THE QUEST FOR ORDER IN THE NOVELS OF ROBERT KROETSCH

by

James Gibson

The University of Manitoba
Winnipeg
1975

"THE QUEST FOR ORDER IN THE NOVELS
OF ROBERT KROETSCH"

by

JAMES GIBSON

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

© 1976

Permission has been granted to the LIBRARY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA to lend or sell copies of this dissertation, to the NATIONAL LIBRARY OF CANADA to microfilm this dissertation and to lend or sell copies of the film, and UNIVERSITY MICROFILMS to publish an abstract of this dissertation.

The author reserves other publication rights, and neither the dissertation nor extensive extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's written permission.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

Chapter

I. BUT WE ARE EXILES 7

II. THE WORDS OF MY ROARING 23

III. THE STUDHORSE MAN 39

IV. GONE INDIAN 56

. . . .

CONCLUSION 71

BIBLIOGRAPHY 75

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.[1]

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.[2]

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

---

[1]Jessie L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), p. 71.

[2]Ibid. p. 76.

of initiation into the mysteries of life; the symbols, the "exoteric"[3] 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.[4] 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.[5]

In part, his role is messianic in the Christian sense, as suggested by the fish symbol traditionally associated with Christ and primitive Christianity,[6] 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

---

[3] _Ibid._ p.132.

[4] _Ibid._ p.146.

[5] _Ibid._ p.128.

[6] _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".[7] 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.[8]

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

---

[7]Robert Kroetsch, "Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction,". Journal of Canadian Fiction. III: 3 (1974): 43.

[8]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?'"[9] 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.

---

[9]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.[1]

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."[2]

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

---

[1]Jessie L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), p. 11.

[2]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, hitch-hiking 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'."[3] 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"[4] 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

---

[3]Ibid. p. 135.

[4]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."[5] They make it clear that their search is also for the fountain of youth, but "the best water in Manitoba" continues to elude them.[6] 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

---

[5] Ibid. p. 138.

[6] Ibid. p. 138.

the three of them felt robbed. Cheated. Sad to the limits."[7] 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 fiancee 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"[8] as Peter studies the water and his own reflection, "as if not sure whom he might see."[9] And further:

---

[7]Ibid. p. 144.

[8]Ibid. p. 2.

[9]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.[10]

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.[11]

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."[12] It is to escape the mirror-reflected image that Peter heads north in an embittered flight. As Kroetsch says, "running was of the essence"[13]

---

[10] Ibid. p. 2.

[11] Robert Kroetsch, Alberta (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1968), p. 31.

[12] Kroetsch, But We Are Exiles, p. 124.

[13] 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