

Reading the Farm
in Prairie Literature

By

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

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I examine some elements of an agricultural myth in several mid- to late-twentieth-century texts of the Canadian prairie. One of these elements of the agricultural myth is the figure of the farmer and the way it functions as a mediator between nature and our perception of it. I also trace the farmer's domination over, yet subservience to, the land through agriculture and how literature represents that contradiction. The third strand considers the evolution of agriculture to agribusiness. And finally, I trace how all of these ideas are manifested in the agrarian site--the house, barn, field, and garden--and the various movements between and among them. I offer a socially-oriented counterpoint to previous works that have been, on the whole, psychological and thematic, such as Henry Kreisel's and Laurence Ricou's studies. As well, I draw on Robert Thacker's "great prairie fact" and Dick Harrison's focus on writing as a cultural phenomenon in order to position an agricultural myth. My main texts, which I examine in detail, cover an array of genres: Sinclair Ross's *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories*, W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*, Robert Kroetsch's "Seed Catalogue," and 25th Street Theatre's *Paper Wheat*.

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Reading the Farm in Prairie Literature

Positioning an Agricultural Myth: An Introduction

From the time that early humans began to settle in one place and grow the food that allowed them that stability, we have had agriculture, a term that, by encompassing “culture,” suggests how fundamental, if indirect, is our relationship with growing things. Writers, from Virgil to our contemporaries, have variously represented agriculture and its practitioners as simple, godly, pristine, narrow, bland, noble, practical, pitiable, virtuous, wrong-headed, sustaining, and innocent. The list could go on at some length. From this array of representation springs my desire to investigate how agriculture signifies in my own culture, the Canadian prairie.

Agriculture has become an increasingly meaningful signifying system on the verge of this new century, even as its structures and its viability are being brought radically into uncertainty. Today, rural populations, in places such as the Canadian prairies, are experiencing rapid decline. The traditional farm infrastructure that has, until recently, included grain elevators, the towns that grew up around them, with stores and implement manufacturers, and the farms themselves, is becoming obsolete. In 2001, historian Gerald Friesen notes “that the eight percent of prairie Canadians actually engaged in

farm production cannot be certain that their economic role will even exist a decade from now" ("Defining"19). In the title of Friesen's article, "Defining the Prairies: or, why the prairies don't exist," he provocatively suggests that "prairie" as an imaginative construction, has ceased to have meaning because, in part, the strong agricultural base that gave that term its focus no longer exists.

As a result of rural decline, prairie society, at least superficially, has moved further from agrarian concerns over the last one hundred years. Even though many people are still directly or indirectly involved in the related industries of agribusiness and agrifoods, and even though these endeavors are important to the economy on the prairies, some urban dwellers, if they are so inclined, can pretend in 2001 that agriculture simply does not exist, that steaks spontaneously come into being encased in styrofoam and plastic wrap, and that vegetables cunningly arrange themselves into aesthetically-pleasing displays in markets, never having been in intimate and dirty contact with the earth or some actual person on a farm. And yet, though it might seem anachronistic to talk about the connection between agriculture and literature in a highly industrial and technological time, the reality is that agriculture, in its many configurations, is a residual experience that continues to shape our literature because we continue to believe in versions of an agricultural myth. And, living as we do in times of great agricultural stress, that agricultural myth becomes a

particularly complex and, at times, compelling signifier.

Contemporary agriculture, throughout much of the world, the Canadian prairies included, instead of flourishing in a mechanically sophisticated age, is struggling against unknowable economics that threaten to make farming as a way of life obsolete. Lois L. Ross writes that the “overwhelming problem is that most farmers are now living on less, paying more for everything, and borrowing more than ever before in an effort to stay afloat” (6). As she says, one reason that farm income has not kept pace with output costs is “that grain prices are tied to a monopolized international market” (7) whose first priority is profit for (often foreign) investors and not the sustainability of prairie agriculture.

The prairie farm is, and always has been, a fundamentally ambiguous place. It is where human beings inscribe themselves on land, altering the natural world around them: breaking prairie sod, seeding non-native crops, installing irrigation systems, and killing pests. It is also where that natural world can unexpectedly and effortlessly dominate: killing crops with a late spring frost, flooding farm lands, and parching fields with too little moisture. Both of these movements--humanity altering land and land affecting people--are understood implicitly as part of farming. Indeed, the tension between these two forces is part of the agricultural myth of farmers as heroes, who battle a faceless and daunting nature, even as they love it

and coax it into plenitude.

The farm is also a particularly interesting concept because it signifies in such different ways. There is a growing awareness on the part of environmentalists, for example, that farming constitutes a veritable biohazard. It is not uncommon to hear stories about the danger to water quality of large-scale hog operations, or the hazards of long-term pesticide build-up.¹ Soil degradation, artificially-created monocultures (in which seeding a single crop makes it more susceptible to disease), and the loss of natural habitat for wildlife are just a few of the questionable consequences of modern agriculture. Humanity's relationship with land has become so strained that, even for people tucked away in the middle of large cities, it is for some increasingly difficult to be unaware of agrarian stresses.

But at the same time, society also views farming, at least in a popular sense, as a vocation more than a business, and farmers as people who are fundamental to society, because, in popular parlance, they "feed the world." And even urban societies, I suspect, feel a vague regret at the demise of the grain elevators as symbols of the prairie. These persistent romantic assumptions about farms give rise to industries like rural bed-and-breakfasts that encourage urban people to commune with a wholesome and unsullied nature.² Underlying both of these readings--farm as biohazard and farm as site of noble

endeavor--is an understanding of the farm as necessary in a practical sense for our survival because it produces the food that we consume in order to live.

I have and will use the terms *agrarian* and *agriculture* to describe my subject, but it is important to establish some boundaries for the terms. I will use the word *agrarian* to describe anything pertaining to land use, but also to suggest a generalized sense of agriculture, which could include anything from fruit orchards to dude ranches. When I use the term *agriculture*, I will be concentrating specifically on what we might, until recently at least, have thought of as a typical prairie farm (in other words, a grain or mixed farm). For my purposes, I will largely exclude any consideration of the ranch. Ronald Rees, in *New and Naked Land*, argues persuasively that for several reasons ranching has typically been a different pursuit than farming. The ranch, unlike the farm, has not had, historically, the same connection to a particular piece of land. Rees shows that because early ranches were free-range, the rancher/cowboy developed a corresponding free-range personality with a perception of land quite different from a farmer's:

From his rancher's need to know his range and the behaviour of his cattle developed an attitude to environment that was more tolerant than the farmer's. To the farmer, virgin prairie was a wilderness that had to be "tamed" and cultivated, but to the rancher it was an

already productive milieu that needed only to be managed. The rancher felt that he and nature were partners, and he resented changes in the natural order. With time, ranchers themselves were forced to exercise control--they had to make fences and grow fodder once open range ranching was no longer possible or profitable--but their affections lay always in open, uncultivated prairie. (146)

Rees also argues that ranchers were historically more affluent, a condition which allowed them an ease that the sodbuster did not experience. Even the style of ranch settlement was different. The sprawling ranch-house was an abode that stands completely apart from the sod hut. And unlike the grid of the homestead system that isolated farmers on the prairie, a rancher, Rees tells us, was able to form an "organic settlement, not a mechanical one":

The most telling symbol of the greater spontaneity of the rancher's way of life was the cabin in the coulee surrounded by, not a shelterbelt, but a promiscuous growth of native aspen, willow, or box elder. Unrestrained by the sectional survey and the homestead laws, early ranchers, like the first farmers, were able to build their cabins or ranch-houses in places that gave shelter from prairie winds and storms. (144)

The ranch experience, too, has its own lively and popular literary

expression in the form of cowboy poetry, which in recent years has become a robust and enthusiastic celebration of the ranch.

Nowhere are agrarian concerns more evident than on the Canadian prairies where agriculture has evolved over recent decades, from a way of life that involved small, family-oriented, and community-based operations, inseparable from a particular culture or social network, to a large entrepreneurial enterprise called agribusiness. Through shifts in language, the neologisms *agriculture* and *agribusiness* themselves tell the story of agriculture's evolution. Agriculture was once a family-oriented way of life, a business to be sure, but also an endeavor that was firmly embedded in the fabric of a cultural community. Agribusiness, however, has shed the homey family associations connected with earlier stages of farming and become relentlessly commercial, industrial and technological, culminating in the factory farm.

To be sure, both agriculture and agribusiness are based on the concept of land possession. Ownership of land has always been a big issue on the prairies, in fiction and out of it. Settlers often accumulated land and continuously cropped it as a way of civilizing the prairie, the impetus behind Martha Ostenso's Caleb Gare and F.P. Grove's Abe Spalding. The simple equation for such figures was a belief that more land would equal more prosperity. Speculators, too, played a role in land (ab)use. As Maggie Siggins, a Saskatchewan

journalist, says in *Revenge of the Land: A Century of Greed, Tragedy and Murder on A Saskatchewan Farm* (1991), sometimes the owners of a particular piece of land were “not dedicated toilers of the soil; [but were those who] most hated getting their hands dirty. They were businessmen who hired other people to do the hard work. They were land-speculators who got rich by exploiting anybody who showed signs of weakness” (x) or, I might add, vulnerability. Siggins first became interested in a particular farm because of a grisly murder committed there in the 1980s, but her further investigation revealed a bigger story, a whole string of travesties that had been committed in the name of land ownership on this single farm, including the greed of speculators, the obsession of landowners determined to maximize their profit, and gamblers who “threw away their life’s work on worthless stock certificates” (x). Siggins says in her preface, “The terrible crime is only the climax of this drama. For over one hundred years, malevolence, unrequited ambition, and greed stalked the land. This book is about how the West was really won, and by whom” (x). As Siggins shows, the possession of land involves complex thought processes; it is at once financial and emotional.³

Land is worth large sums of money, but the idea of the home place also has enormous emotional significance for people who have spent lifetimes living and working on a piece of land. It would be useful here

to move to an American context for a brief, well-known example. John Steinbeck explored this tension between the concept of a working partnership of land with people, and land as factory, an industrial money-maker. In Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, subsistent tenant farmers are pushed off the land by increasing mechanization until they no longer have any personal connection to the land and the food it grows. The image of the alien man on a tractor, working for a large company, and moving unconnectedly over the field becomes a profound symbol of discordance between people and land:

And when the crop grew and was harvested, no man had crumbled a hot clod in his fingers. No man had touched the seed, or lusted for the growth. Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread. The land bore under iron and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved or hated, it had no prayers or curses. (49)

The increased industrialization which we find in Steinbeck is a force that, more widely, has driven a wedge between people and land, especially articulated in American literature. Steinbeck's gap between land and people prefigures the division between producers and consumers in more contemporary times in which people have little understanding of the origins or modes of production of the food they buy at supermarkets.

In response to such disconnections, journalist Lois L. Ross travelled

across the prairie provinces in 1984, talking to farmers about the state of agriculture, the result of which was a documentary-style book of interviews and photographs, *The Changing Face of Farming*. In her introduction, she distinguishes between the increasingly polarized enterprises of agriculture and agribusiness. Agribusiness, she writes, is a “corporate-controlled agriculture”:

an industrial form of farming where success is based on specialization and expansion, with profit the main concern. The strategy is short-term and fast-paced.

Agriculture, on the other hand, has traditionally placed emphasis on a sense of rural community and the things that sustain a community or culture. The emphasis, rather than being primarily on the dollar sign, is placed on such factors as a strong population base, meaning many farmers, co-operation among neighbours and within the community, and protection of the environment and the soil through diversity. This means, of course, protection of a whole livelihood for the future generations who will make up the community and farm the land. (9)

Similarly, Trevor Herriot in *River in a Dry Land* persuasively argues that agribusiness, although it can, in the short-term, provide verdant homogeneous fields, reveals a darker side than the lush crops at first might show:

The dominant model of agriculture, supported by government programs and university research, has made farmers ever more dependent on petrochemicals and banks. From the synthetic fertilizers, pedigreed seed, and toxic cocktails of crop-spray to the outsized, fuel-guzzling, computer-enhanced implements and the trucks hauling the yield to the inland terminal, our farmers are pumping gas and money into the land at a frightful rate. How long we can sustain this kind of agriculture is a question we studiously avoid in our regard for the future and our definition of economy. (278)

Agriculture has become *agribusiness*, and something we mean by the word *culture* has given way to a successor whose name does not bear the old associations. What is especially germane to my interests is that agrarian change increasingly over the past century has provided a framework through which agriculture has become a signifying system in literature, creating works as disparate as Sharon Butala's nostalgic *The Perfection of the Morning* and Robert Kroetsch's postmodern "Seed Catalogue."

In "Seed Catalogue," Kroetsch asks, "How do you grow a poet?" The agrarian metaphor at the root of this question, for all the poem's theoretical savvy, is not incidental. Many Western Canadian writers and critics have echoed that same question (although perhaps not so

succinctly), speculating on the growth of artistic expression in a land that is not so far from a time when the primary concern was literal planting, as opposed to imaginative seeding. Even at the start of the twenty-first century, after several generations of settlement on the Canadian prairies, our relative lack of history has allowed a perception of rootlessness to persist. The pioneers struggled with their adaptation to this “new land” in immediate and physical ways. New immigrants came to an unfamiliar land and had to create not just a sense of home, but first shelter, garden, and crops--all the practical and necessary things that humans need to survive. Although contemporary Western Canadians, in recent years, have been less concerned with a physical making of place, they still struggle with the imaginative creation of place, a struggle that is made more problematic, in part, because people have a weaker link with the natural world than ever before. No longer pioneers mythologized as heroic people struggling to remake nature with indomitable will and endless toil, contemporary prairie dwellers nevertheless still seek to define themselves in ways that recognize nature and their relationship with nature. As Kroetsch says,

The human response to this landscape is so new and ill-defined and complex that our writers come back, uneasily but compulsively, to landscape writing. Like the homesteaders before us, we are compelled to adjust and

invent, to remember and forget. We feel a profound ambiguity about the past--about both its contained stories and its modes of perception. (*Lovely* 5)

This compulsion people feel to write themselves into a relationship with the land does not fade as society's ties with nature become more abstract. Kroetsch argues that they only change. He traces the movement between what happens to the farm in realist fiction, and what happens to the farm as a "remembered place" when it becomes a source of poetry. He muses that when farms and small towns

were the actuality of our lives we had realistic fiction, and we had almost no poetry at all. Now in this dream condition, as dream-time fuses into the kind of narrative we call myth, we change the nature of the novel. And we start, with a new and terrible energy, to write the poems of the imagined real place. (*Lovely* 8)

Kroetsch's argument is that the way place is imagined by a society affects how it is represented by writers, and in what genres it most crucially figures. He proposes, too, in outlandish Kroetschean fashion, that we might well, paradoxically, produce a place that is both "real" (manifest, given, immutable) and "imagined" (fashioned according to our dispositions). This double claim, that land is both given and made, I will argue, is crucial to literary expressions of the agricultural myth.

Place, as Deborah Keahey suggests, is always difficult to define. In

her study *Making it Home: Place in Canadian Prairie Literature* (1998), she says place “can be a geographical location, but it can also be a symbolic, social, cultural or psychic one. To know ‘your place’ can mean to know who you are, or how you are defined by others, and your relationship to the world around you” (11). Similarly, the historian Gerald Friesen usefully details three main ways of thinking about a region. According to him, place can be defined in formal, functional, and imagined ways (“Defining” 14). The formal refers to a particular region’s landscape and climate, represents an idea, therefore, that the prairie is distinctive because of its physical properties. For instance, a sense of the prairie as a flat land form is a kind of formal definition, limited though it may be. The functional definition presupposes that a region has a certain function within a larger system. The prairie, for example, can be imagined as a grain-producing area, as part of a more subsuming economic structure. The imagined region, as Friesen says, is “much favored by students of prairie literature” (“Defining” 15) because it prefers to describe region as a myth or mental construct. For my purposes, I propose a combination of these approaches, by which the prairie is both an imaginative construction that resides in people’s minds, and an actual formal and functional system that people not only think about, but live in and work with.⁴ Like Kroetsch’s double claim that land is both given and made, this amalgam helps to establish

a complex ground for an agricultural myth.

Wendell Berry, an American poet and agricultural essayist (whose work, I believe, can be creatively transposed to a Canadian situation), also addresses the idea of land and society. Berry feels the need in a largely urban society to reconstruct the connection between culture and agriculture. Consider his metaphor for making place. Inside a bucket that has hung on a post for a decade in his native state of Kentucky, Berry watches as soil forms from the accumulated leaves, rain, and bird droppings that have collected randomly over time. He extrapolates this agricultural image to a cultural one:

A human community, too, must collect leaves and stories, and turn them to account. It must build soil, and build that memory of itself--in lore and story and song--that will be its culture. These two kinds of accumulation, of local soil and local culture, are intimately related. (*What* 154)

Berry uses the example of the bucket making soil as a metaphor for the slow but certain accumulation of thought and deed that helps to form a sense of society that is inclusive of land (society and land together forms what Berry calls a "culture"). This accumulation creates for a particular place, a "memory of itself," a sense of place that is imaginative and, at the same time, tangible, made actual like the soil in the bucket.

Berry uses an organic metaphor to visually and concretely link

agriculture to culture. His juxtaposition of soil and culture may strike us as fanciful at first, but our own reliance on organic metaphors in the most quotidian speech (things are “cropping up,” we get at the “root” of a problem, something is “nipped in the bud,” there is a “blight” upon the land, we generate the “seed” of an idea, someone gives a “withering” look) suggests that Berry is speaking of something fundamental. Our pattern of language reveals how ingrained agrarian elements are in our imaginations, for rural and urban people alike. Besides our vocabulary, there are tangible signs of those imaginings everywhere. Urban interests, such as backyard gardens, landscaping, parks, zoos, the overuse of herbicides on lawns, to name a few, prove that agrarian modes exist everywhere, even in the heart of cities, because they exist, profoundly, almost irrevocably, in our imaginations.

There are two ways of looking at the question of land and people. One asserts that land creates people, that elements of the landscape form constructions of identity and self (the idea that prairie people, for example, are strong-minded and resilient because the harshness of the land has made them that way). This is the idea that informs Henry Kreisel’s oft-quoted dictum: “All discussion of the literature produced in the Canadian west must of necessity begin with the impact of the landscape upon the mind” (257). Sharon Butala, in a similar way, argues that the land has created her partner, Peter, a rancher in southwestern Saskatchewan: “his psyche itself had been shaped by

Nature not merely by *his* observations of *it* but by its subtle, never described or even consciously realized, influence on *him*" (*Perfection* 88). This theory, sometimes called environmentalism, has operated as an implicit assumption in a lot of Canadian literature and criticism, giving rise to works such as D.G. Jones' *Butterfly on Rock* and Laurence Ricou's *Vertical Man / Horizontal World*.

The other approach to environment asserts that, in a certain way, people create land. This view does not argue that land is not a "reality," or that we cannot see it and touch it and map it, merely that whenever we think about, talk about, or describe land, we necessarily convert that empirical reality into a kind of fiction, and thus we "create" land (we may "see" a landscape as harsh or unyielding, for example, because of a need to explain how we have failed to adapt to it). Eli Mandel, in part, is talking about the idea of people creating land when, responding to Kroetsch's pronouncement, "The fiction makes us real" (*Creation* 63), he says: "The writer's task becomes an increasingly sensitive articulation of his literary tradition--not to write up the experiences of the country but to articulate the forms of its fiction" (58). As in a lot cases of radically-opposed views, the most satisfying position often lies somewhere in the middle--the occupation of place, and the understanding of it, leading to a reciprocity between people and land. Kreisel's title for his landmark environmentalist article, "Prairie: A State of Mind," shows how both views can and

often do co-exist.⁵

The reciprocity between people and land can be read in many agrarian texts. Farmers and farming in general are commonly described as being molded by the land and its imperatives. As well, the agrarian landscape takes on, say, the frustrations of the farm(er), and so land often becomes, then, barren and uncompromising. In Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese*, for instance, Caleb Gare is a tyrannical farmer who nevertheless has an ambiguous relationship with land. He is wholly focussed on his fields, the crops that he grows, and the ways he can dominate his family so that their efforts too can be funnelled into the land. But the land itself is described in the novel as being equally severe, as "tyrannical" as Caleb himself (35). His flax field, with its delicate blue flowers, however, would seem to represent something other than harshness. The flax is able to draw out a gentleness in Caleb, who would surreptitiously "creep between the wires and run his hand across the flowering, gentle tops of the growth. A stealthy caress--more intimate than any he had ever given to woman" (147).⁶ But even this lovely delicate flax is an ambiguous symbol: "There was a transcendent power in this blue field of flax that lifted a man above the petty artifices of birth, life, and death. It was more exacting, even, than an invisible God. It demanded not only the good in him, but the evil, and the indifference" (147). In the end, in

a futile effort to save the flax, Caleb drowns in the muskeg, even while he reaches "outward toward the flax, as if in supplication to its generous breadth" (298-99). Ultimately, the agrarian world fails Caleb as Caleb fails the agrarian world. The interplay between these forces--how land creates people, and how people construct place--shows how complex a signifier agriculture in literature can be.

Perhaps in answer to that complexity, contemporary writers sometimes respond by nostalgically looking back to a less complex agriculture, in a type of yearning for a pastoral ideal. Because the pastoral is connected to agriculture in this way, it will be useful to foreground the agricultural myth through a brief examination of pastoralism. In *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), a landmark study, Leo Marx traces the movement of technology encroaching on nature in an American context. Marx distinguishes between a "sentimental pastoralism," expressed by society in general, in a vague wish for a life outside cities or "the piety toward the out-of-doors" (5); and a more serious "complex pastoralism" that he sees demonstrated in American writing by authors such as Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Emerson. Marx traces how those writers invoke

the image of a green landscape--a terrain either wild or, if cultivated, rural--as a symbolic repository of meaning and value. But at the same time they acknowledge the power of a counterforce, a machine or some other symbol of the