit, as they are in Modernist poetry, they communicate the codes and values of the culture from which they spring. These codes not only guide the expectations of the audience, they also serve as a poetics. They restrict the possibilities of what can be done and said in literature: but most importantly they function as arbiters of a culture's value and meaning. Authors can

write mimetically, in a kind of shorthand. and readers need not have the significance of terms explained to them; the meaning is "understood" because they are embedded in the audience as cultural interpretive codes.

Post-modern poetics gave Canadian poets the opportunity to change all of that. It articulated a poetics that allowed for writing that made form and structure explicit. Without post-modern poetics. writers would have to continue writing according to "implicit" codes, which in a sense restricts the artist to someone else's palette. This was effectively the case for Canadian writers who tried to apply Romanticist poetics to the Canadian landscape.

English Romantic and Pastoral poetic conventions derived from the quiet of the British Lake District and manicured and cultivated British gardens are ill equipped to deal with a Canadian landscape and climate that can – at their worst – be nothing short of brutal. The poem *Indian Summer*, written by William W. Campbell, serves as a useful contrast and comparison to what the poets are attempting in *a/long prairie lines*, as much for what it does not do as what it does.

> *Indian Summer*
> Along the line of smoky hills
> The crimson forest stands
> And all the day the blue-jay calls
> Throughout the autumn lands.
>
> Now by the brush the maple leans
> With all his glory spread
> And all the sumachs on the hills
> Have turned their green to red.
>
> Now by great marshes wrapt in mist,
> Or past some river's mouth,
> Throughout the long, still autumn day
> Wild birds are flying south.

Campbell has 'Canadianized' a British pastoral poem by means of substitution, replacing English flora and fauna (roses, nightingales etc.) with native Canadian ones – blue-jays, maples, sumachs. Everything about its structure is thoroughly conventional, in the English pastoral tradition. There is a curious, perhaps ironic, element of passivity in the

verbs: the forest *stands*, the maple *leans*, marshes *wrapt in mist*. The result is a kind of Anglicized and tamed landscape.

Smaro Kambourelli noted that the long-standing difficulties of writing in Canada derived from using literary conventions derived from the British literary tradition. She cites Edward Hartley Dewart:

> "Our colonial position, whatever may be its political advantages, is not favourable to the growth of an indigenous literature. Not only are our mental wants supplied by the brain of the Mother Country, under circumstances that utterly preclude competition, but the majority of persons of taste and education in Canada are migrants from the Old Country, whose tenderest affections cling around the land they have left. (xiv)"

Kambourelli goes on to add:

> "Even when this condition is not represented directly as theme, it is thematized in the employment of genre and in the typological use of certain thematic elements: the calling upon the muse for assistance in writing in a culturally barren landscape; description of the uncouth new land; a preoccupation with the sublime (often as a corrective to the foreignness of the landscape) exhortations to the settlers on labour; battles with Indians; love interludes (occasionally allegorical) and certainly praise of England. These sentiments often occur in form of digression from the Canadian material, and almost inevitably in reference to the Old World. (15)

Aside from the absence of indigenous poetic strategies, Canadians face the obstacle of ignorance. I started this chapter with a number of quotes that help illustrate the situation both as it is and as it has long been. Gunilla Florby, writes that "Being Canadian and hence of necessity peripheral, [Kroetsch and Laurence's] work has to force many barriers before reaching the large audiences in the Euro-American metropolitan centres."

Canada's identity crisis, too, plays a part in our capacity to articulate a "Canadian" poetics. The absence of what Robert Kroetsch called "a Canadian Meta-Narrative" is a function in part of the Canadian reality of multiculturalism, which means multi-tribalism. The reason we have trouble identifying or winnowing down Canadian cultural practices is because there are so many of them, and there is no consensus. There have been repeated attempt to deal with Canadian identity with reference to its "two founding peoples," English and French, and in fact to enshrine this conception of national identity in the constitution.

This myth manages to exclude not only First Nations, but also persons of every other ethnicity who have followed. The persistence of this model is a reflection of the ways in which the former Upper and Lower Canada, now Ontario and Quebec, dominate the national political scene not only politically but in their own perceptions.

What defines Canadians is the way in which cultures have both maintained their own traditions and cultures, while (sometimes) acting in deference to other cultures. The Canadian model for cultural integration is the tossed salad, not the American melting pot. The question for many Canadians has often been "How can we formulate or define an identity which is not exclusive: which is open to other cultures, and yet which can still act as an assertion of identity?" The concerns about domination and multiplicity that are expressed in post-modernism also made it attractive as a writing strategy for this reason.

The importance of such status relationships *between* tribes can hardly be overemphasised. Being peripheral – marginal, of low status, has significant economic consequences that then have literary impacts. Set a story in New York, and you need only write "New York", because our culture (and for that matter, "world" culture) is replete with images and stories from American media centres. The same issues of status and value function within Canada as well as without. The prairie is to the rest of Canada as Canada is to the world: nice enough people, but basically hicks living in an undeveloped backwater.

There is a sense in which the inverse of the maxim "power is knowledge" is true. Status is in part a function of *fame*. A Canadian meeting an American is the social equivalent of a rabid fan meeting a celebrity by chance, where the relationship – a huge gap in status – is defined by the fact that the fan knows everything about the celebrity, while the celebrity knows nothing about the fan. Canadians live next to the most famous country in the world, and are a former colony of the second most famous country in the world. Canadians and much of the rest of the world are in the position of continually being inundated with American culture and media while Americans know very little about the rest of the world.

The same applies on a different scale in Canada, where westerners and easterners sit at the bottom of a media waterfall from the centres of power, Toronto and Ottawa.

The relationship between cities as concentrations of civilization in comparison to "backward" rural regions occurs in all human societies. The translator, Michael Glenny, beautifully articulates the horrific disdain of cosmopolitan creatures for their country cousins in the introduction to Mikhail Bulgakov's *A Country Doctor's Notebook*.

> For Bulgakov, however, the greatest underlying source of unease, amounting at times to despair, was something less tangible though very real to him, since it occurs as an ever-present refrain through these stories. This was the sense of being a lone soldier of reason and enlightenment pitted against the vast, ocean-like mass of peasant ignorance and superstition. Again and again Bulgakov stresses what it meant to experience in physical reality the moral anomaly which for a century and more before the revolution had caused such agony to the liberal, educated elite of Russia: that intolerable discrepancy between the advanced civilisation and culture enjoyed by a small minority and the fearsome, pre-literate, medieval world of the peasantry. Although his patients are his contemporaries and fellow citizens of what purports to be a modern state, Bulgakov is constantly haunted by an awareness that in dealing with them he is actually at the point of contact between two cultures which are about five hundred years apart in time. It is books like this which make one appreciate the tremendous achievements of the Soviet education programme since 1917. (8-9)

Strangely, the view of Bulgakov's biases that Glenny articulates in his introduction seems to be absent in the translation Glenny's offers of Bulgakov's text.[6] But can one read Glenny's words with anything but perverse delight, as a roiling mass of social contradictions, simultaneously exalting bourgeois, Europeanized civilization and the Soviet education programme which, at least putatively was dedicated to the proletariat? But the relationship that Glenny expresses is so exquisite – the sense not of mere vicarious social embarrassment but of *agony* that cultural elites experience in sharing a country with people of whose lives they know nothing. We can play at transposition, substituting London, New York or Toronto for Moscow, and lower classes, Deep South and Canadian West (especially Alberta), respectively, for "peasantry".

---

[6] It is certainly absent from Bulgakov's other works, like *The Master and Margarita*.

The effect of these imbalances in media – comprising news as well as "culture" – is that we (Canadians and Western Canadians) never see ourselves. There is a vitally important sense in which media and culture are arbiters of value: it costs money to print a book or make TV or film. and it is easier to recoup that money by relying on the pre-existing awareness of media centres. which further increases the status and fame of the place and the people who live in it while diminishing those who don't. This is obvious with groups and categories of persons who have been actively discriminated against: women. people of colour, the lower classes. gays. and ethnic and religious minorities.

I am not making the argument that Canadians have been systematically discriminated against as blacks and women have. But it does not change the fact, and a fact it is, that Canadians. and Western Canadians in particular, seldom see ourselves reflected in the culture around us. This is a result of two common and typically human effects of the phenomenon of huge centres of media and status. like New York, London, or in Canada, Toronto. The people who live there are also living in the media wallow of their local scene: there is always enough going on in such places that they needn't bother to hear or know about other places. They globalize: this is an obvious and tiresome habit of the American news media, just as it is of cultural elites in centres of power. Events of purely local concern in Toronto are routinely treated as being of imminent national concern to all Canadians.

Post-modernism allowed the prairie writers to point out the emptiness in status structures that devalued (in order of conventionally descending status) Canada, the west, and working people. Robert Kroetsch's significance in the movement is derived not only from his pre-eminent critical position, in that he played the apparently promethean role of bringing post-modernism to the prairie, but in his writing of the poem *Seed Catalogue*.

Seed Catalogue clears a space for the Canadian West by pulling the American cowboy off his horse. "The man on a horse, riding off into the sunset, is the quintessentially Western image of the masculine, and perhaps the final fantasy of patriarchal culture," writes

David Amason, "In Seed Catalogue, Robert Kroetsch sets out to deconstruct the meta-narrative of the cowboy," (79)

The cowboy is the central figure of American secular mythology; an emblem not only of the American West, but of America herself. The myth of the cowboy promulgated by Hollywood has helped define the way in which the world thinks about Americans. (The Canadian figure, the Mountie, is equally western, and – ironically enough – also promulgated by Hollywood.) In contrast to the American Myth of the West, we have Canadian invisibility. But Kroetsch is not pulling down the cowboy in order to take his place: Pete Knight is a Canadian cowboy, killed in a fall. And Kroetsch's speaker, too, falls off his horse:

> You've got to understand this:
> I was sitting on the horse
> The horse was standing still
> I fell off. (110)

Kroetsch's list of absences too, is a rejection of others' (mostly European) cultural expectations: the absence of ancient civilizations (pyramids, Greece and Rome), of the traditions of Europe, of Sartre and Heidegger, of "high" culture. These things weren't *here*. The rejection is a shift in the centre of status that rejects the literary traditions of the colonizers, and Western Canadians have several: Mother England, Uncle Sam, and Central Canada. The status structures of these poems are centred in the prairie, not in London, New York or Toronto.

Despite the post-modern poetics, the writers in *a/long prairie lines* also rely on the reader's experience of the prairie for some passages to be "understood". The sense of home, of security and safety of place, all take on special characteristics on the prairie. It is partly a function of the aforementioned biblical climate, of the way people interact, of the way towns are scattered in archipelagos strung along on the roads and rails. But there is, too, a very special relationship with the landscape itself. Gabrielle Roy writes of it in her autobiography, *Enchantment and Sorrow*:

When you came out of that little wood at the end of the farm road, you'd instantly feel you were entering infinity. From there the prairie stretched away as far as you could see; in one immense, rolling plain it unfolded in a series of long fluid waves sweeping unendingly to the horizon...

In that permanence in constant motion, in that tranquil yet beckoning immensity, there was a beauty that tugged at my heart like a magnet, even when I was still very young. I kept returning to that vista as if it might get away from me if I left it alone too long. I'd arrive at the end of the farm road, reach the place where the trees parted, and the vast, magnetic expanse would appear, and each time it was the world laid at my feet again. But really much more than the world, I know that now. (36-37)

Or as Margaret Laurence said in conversation with Kroetsch:

In some ways I had to come back spiritually and write about my own roots. Whether or not I had ever lived in the prairies again was really unimportant in a sense. There is a kind of spiritual return. I don't know whether it is a kind of totally Canadian experience. I know it is very western. (20)

The effect of the landscape on those who call the prairie home is markedly different than those who come to it from "away". Roy's experience is far from unique. In his essay *The Prairie: A State of Mind* Henry Kreisel writes

The prairie, like the sea, thus often produces an extraordinary sensation of confinement within a vast and seemingly unlimited space. The isolated farm-houses, the towns and settlements, event the great cities that eventually sprang up on the prairies, become islands in that land-sea, areas of relatively safe refuge from the great and lonely spaces. (9)

These sentiments helps explain both the motivation and frustration that drives the poets of *a/long prairie lines* to assert the prairie and its cultures as a place and people of value. In this sense, the long prairie poem is a kind of creation myth of how we came to be and an explanation of the way our world works.

The strategic significance of post-modernism was two-fold, and accounts for its widespread appeal in Canada and elsewhere. Previous literary conventions tended to encourage mimesis rather than diegesis: the general poetic and dramatic rule was "show don't tell". Post-modernism made it possible to both identify and tease out the "dominant" cultural interpretive codes implicit in a work. This (non-Derridean) deconstruction operated as a kind of universal solvent. In so doing it created an aesthetic that allowed writers to comment upon

and undermine those codes (in effect) while articulating *their own* interpretive and cultural

codes. It is a strategy that allows for the assertion of identity in the face of a cultural tradition

that either devalues or ignores your own. The philosophical presuppositions of post-

modernism about self and identity allow its practitioners to deny the very conditions which

make it such an effective strategy – namely that it is, *in itself,* a strategy for the acquisition of

status . and thus for transforming the identity of themselves and others.

Claiming Space: The Long Prairie Poem as a Foundation for a Prairie Mythos

Post-modern poetics were a necessary but not sufficient addition to the arsenal of

poetic strategies required in writing in a New Land. Writing the Canadian prairie is rife with

further poetical logistical difficulties. The prairie is vast, the history is spread thin and there

are few landmarks or monuments to its passing. It is a place of not one but many cultures and

traditions, both immigrant and native; they are scattered over its surface, dotted in an

archipelago of prairie towns, linked by road and rail. The people are often "common" folk, of

the kind whose struggles are rarely the subject of song and story. The flora and fauna are not

those of traditional poetry. There is little literature to fall back on, to allegorize or play with.

Its climate is Biblical: not only floods and drought but *plagues* – of mosquitoes, grasshoppers

and the like – are commonplace. These difficulties are articulated in the poems themselves:

"How do you grow a poet?" asks Robert Kroetsch in *Seed Catalogue*, "How do you grow a

past?"

The answer is in not one but many ways: assertion of the characters and cultures of

the prairies through polyphony and transcription of the spoken word; the appropriation of

history and space through "found" documents; in the absence of a literary tradition, the

appropriation of other texts that recognized the prairie and its people; the assertion and

ascension of value in the myth-form, and finally in the form of the long poem itself.

The long poem works as a poetic strategy precisely for the reason that Edgar Allen

Poe thought it was a failure of form:

> "[Poe] proceeds to define the long poem as 'merely a succession of brief ones – that
> is to say, of brief poetical effects' (22). Poe defines the long poem as an aberration of
> lyric poetry, a failure to sustain lyric intensity, *and* as encompassing lyric poems –
> the 'long poem' as what it is not." (Kambourelli, 51)

Poetry traditionally operates through compression and structuring, relying on

synechdoche or a particulate metaphor which gestures to something greater, or generating

poetic meaning and resonance by establishing metaphoric relationships. Poe argues that the

long poem is not poetry because it does not achieve the kind of effects that one expects from

poetry. because such effects depend in part upon a singularity of purpose and subject, the

kind of "concentration" and "purity" that characterizes the lyric. Poe's condemnation of the

form of the long poem is based on its taxonomic deficiencies. There are few more feeble

criticisms that taking a work to task for being what it is not.

But Kambourelli also cites Whitman's response to Poe, in which Whitman "relates

the design of Leaves of Grass to Poe's assertion:

> ... 'that there can be no such thing as a long poem. The same thought had been
> haunting my mind before, but Poe's argument, though short, work'd the sum out and
> proved it to me.'

> James E. Miller accounts for Whitman's statement by saying that 'in effect, what Poe
> did for Whitman...was to enable him to see how to write his long poem without
> violating 'psychal necessity' – that is, by making the long poem out of a sequence of
> subtly related lyric moments (Kambourelli, 51)

Whitman's statement is ambiguous, but Miller's point is interesting, because it shows

the way in which a poetic strategy can be transmitted. The restrictions of poetics and of genre

make certain kinds of writing possible, others impossible. Poe's articulation of the way the

long poem failed showed Whitman how the long poem could be written. Kroetsch's *Seed*

Catalogue set a similar example through its writing as an expansion of poetic possibili͏ ͏s.

Lenoski commented in his note to the title of Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue*:

> The impact of this poem on the development of an indigenous prairie voice has been
> enormous. Several of the authors in this book consider their work to be the result of
> the enKroetschment of "Seed Catalogue." In fact, it was dedicated to two of them:
> David Arnason and Dennis Cooley.

The doing reveals the possible. Poetic constraints are not simply taboos: they make it

difficult or even impossible to even imagine a strategy or technique by which something can

be expressed or done. The fractured form of the long poem, its "failure to sustain lyric

intensity" frees the prairie poets from the constraints of the monologic, of the poetic and

cultural terms of reference that devalue them. It opens up the possibilities of poetry and

allows them to present many different voices, shifting tone and allowing for snippets of conversation. It doesn't structure poetic experience in inexorable narrative: it allows for other possibilities – the accidental glance, the presence of the mundane and the everyday. It shifts across time and place. It is a poetic form and stance that allows the poets to claim the space of the prairie for themselves.

The model for such writing, cited by both Robert Kroetsch and Dennis Cooley is William Carlos Williams' notion of "local pride". Kroetsch writes:

> I was living outside of Alberta (and outside of Canada) while writing most of my fiction and poetry. Perhaps for that reason I was constantly aware that we both, and at once, record and invent these new places called Alberta and Saskatchewan. That pattern of contraries, all the possibilities implied in *record* and *event*, for me finds its focus in the model suggested by the phrase: a local pride. (The phrase is from William Carlos Williams – indeed those three words are the opening of his great poem *Paterson*, about Paterson New Jersey: a local pride.) The feeling must come from an awareness of the authenticity of our own lives. People who feel invisible try to borrow visibility from those who are visible. To understand others is surely difficult. But to understand ourselves becomes impossible. (6-7)

"Local pride" seems a modest term to use, considering the less than temperate passions that are often the impetus behind this writing. Dennis Cooley's book *The Vernacular Muse* opens with Kroetsch's oft cited "The bastards can't keep us from talking" and Cooley's title essay, *The Vernacular Muse in Prairie Poetry* is a raging polemic. It traces a series of critical reactions and counter-reactions to the kind of writing that Cooley is advocating:

> This is a common and continuing fight - to be able to use yr own voice in yr own world. To get our from under the smother of an official culture that is imported and 'high'. To be at home in the world. To name and proclaim an unwritten part of ourselves, spoken but never written because the writing available to us would not accommodate our worlds. Because that 'high' writing told us, and continues to tell us, we must speak only in its voice. (170)

Part of the function of poetry in particular (and literature in general) is that poems, language and metaphor make assertions of value. This is understood, I think in what Cooley and Kroetsch are saying: poetry and writing is about what is valuable – Truth, Beauty, Kings. Queens, the Lake District, New York or Paris. Writing about ourselves – naming the things

around us - allows us to create a space for ourselves, and to assert and raise our own status. The poet as prairie elevator, as it were.

Writers with established literary traditions rely on the shorthand or what has been written and said before. The absence of such traditions on the prairie means looking to other texts to find our voices: found texts. Without a conventional literary prairie narrative, they look instead to other points of self-reference: diaries, letters and certificates, newspaper reports. It is an extension of what Dorothy Livesay called the "documentary" nature of the Canadian poem. The writings of Henry Kelsey provide a kind of exception, in that Kelsey was a poet as well as an explorer, and his scraps serve as the basis for John Whyte's *Homage*.

Many of the poems quote the news. Cooley's *Fielding* uses letters and his father's death certificate. We also find letters written by the surveyors in *Wild Man's Butte*. Friesen's *The Shunning* has a doctor's diary and a reproduced medical record. Arnason uses letters to tell accounts of the death of Icelandic immigrants from a smallpox epidemic in their first brutal winters in Manitoba in *Marsh Burning*, and an examiner's description of a dead body found in a lake. Aritha Van Herk's *Calgary this growing graveyard* quotes Bob Edwards on Calgary and samples advertisements – radio ads for Ernest Manning's religious program, bumper stickers, signs, and the gravestones. In his review of *a/long prairie lines*, Don Perkins wrote:

> Easily the most startling evocation of and reflection on the accumulation of "past" is Aritha Van Herk's 'Calgary, this growing graveyard," which uses the names on gravestones as yet another public "document" and creates an image of history pushing itself up from below like spirits from the grave. (145)

Kroetsch finds the voice and self-reference, in a MacKenzie Seed Catalogue – in that lowest of all art forms, advertising. Advertising often has a worse reputation than pornography, which at least has a polite or "proper" name – erotica. But advertising is the perfect medium for Kroetsch to appropriate. Advertising *is* the creation of value through the instigation of desire. It appeals to a specific audience, flattering and elevating them – it seeks

both to coerce and seduce its reader with promises of elevated status. it applies social

pressure by suggesting that your friends and neighbours are doing it. So it provides a local

voice. and in printing it sanctifies it:

> "I wish to say we had lovely success this summer with the seed purchased of you. We
> had the finest Sweet Corn in the country, and Cabbage were dandy."
> - W.W. Lyon, South Junction, Man.

It also eroticizes. As Cooley points out, "The sections taken over (translated) from

seed catalogues, where they were offered as commercial come-ons, become in this new

configuration wonderfully sensuous. downright sensual." Kroetsch wrote that, "A lot of my

material is profane. But the telling of the story about that material, the language itself,

changes itself in some way to what I call sacred."

Advertising provides techniques for the elevation of status and profile and for the

creation of value. It exalts and exults, revels in superlatives:

> "**Cauliflower** is **unquestionably** one of the **greatest inheritances** of the **present
> generation, particularly Western Canadians**. There is **no place in the world** where
> better **cauliflowers** can be grown than right here in the **West. The finest specimens**
> we have **ever seen**, larger and of **better quality**, are **annually grown** here on our
> **prairies**. Being **particularly** a **high altitude plant** it **thrives** to a **point of perfection**
> here, **seldom seen in warmer climes**." (117)

While advertising elevates, it also cheapens – it turns everything into a commodity,

making it translatable into hard figures. It is reviled for its mercenary pandering– naked

appeals to our desires and pride, almost always making the promise that the product it sells

will enhance your social status, often so much so that you will get laid. Kroetsch's

appropriation of advertising sanctifies and elevates both the low form of advertising itself and

its content– local voices, practices and processes.

Writing down the oral serves to assert identity, the character of the people whose

words are transcribed. So we read the language of prairie bullshitters, a language that binds

the people to the earth and to one another. The language of the prairie vernacular, Cooley's

and Kroetsch's great love. The apostrophes of speech abound. In *Wild Man's Butte* "Goin'

off lookin' for water At 56 years of age, when you could have sent that greenhorn Frenchie

out." In *The Wind Our Enemy* "'(Watching the futile clouds sneak down the north) 'Just

empties goin' back!'"'. Sometimes comic:

> that
> girl in the skating
> rink shack who had on
> so much underwear you
> didn't have enough
> prick to get past her/
> CCM skates. (118)

It is a strategy to capture prairie dialects, comic and tragic. Suknaski's *Homestead*

1914:

> tells of how the boss that day
> slipped a crisp 20 into his pocket and said
> *you vill be okay meester shoonatski*
> *dont tell anyvon about dis*
> *commeh bek in coopleh veek time....*
> father says his left testicle has shriveled
> to the size of a shelled walnut
> says there's simply no fucking way
> he'll see another doctor – says:
> *the last one tried to shine a penlight up my ass*
> *now son*
> *no one's ever looked up my asshole*
> *and never will*
> *never* (133-134)

These voices are not presented with lyric intensity – they are often given paragraphs

of soliloquy, as in Friesen's *The Shunning* and in Arnason's *Marsh Burning*. They capture

character, or distinctive quirks of grammar, like the Germanic grammar imported into English

that Friesen uses in the line, "his temple   a blue hole the bullet made." (162)

In the essay *Desire and Prayer* Friesen says of his choice of language:

> I had to decide to what degree I would use German, High or Low. I decided to
> minimize German words, but worked a lot in Germanic speech rhythms and,
> sometimes, word orders. Just enough to give the flavour, and to lead in interesting
> Germanic directions; not enough to be ridiculous. Low German is an earthy,
> humourous language not readily available to seriousness or tragedy. (173)

The particulate stories and voices embedded in the poems are not necessarily transformative; rather, they are inductive and additive. They do not change the way we look at the world of the prairie, but they do add to and build it.

There are other ways in which we seeing ourselves represented. Maps are a way of naming and claiming space, and there is a lot of mapmaking in the long prairie poem, both literally in the figures of the surveyors in *Wild Man's Butte*, but also in the descriptions of journeys across the prairie or across Canada. In *Seed Catalogue* Kroetsch places

> the home place: N.E. 17-42-16-W4th Meridian.

> the home place: 1 ½ miles west of Heisler, Alberta
> on the correction line road
> and 3 miles south (111)

In *Calgary, this growing graveyard*, the very way Calgary is laid out, in numbered streets and avenues is analogous to the lines and sections of the prairie:

> Calgary is a quadrant, the sweep of a long-armed compass quartering the city NW NE SE SW, segmented... An acroustic of a place, 4th St SE far away from 4th St NW divided into quarters and beyond the suburbs themselves divided and named picked up from the subdivisions. (335-336)

The very title of Andrew Suknaski's *Homestead 1914 (Sec 32, TP4 RGE2, W3rd, SASK.)* is derived from section lines. Patrick Friesen, too, situates his speaker in *The Shunning*, "here   on this farm between la broquerie and steinbach" In Cooley's *Fielding* his father, "dragging the discer over Evendon's section 7 miles north of town." The towns are both particulate and relative, part of a journey. Cooley's protagonist drives past

> houses knotting regularly

> every 7 or 8 miles

> elevators like columns of dried blood

> snaring

> names/numbers

> Bienfait   Steelman   Hirsch Frobisher   Oxbow

Glen Ewen   Carnduff   Carievale   Gainsborough (245)

What is the significance of this naming? What does describing a place purely in terms of names or numbers do to create a picture of the place to the reader? How do numbers describe a place to someone who has never been there? They don't. Yet this is the way places are named on the prairie. It is our way of naming. The poets are asserting their right to write and name without explanation, as writers who name New York or London can. They have re-centred the world: this is where I am, this is where Home is: the Canadian prairie.

These poems are written first for others who live on the prairie, not those who have never lived there. There have already been other clues to this – an intimacy of tone derived from the use of the vernacular and present tense, which treats the reader as confidant, as equal, as fellow-traveller. The recurring motif of the section lines is all the more important: the reference of section lines is unique to Western Canada. Their point of origin is a meridian just west of Headingley, Manitoba, from which point they stretch both west to Alberta and east towards Ontario. Just as the coordinates on the grid of section lines refer only to another western Canadian point, the points of reference in the poems themselves – people, places, things, are intended for western Canadians. Where the degrees of longitude and latitude are points of reference for the whole world, the section lines, like the poems themselves are a shared reference for Western Canadians alone. At the same time, there is an awareness of the larger world, derived not only from the ease with which one can see to the horizon, but from the correction roads, too. These roads mark a jog, a discontinuity in the stable grid of the section lines that occurs every few miles so that the grid can account for the curvature of the earth while maintaining right angles on the corners of the fields. A local discontinuity that implies the world.

There is another important aspect to the naming, one touched on by Cooley in the excerpt above but which also occurs in Arnason's *Marsh Burning* and in Whyte's *Homage:*

Henry Kelsey: the naming as part of a journey, where the reader is fellow-explorer, passing

and naming points on a map. Naming as journey. From *Marsh Burning:*

> this is the route to Gimli
> up the transcanada highway
> past Woodstock
> down to Riviere du Loup
> then left to Montreal
> through the Louis Lafontaine tunnel
> right at Toronto
> to Sudbury Sault Ste. Marie
> around Superior
> through Wawa   Nipigon
> past Thunder Bay   Kenora   bursting free
> at last into the open prairie
> right at Winnipeg   then north
> and I am
> home (262)

Then the same journey again, but a repetition with a difference:

> after the long rolling hills of Ontario
> lake and river
> hill and river
> lake
> we swept over Manitoba's border down the undulating road
> past the burned out forest deadfall
> now greening again
> and only a few skeletal trees
> to remind us of fire
> memory singing now
> we slid into fields
> green and yellow
> barley wheat and oats
> flax the colour a lake should be
> poles that vee'd to the horizon
> a high sky with clouds
> massed and turbulent
> past the elevator at Dufresne
> we slid faster and faster
> the road becoming flatter as we moved
> as if the car no longer needed power
> but could glide
> did glide
> into the heart of that prairie
> into Winnipeg
> into home (273-274)

This is no longer a string of names, this is the tale of a journey – and in its second telling, a journey of initiation, passing through fire to rebirth, or ascension and transformation. This is the form of Myth and Quest. This is the very foundation of the prairie poem: the articulation of a literary infrastructure and the creation of a mythos for the Canadian prairie. The myth form elevates and transforms, not just the landscape and the hero/ine, but the reader herself. It is the Long Prairie Poem as Creation Myth.

The influence is acknowledged outright in Wild Man's Butte, where "the mythic plot, which acts as a frame for the story of the surveyor, is based on an Assiniboian creation myth, adapted for the purposes of this piece." (99) As I wrote above, there are two kinds of information, two kinds of experience: formative and additive. The narrative and myth form, the Quest, is the story of identity transformation. Through the story, the heroine learns and gains her place in the world, she endures rites of passage, shifts in status. It is the process of initiation into a new world, or as Kroetsch framed it, "the moment of the discovery of America continues."

One of the solutions for articulation of the Western Canadian identity is to tell the story of one's initiation into it. No longer relying on the written or spoken, the poets turn to experience and history. This is how I came to be here – this is how the land changed my ancestors. The Quest is not conquest, it is the story of coming into one's own, of rites of passage. Just as they have appropriated other forms that uplift and sanctify, so too do the poets appropriate myth, but it is never straightforward or earnest. It is about elevating, but not too high – not above others. The mythic has a hard time on the practical prairie, where cowboys fall off their horses, where less grandiose aspirations – "will there be a crop this year?" – are swept aside by drought or frost. The upward impulse of the mythic is tethered by the corporeal and the ironic, by the intrusion of the real. There is sickness, decay and death, the fragility of flesh and blood and viscera. The pulse of viscera is presented to us in *Homage, Marsh Burning* and *Fielding*. Even Arnason's Icelandic gods are dead or dying – *Baldur is*

dead echoes again and again throughout *Marsh Burning*. Death seems to be everywhere:
Cooley's father, Pete Knight the Cowboy, the dead in the graves of *Calgary, this growing graveyard,* sister Eve in *Homestead 1914.* Long prairie poem as elegy.

In the Quest, the transformative learning experience often takes the shape of a journey. Daniel Lenoski writes in his introduction that "naming and travelling through time and space is crucial to [the poets'] discipline". He says his endnotes are:

> designed to provide some hospitality and direction for a voyage through the physical, psychic and verbal geography of Western Canada – even as one does when an outsider or relative visits one's home. Besides, if more celebrated and well-known poets from other countries can be sanctified by notes, perhaps Canadian poets can too. (xviii)

In anthologizing and adding notes[vi] to these poems, Lenoski is furthering the intent of the poets themselves. Don Perkins inferred that Lenoski was "apparently influenced by Kroetsch's perception that the long poem is a kind of travel book." Journeys are not mere metaphors for human growth and experience. We interact with the landscape, changing it as it changes us. We *are* changed when we travel to a new land. The visceral pulse that runs through many of the poems ties together life and information, our interaction with the world. "The river flows both ways" is a kind of subtitle to *Homage: Henry Kelsey,* and it recurs not only literally as a river which reverses direction, but in the diastole and systole – the flow of blood by a pumping heart, the advance and retreat of all living systems, the pulse of sap, the cycle of seasons. The Quest is not just about the space that the Hero/ine carves out in the World: it is about how the World affects the Hero/ine.

The two passages from *Marsh Burning* above follow this shape. It is similar in both form and experience to Gabrielle Roy's passage above:

> When you came out of that little wood at the end of the farm road, you'd instantly feel you were entering infinity. From there the prairie stretched away as far as you could see; in one immense, rolling plain it unfolded in a series of long fluid waves sweeping unendingly to the horizon...

The expanse of the prairie is not empty – it is infinity. (Cooley: "not empty this space is not empty") Arnason's speaker, like Roy, is "bursting free   at last into the open prairie." Arnason's two routes home are also travel directions: "This is the route to Gimli," mapmaking, and establishing points of (Canadian) reference. They establish *where* he is and, in so doing, *who* he is. They follow the Quest shape – the passage through the wasteland of burned out trees into the new green world of Manitoba, and an ascension – no longer driven, merely gliding. It is a journey culminating in an identity transformation – in this case, a transformation that links status with place: home.

Of the many definitions offered in the dictionary for *home*, the two that come closest to its repeated use in these poems are paired (at number 4): "a) An environment offering security and happiness. b) A valued place regarded as a refuge or place of origin." It is a place that offers stability and security of identity. On the prairie, there is a special sense of home: the isolation combined with hardship means that we are often driven from our place of origin. Prairie exiles. When we are displaced from it – either socially, or in the case of Arnason's speaker, socially and geographically, we are left uneasy. "I'm not feeling myself today." The unease manifests itself in a kind of restlessness spurred by subterranean drives and urges, mythic impulses, cravings. In Arnason's speaker, the impulses well up from Icelandic sagas and legends, both grim and comic.

> Baldur is dead / slain
> Baldur
>   who was white as the snows on Hecla
> Loki is free
> Fenrir prowls   just beyond the horizon
> somewhere over Fundy

Dwarves cavort on his lawn, on the highway, laughing. In the swirl and chaos of floods and disasters he sees himself as Hero and Knight, astride not a horse but a reindeer. Margaret Sweatman noted that, "*Marsh Burning* begins like an Icelandic saga," and goes on to cite Robert Scholes:

As the legend is based on an ideal which serves a real need, the saga is based on a reality, the tie of blood, which has its own ideals: the community of blood, vengeance in blood, the vendetta, marriage, kinship, heritage, patrimony, heredity. Around these concepts the saga gravitates. It is actualized in the Icelandic family sagas, in biblical genealogies, in song and story everywhere. It is rooted in the past, in family history and heritage, and its values are as powerful as those of the legend, though less idealistic. (33-34)

Arnason has said elsewhere that he resisted the term of myth because of its religious connotations. But the Icelandic saga provides for him a form that is peculiarly well-suited to the ambiguous use of myth forms in these poems: "its values are as powerful as those of the legend, though less idealistic." The Norse gods are not immortal: they too can die and rot. There are many of them, not just one, and one of them – Loki – is a trickster god, a god of chaos.

The narrative element in several poems trace stories about *beginnings*: first encounters, journeys of transformation into a new land, both individual and collective experiences: *The First Woman*, the sickness and misery suffered by the newly arrived Icelandic immigrants in *Marsh Burning*, the surveyors in *Wild Man's Butte* and the literally mythic Man and Woman who also people that poem. Suknaski traces the arrival of his parents in *Homestead, 1914*. Henry Kelsey, as Jon Whyte noted, was "the first English poet of the Canadian prairies, an ancestral voice."

It is important to note that these poems are speaking from the point of view of immigrant cultures and never from the point of view of native Canadians - Indians. It is a point that should be addressed. *The First Woman* is, after all, "the first white woman in the West" – her voyageur husband has an "Indian wife at Pembina." Indians have a high symbolic profile, both nationally and internationally, even if much of it is derived from stereotypes. They are, after all, the second half of the mythic American binary "cowboys and Indians". Unlike Canadians in general, they have a history and a way of life that has been the subject of story and song and Hollywood blockbuster.

There is a similarity between the symbolic significance of the Jews as God's chosen people in Europe and the ideas of the Indians as "noble savages", articulated by Rousseau and others. Like the Jews, Indians have enjoyed exalted symbolic status while in the reality of their lives they were the targets of hatred and bigotry, stripped of their property and shunned from the societies in which they lived. Indians were and are thought to have a special spiritual kinship with the land, and there is an idea that in living as they did they somehow were not as fallen or debased as wordly and corrupt Europeans. This notion persists today with groups of Germans and Czechs who habitually dress up as Indians, building tipis and wearing indian-style dress, or in the bizarre figure of Grey Owl.

It is a cold fact of life in Canada, and certainly on the prairie, that while immigrants from countless backgrounds - including ones with deep antipathies in the old country - were able to forge lives together despite cultural differences, Indians remain socially and culturally an Other. There are many reasons for this, some of them the results of government policy, like the apartheid-style policies of reservations or failed attempts at cultural assimilation through residential schools. However these are just the institutional articulation of decades and centuries of profound and long-standing racism directed at natives. They have resulted in widespread poverty, suicide and substance abuse, phenomena with which the residents of cities on the prairie are well aware, because there are more Indians living in cities and towns in the West than in the rest of Canada.

In his *The Prairie: A State of Mind*, Henry Kreisel discussed the absence of Indians in the pre postmodern literature of the west:

> The conquest of territory is by definition a violent process. In the Canadian west, as elsewhere on this continent, it involved the displacement of the indigenous population by often scandalous means, and then the taming of the land itself. The displacement, the conquest, of the Indians, and later the rising of the Metis under Louis Riel, are events significantly absent from the literature I am discussing. (11)

These facts must be addressed and acknowledged, but they are also complicated because the separateness of Indians is also a function of their own resistance to assimilation

66

which has occurred to a lesser degree than in the United States. While I believe this is both

significant and positive as far as Indians' autonomy and dignity as peoples are concerned,

when it comes to their relationship with immigrants and non-natives, the two communities

are living in different worlds. It could therefore be argued that the absence of Indian voices

(with the exception of Ayee in *Wild Man's Butte*) and Indians in general in these poems is in

a sense an accurate reflection of the immigrant experience on the prairie.

The status of Indians in these poems, too is interesting and sometimes problematic.

With the exception of *Homage: Henry Kelsey*, the Indians are women, not warriors– Ayee in

Wild Man's Butte, the Blackfoot "Indian wife" in *The First Woman*; and Kroetsch's "old

Blood whore." Women, it need hardly be remarked, have in many cultures traditionally been

considered of lower status than men – and aside from characters like Lady MacBeth and

Medea – less threatening. They have the same function that women often do in literature –

they are arbiters of status: in bestowing or withholding sex or love, they grant status, so that

at the end of a narrative, a Hero's journey or personal transformation is shown to be complete

when he proves himself worthy of a woman's love. We see her, in withholding mode, in *Seed

Catalogue*:

> The absence of the girl who said that if the Edmonton Eskimos won the
> Grey Cup she'd let me kiss her nipples in the foyer of the
> Palliser Hotel. I don't know where she got to. (116)

Appropriation of voice is extremely controversial where it may be interpreted as the

appropriation of identity of an oppressed group. Indians' international profile and "status"

means their identities are readily appropriated. While Indian voices are absent, they are not

absent as figures – but are usually neither denigrated nor maligned. The most inflammatory

phrase, "the old Blood whore," is undoubtedly unpleasant, but Kroetsch's speaker is "in love

with her." Does this mitigate the slur? If it was left out or scrubbed out, would its absence be

a denial, a bowdlerization that denies the complexities of life and identity on the prairie?

One of the poetic strategies used to assert value has been to use polyphony, but more specifically to tell the story of one's own culture or tribe within the prairie. It means speaking for yourself, and not for others, and so the failure to appropriate native voices can in other instances be interpreted as respect. For Arnason, this means the initial experience of Icelandic immigrants and of the lives of their descendants on the shores of Lake Winnipeg. For Patrick Friesen, it is the very closed community of Mennonites in *The Shunning*. The stories of transformation and of formative experiences have been their own or those of their forebears.

The First Woman, and *Henry Kelsey* represent Indians with dignity, prior to the "fall" in status brought on by the arrival of Europeans and its concomitant persecutions. As one historian wrote of the first encounter of Cartier with native Canadians, "The native world of the sixteenth century was far more complex and wealthy that Cartier could have known. And we can only guess at what the Indians thought of Cartier. What we do know is that they loved their homeland and had a deep spiritual attachment to it." (19)

This attitude is a characteristic of the prairie poets. The notion of the prairie as home is part of the re-centring, the assertion of the prairie as place of value. Such an assertion seems somehow unprecedented – and running through these poems, sometimes buried, sometimes explicitly, is a simultaneous rejection and assertion : "Not this, but this...". Not your (European) conception – my (prairie Canadian) conception. From *Seed Catalogue*:

> *How do you grow a past?*
> to live in
>
> the absence of silkworms
> the absence of clay and wattles (whatever the hell they are)
> the absence of Lord Nelson
> the absence of kings and queens (116)

And so on, through a list of things that are not part of our history – they are someone else's. History continually intrudes into these poems, not just as a matter of the search for forms or self-reflection, but because history too is bound up in the assertion of our own value. As Samuel Butler put it, "It is said that while God cannot alter the past, historians can; it is

perhaps because they can be useful to him in this respect that He tolerates their existence."

History, revisionist and otherwise, has enormous rhetorical value in the establishment and maintenance of status. So just as the poets claim space, they claim history too, but from a different point of view.

This recentring takes into account what is being rejected. In *Homage: Henry Kelsey* it takes the form of a kind of call and response whose central metaphor is the poem's subtitle: *the river flows both ways*. Whyte exploits Kelsey's historical role as originary immigrant and explorer and frames him as Quest Hero.

The Quest-shape of the poem should come as no surprise: Whyte wrote in his notes that "The poem began to shape itself into an epic. My academic work on the medieval poem *Pearl* started to inform what I was doing. I would, like the jeweller of that poem, put his poem in a new setting. Hence 'homage'." T.A. Shippey writes that *Pearl* was written by the same author as that classic Quest poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (161) and shares with it the same transformative power of a journey derived from the land and its people. But while the land sings to Kelsey, as in the other prairie poems in the anthology, the mythic is grafted to muck:

> Hail Kelsey, come: the land is not barren,
> Land of little sticks, caribou lichen musketers only;
> Come to the land: the land is not barren,
> The land that is mused, is browsed, is fused
> By mooseways over, among, between and through
> The muskrat-slickened banks of oozing mud,
> Its list aboil, aswarm with mosquitoes
> The must of melting and dispersing such a wonder
> Of flying, biting, cloud turmoiling things; (9)

It seems that straightforward or earnest mythmaking is an impossibility. There is always a kind of equivocation tempering the mythic with history, or reality. We live here – so how mythic can it be? A historical reference with emphases that sum up the difficulties of prairie history and writing acts as a bridge between Kelsey's own poem and the beginning of Whyte's:

The material relating to Henry Kelsey is so meagre that even the most commonplace fragments may be worth of record.

Arthur G. Doughty and Chester Martin
Introduction, *The Kelsey Papers*, xxiv

These are qualities of the prairie poem in general: fragments, valuing the

commonplace. The next word, *Ungava*, (according to Lenoski's notes, "used for its Inuit

adverbial meaning of 'beyond,' not as the place name,") recentres the poem:.

Ungava
Is sallied forth from
England is an ungava

This is a poem written from the perspective of the land where Kelsey arrives, in the

language of one of its people. It also shows the way in which Whyte uses layout as a means

of conveying information that is unavailable when writing in a traditional, linear style. His re-

centring of the perspective of the poem is reflected in his typography, in which the word

Ungava is centred on the page.

Whyte uses typography to change the way we read the words – and look at the world.

They are "force-justified," pushed against the margins of the page and trailing along the

sides. There are many ways we can read them: we can read down one side, then the other, or

dart back and forth – Whyte has set up the words to play against one another across the page.

But they are also the shape of a river, or of a stream through a marsh with islands protruding

through the stream. Through the flow and eddies of the language, form emerges.

Changing the shapeless torrent of life into a discrete quantity

language is a vehicle	the universe decrees
for its description	creating spaces
for another space	to exist
silence between utterances	in space
in which are acts	acts begetting facts
in which words form	totem, factotum
Fact, act, fiction	the thing made
In space	a journey made
Made	journeyman's creation
Time	isolating

Into Autumn	the declining	sun
Narrows	river	day by day
before		after
here and		there
are		abstracts
without		meaning
there is a point		at which
something is		nothing
and nothing	is	something
clear water	at sunset	encased
sliver ice	sluggish	beneath mica
stored willows	wavering	the current
wind wane	leaf gold	near stillness
black blossoms	rose hips	the flatness
ground mist	glisten	deer listen
berry-eating bear	in the cool	aspen
in the dark	spruce	forest

(26-27)

There are many ways to read the words, not one. The oscillation between the margins is not an oscillation between extremes, it is part of a process of give and take. The diastole and systole that Whyte repeats is the beating of a heart, it is the interaction of Kelsey with his environment, it is the river flowing both ways, it is the advance and retreat of life over the cycle of the seasons. It is a fractal process – we see its pattern reflected at many different levels of scale.

Another Native word, Seekwan, spring, provides a poetic toehold for Whyte and for Kelsey. The phonemes seek and wan are broken apart and reconstituted: seek wandering, seek wondering. Spring, the season of rebirth – the mythic meets the seasons once again, but is grafted to Kelsey's own mythic transformation:

> seek wander
> and be born again beyond
> the sun setting lustwandering

no time for rest
stir. step. stride. walk. wander. follow. pursue
sequent seekwan (8)

Kelsey's initiation into the world of native vocabulary, strange landscapes and

animals for gods has its effects. The journey alters the journeyman, alienating him from the

land of his birth and from his own people:

Who recognized the   stranger   returned?

Kelsey *was not sensable of ye dangers.*
Those to whom he reported now were strangers (32)

The fifth part of *Homage* uses the language of science and binds the abstractions of

information to poetry – the information that is left behind when experience is removed *is* the

stuff of poetry. The physical and the material are emphasized, as are metaphors of flow –

capillaries, "sap, sweet liquid," but Whyte is spinning out as many possible interactions and

perspectives as he can: abstract and scientific, micro- and macroscopic; a tree's extensions in

space and time; scars and decay; its significance to animals other than humans; the ways it

can appear, feel or smell:

Shining, silver ghostly tree in hoarfrost in the fog,
Or glistening in apparitional dew at dawn;
Sentinel, guideway, haven,
Home to the squirrel, eyrie for raven, harvest for woodpecker,
Nest for flicker, outpost of owl, walkway for nuthatch;
Bed by bed of boughs sundered from its trunk

stem
flowering
resinous
sweetly
scented
tree (51)

The tree is not one but many things. Whyte traces the processes of life the tree

engages in with its surroundings. As a living entity, it affects and is affected by its

environment. Through its growth (rings) it marks the passage of time, and its longevity and

firmity of place give it special significance:

Epitomizing place
As myth makes history meaningful
While making of it something else (52)

The tree is itself the end of Kelsey's mythic transformation. In *Cosmos: Order and*

Turning. an essay on his poetics, Whyte writes of *Homage*:

> So - there in Eden Henry Kelsey stands as archetypal western Canadian – takes
> Indian woman to wive (or at least swive) with him, discovers how riverine the
> country. rivers being part of the return, and becomes poem. Becoming, as Sheila
> Watson pointed out..being the existential mood of the verb "to be".

> After he has played Prologue, chorically and cosmically Canadian, coming on the
> stage to say the curtain has risen on a new act, Kelsey disappears into the landscape
> and becomes what all Canadians secretly yearn to be: a tree. (272)

This materiality and scientific language are also used by Cooley and Arnason. Cooley

describes our bodies, linking science and poetry, information and heredity:

> nerves skein   blind

> albino seaweed blown

> in our bodies' pools

> > listening

> carbon phrases / your phrases

> > strung between us father (249)

From the image of the Kelsey-as-tree, Whyte moves to images of circles and spheres

– eyes and worlds. The convergence of spheres is a convergence of worlds:

> your sphere, my sphere;
> your sphere, Kelsey's sphere;
> my sphere, Kelsey's sphere; (53)

Kelsey's journey is our journey. When Whyte writes in the poem's final lines that

> The story continues, the story is ended.

> The story continues, "The story is ended..."

> The story continues (59)

The story that he refers to is Kelsey's journey and ours; his initiation into the New

World is ours. The moment of the discovery of America continues. Poetry acts here as a ritual

not just of initiation but of re-initiation. Repetition and redundancy serve to make information

more certain, and rituals of repetition work to make meaning more certain, a struggle, even a

blow against the inevitability of decay. For those new to the experience, they are transformed;

those who have already undergone the passage are renewed. At the end, there is a new

beginning. The moment of transformation and rebirth at the end. Uncertainty at the end is the

opening of possibility. In Amason's *Marsh Burning* it runs as "fragments of a vision

fragments of a life". (314)

It happens in *First Woman*:

if you listen   first woman
you will hear the steps
of one who follows
far in the back of your mind
moving out towards your eyes (75)

It happens, though tainted with rueful irony in *The Wind our Enemy*:

And suddenly some spirit seems to rouse
And gleam, like a thin sword, tarnished, bent,
But still shining in the spared beauty of the moon,
As his strained voice says to her, 'We're not licked yet!
It must rain again – it will! Maybe–soon–' (108)

In *Grasshopper*, it runs:

even the lost postulations for the Last Best West
can be called back again (219)

Lenoski's note to these lines adds: "While The Wanderer ends by placing his faith in

heaven, here hope for a return to fulfilment, community and home focuses on the experiences

of ordinary people."

In Cooley's *Fielding* the transformative rite of passage is his own, brought on by the

death of his father. The journey he makes on the drive back to Winnipeg, with its ritual

namings, includes one of the religious billboards that greet travellers along highways "YE

MUST BE BORN AGAIN" and he sees his father reborn in himself:

> your breath tumbles
> shining quiet
> inside my ribs
> find your hand hard in mine
>
> your lines wound in
> the stretch of my muscles
> still living
> but you are dead
> & we float like lost birds
> over this frozen
> land reading
> these things
> that we know
> the long silence slanting past
> now in the mind (249-250)

Once again, Lenoski provides the note completing what the poet won't: "The line is

"now in the mind indestructible," in Ezra Pound's *The Pisan Cantos*." Cooley's poem is an

assertion of the value of his father's life, and of the life of those whose work is erased by

time.

In *Seed Catalogue*, the moment of ironic self-recognition is "the smell of my

sweating armpits," and the unfinished ending is the schoolyard joke, "Adam and Eve got

drownded— Who was left?" with its punchline, ("Pinch me!") left off. While the other

italicized questions sprinkled throughout the poem -"*How do you grow a poet? How do you

grow a past?*" have been answered, though seldom completely, by the poem itself, the

abridged punchline is left to be filled in by the reader. Aside from its schoolyard use – a

prank that invites pain upon the speaker – it is also colloquially familiar as something you say

to someone to make sure you're not dreaming – to assure you that your experience is real,

and not a fantasy. Kroetsch, having written the prairie, asks the reader to complete the final

act which will make the words flesh.

Of all the poems in *a/long prairie lines*, Patrick Friesen's *The Shunning* is the most accessible and the most "universal" while also being the most culturally and historically specific. Friesen tells the story of how his inspiration for *The Shunning* came about:

> Richard Hildebrandt, a friend in whose house I was working, called me downstairs one night to watch "Man Alive," a religious television program. We watched the story on the purging within the Holdeman church in my home town. The young bucks, not old or wise enough to hold their positions of responsibility in the church, were out to clean up what was, as far as any outsider could see, the narrowest, cleanest church in town.
>
> Everywhere they looked, outside of themselves, they saw pride and corruption of purpose. Especially, they seemed to see it in people older than themselves. *The spiritual violence began.* People were banned and relatives and loved ones ordered to shun them. Business people were asked not to do business with those considered "non-Christian" by the church hierarchy. Otherwise their business would be shunned. Censorship, the heavy hand of self-righteousness, took over the church.
>
> There was really nothing new here. Intellectually I had known about this kind of thing. When my former neighbour appeared on the screen, a neighbour who had been a friendly, faithful Christian, and explained, with sorrow and pain in her voice, how he had been banned for pride...when his wife told how she was asked to shun her husband, and how she refused, then I knew the focal point for the work in progress. (171) [Emphasis mine]

At the heart of *The Shunning* is the struggle for the freedom of the individual to pursue their own strategies and the ways in which a community seeks to maintain order and belief. Friesen's own apostasy from the beliefs of his community was long standing, and was driven by a further very spiritual sense of self; more than just self-preservation, self-assertion and liberty. In an interview with Robert Enright, he discussed the ways in which he used language strategically for the sake of his (not very post-structuralist-sounding) identity: "I recognized I had to save the centre – you use whatever is necessary: you build up masks, you build up walls and then later you have to tear some of them down again. (26)

The transformations of identity that Friesen traces in *The Shunning* are both highly culturally specific and universal: the way in which a community – in this instance, Mennonite – exercises social control over an individual. The extremity and cruelty of the measures brought to bear heighten the dramatic intensity while the basic experience is easily

recognizable, and in an important sense, universal. Paradoxically, the very universality of *The*

Shunning leads reviewer Don Perkins to question its inclusion in the anthology:

> Indeed, and not surprising, given Lenoski's own inconsistent – or inclusive – use of
> the word, the prairie as landform is, as we have seen with Whyte's poem, or find
> again in Arnason's and Van Herk's, incidental or peripheral to several of these
> poems. In particular, it earns scarcely a mention in Patrick Friesen's "The Shunning,"
> which is more a "rural" than a "prairie" poem, and one in which the emphasis is on
> the historical experience within a Mennonite community than on the place where it
> was located. This poem is the only one that does not seem to belong, given the title of
> the anthology and the expectations it might raise that somehow either the
> geographical or political senses of "prairie" might define the poems, and be defined
> by them in return, in keeping with the Canadian tradition, identified by Russell
> Brown, of long poems concerning the places in which the writers found
> themselves.(145)

Perkins conveniently ignores that history has to take place *somewhere*. Hume once

wrote, "To check the sallies of the imagination, and to reduce every expression to geometrical

truth and exactness, would be most contrary to the laws of criticism; because it would

produce a work, which, by universal experience, has been found to be the most insipid and

disagreeable." Perkins' appeal to geographical correctness is of this type. His complaint is

like going to the opera and complaining that the backdrops did not receive the prominence

they deserved.

Friesen wrote that before embarking on *The Shunning*, "I was going to write a book.

It would say something about Mennonites in southeastern Manitoba. This much was

conscious."(170) These "historical experiences" are the experience of Mennonites

specifically situated on the Manitoba prairie. The place-names carry with them the history of

the people who founded them: French, English and German. "Maybe you want the priest

from St. Pierre" (182) "Here on this farm between LaBroquerie and Steinbach" (169)

The family names he mentions are instantly recognizable in Manitoba as Mennonite:

Barkman, Loewen, Penner, Reimer, Toews. Flora and fauna, too, are named and the

backbreaking labour and rituals of clearing the land are evoked:

> a cairn for each acre
> or   from a distance   tombstones

nothing alive here but the horses
and me sweating for dirt   talking to myself

unload the stoneboat
make a living with what you have (179)

The stoneboat was used to haul away rocks, glacial till left behind by the receding

glaciers in past millenia, stones that riddle the rich earth of the prairie and which despite

annual clearing are continually thrust to the surface by frost.

The Shunning is Friesen's own telling of his community that was paired with a

personal apostasy. While his specific experience is Mennonite, it is also a common

experience of individuals in immigrant cultures, of dealing with the demands of one's own

culture and the freedom and possibilities offered up by the other cultures surrounding you.

Friesen spoke to Robert Enright about his own cultural apostasy in an interview in *Prairie*

Fire:

> "I had no borders. And that was a function of how I'd been brought up. It's
> something I still work with, actually, trying to place my borders...Now about the
> obsession, it's just that this is my one life that I know and it's what I was thrown into
> and I damn well want to understand and do something about it. I didn't just want to
> fight it, because there was something there to be saved. But what? How do you stay
> who you feel deep down you are?" (15)

Friesen's question goes straight to the heart of the matter: identity. Conversion and

apostasy are the two most profound transformations of identity, since they entail change in

all three criteria of identity: individual values and strategies, status and membership within a

tribe or culture. Friesen is profoundly aware of the results of resistance to the established

order: Peter's resistance leads to his being shunned, which in turn results in his suicide.

While conversion entails entrance into a tribe, apostasy does not. Apostasy means

abandoning your previous identity, because you are cast free from or out of a tribal status

structure. Just as conversion does, apostasy opens up the possibilities – possibilities for

something new. A rebirth. A new identity. A new West. A new prairie. A new Canada.

Conclusion

I have sought to demonstrate not only the strategies and techniques that the poets in *a/long prairie lines* have used in writing their poems, but also to explain the social, political and literary context that suggested those strategies. While post-modern poetics made the original writing possible, I think that the ultimate consequences of Diane Tiefensee's Derridean deconstruction of Kroetsch and his critics would have had a silencing effect. My articulation of a Darwinian, materialist critical stance was intended in part to ensure that Kroetsch's barroom war cry, "The bastards can't keep us from talking" remained true.

The poets in this anthology are erecting a literary infrastructure, establishing a mythos for the prairie. Part of such an endeavour, appropriately enough for prairie poets, is to be groundbreakers or pioneers, to assert first of all through their writing that the prairie and its people are worthy of being the subject of poetry. Second, and no less important, is the articulation of how this is to be accomplished. This often means a kind of playful equivocation: doing one thing while resisting it – myth making while undermining it, using mythic and narrative elements in chunks, while resisting the temptation to create a uniform narrative, a single story - not one but many tales. Multiplicity and polyphony are parts of these poems because they reflect the particulate and reject the idea of cultural homogeneity. Introducing many different elements as if in a rush to get the whole world out – lists of flora and fauna, and insisting on an irregular form in order to shake the reader out of the way they "normally" read. Literature relies on what has been written before - where there is nothing, the poet must provide everything.

All of this is combined with a desire to establish the poets' own terms of reference. These poems, often written in present tense, rely on the reader's experience of the prairie, and if they don't have it, they may be out of luck. Some might complain that this makes the poems not only obtuse, but that it guarantees that they will not understood beyond the borders

of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. But that is precisely the point. These are poems written by and for Western Canadians, filled with inside jokes and the tone of a confidant.

The "prairie post-modernists" as I have called them, have had a profound effect on the writing scene in Western Canada, as writers of poetry, fiction, criticism and theatre. Dorothy Livesay played an important role when she was writer-in-residence at the University of Manitoba in 1975. She was a matriarch of sorts to the movement, with her essay *A Putting Down of Roots* describing both the impetus and the metaphor for the long prairie poem. She also acted as mentor to Patrick Friesen, but also founded *Contemporary Verse Two (CV/II)*. She wrote in her essay *Canadian Poetry Today* that Canada Council grants to publishers and for reading tours in the 1970's resulted in an explosion in the number of published poets between 1975 and 1985.

The prairie post-modernists actually comprised a large community of more or less like minded authors, many of whom were known as "the St. John's College Crowd" at the University of Manitoba, among them Kroetsch, Cooley, Arnason, Daniel Lenoski , (the editor of *a/long prairie lines*) and Kenneth James Hughes, the editor of *Contemporary Manitoba Writers*. They are alternately known by their involvement with their publishing endeavours as "The Prairie Fire Crowd," or "The Border Crossing" bunch. The influence of their decades of teaching both creative writing and literary theory has resulted in a fecundity of prairie writing that may seem to the uninitiated "puzzling and inexplicable," as a recent book reviewer in the Globe and Mail was seen to write.

The way by which the poems in *a/long prairie lines* assert prairie identities is also significant; it is not an assertion that *only* the Canadian Prairie has value; it is an assertion that *we too* have value. Assigning a particular "face" to a national identity in Canada flies in the face of both fairness and fact. Diversity in Canada is a fact, as it is on the prairie. These poems reflect and value diversity because they assert cultural or social identities in the same way that they assert the value of the prairie as a whole: we, too, have value, a value that does

not detract from yours. Such assertions of value will meet challenges, because status and value systems are interrelated.

Canadian struggles over national identity are hamstrung, and rightly so, by the lack of cultural cohesiveness and by diversity. Disunity as unity is part of what defines our national strategy. These poems, in creating a poetic infrastructure open up the possibilities of what can be said and set up a literary basis to which future artists can turn. We can then move from explaining ourselves to being ourselves.

Bibliography

Brown, Craig (Ed.). *The Illustrated History of Canada*. Key Porter Books, Toronto, 1997

Bulgakov, Mikhail. *A Country Doctor's Notebook*. Translated by Michael Glenny. The Harvill Press, London 1995.

Campbell, Jeremy. *Grammatical Man: Information Entropy, Language and Life*. Simon and Schuster, New York 1982

Carroll, Joseph. *Evolution and Literary Theory*. University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London, 1995.

Cooley, Dennis. *The Vernacular Muse*. Turnstone Press, Winnipeg 1987

Eco, Umberto. *The Search for the Perfect Language*. Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 1995

Feyerabend, Paul. *Against Method*. Verso Editions, London 1978.

Feyerabend, Paul. *Killing Time: The Autobiography of Paul Feyerabend*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1995.

Fussell, Paul. *Class: A guide through the American Status System*. Touchstone, New York 1983.

Florby, Gunilla *The Margin Speaks: A Study of Margaret Laurence and Robert Kroetsch from a post-colonial point of view*. Lund University Press, 1997

Kambourelli, Smaro. *On the edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1991

Koestler, Arthur. *The Act of Creation*. Picador Books, London 1975.

Kroetsch, Robert. *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 1989.

Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 2nd Edition, Enlarged. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970.

Hughes, Kenneth James Ed. *Contemporary Manitoba Writers*. Turnstone Press, Winnipeg 1990

Lenoski, Daniel S. Ed. *A/long prairie lines: An Anthology of Long Prairie Poems*. Turnstone Press, Winnipeg, 1989

McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Signet Publishing, New York 1964

Richards, I.A. and Ogden, C.K. *The Meaning of Meaning*. Harcourt Brace Company, New York 1923.

Richter, David H. (Ed.) *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. Bedford / St. Martin's, New York 1989.

Roy, Gabrielle. *The autobiography of Gabrielle Roy: Enchantment and Sorrow*. Translated by Patricia Claxton. Lester & Orpen Dennys, Toronto 1987.

Sacks, Oliver. *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*. Harper & Row, New York, 1987.

Shippey, T.A. *The Road to Middle Earth*. Grafton, 1983

Sproxton, Birk (Ed.). *Trace: Prairie Writers on Writing*. Turnstone Press, Winnipeg, 1986.

Skvorecky, Josef. *Talking Moscow Blues: Essays about Literature, Politics, Movies and Jazz*. Sam Solecki Ed. Lester & Orpen Dennys, Toronto 1988.

Tiefensee, Diane. *The Old Dualities: Deconstructing Robert Kroetsch and his Critics*. McGill University Press, Montreal and Kingston 1994

Weiner, Norbert. *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*. Avon Books, New York 1967.

Journal Articles

Canadian Literature, Autumn 1996, vol. no 150, p 140-2. Review by Susan Rudy Dorscht of *The Old dualities: Deconstructing Robert Kroetsch and his critics*.

The Poetry Review: Journal of Canadian Poetry Vol. 6, For the year 1989, p 143-147. Review by Don Perkins of *a/long prairie lines*

Prairie Fire. Vol. 13 No 1. Spring 1992. Robert Enright's interview with Patrick Friesen

Scientific American, Vol 283 No. 1. July 2000. Ernst Mayr, *Darwin's Influence on Modern Thought (78-83)*

[i] Cooley in *The Vernacular Muse*, Kroetsch in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*

[ii] McLuhan identified the distinction between different levels of information in different media as the difference between "hot" and "cool" media. Type or written text is a hot medium, with low information content that depends on the reader to *generate* significance and meaning. Television and film are cool media with a very high carrying capacity, the ability to transmit an enormous amount of information at once. They can resolve uncertainty and resolves the meaning for the viewer or audience. This is why pictures are worth a thousand words – and why they are so persuasive. The uncertainty of the transmission is resolved through redundancy – either in the form of repetition over time, or if a large amount of information can be transmitted at once (through a medium with high channel capacity – like TV film, or face to face conversation) then you can simultaneously transmit different kinds of information that all reinforce the message: In film. colour, lighting. makeup, acting, words, sound effects and music all combine to make an effect. The entire purpose of narrative and poetic structure is in to act as a form in generating effects through different kinds of redundancy.

[iii] While it is a physical process, information is so (appropriately) mercurial that its processes often seem "magical". The power of information is reflected in the magical connotations attached to language, specifically to the words "story" and "grammar": T.A. Shippey writes:

> "The Old English translation of Greek *evangelion*, 'good news' was *gódspell*, 'the good story,' now 'Gospel'. Spell continued to mean. however. 'a story, something said in a formal style,' eventually, 'a formula of power; a magic spell.' (47)

> "'[G]lamour' – Magic, Enchantment Spell; esp. in the phrase 'to cast the glamour over one': from this sense has evolved the idea of "A magical or fictitious beauty…a delusive or alluring charm: and so, pretty obviously to the cardboard senses of today.
> Further, the word was evidently by origin a corruption of 'grammar,' and paralleled in a sense by 'gramarye'= "Occult learning, magic, necromancy,' says the OED. Cambridge University had indeed preserved for centuries the office of 'Master of Glomerye,' whose job it was to teach the younger undergraduates Latin."

[iv] Campbell notes that information theory's lineage is decidedly low, being derived from entropy and probability, both notoriously slippery ideas that mix both subjective and objective criteria for assessing the disorder. Shannon had wanted to use the term uncertainty, but John von Neumann told him to use entropy, since "no one knows what entropy is, so in a debate you will always have the advantage." (GM 32) The term entropy is a measure of disorder in a system, derived from the second law of thermodynamics, a law that according to physicist P.W. Bridgman, "still smells of its human origins." Probability and statistics, too are "low": the former evolved from gambling. Of statistics Jeremy Campbell writes:

> "Entropy is closer to the untidiness and variety of life than previous physical laws. Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West*, singled out entropy as the concept most typical of the downfall of modern science from its classical purity and certainty. He chose it because entropy is a statistical rather than an exact principle and has more to do with living things than the timeless, abstract equations of the old mechanics. Spengler wrote:

> "Statistics, belongs, like chronology, to the domain of the organic, to fluctuating life, to Destiny and Incident and not to the world of laws and timeless causality… As everyone knows, statistics serves above all to characterise political and economic, that is, historical developments. In the "classical" mechanics of Galileo and Newton there would have been no room for them." (50-51)

Spengler's sour comments obscure the fact that the appropriation of probability by scientists allowed "Science" to maintain its reputation. People who use computers to synthesize sounds or pictures have often remarked on the difficulty of replicating natural effects because of the "messiness" of the world in comparison to the "purity" of mathematics. The rigidity of absolutes comes with the risk of being absolutely wrong, but probability allows for a range of likelihoods. Even if a result is highly unlikely, as long as it falls within a predicted range the reputation of a theory and its proponents can remain intact.

[v] Hayles compounds her mistake by suggesting that the reason Shannon "favoured" order over chaos is because he was working for Bell, a private business. Though she cited Grammatical Man in her bibliography, she obviously missed the following paragraph:

> Edward Moore …described Shannon as a perfectionist who worked at a very fast pace but could not bear to surrender a paper for publication until it had been refined and polished to the

> highest gloss. "He would let a piece of work sit for five years, thinking it needed to be improved, wondering if he had made the right choice of variable in this or that equation," said Moore. " Then, while he was still contemplating improvements, someone else would come out with a similar result which was correct, but so lacking in formal elegance that Shannon would have been ashamed to have done such a shoddy job." (20-21)

[41] Don Perkins took a dim view of Lenoski's endnotes, calling them "excessive, often intrusive" (intrusive endnotes?). The sanctificatory power of endnotes may be debatable, but their explanatory power is not. Their tone is biographical and intimate; they fill in connections between poets in the anthology of which we would otherwise be unaware, especially personal ones. Take this note from *Fielding* for the word "david":

> David Arnason is a colleague, friend and former neighbour of Dennis Cooley:

Or part of the note for the title of *Seed Catalogue:*

> The impact of this poem on the development of an indigenous prairie voice has been enormous. Several of the authors in this book consider their work to be the result of the enKroetschment of "Seed Catalogue" In fact, it was dedicated to two of them: David Arnason and Dennis Cooley.

Or the note for "at the cabin" in *Fielding:*

> Cooley bought his Winnipeg Beach Cabin from Dorothy Livesay.