

THE QUEST FOR ORDER IN THE NOVELS  
OF ROBERT KROETSCH

by  
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OF ROBERT KROETSCH"

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## INTRODUCTION

The search, or quest, is a central motif in Robert Kroetsch's four published novels. The quest motif appears prominently in his first novel, But We Are Exiles, and is of central concern also in the novels of his Gone West trilogy--The Words of My Roaring, The Studhorse Man, and Gone Indian. To some extent, it can be seen in his work of non-fiction Alberta. It is my contention in this thesis that the quest engaged in by the protagonists of Kroetsch's works is essentially a quest for a clearer "naming", that is, an attempt to define the conditions of existence. This quest for definition is therefore an ordering or re-ordering process in which Kroetsch's characters attempt to map their interior and exterior landscapes. In this process they try to move from a painful, impersonal, chaotic wasteland towards a less painful, more personally defineable order.

The wasteland is, of course, one of the central images in the quest motif outlined by Jessie L. Weston in From Ritual to Romance. Miss Weston examines apparent discrepancies between elements in various medieval grail romances and suggests that the differences between versions and the apparent incongruity of symbols can only be reconciled by understanding that there is, in the grail romances, a fusion of Pagan and Christian elements. In the course of her analysis and explanation of various links between ancient fertility ritual and medieval romances, Miss Weston describes some fundamental elements of the ritual, its principal characters and symbols, as well as its significance.

The quester traditionally is a knight who rides forth seeking a vision

of the Holy Grail and who, on his journey, encounters a test of some sort in the Perilous Chapel. If he passes the test, he may meet the infirm Fisher King, the keeper of the grail secret. The land of the Fisher King lies wasted and the king himself lies ill with a grave wound in the sexual organ. The blight which is on the land seems to be a result of the wound suffered by the Fisher King, but that wound cannot be healed until a quester comes to pose the healing, freeing question. The asking of this question is therefore highly significant, for it will at once cure the Fisher King and, through him, the blighted land.

Although Miss Weston examines a number of medieval grail romances and finds differing details in nearly all, she does distinguish some common elements. The Holy Grail, she suggests, may in legend be the vessel used by Christ at the Last Supper, but the grail and the lance which accompany it in the symbolism of the grail romances cannot be found in the Scriptures. She concludes that:

They are sex symbols of immemorial and world-wide diffusion, the Lance, or Spear, representing the Male, the Cup or Vase, the Female, reproductive energy.<sup>1</sup>

She continues:

I would suggest that, while Lance and Cup, in their associated form, are primarily symbols of Human Life Energy, in conjunction with others they formed a group of 'Fertility' symbols, connected with a very ancient ritual, of which fragmentary survivals alone have been preserved to us.<sup>2</sup>

The grail and lance then are seen as central symbols in an ancient ritual

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<sup>1</sup>Jessie L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), p. 71.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. p. 76.

of initiation into the mysteries of life; the symbols, the "exoteric"<sup>3</sup> elements of the ritual have survived, but the central mysteries, the "esoteric" meaning, have been lost. The central mysteries are thus unnamed, although they are thought to concern not just physical regeneration but also spiritual regeneration.<sup>4</sup> At the core of the ritual then lies the central unnamed and perhaps unnameable mystery, whose meaning cannot be articulated and which can now only be expressed analogously through the symbols of Quester, Grail, Lance and Fisher King.

The Fisher King, a central character in the grail romances, is a figure of somewhat obscure origins. According to Jessie Weston,

He is not merely a deeply symbolic figure but the essential centre of the whole cult, a being semi-human, standing between his people and land, and the unseen forces which control their destiny.<sup>5</sup>

In part, his role is messianic in the Christian sense, as suggested by the fish symbol traditionally associated with Christ and primitive Christianity,<sup>6</sup> but he is also directly involved in the life processes around him in a manner in which Christ was not. It is clear for instance that the blight on his land is a reflection of the Fisher King's infirmity and that until he is healed the land and its inhabitants will remain drought-stricken.

The healing of the Fisher King however, can only take place with the intervention of a quester. Weston examines a number of quests and again outlines the similarities. It is clear that the quester, to complete his quest, must ask a question which will have the effect of restoring to

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid. p.132.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid. p.146.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid. p.128.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. p.117.

health the King whose infirmity afflicts his land. It is also clear that the land suffers from a prolonged drought and that the quester's question will restore the waters. This freeing of waters, of course, is the symbolic analogue of the king's restored potency. It becomes clear too that the failure of the quester to formulate and ask the appropriate question will simply prolong the blight by leaving the Fisher King enfeebled. Therefore, although the Fisher King is a central figure who must be cured before his land can be restored, the quester is also a significant figure who must define and pose the question. The fate of these two figures is therefore inextricably linked for, of course, if the quester fails in his task, he remains an inhabitant of the continuing wasteland.

The wasteland condition and the associated motifs described by Jessie Weston have provided a compelling metaphor for twentieth-century existence--from T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" to the present. The attractiveness of the wasteland motif is understandable, for it provides a useful metaphor for the alienated individual in a mass society. Use of the wasteland motif is widespread not just because of T.S. Eliot's utilization of it, but because this motif embodies a basic problem of definition faced by increasingly alienated twentieth-century man. Central to the wasteland motif, as explained by Weston, is the significance of the formulation and the posing of the freeing question which will heal the King and make whole his land and people. One individual, if he can control the formula, can heal the society and win knowledge of the central mysteries of existence. It is this process of naming and defining which contemporary man finds increasingly difficult and which fascinates the literary artist who wishes to define the essence of a region, a nation, or perhaps even an entire

society. It is this naming process which fascinates Robert Kroetsch and provides much of the impetus for his fiction.

Kroetsch has said that while he once felt that the Canadian artist should name and define experience, he now feels that the artist should "un-name" or undefine experience, to purge it of misconceptions. Referring to Margaret Atwood's Surfacing and Rudy Wiebe's The Temptations of Big Bear, Kroetsch suggests that Atwood and Wiebe resolve the problem of the tension between appearance and reality by "un-naming" or "demythologising the systems that threaten to define them".<sup>7</sup> He adds:

It is possible that the old obsessive notion of identity, of ego, is itself a spent fiction, that these new writers are discovering something essentially new, something essential not only to Canadians but to the world they would uncreate. Whatever the case, they dare the ultimate contra-diction: they uncreate themselves into existence.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, the process Kroetsch outlines here is itself part of the naming process: it is simply the necessary preparation for the act of naming. The "uninventing" process Kroetsch describes does not "contra-dict" the naming process; it simply establishes the conditions in which naming can take place. Kroetsch is here very clearly defining a "pre-dicament" so that the previously named conditions can be "unnamed" and then reinvented in a different way.

In his novels of reinvention, Kroetsch utilizes the quest as a central device, and while the quest is essentially undertaken by individuals for the sake of individual order, attitudes and details connected with the quest are also of regional, national and ultimately

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<sup>7</sup>Robert Kroetsch, "Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction," Journal of Canadian Fiction. III: 3 (1974): 43.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. p.45.



universal significance. If, as Northrop Frye suggests, the Canadian sensibility "is less perplexed by the question 'who am I?' than by some such riddle as 'where is here?'"<sup>9</sup> then Kroetsch is attempting to define both the nature of 'here' and the nature of the problems encountered by those who inhabit 'here'. In the following pages, then, I should like to examine the quest for order in Kroetsch's novels and to examine some of the literary analogies he employs to suggest the nature of the quest.

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<sup>9</sup>Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 220.

## CHAPTER I

### But We Are Exiles

Robert Kroetsch's first published novel, But We Are Exiles, opens with a search for the drowned body of the Dionysian character Michael Hornyak. This underwater search not only provides a central image for the novel but also furnishes a motif which is developed in the later novels of the Gone West trilogy. As the title of the trilogy suggests, Kroetsch's protagonists demonstrate a concern for the problem of "going west", that is, of dying, and it is against the ultimate measure of death that these characters must attempt to gauge their lives. Johnny Backstrom, the undertaker in The Words of My Roaring must understand the lesson implicit in the drowning of Jonah Bledd before he can understand his own motivation. Demeter Proudfoot in The Studhorse Man must attempt to come to terms with the significance of the dead Hazard Lepage before he can find the synthesis missing in his file cards. Paradoxically, Mark Madham in Gone Indian, instead of trying to understand the "death" of Jeremy Sadness, is unwilling even to recognize that there might be some significance in Jeremy's disappearance.

Peter Guy in But We Are Exiles first of all searches literally for the body of Hornyak, then attempts finally to understand the influence which the living Hornyak exercised over him. Peter's quest, then, which began six years before with Hornyak on the road through Western Canada, runs full circle and concludes with Peter's superseding of Hornyak's body on the

funeral barge. Like Johnny Backstrom later, Peter has trouble distinguishing between beginnings and endings, but, unlike Johnny, Peter remains on the periphery, always circling but never defining the appropriate formula which would lead to increased self-knowledge and order. In fact, he is like the quester of the Gawain legend, of whom Weston says:

Here the hero sets out on his journey with no clear idea of the task before him. He is taking the place of a knight mysteriously slain in his company, but whither he rides, and why, he does not know, only that the business is important and pressing. From the records of his partial success we gather that he ought to have enquired concerning the nature of the Grail, and that this enquiry would have resulted in the restoration to fruitfulness of a Wasteland, the desolation of which is, in some manner, not clearly explained, connected with the death of a knight whose name and identity are never disclosed.<sup>1</sup>

As already indicated, Peter has no clear idea of his quest, and ultimately takes the place of Hornyak's faceless body on the funeral barge. Hornyak is therefore the knight killed mysteriously whose place is taken by Peter, the quester. Because his body is faceless when found, Hornyak is also the individual who, although frequently discussed, is never successfully defined. During a tense last meal, Hornyak says to Peter:

"Guy, you don't know your own mind...." "Sometimes I envy you. My trouble is I know my own mind and that's a terrible thing." He waved the lamp around at the shadowed silence of the engine room. "I know what I want. You see that Guy? I know till I ache from my balls to breakfast. I know till I want to wring one shout from that jesusly silent throat of yours."<sup>2</sup>

Hornyak, then, is the individual who seems to know his own identity and purpose. Despite his apparent self-confidence and despite his vitality,

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<sup>1</sup>Jessie L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Kroetsch, But We Are Exiles (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1965), p. 9.

however, he is a hollow man who finds his life indissolubly linked with Peter's.

Peter Guy, on the other hand, attempts to understand past events which have influenced him and tries unsuccessfully to articulate the chain of cause and effect which has produced his present predicament. Peter, of course, cannot define or utter the significant question which would free them from their common wasteland. He remains silent to the extent that he allows Hornyak to enter a dangerous fume-laden barge with an unshielded light. The light which Hornyak had previously waved at the darkness produces a violent, all-consuming explosion that results in a macabre burlesque of self-illumination: self-immolation. Hornyak's self-illumination, like that of Narcissus in the epigraph at the opening of the novel, is totally destructive and there is clear warning in this episode that any attempt at self-definition must be undertaken carefully, not brashly. More importantly, it is clear that the quest is metaphysical rather than physical. Hornyak's death is the result of his customary physical assault on life, and Peter's apparent death at the conclusion of the novel is the result of his failure to define his quest and free himself of his albatross, Hornyak.

At the chronological beginning of events in the novel, Peter, hitchhiking west to meet his fiancée, Kettle Fraser, encounters Michael Hornyak in Manitoba. Hornyak, as his name suggests, is a vital, experienced, unlocalized figure who, although heading east in his black Rolls Royce (a vehicle reminiscent of Johnny Backstrom's hearse), reverses his direction to travel west with Peter. Hornyak's virility, compelling charm and self-fidence distinguish him from the unsure, uninitiated Peter and make it possible for him to serve as the agent of Peter's initiation. The orgiastic

thirteen days spent by these two as they drink their way across the prairies, are also the days which see Peter's rite of passage with the girl he and Hornyak pick up in Regina. As the novel progresses, however, it becomes clear that Hornyak's ability to move anywhere with impunity is more apparent than real. He cannot always move in a new direction and create new order at will and his meeting with Peter begins a chain of events which leads ultimately to Hornyak's fiery death. Thus, his initial contact with Guy marks not an extension of his potential to create order but a weakening of that power.

Even as Peter and Hornyak begin their journey westward, the subject of order is raised: " 'Chaos', Mike said. 'We've got some chaos to contend with. So hand me that bottle under your seat'." <sup>3</sup> Clearly Hornyak's answer to chaos is an incredibly vital, Dionysian assault on life and a refusal to accept as sacrosanct previously defined modes of action. He says, "Let's stop somewhere and start my old tradition" <sup>4</sup> yet, for all his apparent disdain of convention, it is later revealed by Kettle that he envied Peter his "good" family background and considerable family tree. It is ironic that Peter, in the process of breaking ties with his family and the dynastic order they represent, should take his guidance from a man who ultimately seeks the very kind of stability which Peter has just rejected.

As Peter and Michael move through Manitoba the quest is defined more clearly as a quest for cleansing water, and the effect of this quest

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid. p. 135.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid. p. 137.

is to emphasize the wasteland motif. It should be pointed out that Peter's main recollection of these early scenes takes place as he lies dying at the close of the novel; and at that point, as he drifts in the storm on Great Slave Lake, the earlier search for water is an ironic underscoring of his continuing spiritual aridity in the face of the annihilating physical presence of water.

Peter and his mentor Hornyak are seen increasingly as supplicants in search of the cleansing baptismal waters which could ease the drought of their wasteland. As they near Portage la Prairie on the road west, they see a billboard which offers the possibility of repentance and absolution from sin, and Hornyak remarks "there's hope, but not much."<sup>5</sup> They make it clear that their search is also for the fountain of youth, but "the best water in Manitoba" continues to elude them.<sup>6</sup> Their rather desperate pursuit of a boat-carrying trailer in the hope that it might lead them to water, is treated as a joke by the driver of the trailer and they end up lost in the fluid wastes of Saskatchewan wheat fields.

The red-headed girl whom they pick up in Regina provides a temporary interlude and a corruption so casual that it is barely remembered; but it is significant that the search for water continues unabated afterwards through parched hills until, near Banff, they find Kettle and water. The water, however, is a hot sulphur stream and their triumph is short-lived as an aged guard destroys the mood. " 'You're supposed to pay up there,' the guard called. 'You can't pay' Mike yelled back. 'Not to be reborn.' And

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid. p. 138.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. p. 138.

the three of them felt robbed. Cheated. Sad to the limits."<sup>7</sup> The search for water ends here with the union of Kettle Fraser and Hornyak, but even though her name contains the names of two rivers union with her produces no release but only further barrenness. Kettle is not a redeeming woman like Helen Murdoch in The Words of My Roaring or Bea Sunderman in Gone Indian; she is simply another exile like the red-headed girl picked up on the road west, or the cook aboard the Nahannie Jane.

The last step of Peter's rite of initiation is his startled glimpse in a mirror of his fiancée Kettle in the bed of Hornyak. Betrayed, Peter heads north for his exile, but this incident, of profound significance to Peter, initiates a thematic and imagistic sequence which reverberates throughout the novel. The image of the mirror reintroduces the theme of Narcissism initially suggested by the epigraph from Ovid's Metamorphoses, and adds the dimension of inner quest to the novel. Narcissus, of course, is the youth of surpassing beauty for whom Teiresius prophesied a long life, but only if he never came to know himself. Beloved of Echo, he spurned her and all others, drawing the curse of unreciprocated self-love. Discovering himself in a reflecting pool, he pines and dies in unsatisfied longing. In Teiresius' sense, he fatally "knew", that is, saw himself.

At the opening of the novel Peter Guy is seen searching the river for the body of Hornyak and the Narcissistic parallels are startling. The river is "mirror smooth"<sup>8</sup> as Peter studies the water and his own reflection, "as if not sure whom he might see."<sup>9</sup> And further:

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid. p. 144.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid. p. 2.

The image mimicked his hesitation, mocked his doubt by repeating it. The deep-set eyes worried against the slant of light. The mouth pursed and offering a kiss, in its subtle retreat, threatened now to open and drown. Peter shook his head to be sure it was himself he saw.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, it can be seen that Peter's search for the body of Hornyak is expressed in Narcissistic terms. Peter's search is ultimately solipsistic and his inability to penetrate the surface or break the mirror indicates the hopelessness of his quest.

The mirror, as in "The Lady of Shalott", suggests life seen from a distance, inverted--literally, an illusion. In Alberta Kroetsch says:

In front of the Chateau is a reflecting globe, and one morning we watched a tourist walking around and around it, trying to photograph not the lake and the mountains themselves, but their reflections as they appeared in the globe. John and I stroked our new beards and marvelled at human folly.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, life is to be enjoyed spontaneously and instinctively and the mirror reflects an inverted, illusory world.

Later in the novel, Kettle describes to Peter the new house and the orderly urban existence which awaits them both in the south, and, recognizing that order as emptiness, she cries, "break the mirror for me. Break it, break it please, smash it, Peter. Listen to me, smash it."<sup>12</sup> It is to escape the mirror-reflected image that Peter heads north in an embittered flight. As Kroetsch says, "running was of the essence"<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>11</sup>Robert Kroetsch, Alberta (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1968), p. 31.

<sup>12</sup>Kroetsch, But We Are Exiles, p. 124.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. p. 18.



and Peter was fleeing what he could not order and control.

Six years later, Peter is on his way to becoming Hornyak, that is, he is beginning to assume the role of saviour-victim that ultimately makes him take the place of Hornyak's body in the coffin. Initially, however, Peter's Narcissism contains voyeuristic undertones, for it is clear that the door to the bedroom was unlocked and that Peter was intended to see and wanted to see the lovemaking of Kettle and Hornyak. In the thirteen unsent postcards, which are reminiscent of Geoffrey Firmin's lost communications in Lowry's Under The Volcano, Peter indicates that Hornyak was the kind of man Kettle deserved; but despite the noble sentiments, the implicit acceptance of betrayal is disturbing. The Narcissism of Peter is a defensive, passive inwardness which reflects a refusal to accept challenge. It is a refusal of self-assertion compounded by idolatrous worship of Hornyak's vitality, and its corollary is a basic conviction of personal worthlessness which leads Peter to the position of willing cuckold.

In his play Exiles Joyce creates a triangle somewhat similar to the Peter-Kettle-Michael triangle of But We Are Exiles. Of concern in Joyce's play is the basic problem of giving oneself and yet remaining free. Richard and Robert, once cronies in debauchery, now find themselves rivals for Bertha, wife of Richard. Robert, an inept suitor, cannot ever use the word "love" while speaking to Bertha, and Richard, ostensibly the distracted artist, is the brooding voyeur who knows of all the advances made by Robert yet rationalizes his refusal to intervene on the grounds that to do so would be to abridge Bertha's freedom to choose. In their origins, as well, Richard and Robert parallel Peter and Michael, for

Richard is of a family with a "name" while Robert, by his own description, has struggled up from lowly origins. Their relationship is that of master and disciple, and its chief feature in the mind of Richard is the inevitability of betrayal. Richard's faith in Robert is "the faith of a master in the disciple who will betray him."<sup>14</sup>

Richard's stated concern for the problem of giving oneself and yet remaining free is no more convincing than Peter's withdrawal in favour of Hornyak. Ultimately, in a passage of crucial importance, Richard confesses:

...In the very core of my ignoble heart I longed to be betrayed by you and by her--in the dark, in the night, secretly--meanly, craftily. By you, my best friend, and by her. I longed for that passionately and ignobly, to be dishonoured forever in love and in lust, ...<sup>15</sup>

Unlike Richard, however, Peter's need for betrayal produces not only the possibility of betrayal but the act itself and, while it is suggested that there is freedom for Richard in his relationship with his son Archie, it is clear that no offspring can grace the triangle in But We Are Exiles.

Peter's flight north, first with the old couple then more hopefully with the young honeymooners, ends on a riverboat on the Mackenzie River. The riverboat at least provides a purposeful and organized refuge. It is "an order maintained as precariously as that maintained by the hands on the wheel. The chaos held in check."<sup>16</sup> Peter's personal aimlessness is contrasted with the sure control of the river pilot, and his longing for

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<sup>14</sup>James Joyce, Exiles, in The Essential James Joyce, edited and with an introduction by Harry Levin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd. 1972), p. 276.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid. p. 295.

<sup>16</sup>Kroetsch, But We Are Exiles, p. 19.

order is manifested in his determination to master the river. The voyage, which occupies much of the actual novel, takes place in an essentially primordial world in which the only model of order is that of the river-boat--especially that of the pilot. It is a world where "illusion and reality were confounded in a softly shining landscape, the sky upset into its own reflection."<sup>17</sup> It is a world alien to man because "the chaos had not yet been resolved into form; men could find no cause for stopping."<sup>18</sup> It is a primeval land of undeveloped potential and only the pilot of a boat can resolve the infinite alternatives into meaningful order:

Here the pilot's eyes and hands were in isolated yet absolute command. Pure. He wanted to shout the word. This is mine. Storm, ice, wind, rock--those can challenge me. But here a man is defined free from the terrors of human relationships.<sup>19</sup>

Human relationships do intervene, however, and six years after the reflected image of two bodies intertwined and the flight north, the search for the body of the drowned Hornyak finally focuses Peter's generalized quest. In Narcissistic terms, Peter's search for the body of Hornyak becomes synonymous with his search for himself. The search for order and the journey downstream are paralleled by a deeper personal probing on the part of Peter. Ultimately, of course, the discovery of Hornyak's faceless body and Peter's final assumption of Hornyak's place in the funeral barge, mark the merging of their identities.

Conrad's Heart of Darkness offers some interesting parallels to the novel under consideration, especially in the similarities--both

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid. p. 30.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid. p. 31.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid. p. 19.

direct and oblique--of the two river journeys. Just as the "pilgrims" on Marlowe's vessel seemed vaguely engaged in a conspiracy, so the men aboard the Mahannie Jane are united by a bond of guilt over the death of Hornyak. The boat's passage down the river is watched from the shore with the same kind of awe that greets Marlowe's vessel; " ...they did not raise a hand, as if to wave would be to confess a belief in the boat's presence that was not warranted by common sense,"<sup>20</sup>

Just as Marlowe's voyage to the centre of the continent and his meeting with Kurtz were of great personal significance to Marlowe, so Peter's cruise down the Mackenzie and his search for the body of Hornyak are of great personal significance to him. Meeting Hornyak shortly before the fatal accident, Peter says, "you find your human sacrifices don't you?" and recalls the implication in Heart of Darkness that Kurtz demanded and received human sacrifices.<sup>21</sup> It is also important to note also that Marlowe's search for Kurtz is not only of immense significance to Marlowe himself but, by extension, to anyone in his audience capable of comprehending the significance of that search. The unseen Kurtz, regarded by some in Heart of Darkness as a profound threat, is regarded by Marlowe as a man of great importance. Kurtz's discovery and decline are instructive, and his death cry climaxes a series of intense self-realizations on the part of Marlowe--realizations which, by inference, are of significance to Europeans in general. Kurtz, a type of saviour-victim, is the victim of certain attitudes and ideas in his society. Imagining himself the bearer of

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid. p. 29.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid. p. 22.

civilization, he succumbs to atavistic impulses. Consciously he assists no one, but, in the object lesson he provides for Marlowe, he assists both Marlowe in particular and Europeans in general.

But Heart of Darkness can offer parallels only up to a point, for Kroetsch does not use literary references in such a way that a schematic or paradigm can be applied. Ultimately, Kroetsch's divergence from Conrad's pattern is as revealing as his adherence to it. Initially, one is tempted to see Peter in the role of Marlowe, the quester, with Hornyak as his Kurtz. This comparison is true up to a point; Peter's search for the body of Hornyak does parallel Marlowe's search for the living Kurtz. But Peter, unlike Marlowe, is so self-absorbed that he cannot achieve the critical distance required for a useful analysis of Hornyak. In fact, Peter does the opposite and metaphorically becomes Hornyak not only by recapturing Kettle, who was his intended and who becomes Hornyak's concubine, but finally, as already indicated, by jettisoning the body of Hornyak and taking its place in the burial cante.

In Peter's quest, then, Hornyak is seen as a type of saviour, while Peter himself is seen initially as a victim. Hornyak is apparently a fertility figure par excellence, yet there is also an implication that he is barren<sup>22</sup> and unable to have the son he desires. He therefore is a type of the Fisher King. In a passage which emphasizes this he is described as, "the great Hornyak himself, young baron of the trade that supplied frozen fish to Chicago and New York."<sup>23</sup> Also implicit in this reference to Hornyak

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid. p. 3.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid. p. 35.

is the ironic suggestion that he is a type of saviour.

Later this reference is reinforced during the thirteen day drive over the dry prairies when Peter bitterly describes Hornyak's entry into a cafe as that of "some great bloody redeemer."<sup>24</sup> Still later, on the Mackenzie, Peter, true to his biblical namesake, thrice denies Kettle's hysterical assertion that the scream of metal on rock is the underwater cry of the drowned man. At one point in the journey upstream with the body of Hornyak, the total number on board the Nahannie Jane is thirteen, and includes the shadowy second engineer who doesn't speak and who seems to need no light.<sup>25</sup> This parodic band of apostles, however, has little chance of receiving illumination from Hornyak, who in death as in life, receives little love from them.

As Peter progressively assumes the identity of Hornyak, he takes on the role of the saviour along with it. Arguing with Kettle, for example, Peter says "why apologise? I'm the type for Christ's sake. I'm the goddam saviour type."<sup>26</sup> In this highly significant scene he argues with her while shaving, and stops, his face half-shaved. Harlequin-like, he is symbolically the divided man who cannot reconcile the antinomies of his being. Having rejected the order of his childhood, he cannot embrace the spontaneity of Hornyak and thus he remains undefined. It is significant too that the argument takes place, not face to face, but through the medium of the mirror, and that the argument is provoked by his refusal to return to bed with her.

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid. p. 35.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid. p. 106.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid. p. 75.

Kettle once again is the sensuous, direct woman while Peter again views her through the distance--and the safety--of the reflecting mirror. Peter, of course, cannot break out of the stifling solipsism here represented by the mirror.

As Peter tries to escape what he cannot control, so many figures in the novel seek exile. The nature of their exile ranges from the unthinking need for cash which motivates the captain, to the need for definition which prods Peter. Kettle and her father, however, provide a different perspective on this exile, and for Gordon Frazer the overwhelmingly important fact of his northern exile is its paradoxical freedom. "A man is free here. You ever hear the word? He is so free that nothing else in the world is ever as good again."<sup>27</sup> This absolute freedom, like that discovered by Kurtz, is inimical to self and Frazer's drunkenness is the result of his inability to escape the past or to order the north. He sends his daughter away to the south, which becomes her exile:

And when Peter met her in university the wilderness she had been exiled from was a forbidden land, yet a world to which she dreamed of returning for it had become freedom and excitement and Utopia to her.<sup>28</sup>

However, neither Kettle nor Peter nor the crew can avoid the effects of the past. Discovering that she cannot recapture the old sense of freedom or re-enter Eden, Kettle ultimately urges Peter to join her new urban world in the south; to which Peter replies, "but I'd track in the old world."<sup>29</sup> Earlier, before Kettle arrived on board the Nahannie Jane

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid. p. 46.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid. p. 33.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid. p. 124.

for the journey upstream, Peter scoured his cabin to obliterate the evidence of sloppy, chaotic habits and tossed the brush overboard. In what is a rather clumsy symbolic attempt to indicate the impossibility of obliterating the past, the brush is handed back to him.

The native people who come into contact with this "Catch 22" order of white society, are, in this novel, equally traumatized. Lawrence Firth, the eskimo encountered by Peter in Tuktoyuktuk, is at the mercy of white law and order. He cannot leave because he owes money to the Hudson Bay Company store, yet he cannot possibly repay them until he goes fishing. Firth's indeterminate cultural status, midway between native and white, is suggested by his scarred face. Like Peter's in the shaving scene, Firth's face gives permanent testimony to his cultural dichotomy. While Daniel Beaver, in Gone Indian, can articulate the dilemma and in doing so assist Jeremy's quest for definition, Lawrence Firth can only endure the absurdity of his predicament. He, like Peter, is trapped by a situation he cannot adequately describe and so he, like Peter, remains an exile at the conclusion.

The failure of Peter's quest and his implied death by freezing, can finally be seen as the outcome of his failure to formulate and ask the freeing question. Could he have articulated his link with the past and could he have named the nature of Hornyak's attraction, he might have been able to emulate Hornyak's vitality and therefore cure his personal wasteland. As it is, however, Peter never overcomes his stultifying Narcissism and remains the vain quester. He is ultimately a loser, but in this case an unbeautiful loser. Peter cannot sufficiently lose his old identity-- that is, unname himself, and therefore he cannot redefine himself.



Unlike Johnny Backstrom, who, as we shall see, understands his own limitations, or Jeremy Sadness, who transcends his, Peter remains trapped. He is never able to release the question from his "jesusly silent throat"<sup>30</sup> and so endures his senseless death in the snowstorm at the conclusion of the novel.

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid. p. 9.

## CHAPTER II

### The Words of My Roaring

...the misfortune which has fallen upon the country is that of a prolonged drought, which has destroyed vegetation, and left the land Waste; the effect of the hero's question is to restore the waters to their channel, and render the land once more fertile.<sup>1</sup>

In The Words of My Roaring, the backdrop is depression Alberta just before an election. Suffering drought for the nth successive year, the land is peopled by figures whom privation has rendered elemental. Kroetsch's technique is to take a situation and characters, already amplified by events, and by his utilization of myth, raise them to the level of archetype.

Kroetsch suggests, early in the novel, that the blight on the land could be brought to an early end if the people of the district would cast their votes for the appropriate candidate in the coming election: either Doc Murdoch or Johnny Backstrom. The election, then, quickly assumes great importance, and its significance of course is magnified by its two local contestants, the old doctor, Doc Murdoch and the young undertaker, Johnny Backstrom. The battle between the two assumes near cosmic proportions, for the massive, old, white-haired doctor, having delivered most of the constituents obstetrically, now promises them political salvation, while the undertaker promises not only final deliverance but immediate rain.

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<sup>1</sup>Jessie L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920) p. 19.

The campaign is waged in a series of towns arranged neatly in linear progression on the geometrically divided prairie. A measure of geographical order thus seems to exist, in sharp contrast to the social and economic chaos of the area. Although the sites of the campaign may be located in Cartesian terms, the contest between Johnny and Old Doc is a verbal one, and ultimately it is on the verbal level that order must be created. Johnny Backstrom's rich and compulsive flow of words is a continual attempt to name and define<sup>2</sup> experience. Although initially this compulsion seems as futile as that experienced by Beckett's tramps in Waiting for Godot, the search finally produces, not just near infinite permutation and combination of phrases, but increased definition. The "words" in the title of the novel are those of David in Psalm 22, echoed by Christ on the cross, and spoken by both in despair at the seeming absence of their divinity. Johnny's "roaring" is of a more existential nature, however, and in his rage against an impenetrable cosmic design, he moves toward a more meaningful naming of the conditions of his existence. In Alberta Kroetsch says:

The process of naming is hardly begun in Alberta. We who live here so often cannot name the flowers, the stones, the places, the events, the emotions of our landscape; they await the kind of naming that is the poetic act.<sup>3</sup>

Johnny, like Kroetsch's other protagonists, is attempting to define by naming, and by defining he hopes to exorcise, or at least control, malign influences. The process of naming is thus central to the creation

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<sup>2</sup>Morton L. Ross, "Robert Kroetsch and His Novels," in Writers of the Prairies, edited by Donald G. Stephens (Victoria: U.B.C. Press, 1973) p. 108.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Kroetsch, Alberta, (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1968) p. 83.

and maintenance of personal and social order. The quest then is for the word or concept which will enable Johnny to define his relationship with others. It follows that each incident which facilitates this definition is significant in the development of Johnny Backstrom the man. In one of his guises in the novel, Johnny is like the poet in A. M. Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," who "...is / the nth Adam taking a green inventory / in world but scarcely uttered, naming, praising..."<sup>4</sup>

It is by no means clear in the novel that Johnny will be able to channel his great energy in a constructive direction. What is clear is that the danger in Johnny's Dionysian assault on life, if carried to its extreme, would produce not regeneration and definition, but complete disintegration and chaos.

During a radio address by John George Applecart, Johnny, listening in the funeral parlor, consumes a mickey of rye. Desperate, after the suicide by drowning of his friend Jonah Bledd and drunk after consuming the rye, Johnny engages in a shouting match with the radio voice of Applecart. Recognising the hollowness and essential dishonesty of Applecart, Johnny smashes the radio in a fury and demands of the non-present and now silenced politician a complete and unpartisan description of the conditions of existence. Of himself Johnny demands that he for once tell the truth, and admit that he cannot produce the rain he has promised. After the passage of a few hours hastened by a rye-induced unconsciousness, Johnny continues his philosophical speculations and enlarges his concern for metaphysics to include the bodywork of his hearse.

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<sup>4</sup>A. M. Klein, The Rocking Chair and Other Poems, (Toronto: Mc Graw-Hill Ryerson, 1951) p. 55.

Attempting to repair the fender which had been dented in the collision which injured Jonah Bledd, Johnny's too great enthusiasm increases rather than diminishes the damage. Indeed, in his frenzied attempt to achieve a balance of sorts, Johnny attacks and mutilates the good fender. He explains his action on the grounds that:

That mysterious thing seized me; that longing for the old chaos.  
That old earth, without form and full of the void. ...Sometimes  
it seems that chaos is the only order. The only real order.<sup>5</sup>

In this instance, the temptation of utter chaos leads Johnny to the stampede, where he witnesses the mortal wounding of a rodeo clown by a bull. This example of random mayhem satisfies his urge for disorder but, much more importantly, it provides Johnny with the central metaphor for his first really effective campaign speech. Johnny, who can find parables in the body work of his hearse,<sup>6</sup> constructs a parallel between the sacrifice of the clown to the violent bull, and the suffering of westerners under the economic depredations of the Beast of Toronto. As always, Johnny's response to the incomprehensible is a violent verbal assault which reverberates with the language of the Book of Revelations, but the danger here is that in his metaphysical exuberance he constructs false, misleading and dishonest definitions of existence.

Johnny's problem then, is not only to define order, but to define it in such a way that he does not deceive others, or himself. He must

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<sup>5</sup>Robert Kroetsch, The Words of My Roaring, (Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada Ltd., 1966) p. 101.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. p. 100.

define, and reject, the easy falsehood, and define, then accept, what may be a much more difficult truth. Johnny is, of course, akin to the vegetation spirit described in Frazer's The Golden Bough and in Weston's From Ritual to Romance. However, it should be emphasized that Kroetsch does not use myth in such a way that a paradigm can be employed. He interweaves aspects of a number of established myths to produce a new form but the constituent parts, as well as the new form, should be examined so as to assess the effectiveness of the whole.

It will be useful at this point to examine the main mythic substructures of the novel and to attempt to assess their use. Hopefully, what at first sight may seem to be a bewildering confusion of mythic references, will be seen in overview, as constituent parts in a pattern of regeneration. Johnny, then, like Peter Guy in But We Are Exiles, combines aspects of both the quester and the Fisher King. It should be restated here, as suggested in the quotation opening this chapter, that the land of the aged Fisher King lies drought-stricken, and that the blight on the land is clearly the result of the infirmity of the Fisher King. The quester, who may initially have no clear idea of his task, must ask the appropriate question which will restore the regenerative power of the King, and through him restore the waters of the land. Johnny's quest, initially and superficially, is for political office, and with it, financial security but eventually his quest becomes larger as he composes the crucial questions about himself which releases him from selfish concerns. However, Johnny is also like the Fisher King in that his extraordinary vitality is potentially regenerative (Johnny's pregnant wife versus Hornyak's sterility). Both quester and life force then, Johnny must define within himself the question

which will enable him to reorder his own existence.

The novel ends not with the anticipated election victory but the rain, and the emphasis is placed on fecundity returned. Johnny's proven physical fecundity is apparently transferred to the physical and social environment, but only apparently. Johnny is not actually the revived Fisher King; he himself has recognized by the conclusion of the novel that he did not cause the rain to fall. The significant regeneration has taken place on the personal level with Johnny's reconciliation of the dualities of existence. It is on this level that Johnny's quest is successful and that he is cured of his psychic impotence. The meaning of the Latin "amo, amas," which he could not master as a boy, has now become clear.<sup>7</sup>

Important in this novel, and linked with other mythic substructures, is the condition of paternity. In general, Kroetsch's protagonists seem to lack a strong biological father and Johnny's case is the most extreme. His own father, an ineffectual would-be carpenter, dies in World War I and Johnny is practically adopted by Doc Murdoch. The campaign central to the novel is not only a campaign for the votes of the constituents (it was never just that), but also a contest which on a very general level pits young against old. By inference Promethean, the parallels are also implicitly Christian and Johnny is thus, like Adam, in the Garden of Eden rebelling against the benevolent Father. Johnny views his campaign against Doc as an act of ingratitude and a betrayal, on his own part and it is not until the garden scene with Helen Murdoch that Johnny can accept the forgiveness offered. The garden scene marks Johnny's acceptance

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid. p. 25.

of grace and forgiveness, a state he could not accept before Helen's intercession.

The central creature in this garden, however, is not Doc but Helen. Helen Persephone Murdoch may seduce Johnny by her beauty, but her influence is not degenerative but restorative. She is also Eve, Mary Magdalen and more. She is forgiving, life-giving woman: the triple goddess of Robert Graves, who, by her intercession, bestows a measure of grace on the male suppliant, and, by forgiving him, releases him from an enormous, debilitating weight of guilt. Her intercession is absolutely vital to the quest of Johnny Backstrom, as the order he seeks to define can be created not just by the male principle but by the male in conjunction with the female. One may not find the symbolic lance and cup, symbols of the grail quest in Kroetsch's novels, but one does find ample reference to the importance of male and female conjunction, of which the lance in the cup is but the symbol.<sup>8</sup> Helen, unlike Johnny's wife and unlike a great many women in Canadian Literature, is unrestricted by Puritan sexual mores. More importantly, her failure to be limited by a narrow, moralistic piety, leads not to her destruction but to her release. Elaine, his wife, offers Johnny reasonable affection, but Helen gives unrestrained passion and there is, in the garden scene, a soaring sense of release and innocence restored.

Initially, Johnny is seen as the serpent, and according to this imagistic pattern Doc is a type of Adam with Helen as his Eve. This particular interpretation of the image complex is supported by the image

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<sup>8</sup>Jessie Weston, op. cit. p. 80.



of Doc as the tender of gardens,<sup>9</sup> while the East, which had once been his home, is seen as the archetypal garden:

... Those huge trees. Instead of little poplars and willows and balm of Gilead. Those rivers and streams all over the place and grass up to the cows' bellies. Corn that was taller than I was. And fruit on trees instead of in boxes.<sup>10</sup>

This realization tempts Johnny to find Helen an orchard, so he "might guess the original look of surprise."<sup>11</sup>

On this level Doc Murdoch is seen therefore as a post-lapsarian, fully mortal Adam, who must attempt to defend his garden against the encroachment of winter. On this level Johnny is seen as the serpent and when he enters the town hall political rally, he is hailed by Doc Murdoch for having "wormed his way in here uninvited."<sup>12</sup> Not only is Johnny depicted as the serpent, he sees himself as the betrayer. This aspect of his role is emphasized even further by his name--John Judas Backstrom--and it is significant that he was given his middle name by his mother, on the grounds that Judas was a much maligned and misunderstood individual:

... She felt there was in his fate something more to be applauded than to be derided; he too had a part in the grand design. My mother was a great recognizer of grand designs.<sup>13</sup>

The significant phrase here is "the grand design," for the antinomies of light and dark, life and death, Adam and Serpent, lifegiver and under-

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<sup>9</sup>Robert Kroetsch, op. cit. p. 155.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid. p. 57.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid. p. 57.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. p. 45.

taker, can only be resolved by recourse to an overview, a grand design. The welter of images, the multiplicity of symbolic patterns, can only be resolved by a grand design which can accommodate all the apparent opposites. Johnny's quest for order, his attempt to define, can only be successful if he can reconcile the dualities of life and death and if he can, like Brian O'Connell in W. O. Mitchell's Who Has Seen The Wind, recognize a larger design and accept his place in it.

In addition to mythic references which help to amplify the nature of Johnny's quest, Kroetsch also uses the "Dopplegänger," or double, to provide different perspectives on the best path by which to achieve that quest. This device is not peculiar to The Words of My Roaring, however, for the Narcissistic parallels initiated in But We Are Exiles, which imply the search for an alter ego, are developed in succeeding novels. In a display of Puckish humour, an inscrutable Kroetsch is even seen on the dust jacket of his latest novel, Gone Indian, examining his mirror-reflected image.

The double is commonly a character in the novel who either bears a resemblance to another character, usually the protagonist or someone with whom the protagonist feels a similarity of condition. Here, as in a Joycean "epiphany," the realization of similarity may be apparent to the reader before it is to the character, but, in some way, the double does serve to indicate the consequence of a certain course of action or a particular cast of thought.

There are several Dopplegängers in The Words of My Roaring and the first encountered is Johnny's friend and campaign manager, Jonah Bledd. It is useful here to remember that the biblical Jonah, denying the commands

of God, flees by boat, and in his flight is cast overboard and swallowed by a fish. It is significant that the biblical Jonah is released only when he accepts his place in the design created by God. Jonah Bledd, only four days younger than Johnny and a companion of long standing, disappears, a presumed suicide in Wildfire Lake. After the accident which breaks his arm, Jonah clearly lacks the ability to create further order and cannot accept the conditions of Depression existence. His death is viewed as a betrayal of life by Doc Murdoch, who insists to Johnny that Jonah's suicide is an admission of defeat. "He was afraid to be a fool. So he was a coward instead."<sup>14</sup> Jonah's death serves as a warning to Johnny and an indication of an inadvisable course of action.

Reinforcing the suggestion that Johnny and Jonah are doubles, is the fact that after Johnny accepts Doc's analysis of Jonah's death, he feels renewed. He says:

And you know something, it's a funny thing; I was sitting there talking, and all the time I was feeling as if I had drowned .... I felt cleansed.<sup>15</sup>

Johnny's recognition of Jonah's refusal to struggle produces genuine regeneration. "A reformation was in order, a genuine attempt at a new beginning."<sup>16</sup> In But We Are Exiles the faceless body is never definitely identified, that is "named" as Hornyak's, and, similarly, in The Words of My Roaring, Jonah's body is never found. However, whereas Peter Guy was

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid. p. 68.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid. p. 70.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid. p. 73.

unable to comprehend and name the nature of his Doppelgänger Hornyak, Johnny, in understanding the nature of Jonah's betrayal, releases himself from it.

Another figure who reflects a distorted image of Johnny is the individual known only as "the prophet." His is the voice of doom insisting on punishment for guilty mankind, and like Saint Sammy in Who Has Seen the Wind the prophet is a spokesman for fanatic dogma, not humane compassion. His prophecy is a never-ending litany of doom, no less enthusiastic for its constant revision. The prophet, taking his own words literally, and having lost balance and the ability to examine his own statements is the victim of his own rhetoric. Johnny, too, is in danger of falling victim to his borrowed political rhetoric, and it is the prophet who brings him to this realization near the conclusion of the novel. Travelling down Highway 313, on his way to meet Doc at the Gunns, Johnny encounters the prophet for the last time, just before the rain-storm. The perverse determination of the prophet to see things only as described in his fundamentalist cant, convinces Johnny of the danger of the narrow view.

And pretty soon a terrible doubt had hold of me. I confess.  
A suspicion. The more I confronted the facts, the more I was  
overwhelmed by a terrible realization.  
I had nothing to do with the rain.<sup>17</sup>

Johnny's discussion with the prophet finally becomes an attempt to decide responsibility for the workings of pure chance. The perverse determination of the prophet to construe every accident as conclusive proof of the correctness of his vision, provides an ironic underscoring to Johnny's

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid. p. 192.

promise of rain. The similarities of their invective is apparent even to Johnny and, although reluctant to relinquish all responsibility for the rain, he does so finally. It is apparent that his new perception of his place in the order of existence is due in part to the distorted image reflected by the fanatic, the false prophet.

A third Dopplegänger is the curiously tall stampede clown, whose size prompts Johnny to say:

You don't often see a big clown. Not really big. This one--well, I might as well be honest--he was crowding six-three or six-four.<sup>18</sup>

Gravely wounded in the dust, the clown is revealed to be a much less substantial figure than appearances indicated. He is an emaciated figure under a painted smile who desperately attempts, without success, to communicate something to the onlookers. Johnny, initially reluctant to admit their obvious similarity, quickly recognizes the dramatic possibilities of the situation and appropriates the identity of the dying clown. The clown, therefore, provides Johnny with the immediate inspiration for an effective, though not necessarily truthful, political speech and also provides an image of the ultimate futility of his attempt to communicate with devious half-truths and borrowed metaphor.

The central image in Johnny's effective speech is the beast metaphor borrowed from John George Applecart, who in turn had borrowed it from the Book of Revelations. Both Johnny and Applecart use this image to inflame Western chauvinists and to emphasize the victimization of the West by Eastern economic influences. As a political device, the image is successful. As a literary device it is even more effective, for while it is clear that

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid. p. 106.

Johnny depicts himself as the ironic saviour, the clown victim of the beast, he is equally the beast himself.

It should be pointed out that the Beast of Revelations 13: 11, is the subtle speaker who encourages temptation and causes those in its hearing to blaspheme by believing that which is not so. Johnny is willing not only to create impressive rhetorical structures to influence the voters, but also to accept as truth those same rhetorical structures which contain none. Further evidence of Johnny's self-centred, beastlike rapaciousness is given by his prodigious consumption of food in the midst of a drought-stricken land.

...I consumed. Yes sir, I consumed--pineapple squares and strawberry shortcake, Dutch apple pie and hot dogs with raw onions and whisky and ice cream and sour-cream raisin pie and affection and love and saskatoon pie and generosity and deference and admiration and adulation. I consumed and I consumed. I have a huge capacity, there was no filling me up; I was starving and I ate. I was bottomless. I devoured.<sup>19</sup>

The clown episode, then, is one of considerable complexity as Johnny considers himself as potential saviour, while actually being depicted as ravening beast. He must recognize the threat his unbridled appetite poses and channel his energies (seen here as destructive, or at least misleading) in a direction where they will produce regeneration. This redirection can only take place after a retreat from what is really a selfish disregard of the needs of others.

The need for a retreat, and the nature of what might be retreated too, is indicated by the farmer known as "Walleye" in the novel. Not a Dopplegänger, but definitely a foil, Walleye appears in a number of crucial

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid. p. 114.

incidents. Present during Johnny's initial promise of rain, Walleye is the man forced by crop failure to auction his farm. It is at Walleye's auction that Johnny grandly buys a Model A he cannot pay for. It is typical of Johnny at this stage that he selfishly ignores the plight of the man dispossessed and uses the opportunity to advance his political fortunes. Surprisingly, Walleye bears no grudge.

In the last and most important meeting between these two, following Johnny's successful rodeo speech, Walleye reveals that in the legendary baseball game at which the young pitcher Johnny Backstrom struck out twenty-seven men in a row, Walleye was the crucial twenty-seventh batter. Johnny has emphasized the significance of his throwing arm, inscribing "the old magic circle with my old magic arm."<sup>20</sup> The circle image is traditionally one which is connected with the sun. It may suggest perfection, power, and, as a wheel, suggests, at its circumference the temporal and at its centre the timeless.<sup>21</sup>

The wheel thus symbolizes the blessed state of attainment which the great teachers of India--Krishna and Budha in particular, have taught as man's true goal; to find pure centre, the atman or absolute self, at the heart of every action and choice, and thereby to act in perfect harmony and serenity.<sup>22</sup>

Johnny's pitching feat obviously plays a large part in his private mythology and he uses it to bolster his heroic image. In his fantasy he is Backstrom the young giant killer who singlehandedly saves the day.

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>21</sup>J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962) p. 350.

<sup>22</sup>Philip Wheelwright, The Burning Fountain, (Scarborough, Ontario: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1968) p. 128.

Walleye contends, however, that while Johnny was superb that day, he, Walleye, out of sympathy for the awkward young pitcher, allowed himself to be struck out to preserve Johnny's perfect game. Johnny, of course, cannot accept this version, which denies him singlehanded control of events; but the magnanimity shown by Walleye years before as well as in the present, is in contrast to Johnny's insistence on total personal control of the conditions of existence. It is clear that Johnny's success is not simply the result of his "magic circle," or gigantic will, or heroic demeanour, but depends on the goodwill and charity of at least one other person. It is precisely this interdependence which Johnny must first define, then accept.

By the conclusion of the novel, Johnny has superseded Doc Murdoch as the leader of the community; but he does so not simply because he is the most powerful, but rather because he has attained a level of definition which previously eluded him. In his fashion, he has reconciled the old dualities and recognized that the terms "beginning" and "ending" are meaningless when one is referring to a circle or a natural cycle. As he assumes the position of eminence in the community so long held by Doc Murdoch, he does so as a much more complete man than he was initially. With the assistance of Helen he has accepted forgiveness, while as quester he has asked the question which produces increased definition. Like a modern Fisher King, he has been able to release his enormous regenerative powers to the land. More important, in Kroetsch's terms, as a man he is made whole.



### CHAPTER III

#### The Studhorse Man

In The Studhorse Man, the technique of having a fictive-biographical subject pursued by a fictive biographer who is also the narrator, produces the appearance of a double quest. Although, for the purpose of analysis, it is possible to distinguish between the searches engaged in by the two characters, their quests will ultimately be seen as inextricably linked halves of one ironic and unsuccessful quest for order. If, at the conclusion of The Words of My Roaring, there was a suggestion that order might be recreated on the social as well as personal level, there is no such suggestion in The Studhorse Man. In this novel Kroetsch presents a view intermediate between the potential social regeneration in The Words of My Roaring, and the complete rejection of chaotic society implicit in Gone Indian.

The Studhorse Man presents an infelicitous view of the milieu in The Words of My Roaring ten years later. The passage of time is apparently significant, as the exuberance witnessed in the preceding novel at first hand is seen here only indirectly as reflected in the mirror of the nominally deranged narrator, Demeter Proudfoot. It is his biographical mania which constitutes the quest for order, or ordering principle, in the novel. It is the object of this mania, the vital Hazard Lepage, who engages in the other half of the quest, a quest for the mare worthy of his stallion Poseidon.

The narrator, Demeter Proudfoot, and his subject, Hazard Lepage, represent only ironically separated Apollonian and Dionysian elements. This separation, first seen in But We Are Exiles, was reconciled in the person of Johnny Backstrom, in The Words of My Roaring. Here in The Studhorse Man the split opens again. Of course, Demeter represents only a travesty of the Apollonian while Hazard's Dionysian impulses are no longer appropriate. The distance between the two is a measure, not only of the gulf separating the characters of Demeter and Hazard, but also an indication of the changed times. In 1945, in a world rapidly becoming mechanized, Hazard, the studhorse man, is an anachronism. It is significant that the narrator biographer writes from an insane asylum and that his subject, the man in the novel who most closely approximates the Life Force, is viewed as a museum piece, as a man out of touch with the currents of his time. Given the existing conditions for these ironic quests, it is not surprising that neither is successful, but an understanding of the means used to develop both quests is indispensable to an understanding of the significance of existing conditions in the world of Kroetsch's novels.

The quest of Demeter Proudfoot is a quest to understand the peculiar power exerted by Hazard Lepage. Demeter, recognizing the unique vitality of Hazard, attempts to define and comprehend that vitality by a tireless cataloguing of the details of Hazard's life. Just as Johnny Backstrom must find the terms which define his existence before he can achieve comprehension, so Demeter must attempt, through biographical meticulousness, to define and control Hazard's power. However, while Johnny had the exuberance necessary for the task, Demeter lacks it and can only rearrange the details of Hazard's life without perceiving the

significant design. To use Coledridge's distinction, while the novel itself is a work of the imagination, Demeter's biography is only a product of the fancy. It rearranges the blocks which are the details of Hazard's life without achieving the unity of genuine creativity. Demeter, however, views his task as a supremely important one.

The biographer is a person afflicted with sanity. He is a man who must first of all be sound of mind, and in the clarity of his own vision he must ride out the dark night, ride on while all about him falls into chaos. The man of the cold eye and the steady hand, he faces for all of humanity the ravishments and the terrors of existence.<sup>1</sup>

This view of the messianic role of the artist is not particularly unusual, but what makes it remarkable is that the words are spoken by a man who is, at the time of writing, confined to an insane asylum. Like Marat of Marat-Sade, Demeter sits naked in his bathtub filling his file cards and collating his information, and like the Lady of Shalott he can view the reflected image of the world outside in a fortuitously placed mirror. Both images are significant, for both suggest individuals at several removes from reality. Marat sees his careful attempts to create a new world order confounded by the libidinous de Sade, but this Marat is an actor, playing a madman whose delusion it is that he is Marat and can create order. The Lady of Shalott, viewing life through a blue-tinted mirror from the safety of her tower, is destroyed when she views the vital Lancelot directly. The poem suggests the danger inherent in an art which is almost totally removed from life. This art becomes so ethereal that it cannot survive contact with reality and can only reflect life in a

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Robert Kroetsch, The Studhorse Man, (Toronto: Simon and Shuster of Canada Ltd., 1973), p. 152.

distorted fashion.

The mirror in Kroetsch's novels, therefore, is a treacherous artifact and reflects images dangerously distorted and inverted. With the images of Marat and the Lady of Shalott in mind, the reader is somewhat skeptical when Demeter asserts: "I am able to see far distant; it is what is nearest that I cannot always make out from my high window."<sup>2</sup> Although Demeter is here referring to his room in the asylum, the statement also applies to his biographical interpretations. He is so removed from Hazard's experiences that one must question the design which Demeter creates out of those experiences. Demeter is determined to order the chaos of Hazard's existence and somehow through that his own existence, but to achieve this order he has been compelled to resort to extreme measures. As he says:

I myself prefer an ordered world, even if I must order it through a posture of madness. It is the only sane answer to prevailing circumstances....

Yes, dear reader, I am by profession quite out of my mind.<sup>3</sup>

By the nineteen sixties, the time of narration, world conditions have become so chaotic that they can only be viewed from the qualified safety of an insane asylum. In other words, senseless, violent, destruction is not a temporary aberration in an otherwise ordered existence: it is the norm. Demeter, unable to perceive order in the external world of the sixties, orders it internally by imposing on it the form of hockey game. In this perpetual game, peopled by illustrious names of professional hockey, exists the clear, absolute order which Demeter

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid. p. 85.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. p. 61.

seeks:

Those children of winter are my dream; they race in the night's dead hours. Uniforms identify the enemy, the friend. Each man guards his place. When you are struck, you strike back.<sup>4</sup>

Outside fantasy, the world stubbornly resists such facile ordering, and the nicely balanced action and response in the dream have, for counterpart, the carnage of two world wars, and other random mayhem of a chaotic century. Obviously, in a novel which is the work of a fictive narrator who is nominally insane, one must consider the accuracy of the material and the interpretations being presented. However, in this case, the problem is smaller than might first be assumed, for it is relatively easy to distinguish between the facts which the narrator so assiduously collects and his interpretations of those facts. Demeter's devotion to detail is complete; it is his understanding of that detail which is flawed. Like Marat before the victorious de Sade or the Lady of Shallott stricken to death by the virility of Lancelot, Demeter Proudfoot is literally driven to distraction by the unnameable force and vitality of his personal tetragrammaton Hazard Lepage. Demeter's prim rationality, which marks all his utterances, is incapable of encompassing Hazard, and it is this failure which drives him to his obsessive pursuit of detail and fanatical devotion to biography. Demeter, who through biography would order existence for mankind, cannot ever order it for himself.

Demeter's failure to understand Hazard is not unique among the male characters of the novel. None of the other characters understands Hazard either, but at least Demeter recognizes the fascination exerted by Hazard.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid. p. 122.

He says: "Forgive me if I am sometimes enthralled by his very crudeness."<sup>5</sup> Demeter's incarceration then can be seen, not as an indication of his unreliability as narrator, but as a sign of his desperate yet unsuccessful attempt to comprehend. He at least recognizes that there is a need in himself and in the contemporary world to recapture the vitality of which Hazard Lepage is the last representative. His failure then is also the failure of a contemporary world, dominated by rational mechanism, to comprehend the spontaneous, non-rational, non-mechanistic Dionysian life force which is embodied in Hazard Lepage. Whereas in the preceding novel Johnny Backstrom could define the terms of his existence and release his regenerative powers, Demeter, for all his file cards, cannot compose the appropriate question. Although Demeter is instrumental in saving Poseidon and assuring the continuance of the Lepage breed, he acts in the knowledge that he has assisted in the dissemination of devices to thwart rather than facilitate fertility. Thanks to his intervention,

scurrilous, barbarous, stinking man would soon be able, in the sterility of his own lust, to screw himself into oblivion, to erase himself like a rotting pestilence from the face of God's creation.<sup>6</sup>

This is not the tone of a genuine studhorseman, but rather the tone of a Lemuel Gulliver at his misanthropic worst, at the end of the fourth voyage.

If Demeter's quest is for order in the welter of secondhand experience, Hazard's quest constitutes a flight from order in a welter of direct experience. Hazard, the breeder of the great blue Lepage horse, is

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. p. 174.

consumed by his quest for the perfect mare for his virgin stallion Poseidon, and practically everything he undertakes in the novel is at least ostensibly in furtherance of that goal. This quest produces a number of humorous episodes which are decidedly mock-heroic, but while the details and incidents may be humorous, the conclusion of the quest produces amusement only if it is viewed from a very limited perspective. In the highest tradition of comedy episodes humorous at first sight reflect a most serious view of the human condition, and details Rabelaisian in themselves combine to form a design which when viewed in the larger context, is decidedly sombre. It is difficult, for example, to ignore that the events of the novel have their beginnings in an incident which took place during the battle of Passchaendaele (homonymously "Passiondale") in 1917. It is also difficult to ignore that the actual journey undertaken by Hazard is the result of a bone drive at the conclusion of the Second War in 1945. More bleakly, it becomes clear that Poseidon is of value ultimately, not for his impressive stature or strength, but for his great supply of urine. In his female offspring this attribute is of value in the production of pregnant mares' urine, which is essential to the manufacture of birth-control pills. It is a fitting end to Hazard's ironic quest that this happens, but it is only blackly humorous that the best efforts of the only man in the novel to embody the life force should result finally in the thwarting of fertility rather than promoting it.

It is important to note that this novel opens at the very end of the Second World War, while Hazard's youth was spent in the First World War. It is a significant comment on the society and times that the potentially creative energies of Hazard Lepage should have been directed toward destruction. This earlier confounding of Hazard's regenerative

force is only an anticipation of the ultimate failure of his quest. Hazard then, like Don Quixote, espouses values which are no longer held by his society; but whereas of Don Quixote it could be said that he represented an order whose time was past, the same cannot be said of Hazard. The non-rational energy which Hazard embodies is not an intellectual superstructure imposed on society, but is in fact the vital essence which must permeate all levels of society if it is not to be a dessicated husk. Without this essence society becomes only the list of people enumerated by Demeter and invoked by him as "all of you who think you do not live in a madhouse."<sup>7</sup>

Against this background of destructive violence, Hazard is seen as a demythified life force who embodies a life principle no longer held in esteem, and who is powerless in the face of overwhelming opposition. It is painfully ironic that the earliest impression we have of Hazard is in the middle of one of the bloodiest and most senseless battles of an inconclusive war, and it is only grimly humorous that he receives his permanent wound, a strained back, while retrieving his bayonet from a dead soldier. This burlesque of the wound which afflicts the Fisher King does not seem to diminish Hazard's reproductive energy, but it does serve as a constant reminder of the violence in which life is rooted and of the death which is its end.

It becomes clear in the parable which Kroetsch creates that the Dionysian element of life embodied by Hazard and essential to the creation of a fully human order, is at best neglected and at worst maliciously misrepresented and attacked. One aspect of Hazard's Dionysianism is a

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid. p. 142.



refusal to do homage to the work ethic and this and other aberrations gain him the scorn of the worldly successful Tad Proudfoot, who states: "You're too damned lazy! You won't work. You won't earn an honest dollar."<sup>8</sup>

Hazard's failure to honour the sacred cows of his age clearly marks him as an outsider to his contemporaries.

It is important to note that while Hazard Lepage is unique in the novel, there are many Proudfoots. The Proudfoots are thus similar to Faulkner's Snopeses but while the Snopeses are almost totally distinguished by their cunning, the Proudfoots can at least produce a Martha as well as a Tad, a Timothy as well as a Demeter. The Proudfoots are apparently the survivors in a world which not only loses Hazard, but destroys him. They are survivors because, with the possible exception of Demeter, they are unburdened by ideals: they worship expediency. Even Martha, by her union with Utter at the conclusion of the novel, has swiftly abandoned her loyalty to the dead Hazard. The exception is, of course, Demeter, with his monomaniacal determination to capture the essence of Hazard, and he is defeated by the literal-mindedness which is his common bond with all Proudfoots. Hazard, on the other hand, is non-expedient to the point of self-destruction, and it is this refusal to bow to the needs of the moment which make it possible for Hazard to be the quester.

It has already been noted that Hazard's quest is mock-heroic and there is an exuberant variety of references employed to suggest the scope of his quest and its ironic nature. In some ways, Hazard is an unlikely figure in an unlikely time to embody the regenerative principle. At

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid. p. 15.

the opening of the novel, Hazard is fifty-one and is several decades older than one expects the normally youthful quester to be. In addition, his fiancée of thirteen years, Martha Proudfoot, despite being remarkably well preserved, is still a maiden of thirty-seven. It is important to note, though, that by this time Hazard is really engaged in his quest and has been for some time. Significant direction has been given Hazard years earlier by his experiences in World War I and, in particular, by the events surrounding his killing of the German officer at Passchaendaele. Just before this, Hazard encounters a peculiar old clairvoyante who predicts that "La mer sera votre meurtriere."<sup>9</sup> This phrase is translated by Demeter to read, "the sea shall be your murderess," and the oracular vagueness of both the original phrase and Demeter's translation give rise to a series of misinterpretations and bilingual puns. Hazard assumes his end to be connected with water, which is only indirectly true. The old crone, is, in reality, warning Hazard of the dangers of his quest for the mare, the English homonym of the French word mer, or sea. She is also warning Hazard against the, as yet, generations distant Poseidon who will finally kill him. Poseidon, the god who was so inimical to Odysseus in his attempt to return home was, of course, the Greek god of the sea.

There are in The Studhorse Man frequent ironic parallels drawn between Odysseus and Hazard, as well as parodic references to the technical devices used in epic poetry. For instance, the prophetic warning is delivered during the battle of Passchaendaele and at the time, Hazard's chances of dying by fire seem much greater than his chances of dying by

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid. p. 12.

water. The prophesy seems to invest Hazard's quest with a supernatural sanction, but the incongruousness of that prophesy in these conditions largely demystifies the oracular device and renders it ludicrous. The same is true of the delivery of the progenitor of the Lepage horse to Hazard after the war. Hazard, wandering by Wildfire Lake, rescues an Indian swimming with a colt. The Indian insists that the colt is Hazard's and promptly disappears. This peculiar event contains echoes of the coming of King Arthur in Tennyson's Idylls of the King and the delivery of Excalibur to Arthur by the mystic hand from the Lake. The unlikely context of these heroic foreshadowing in The Studhorse Man, however, produces an ironic rather than a serious effect.

Likewise, at the beginning of the novel we see Hazard in his peculiar arklike mansion: "Sitting, he could not help but confront the chaos on the bookshelves beside the desk."<sup>10</sup> He reads from his bible, the General Stud Book and starting at the beginning, reads the names which trace the development of the horse. Unfortunately for Hazard, however, his interest in names does not go beyond their incantatory value. His refusal to go beyond the literal meaning of the original prophecy "the sea shall be your murderess," results in a misapprehension of its significance which blinds him to the real danger of his quest. The image of chaotic bookshelves laden not with books, but with the paraphernalia of horse-rearing, is an early and effective image of the determined anti-intellectual, anti-rational, anti-historical bias exhibited by Hazard. The urge to create intellectual order is entirely antithetical to Hazard's desire to live

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid. p. 9.

spontaneously; his need for order does not go beyond the desire to see the Lepage horse continued.

Hazard's fear of entrapment and his basic vitality produce a scene of great humour when Hazard is rescued from the blizzard by P. Cockburne curatress of the Edmonton museum. Recognizing that P. Cockburne is a sculptress measuring him for immortality, Hazard demonstrates a fear similar to that of the primitive man who will not allow his photograph to be taken for fear that his very essence will thus somehow be imprisoned. As Demeter says, "Hazard did battle; the dear ninny was terrified of history. But in the end and finally, that which he wrestled most was the image of himself for which the hands of P. Would seek to take measure."<sup>11</sup> His refusal here to be defined in any fixed fashion is a clear indication that his vitality and force are such that they will resist definition, particularly by someone like Demeter Proudfoot.

It is due to Tad Proudfoot, uncle of Demeter and Martha, that Hazard is forced to undertake the quest outlined in the novel. The lure is the bone drive, organized by Tad for the enhancement of the war and his own benefit; and the outcome is the macabre bone fight in Chapter II which again in blackly humorous fashion emphasizes man's ultimate end and the terrible carnage of war. Just as it was ironic that the man who represents the life force should gain a permanent wound while killing a man in the First World War, so it is ironic here that Hazard must attempt to find the money to buy the mare by gathering bones. The scene has an even greater importance, however, for it provides an example of Hazard's essential isolation and the way in which Tad both represents public opinion and

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid. p. 33.

manipulates it against Hazard.

At the conclusion of the pitched battle Hazard is totally alone against all those who were his allies to begin with. Tad has very effectively made him into the scapegoat for all the frustrations of the men who surround him. Tad has little difficulty in depicting Hazard as a man whose denial of convention is somehow an assault on decency and propriety. Thus, under a shower of bones and quite unwillingly, Hazard unwittingly embarks on the unplanned journey. Clearly, the hero in this quest is not only unsure of the object of his quest, he is unaware initially that he is even on a quest. The burlesque of the heroic quest is carried even further with Kroetsch's invention of the ironic poles of Hazard's world. Coulee Hill, containing Martha and her mares, is the vital, life containing East and the Heaven of his world, while Edmonton, containing both animals and men gelded by mechanism is its West and its Hell. The latter is suggested by the laconic interchange between Hazard and the railwayman after the train ride taking Hazard to the city: " 'Where in hell...' Hazard began again. 'No' the brakeman laughed encouragingly. ' In Edmonton.'"<sup>12</sup>

During his brief stay in the city, Hazard helps bring chaos to its civilized order by releasing eight hundred horses. The release of the horses during a raging blizzard and their subsequent rampage through the town is a complex image. Of course, the chaos resulting from the stampede suggests the breakdown caused by the natural forces of the blizzard, but the fact that in the host of horses is to be found only one genuine stallion, reflects the unique masculinity of Poseidon and Hazard. This uniqueness is

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid. p. 24.

emphasized further by the battle between Poseidon and the statue of the horse before the legislature. Once again it is art versus reality, and in the eyes of the politicians leaving the legislature the stone horse is the victor. Hazard's contrary opinion is shared by P. Cockburne and, in the sanctuary of her museum, his journey is temporarily halted. As Demeter says:

And Hazard was shortly to betray the intent of his worthy quest. He was to be subverted by the very force in whose name he pretended to act. It is not easy to admit of weaknesses in one's hero. Sir John A. McDonald tippled, let his biographers quibble as they will; Hazard Lepage was a man of inordinate lust.<sup>13</sup>

After Hazard's "victory" over P. Cockburne he inadvertently locks himself out of the museum and dressed in the uniform of the R.C.M.P. he once again unwillingly resumes his journey. Hazard's rather conspicuous costume is just one of a number of disguises which he assumes, but what initially suggests Proetan form, that is, the ability practically to become another person, ultimately reveals a man who lacks definition in the contemporary world. It is a mark of Hazard's anachronism that he appears at various times as farmer, mounted policeman and minister. It is significant that Hazard and Utter finally steal clothes from Johnny Backstrom's undertaking establishment, and that from that point on Hazard appears in the clothes of a dead man.

If Hazard's battle in the museum was against history and whatever would try to organize and regularize his spontaneity, his real battle is against a much more subtle temptation in the Home for Incurables. The Home, with its interminable card games and the impossibility of losing, suggests a release and escape to Hazard which he finds tempting. Essentially without

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid. p. 30.

analyzing the wealth of detail, the Home appears to be an atemporal, geriatric lotus-eaters' paradise, the inhabitants of which fend off death but not old age. For Hazard the life is safe but boring and the buildings sepulchral. Hazard is seen as a necessary figure yet a solitary one, whose continual winning is a relief to the other inhabitants. The description of the effect he creates--he is given the title "Our Visitor"--suggests his messianic role, and thus to his various other identities is added one more--that of ironic saviour. It is significant that, although Hazard is expelled from the Home, he has largely succumbed to the temptation.

Why then, he wondered, why should he himself venture outside the Home for Incurables and return to that mansion? At the mansion he was alone; here he had company. There he must care for his horses; here it was done for him. And all he had to do was go on winning and winning and winning.<sup>14</sup>

His resolve when he leaves is to have done with the business of studhorseman, but he has not yet abandoned his creative instincts for the terminal lassitude of the Home for Incurables. When he is given a choice by the Widow Lank of killing the pig or attempting to impregnate the widow, he opts for the latter. Given the choice of killing or creating, Hazard still chooses life, but the companion he is to meet shortly, Eugene Utter, will assist in the distortion of even this basic drive.

Eugene Utter, encountered by Hazard in a pub is a demonic figure, as suggested in their first rather cryptic exchange: "And just where in hell," Hazard replied, would I find another horse?" "That's what I'm here for," the stranger replied."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid. p. 53.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid. p. 86.

Utter, who lost two fingers to dynamite in the service of a Doukhobor woman, becomes Hazard's travelling companion.

The questing pair came on Easter Sunday--Easter was on April first that year--to the Cree River--only to discover the river was so in flood the bridge had gone out.<sup>16</sup>

Their crossing nearly results in their drowning and produces further evidence that Utter's presence is not entirely accidental. In mid-stream Utter cries: "I was not sent here for this."<sup>17</sup> Utter obviously fears death by water and, once safely on the other side, he enhances his fiery image by igniting the schoolhouse in which they have found refuge. This blaze, intended by Utter to release them from the bondage of love, in fact reduces them to fundamentals by destroying everything which linked them to the past. This might be a positive result except that as they stand watching the fire a mouse runs from the fire, then, seeing Utter, darts back in. The mice, "in medieval symbolism, associated with the devil."<sup>18</sup> would sooner perish by fire than encounter Utter.

The upshot of this peculiar quest is that Utter leads Hazard to the place where Hazard is shot in the rear and nursed by the mysterious, sensuous Marie Eshpeter. Again, Hazard's wound is a parody of the Fisher King's wound but, unlike Helen Persephone Murdoch in The Words of My Roaring, Marie Eshpeter is no lifegiver and Hazard is not made whole again. Rather, Marie Eshpeter is a succubus who produces death, not life. Hazard's escape from her and his attempted confession to the priest result in his parodic

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid. p. 92.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid. p. 94.

<sup>18</sup>J.E. Giriot, A Dictionary of Symbols, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), p. 259.



immolation in the priest's house and, apparently dead, his storage in the cave of the ice house. On this occasion it is Martha rather than Marie who encounters Hazard, and her intercession results in a resurrection.

Martha was champion against our promised end. Death was a nightmare presence bent on snuffing Hazard into a longer darkness; it was the crone and succubus, the ancient fiend turned female that in the night of dream has fatal intercourse with men. Yes, and the moon was a cold bright disc on the sky: Mare Frigaris, Mare Hiemis, Mare Incognito. But Martha strove against those seas of dust... <sup>19</sup>

Martha at once combats death and sets in motion the final train of events which results in Hazard's death under the hooves of Poseidon. It is Demeter who becomes the studhorseman and Hazard who has abandoned his quest.

At the conclusion of the novel it is Demeter who takes Martha's mares to Poseidon in Hazard's home and it is Demeter who holds Martha prisoner and barricades the house against the men he knows will come like "ardent suitors."<sup>20</sup> Like a crazed Telemachus, Demeter defends the mansion against all comers and ultimately allows Hazard to be killed by Poseidon so that the LePage breed can be continued. The ironic prophecy has been fulfilled and Hazard, like Mike Hornyak in But We Are Exiles, is rendered faceless and without identity in death. The mantle of studhorseman may seem to have passed on to Demeter or alternatively to Eugene Utter, but in fact it is destroyed with Hazard. His quest has brought him to death, not away from it, and his quest is completed by others who prevent life rather than create it. To the end, Demeter has been unable to define the

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<sup>19</sup>Robert Kroetsch, The Studhorse Man. p. 153.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid. p. 165.

appropriate question which will somehow release Hazard, and Hazard by himself is unable to define the significant question. Hazard is thus like the Fisher King whose land still lies blighted, and Demeter is the foiled quester whose hopeless quest continues long after the death of the vital Hazard. In spite of the many comic devices used in the novel, the conclusion is quite sombre. The quester fails to define, the Fisher King is destroyed, and the land is left in the hands of the Utters and the Proudfoots.

## CHAPTER IV

### Gone Indian

Christopher Columbus, not knowing that he had not come to the Indies of his imagination. Imagined he had come to the Indies.<sup>1</sup>

With these words Jeremy Bentham Sadness opens his unwritten doctoral dissertation, and in so doing names a central concern in the novel Gone Indian. In its final form, this opening sentence of his hypothetical thesis describes the pitfalls inherent in subscribing to a predetermined view of any phenomenon and also implies the need in Gone Indian to distinguish between omnipresent illusion and elusive reality.

The Columbus-like search for a new land is, of course, one phase of the quest undertaken by Jeremy Sadness in Northwestern Canada; but it must be determined whether Sadness is deluded by his fancy into thinking that he has found a new land, or whether he does in fact go beyond the limitations implied by the quotation and actually explores, defines and finally inhabits the vital north. It is true that the above quotation refers to Columbus' initial perception and attempted classification of North America as the Indies, but the process of naming implied here is extremely important. The passage suggests that regardless of the actual characteristics of a place, a name once given defines and limits even though the definition is not accurate. Clearly, then, whatever the reality, a name defines, and if the perception of reality is distorted then the

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Kroetsch, Gone Indian (Toronto: New Press, 1973), p. 149.

distortion will be perpetuated by the name. If there is to be any escape from this circle, some kind of unnamng and renaming must occur.

The Columbus parallel is appropriate, for Gone Indian describes the process of naming undertaken by Jeremy Sadness in his quest to penetrate rampant illusion so as to understand the conditions of his existence. In this novel may be seen once again a quest to define the appropriate question which, if asked, will result in the freeing of the Fisher King and will affect the success of the quest engaged in by the quester.

In Gone Indian, as in the three novels already examined, there is not one major character but two, and so it may be helpful to examine the structure of the novel before going on to an analysis of Jeremy's quest. In form the novel is complex, but essentially it is a transcription of recorded statements by Jeremy Sadness, graduate student, interspersed with and counterpointed by the rather pompous editorial comments of his dissertation advisor, Professor Mark Madham.

Madham, whose tone is similar to that of Demeter Proudfoot of The Studhorse Man, teaches at the State University of New York. He is a native Canadian who has abandoned Canada for the attractions of the South. He has sent Sadness off to Edmonton for the ostensible purpose of taking a job interview at the University of Alberta, but his actual purpose is to eliminate Jeremy while he, Madham, enjoys Carol, Jeremy's wife. Having no faith in Jeremy's ability to commit anything to paper, Madham dispatches Jeremy with a tape recorder in the hope that his taped comments may somehow serve as the nucleus of a dissertation. It is these Sadness tapes, the remnants of the last "recorded" days in the life of Jeremy, which constitute the nucleus of the novel. These tapes also provoke the comments of Madham,

and thus complicate and enrich the fabric of the novel. The finished product then, the novel Gone Indian, reflects the minds of both Madham and Sadness and requires the active participation of the reader in an effort to resolve the labyrinthine complexities of a vision formed from the transcribed impressions of one person--Jeremy Sadness--as modified by the mind of another person--Mark Madham. Madham admits that,

of course I have had to select from the tapes, in spite of Jeremy's instructions to the contrary: the mere onslaught of detail merely overwhelms. We grasp at something else.

And that something else is the professor's domain: the world of reflection, of understanding.<sup>2</sup>

The apparent ambiguity at the conclusion of the novel concerning Jeremy's ultimate fate is thus more the result of Madham's tampering than of Jeremy's reportage. It is Madham's conclusion that Jeremy is dead at the end but his judgement is not as unbiased as the above quotation suggests. It is coloured by his wish to maintain the relationship with Jeremy's wife Carol and by his inability to recognize that Jeremy may have re-discovered something significant in the northwest which he, Madham, has lost:

... It was I who set him his demanding task, his continent's interior to discover... I sent him out there as on a mission, as on a veritable quest for something forever lost to me and yet recoverable to the world. And he was--let me say it--failing. Failing miserably.<sup>3</sup>

Mark Madham then can recognize Jeremy's journey as a quest for necessary knowledge, but unlike Demeter, who feels but cannot define or understand the energy of Hazard Lepage, Madham can neither feel nor understand the controlling vision of Jeremy Sadness.

Jeremy Sadness, graduate student born and raised in Manhattan,

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid. p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. p. 14.

nonetheless feels a compelling need to reach and inhabit the vital frontiers of society. The epigraph from Frederick Jackson Turner's The Significance Of The Frontier In American History partially defines this urge: "For a moment, at the frontier, the bonds of custom are broken and unrestraint is triumphant." It is that moment of unrestraint which permits the formation of new courses and identities that Jeremy craves.

It is relevant that Grey Owl should have held a lifelong fascination for Jeremy, for the process whereby the Englishman Archie Belaney disappeared and was metamorphosed into the Indian Grey Owl indicates the direction taken by Jeremy.

"Why did Archie Belaney become Grey Owl?...  
The story of a man," I agreed, "Who died into a new life."

"He faked the death."

"But he woke up free nevertheless."<sup>4</sup>

Jeremy demonstrates a consistent interest in metamorphosis and in faking the kind of death necessary for the metamorphosis. Later, Daniel Beaver, who knew Grey Owl, informs Jeremy that he bears a likeness to Grey Owl.

"He was a good fighter," Daniel explained. "He killed a man himself one time, in a fight."

"He killed himself," I whispered. I didn't dare flex a muscle. "He killed Archie Belaney. Then he became Grey Owl."<sup>5</sup>

When Jeremy encounters Bea Sunderman, whose husband Robert had disappeared years before, he recognizes that "she admired Robert Sunderman for having the courage to leave. To knock a hole in the ice, fake his own death, and disappear."<sup>6</sup> And still later, in his dream vision of the return

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid. p. 62.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid. p. 100

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. p. 33.

of the buffalo Jeremy meets Poundmaker, who informs that he is no longer "Antelope Standing Still" but is now "Has Two Chances." This revelation is followed by Jeremy's ritual death at the party in Johnny Backstrom's funeral parlor, as he sleeps a drunken sleep in the coffin meant for Roger Dorck. He then takes a trip to the hospital, where he leaves another man in his bed and escapes.

Jeremy, who had so longed for a metamorphosis of some sort, unwittingly lent his precious self to that old gravedigger....

The metamorphosis, one is tempted to say, was complete. Jeremy, no longer himself, tiptoed through the door, leaving Mr. Sunderman to guard the tomb.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly then, Jeremy is aware of the possibility of a change in identity. Certain images suggest the nature of the restriction he feels, the possibility of escape from this restriction, and the way in which the escape can be made.

One frequently used image, which suggests entrapment, is the image of the labyrinth. At the opening of the novel, Jeremy, just arrived at the airport in Edmonton, stares at "the Shadbolt painting of a labyrinthine airport...a labyrinth...I force myself into a telephone booth."<sup>8</sup> What is suggested here is that the labyrinth may be escaped but only through some form of communication, and the telephone booth at least represents some level of communication. The hospital containing Roger Dorck is like a labyrinth<sup>9</sup> but, more importantly, so is the university city of Binghamton to which Jeremy had fled years earlier.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid. p. 139.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid. p. 28.

I fled through the Catskills. Not to the wilderness. Yes, to the wilderness. To a labyrinth of streets and highways and corridors through which, in nine years, I did not learn to find my way.<sup>10</sup>

Not only is the city a labyrinth, but so too is the university, and Jeremy's nine years of graduate school did not make the university and its procedures any more comprehensible. Jeremy's quest through Academia does not produce the desired understanding nor does it encourage him to formulate the freeing question. Jeremy, with his parodic version of the Fisher King's sexual affliction, cannot function as the quester in the academic wasteland and none of those who pursue him will enlighten him. Clearly, the knowledge Jeremy seeks can only be found in his quest to the frontier wilderness.

Another image employed by Kroetsch is the image of the ring and the ring-giver. The ring is used to suggest knowledge of some kind and the ring-giver is seen as the possessor and dispenser of wisdom or magical knowledge. In Madham's opinion, however, Jeremy is

not the ring-giver of old, not a leader of warriors, not a sound judge of good and evil. The eternal scrounging, lazy unemployed bum of a graduate student.<sup>11</sup>

Madham is at least partially correct, for Jeremy is not the possessor of knowledge, but at least he is aware of his deficiency and is attempting to rectify it. In fact, initially, Jeremy thinks in terms of brass rings and key-rings and it is not until his victorious snow-shoe race that he throws away his jacket and his ring containing the keys to various apartments and university offices. In this somewhat laboured symbolism, it becomes clear

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid. p. 94.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid. p. 21.



that Jeremy must relinquish certain physical keys in order to facilitate his quest for the metaphysical ring which will enable him to define, name and thus control, the wilderness. As he says:

"Nothing. Yes, I am looking for nothing. The primal darkness. The purest light. For the first word. For the voice that spoke the first word. The inventor of zero."<sup>12</sup>

Jeremy then, would clearly like to define the central secret or, as Kroetsch says, "uncreate [himself] into existence."<sup>13</sup>

Jeremy's quest, then, is only vaguely defined at the outset and, like other Kroetsch characters, Jeremy possesses characteristics of both the quester and the Fisher King. Jeremy's unusual horizontal impotence is a burlesque of the affliction suffered by the Fisher King and the cause of that impotence, his unwritten dissertation, emphasizes that Jeremy's wasteland is academic. His cure takes place after his ritual death in Backstrom's funeral parlor and clearly, by this stage, Jeremy has turned his back on academe and taken a new direction. For the most part, though, Jeremy is the quester who does not clearly understand his quest. He must attempt to categorize phenomena impinging on his consciousness and attempt to discern a meaningful pattern which will give order to the phenomena he encounters, thus enabling himself to compose the freeing question. For Jeremy, however, this naming process involves breaking down old patterns and destroying his old identity, so that in the resulting chaos referred to in the epigraph there is at least the possibility of a metamorphosis.

The first stage of this process takes place when Jeremy arrives at

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid. p. 22.

<sup>13</sup>Robert Kroetsch, "Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction," Journal of Canadian Fiction, III, 3 (1974) p. 45.

the Edmonton airport and finds some difficulty in establishing his identity. By what appears to be an accident, Jeremy has traded suitcases with a Roger Dorck of Notikeewin and is simultaneously detained on suspicion of smuggling drugs in partnership with what appears at first to be a stunning blonde. The blonde turns out to be a female impersonator who is smuggling marijuana, and the revelation of this deception leads Jeremy to comment: "This is a peculiar land, Professor. Illusion is rife."<sup>14</sup> Finally, neither dismissed nor detained but simply disregarded, Jeremy settles on a course of action:

I've made a decision. I shall walk out of this place. I shall bravely, recklessly, escape from this suffocating dungeon:  
DISGUISED AS MYSELF.<sup>15</sup>

It is this self which must be defined and named in the course of Jeremy's quest.

The quest for self-definition takes Jeremy to Notikeewin in pursuit of the mysterious Roger Dorck, and not to Edmonton and the Chairman of the English Department at the University of Alberta. By this stage, Jeremy has largely rejected the avenue of formalized knowledge represented by the University as he willy-nilly follows his suitcase to Notikeewin. There he finds that Roger Dorck, King of the Winter at the annual Winter Festival, lies unconscious in hospital after a fall from a snowmobile. Weston points out that in "both the Perlesvaus and the prose Perceval the King has simply 'fallen into languishment.'" This has literally been the fate of

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<sup>14</sup>Kroetsch, Gone Indian, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid. p. 11.

Roger Dorck.<sup>16</sup> Dorck remains throughout the novel a brooding presence who is finally awakened and made whole by Jeremy's blurted question. Roger Dorck, then, is like the disabled Fisher King who lies powerless until he can be released by the quester's question.

In addition, Jeremy encounters Bea Sunderman, Roger Dorck's mistress and the mother of Jill Sunderman, whose father was the vanished Robert Sunderman. Bea insists that Robert, whose body was never found, telephoned after he was supposed to have drowned, and she is convinced that he simply faked his death. Thus Robert, "the best hockey prospect they'd ever seen,"<sup>17</sup> in one step abandoned the competitive order of organized hockey and also his marriage to the young, pregnant wife who had seduced him. Whatever his end, Robert Sunderman exists throughout the novel as an example of the possibility of successful disappearance, and his disappearance is thus a prototype of Jeremy's final transfiguration.

Jill Sunderman with whom Jeremy becomes infatuated, ironically leads him back to Edmonton and the order of the city, a labyrinth from which Jeremy thought he had escaped. She is:

A tall girl with her blonde hair flowing free.... Her hair is too young for her sombre face. An unsmiling woman, about the age and height of my own dark and sensuous Carol.<sup>18</sup>

And like his wife Carol, or Johnny Backstrom's wife Elaine, she seeks the reassuring if restrictive order of established society rather than the chaos which might precede the creation of a new order. Jeremy sees Jill

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<sup>16</sup>Jessie L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), p. 20.

<sup>17</sup>Kroetsch, Gone Indian, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid. p. 20.

as "some odd creature come to ravish the frozen earth: you are of the north, cold, blank, oblivious, whimsical, murderous, amoral, stark. The stark amoral virgin."<sup>19</sup> Seeing her in these terms, it is not surprising to see that Jeremy gets over his infatuation with Jill and starts to pursue Bea Sunderman instead.

Bea, on the other hand, is like an older Helen Persephone Murdoch, a life-renewing figure whose house-named "World's End" is "an imprisoned garden"<sup>19</sup> and whose bedroom is a place where time seems to have stopped.

Later Jeremy comments:

She gave to the whole room the smell of earth: not of flowers only but the dark breathing silence of ferns in crevices of rock. The lichens, orange and yellow, on a rotting limb. The green moss cool to the sliding mouse. The smell of a northern forest, where the snow melts itself black into the last shade.<sup>20</sup>

Bea, then, is seen as a type of northern earth mother who constitutes Jeremy's particular grail, for she is the companion of his continuing quest and herself the ultimate goal of that quest.

The quest for identity, then, takes Jeremy to Notikeewin, where he must not only buy new clothes and thus adopt a different external appearance but must also go through a number of experiences which modify his awareness and thus further his quest. In one instance he is caught in what must strike an outsider as the incomprehensible madness of a winter festival. The festival allows a suspension of the normal rules of society, and so in one sense facilitates the breaking of bonds referred to in the epigraph. In another sense, the festival clearly recalls the abandoned

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid. p. 43.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid. p. 147.

first title of the novel:

The original title, Funeral Games (Kroetsch says he abandoned it as "too Graeco-Roman"), invokes Book V of the Aeneid, where the funeral games for Anchises celebrated by Aeneas and his men serve as a kind of societal passage rite marking the death of the old Trojan order and the turning toward the yet to be created Roman World. Within the novel the Notikeewin winter games serve a similar function: by diverting Jeremy from his job interview at the University of Alberta they divorce him from the competitive urban culture he has left in the northeast, and thereby prepare him for his final plunge into the North.<sup>21</sup>

At one point in the games, Jeremy is hauled before the judge, Bea Sunderman, who is disguised as a bear. In a scene which is a burlesque of the judgement of Paris, Jeremy is asked three questions about beauty but in his answer he simply declares: " 'I love you... You are happy and wise and free.' "<sup>22</sup> To this, the bear responds; "Go free yourself."<sup>23</sup> It is appropriate that Bea appears as bear for the homonym bare is implied,<sup>24</sup> and as Bea lacks any pretensions she can assist in the process whereby Jeremy strips away preconceptions and "uncreates [himself] into existence."<sup>25</sup>

In the background throughout Jeremy's mock trial before Bea, are two important figures in Jeremy's quest: one is the Indian, Daniel Beaver, and the other the ski-jumping cowboy.

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<sup>21</sup>Russel M. Brown, "Freedom to Depart," Canadian Literature, 61, (Summer 1974), p. 103.

<sup>22</sup>Kroetsch, Gone Indian, p. 73.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid. p. 74.

<sup>24</sup>Interview with Robert Kroetsch, University of British Columbia, September 20, 1975.

<sup>25</sup>Robert Kroetsch, "Unhiding the Hidden, Recent Canadian Fiction," Journal of Canadian Fiction, III, 3 (1974) p. 45.

It was the ski jumpers who held me most: those mortal men lifting off, soaring motionless in the cold air: and of a sudden, landing, sweeping downhill to a halt.<sup>26</sup>

Even after the cataclysmic ending to his final jump the cowboy has something to teach Jeremy, for there is no single, reliable report of his condition. Whether dead, deranged or paid off, he is an example to Jeremy of how to fall:

Learning to fall, I was thinking: that's the trick. Flying is easy. The whole, the absolute mastery resides in knowing how to fall. And by Jesus, I'm a living specialist.<sup>27</sup>

Further evidence of how to fall is given by Daniel Beaver who, although about to win the dogsled race, deliberately braked and allowed another contestant to win. Jeremy, outraged at what he considers to be deliberate failure, then enters and incredibly wins the snowshoe race. For his effort, and because he is considered to be an Indian by his white co-competitors, he is beaten savagely by them. Beaver finally convinces Jeremy that an ostentatious victory is not particularly significant. The values of the larger community shrink to insignificance when compared to the more private pleasures of wife, family and self-knowledge.

In the climactic scene of the beauty contest, Jeremy is forced to judge between three indistinguishable women. In this case it is not Bea but Jill Sunderman who presides over the proceedings. Interesting here is Jeremy Sadness' desperate and unsuccessful attempts to classify and quantify beauty. Failing in his attempt, Jeremy crowns Jill herself as Queen of the Winter; he thus simultaneously recognizes her beauty and her virginal

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<sup>26</sup>Kroetsch, Gone Indian, p. 75.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid. p. 78.

coldness. She is, he says, "scapegoat and martyr,"<sup>28</sup> and she reigns over winter and Notikeewin regally but distantly. The archetype here may be the judgement of Paris, but as Brown points out:

Jeremy revises the archetype by refusing to accept the alternatives as defined, thereby freeing himself from the demands for performance that had rendered him physically and spiritually impotent.<sup>29</sup>

It is after this incident that Jeremy undergoes his death and resurrection, as it were, in the funeral parlor of Johnny Backstrom, and it is here that he suffers the slight injury--a nosebleed--which makes it necessary for him to go to hospital, the labyrinth at the centre of which lies Roger Dorck. After leaving a substitute in his bed, that is, further losing his identity, Jeremy makes his way to Dorck's room. Once there, Jeremy asks the questions that the quester should ask and makes a confession to the unconscious King of the Winter. He begins by shouting, "always the question. When will the message arrive?"<sup>30</sup> but then confesses:

"Dorck, this is outrageous. Damn your soul. Forgive me. Bless me, father, for I have sinned. Yeah, and its no use. Don't tell me. You don't have to tell me. Just listen. I want to say here and now that I'm sorry for everything. I was wrong. Whatever it was I did or didn't do, I confess I was dead wrong. I should have done it the other way. Whatever that is. I won't say I'll try and do better. That would be another lie. But I just want somebody to know. I'm out of step. I got off on the wrong foot. But somehow I can't bring myself to make the one little hop that would put me back in step with the goddamned marchers. I can't do it. I just want to say to somebody, I cannot do it."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid. p. 122.

<sup>29</sup>Russel M. Brown, op. cit. p. 104.

<sup>30</sup>Kroetsch, Gone Indian, p. 141.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid. p. 141.

At this Roger Dorck awakes--the King of the Winter roused by the quester--and Jeremy, terror-struck, leaves to find Bea at World's End. Here he finds her, now his personal grail, and in their horizontal union gives proof of his own wholeness. Their union is the culmination of his quest and its definition. It is:

The Columbus quest for the oldest New World....I had tongued the unspeakable silence.<sup>32</sup>

Afterwards, Jeremy can imagine the title of his twelfth attempt at a dissertation as "The Quest Unquestioned."<sup>33</sup>

Soon after the successful completion of the quest, Jeremy and Bea disappear under mysterious circumstances. Jeremy has by implication undergone the metamorphosis which he has so long sought, and by admitting his outsider status to Dorck, his inability to march in step,<sup>34</sup> he has defined it for himself. It is not that Jeremy disappears or dies at the conclusion of the novel: he simply appears to do so.

In effect, Jeremy has achieved his quest. He has been able to formulate the freeing question and in asking it he has freed not only Roger Dorck but also himself. His vision of his grail, his self-definition, permits him to move into a new and previously unnamed area which presumably cannot be described until it is named. It is possible, too, that this new area cannot be named in a way which is translatable into the "old" language of the competitive society epitomized by Mark Madham. Madham, mad Adam and

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid. p. 147.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid. p. 149.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid. p. 142.



literalist that he is,<sup>35</sup> remains the perpetual exile who cannot accept the possibility of Jeremy's success. Madham is clearly fixed in his identity and viewpoint and limited to engaging only vicariously in the search for the vital centre. Madham's cynicism is simply evidence of his unsuitability for the quest, and his fixed viewpoint renders him incapable of defining the releasing question. It is understandable that Madham should find it difficult or impossible to credit Jeremy's success, but it is also apparent that Jeremy does succeed in the quest set him by Madham: the quest for his continent's interior and self-definition.

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid. p. 91.

## CONCLUSION

At the conclusion of the Gone West trilogy, there is both a restatement of problems first stated in But We Are Exiles and also a resolution of those concerns. Mark Madham is a "mad Adam,"<sup>1</sup> for he is an exile throughout Gone Indian, just as Peter Guy, Demeter Proudfoot and a host of others are exiled from the place they would, but can not, inhabit. Mark Madham, Peter Guy and the other exiles exemplify one aspect of exile as defined by David Williams in his article, "The Exile as Uncreator." According to Williams,

... the exile is seen as a kind of anti-poet, the opposite of the figure of the poet, at the feet of his lord, the center of society, who binds words and weaves sounds to make language. The exile is an unbinder, an undoer, and an uncreator.<sup>2</sup>

This is unbinding and undoing in the most negative sense, for it suggests separation from a vital and meaningful centre, which, in the terms of the quotation above, is the only source of definition and order. It is clearly suggested that loss of contact with this centre results in an orderless, undefined wandering, and this malady certainly afflicts Peter Guy, Demeter Proudfoot and Mark Madham.

At the conclusion of But We Are Exiles, Peter Guy is lost physically in the snowy waste of Great Slave Lake and lost spiritually in

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Kroetsch, Gone Indian (Toronto, New Press, 1973), p. 91.

<sup>2</sup>David Williams, "The Exile as Uncreator," Mosaic, VIII, 3 (1975), p. 9.

the dumb silence of his nameless quest. Demeter Proudfoot, at the conclusion of The Studhorse Man, is lost in a labyrinth of file cards and Mark Madham, at the end of Gone Indian, is indefatigably constructing new intellectual labyrinths for himself, while rejecting out of hand the evidence suggesting that Jeremy Sadness might have found and named the vital centre at the heart of the labyrinth. Peter Guy can not comprehend or state the circumstances of his existence, and so remains the most taciturn of Kroetsch's protagonists. Demeter Proudfoot knows that he should describe and define the vital Hazard Lepage but somehow he can never achieve the synthesis which would result in definition. Mark Madham, on the other hand, not only refuses to recognize the potential significance of Jeremy's quest for definition, but contemptuously dismisses it as bogus nonsense. All of these characters fail in their own quest for definition, and the problem, as outlined by Williams, can only be resolved if the exiles can somehow transcend their exile, sever the bonds of inactivity and silence and weave the new sounds which will constitute the new language and the new poetics. Fortunately, Johnny Backstrom and Jeremy Sadness provide evidence of constructive naming, and their examples suggest that exile does not have to be the perpetual state of Kroetsch's protagonists.

In The Words of My Roaring, Johnny Backstrom succeeds in talking some definition and order into his existence. The fact that the contest between Johnny Backstrom and Doc Murdoch takes place on the political level, suggests initially that the regeneration of order may take place on the social level. There is even a suggestion of social regeneration at the conclusion of the novel, as Backstrom's victory in the upcoming election is all but assured. However, although the drought-stricken land is made whole

by the rain which falls just before the election, the significant regeneration takes place within Johnny Backstrom as he succeeds in his quest and is able, at last, to understand, control and channel his considerable energy. At the end of The Words of My Roaring, there is at least the hope that exile can be overcome, and, with the promise of Johnny's election, even the suggestion that society itself might be reconstructed along more rational and humane lines.

If the possibility of social regeneration existed at the conclusion of The Words of My Roaring, it is not realized in The Studhorse Man. The protagonists here are increasingly eccentric, with the narrator, Demeter Proudfoot, being a certified lunatic and the biographical subject, Hazard Lepage, an anachronism. In what is the widest ranging and in many ways the bleakest of Kroetsch's novels, social regeneration in the absence of personal redefinition remains only a very remote possibility.

If general rehabilitation is unlikely after The Studhorse Man, there is at least the possibility of individual redefinition. If Demeter Proudfoot is unsuccessful in his quest, Jeremy Sadness appears to be successful in his, for he recognizes and "unnames" the pitfalls of an overly competitive society which destroys Peter Guy, Jonah Bledd, Hazard Lepage, and limits many others. Moreover, Jeremy the exile, not only unnames the conditions which restrict him, he also takes the positive step of renaming and redefining his existence, therefore releasing himself from exile.

It is clear that there is little hope of regeneration on a broad level although there may be hope on the personal level, and if, in the Gone West trilogy, there is always in the background the spectre of death

which ultimately unnames all, there is also, in the foreground, the comic figure of man, the compulsive name-caller. The spiritual wasteland is the condition of existence encountered by each of Kroetsch's protagonists but it is a condition amenable to reordering through redefinition. Each character in his own quest seeks to locate and define his nameless infirmity, and if he succeeds in posing the freeing question, he may achieve a degree of personal harmony and order hitherto unattainable. The grail, thus glimpsed, inspires the transformation of the exile into the initiate who, sovereign in himself, becomes the centre of his own society, binding and weaving his own language, uttering and defining his own order.

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