

KROETSCH'S CARNIVALESQUE WORLD:
A BAKHTINIAN READING OF THE WORDS OF MY ROARING,
WHAT THE CROW SAID, AND SEED CATALOGUE

BY

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

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba
(c) February, 1992



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ISBN 0-315-77978-0

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to dedicate this thesis to my first English professor, the late John M. Robinson, whose passion for literature, words of praise and encouragement (often undeserved), and warmth and kindness I will always remember. Without the assistance of several people this project would never have been completed. I would like to thank professor Cooley, for his unfailing patience and terrific advice, Shannon, for listening to me bitch and complain, and my parents, for their constant support.

ABSTRACT

This study draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival to explore the imagery of renewal through destruction in Robert Kroetsch's Seed Catalogue, The Words of My Roaring, and What the Crow Said. In each text certain features of carnival--particularly, inversion or suspension of hierarchy, ritual crowning and decrowning, profanation or degradation, carnival laughter, "mesalliances," the grotesque body, and ambivalent imagery--surface as forces which collapse social and conceptual hierarchies, upend religious and secular authority, and overturn accepted truths. Yet this destruction always contains the seed of renewal. In order to escape closed cosmologies and to "reinvent" the world and the self Kroetsch's characters must descend into the depths of hell, chaos, and madness, indulge in primal passions, come to embrace 'woman,' 'indian,' and 'earth.' The abandoned, 'unofficial' world, according to Kroetsch, destroys and renews whoever enters or accepts it.

Following the outlining of Bakhtin's theory of carnival in the first chapter, the second chapter on The Words of My Roaring explains how Johnnie Backstrom's "grotesque" bodily energy ultimately affirms life and inspires his drought-stricken people with belief in the return of rain. The third chapter concentrates on the inversions of male/female and white/indian hierarchies in What The Crow Said, and discusses women and indians as life-affirming figures. The fourth chapter on Seed Catalogue addresses Kroetsch's carnivalesque account of his own growth as a poet. The final chapter briefly compares the

conclusions of this Bakhtinian study with the findings of other critical approaches.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mikhail Bakhtin's theoretical works have gradually become accessible to the West through translation over the last twenty-five years, and in that short time his innovative perspectives on such topics as polyphony, intertextuality, translinguistics, carnival, and novel theory have injected new life into English criticism. His theory of carnival, in particular, has attracted considerable critical interest. Although Bakhtin, for some unknown reason, restricts his study of carnival to European writers, and argues that the regenerative laughter of carnival in literature since the seventeenth-century has been muffled and diminished, Robert Kroetsch, in his article "Carnival and Violence: A Meditation," tells a different story. Kroetsch locates carnival in the texts of modern North American writers, and, more important for our purposes, he invites an application of carnival to his own texts by ending his article with an excerpt from his own novel The Words of My Roaring. Not surprisingly, then, even the most cursory glance at Kroetsch's works will uncover elements which openly lend themselves to a Bakhtinian reading: Kroetsch's celebration of the body, his passion for paradox, his valorizing of folk speech and folk culture in general, and his opposition to Christian authority and socio-hierarchical divisions. If his writings seem exclusively crude, profane, or even pornographic, this is only because modern man has lost touch with the life-affirming power of what Bakhtin calls the "carnavalesque sense of the world." Bakhtin, in a rare moment of brevity, obligingly summarizes carnival

as "the festival of all-annihilating and all-renewing time" (Dostoevsky 124). In Kroetsch's works, particularly with their ambivalent images of the body, life and death reunite in a simultaneity. Taking Kroetsch up on his invitation, then, I will employ carnival to examine his almost obsessive interest in opposing, uniting, and balancing life and death forces in The Words of My Roaring, What the Crow Said, and Seed Catalogue.

Bakhtin most fully explains his theory of carnival in The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics and Rabelais and His World. It is important to note that he concerns himself with the actual social institution of carnival only in as far as its vision and symbolism have been transposed into the language of literature; in other words, he concentrates not on carnival itself but on the "carnivalization of literature" (Dostoevsky 122). Yet a question begs to be asked: what is this "carnavalesque world" that becomes transposed into literary images? Carnival is, first and foremost, the ordinary, official world turned upside-down. It is a communal celebration of all the people, breaking down the divisions between performers and spectators. The people temporarily liberate themselves from oppressive authority and stifling hierarchical divisions, and begin, as Bakhtin tells us, relating to each other in a new way on the carnival square:

The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it--that is,

everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age). All distance between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: free and familiar contact among people. (Dostoevsky 122-23)

Carnival festivities, which typically celebrate the death of the old world and the birth of the new, acquire a definite Western Canadian colouring in Kroetsch's works. Wedding feasts, rodeos, storms, winter carnivals, and prairie pubs all appear as variations of carnival.

Carnival not only suspends social hierarchy, but also inverts it. Bakhtin identifies the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king as the central act of the ordinary world "turned inside out" (Dostoevsky 122). This parodic transferal of power, which begins with the election of a fool to the position of carnival king, celebrates, as Bakhtin explains, the "joyful relativity" of all authority and hierarchical position:

Under this ritual act of decrowning a king lies the very core of the carnival sense of the world--the pathos of shifts and changes, of death and renewal. . . .
Crowning/decrowning is a dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift-and-renewal, the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position. Crowning already contains the idea of immanent decrowning: it is ambivalent from the very start. And he who is crowned is the antipode of a real

king, a slave or jester; this act, as it were, opens and sanctifies the inside-out world of carnival. (Dostoevsky 124)

Kroetsch employs this ritual crowning/decrowning, as we will see, to confront society with what it has rejected. Woman and indian (politically oppressed) and bodily desire (unconsciously repressed) rise up in Kroetsch's carnival to subvert order; they represent the other which one must embrace in order to die and to be reborn, what one must seek if one is to reinvent oneself and one's world. Kroetsch taps the power of the unofficial world to liberate people from all restrictive hierarchies.

The destruction of social hierarchy also frees the word, as revellers abandon official discourse to engage in what Bakhtin calls "Billingsgate" or "the language of the marketplace." In a shift related to the ritual decrowning of the carnival king, profane oaths, abuses, and curses "degrade" or lower whatever is high, ideal, or abstract to the level of earth or body. Bakhtin explains his concept of degradation in Rabelais and His World:

Degradation . . . means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth.

Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place. (21)

The primary target for both Bakhtinian and Kroetschean degradation, consistent with carnival's anti-theological orientation, is orthodox Christianity. The church, playing on the "cosmic fear" of the people, and denying the rejuvenating power of bodily pleasures, frequently appears as the butt, quite literally, of Kroetsch's jokes.

Degradation and deriding laughter in Kroetsch are not, however, forces of "absolute destruction," for they simultaneously celebrate the life of earth and body.

This union of the sacred and the profane typifies another feature of carnival which Bakhtin refers to as "mesalliances." Just as destroying a hierarchical world view results in a gathering of people usually distanced from each other, so it draws phenomena formerly "self-enclosed, disunified" and "distanced from one another . . . into carnivalistic contacts and combinations" (Dostoevsky 123). These mesalliances appear in literature as dualistic images--birth/death, praise/abuse, youth/old age, wisdom/folly, face/ass--and each one serves as a different stage on which life and death eternally reenact their struggle for supremacy.

The concept of the "grotesque body" also plays a leading role in Bakhtin's explication of carnival. The grotesque body is, like

everything else in carnival, caught up in a temporal whirlwind of change and becoming. In contrast to the closed, finished body of the official world, the grotesque body is open to the outside world for it is

unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. (Rabelais 26)

In a view typical of the Renaissance, the unfinished and incomplete grotesque body merges with the cosmos; it contains within itself earth, air, water and fire. Furthermore, the grotesque body, which is not isolated like the official body, unites with and represents all other bodies. People come together in feasts and sex, particularly, to affirm their communal ties, and to revel in the physical acts which enable momentary victories over death. However, like the world towards which it opens, the grotesque body does not merely affirm life, but rather emerges as a battleground for the forces of life and death. In the image of the double body, a dying mother giving birth

to her child, for instance, the body's ambivalence becomes most apparent.

Kroetsch employs these paradigms of carnival--particularly, inversion or suspension of hierarchy, ritual crowning and decrowning, profanation or degradation, carnival laughter, "mesalliances," the grotesque body, and ambivalent imagery--as a strategy to "uninvent" the world and the self, to free the imagination from deterministic structures and closed systems of thought. In the following three main chapters I will focus in turn on one of these major features of carnival. The second chapter on The Words of My Roaring will concentrate on the grotesque body, and how it explains the way in which Johnnie Backstrom both consumes and is consumed by the world. The third chapter will address the inversion of the male/female binary in What the Crow Said. And finally, the fourth chapter will utilize the notion of degradation to explore the poet's relation to his creative sources in Seed Catalogue.

Before we enter those texts, however, it would be useful briefly to locate my critical approach within the body of criticism on Kroetsch. The multi-voicedness and openendedness of Kroetsch's texts make any univocal, monologic criticism seem inappropriate. It is fitting, then, to open a modest dialogue with other voices, orienting this Bakhtinian perspective on Kroetsch with other closely related approaches.

Two articles directly apply Bakhtinian theory to Kroetsch's works. John Clement Ball's "The Carnival of Babel: The Construction of Voice in Robert Kroetsch's 'Out West' Triptych" adds insight into

the union of opposites in The Words of My Roaring, but, as the title suggests, focuses on voice rather than carnivalistic imagery. Neil Randall's more recent "Carnival and Intertext: Humour in What the Crow Said and The Studhorse Man" (1989) concentrates on degradation and Rabelaisian qualities in Kroetsch. Randall attempts to defend the humour in What the Crow Said against Peter Thomas' charge that the novel--with its depthless characters, pervasive silence, and overabundance of shit--is an exercise in utter negation. Yet Randall's defence, though extremely persuasive when touching on The Studhorse Man, at times appears strained and unconvincing when dealing with What the Crow Said. His assertion, for example, that J.G's farting and shitting his pants signify an "affirmation of life" (95), though theoretically sound, does not seem consistent with the novel's tone. The degree of affirmation one can assign to these acts, and to the cursing matches as well, remains marginal for a very important reason: the destructive zone of degradation (the ass) loses its link to the generative zone (the penis) in the novel, as the majority of the men, being slowly consumed by rising mounds of shit, become either impotent or castrated. Randall relies on the generative penis in The Studhorse Man, then, to supplement this lack of renewal in What the Crow Said. In fact, he establishes the necessary penis/ass connection at the intersection between the two novels: "Even as the anus operates as the central symbol in What the Crow Said . . . so the penis dominates The Studhorse Man" (90). A shift in humour necessarily attends such a shift in emphasis on body parts. Yet, though the anal humour in What the Crow Said may be, as Thomas

suggests, darker than the humour in Kroetsch's other novels, both Thomas and Randall overlook a primary source of the text's ambivalence which I will address: the female characters as carnivalistic life-through-death forces. The dark humour which Thomas finds, then, partially to resolve this paradox, seems directed largely toward the male characters. With the inversion of the male/female binary, we can rest assured that Kroetsch's carnivalesque world in What the Crow Said is, at least in part, "inspired with the hope of the happy future" (Rabelais 286).

These Bakhtinian analyses, mine included, rather than articulating a complete break from other criticism on Kroetsch, in many ways complement it. One subject which attracts much critical interest is what Kroetsch terms "uninventing" or "un-naming" the world ("Unhiding the Hidden"), a concept which--in its destruction of all that limits and defines the self--relates closely to Bakhtin's notion of carnival. It is not surprising, then, that Ann Mandel addresses similar features in Kroetsch in her article "Uninventing Structures: Cultural Criticism and the Novels of Robert Kroetsch." She discusses Kroetsch's understanding of death as a creative act, his parody of high by low (in which the doppelgangers frequently symbolize the mind/body dualism), and his ambivalent desire to "fuck the past." Even more importantly, she provides a central idea in Kroetsch that my study will develop more fully and extend, when she observes that the male characters' "refusal of the body is a refusal of the body's death, and with it, the body's life, or sexuality" (61). Kroetsch's characters, as we will see, do not triumph over death unless they

accept the body, scars, humps and all.

One way in which Kroetsch "uninvents" the world is through his extensive use of the Trickster figure, who, unlike carnival with its "communal anarchy" (Labyrinths 36), subverts order individually. Johnnie Backstrom's Trickster-like characteristics have not escaped critical attention, as Kenneth Graham's assessment in "Picaro as Messiah: Backstrom's Election in The Words of My Roaring" would confirm:

A blundering fool like the Trickster, ruled by lust and hunger like the Trickster, and, like the Trickster, prone to accidents that result in transformations, Johnnie acts on his community to change despair to hope and drought to flood. (184)

Graham's analysis of Johnnie as divine Trickster resembles my claim that Johnnie grows from carnival fool to messianic (though still bawdy) carnival king. Johnnie's intense celebration of the body, as will become evident, leads to personal and communal renewal through destruction.

Another way Kroetsch "uninvents" the world is through deconstructing the binary opposites (the union or inversion of opposites is a technique deconstruction shares with carnival) upon which people construct their worlds. Russell Brown in "Seeds and Stones: Unhiding in Robert Kroetsch's Poetry," for example, discusses Kroetsch's deconstruction of the spring/winter binary. The transitional season called "spring," he argues, figures as markedly absent in the Canadian experience of climactic extremes. Brown posits

that Kroetsch establishes binary oppositions only to undermine them, therefore constantly destabilizing and unhinging the reader's perception of the world:

"Seed Catalogue" is not after all a poem constructed through binary opposition, as it first seemed to be, but rather one made up of reversals and corrections. And throughout its length the poem calls into question each new reversal, shows that each correction necessitates further corrections.

(162-63)

Behind each reversal and correction lies the vitalizing power of carnival, and my study of Seed Catalogue supports and extends Brown's idea as it focuses on one correction: the way in which Kroetsch establishes sex as a metaphor for poetic creativity only to undermine it by presenting inversions of creation as alternative models.

Bakhtinian theory is so all-encompassing that it can subsume, or at least enter into dialogue with, almost any other critical perspective on Kroetsch. Its special value here, however, lies not in its broad application but in its capacity to convey Kroetsch's dialogic sense of the world. Emerging from this chorus of critical voices, I wish now to approach Bakhtin's collision with Kroetsch, not with the pretension of offering any final words, but with the hope that Bakhtin's story about Kroetsch will gain more prominent entry into the criticism.

2. BODILY SALVATION IN THE WORDS OF MY ROARING

In Kroetsch's The Words of My Roaring Johnnie J. Backstrom is an eccentric undertaker who, while running for political office in Notikeewin, a town devastated by drought, outrageously promises the people rain. This carnivalesque promise of life (rain) through death (an undertaker) derives primarily, I will argue, from Johnnie's celebration of his own body's triumph over death and destruction. From the outset it is clear that Johnnie draws a sense of identity and pride from the massive size of his body:

I am six-four in my stocking feet, or nearly so, a man consumed by high ambitions, pretty well hung, and famed as a hella with women. Or at least I was, until the eldest unmarried daughter of the Burkhardt clan proved marvelously fertile on the strength of an awkward and hurried trial. (4)

These positive images of the excessive growth and fertility of Johnnie's body correspond quite closely to Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body, which often assumes hyperbolic, exaggerated proportions in its representation of life's abundance. Johnnie's body, in accord with the grotesque body in other ways, is the source, as we will see, of chaotic energies and passions which threaten social, political, and religious order. At the same time, it provides a means for personal and communal renewal.

Johnnie's grotesque body constantly transgresses its own borders through the acts of eating, drinking, sweating, having sex, and evacuating. His open body's interchange with the world enacts a

struggle between the forces of life and the forces of death. Johnnie is deeply aware of the way in which the "body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world" (Rabelais 317). While listening to Applecart, who is "a voice blasting away into the darkness" (94), Johnnie laments:

I consume and I consume. Chapter and verse. Newspaper columns that bulge with advice. The want ads. Food. Hats. Socks. Gasoline. Women. Beer. Hardstuff. I have a large jaw and mouth, my appetite is healthy. My eyes are twenty-twenty and so eager they hate to sleep. My ears are wax-free and larger than normal. I consume and I consume. And yet in the end, where does it get me?" I waited. "In the end," I said, "I am consumed. That's all, that's all. Consumed." (95)

Johnnie's gargantuan appetites, paradoxically, both affirm life and feed his obsession with consuming death, his body "an aching stinking reminder" of his "own ultimate doom" (144). The grotesque body, Bakhtin tells us, functions in a constant state of change, with every moment dying and being reborn; its ambivalence is subject to the carnival logic of becoming, which dictates that anything taken to its extreme limit will pass over into its opposite. This pattern holds in Johnnie's case, as he affirms bodily life so intensely that he becomes conscious of his own mortality. His quest for pleasure is, therefore, also a quest for death, and he drives full-throttle toward both destinations at once with his "one-eyed hearse" (155). As his indulgence in carnal pleasures frequently evokes in him decrowning

thoughts of his own mortality, this seems to reduce his capacity to celebrate wholeheartedly his body's affirmation of life. Yet, paradoxically, these moments in which he contemplates his own dying, far from completely defeating his spirit, actually fuel his passion for life. At Jonah's burial mass, he thinks to himself: "Good God, life is short. Life is short, short, my body cried. So live, it said. Live, live. Rage, roar" (144). In both Bakhtin's and Kroetsch's reckoning, the meeting of dialogical opposites, especially sex and death, always generates excitement and energy.

Johnnie's profound awareness of his body's ambivalence gives him faith in the earth's renewal, faith despite frustration. Constantly consuming alcohol, Johnnie remains forever "drought-stricken and parched" (10). The thirsting, gaping mouth--the central feature of the grotesque body (Rabelais 317)--here links Johnnie's open, dying body to the empty, parched prairies. The gaping mouth is also, however, "the open gate leading downward into the bodily underworld" (Rabelais 325), and it is Johnnie's bodily underworld which contains the promise of both man's and the earth's renewal. And so, open to the world in the act of urinating, Johnnie experiences a rare moment of tranquility and contentment. Momentarily free from the day's scorching heat on a "moonlit night [that] was ours" (16), he marks the land as his own:

Man, it felt good, just to be half-loaded and the pressure easing up in your bladder and the old tool held firmly in the right hand. For that one beautiful moment you feel you've spent a lifetime looking for a place to pee, and here

you've found it. We watered the parched earth. You could hear water running, and that was a mighty pleasant change . . . the cowshit and buckbrush and a drying slough scenting the air; a little rank yet fertile with hope. (16-17)

Johnnie's watering of the earth symbolically confirms his role as rainmaker. As he contains within himself an abundance of water, it is only appropriate that he should have faith the world would return the gift to him in the form of rain. The affluence of his lower body, which is also "marvelously fertile" in terms of procreation, sharply contrasts with the sterility of the earth and offers hope for its renewal. Recognizing the ambivalence of the cosmos that flows through him, Johnnie does not deny the regenerative qualities of urine which waters the earth, and excrement which is "fertile with hope" (17). He soaks and renews the earth in a way that is remarkably reminiscent, though on a smaller scale, of several scenes in Rabelais' Gargantua and Pantagruel. Bakhtin draws our attention to Rabelais' Dingdong, who "praises his sheep by saying that their urine is endowed with the magic power to increase the fertility of the earth, as does the urine of the gods" (Rabelais 149).

Other characters in The Words of My Roaring appear less willing to accept earth and body. Jonah, Johnnie's best friend, cuts himself off from the body's rejuvenating qualities: "Jonah said praying helped. Pray be damned, I said, let it rage, let it roar. Let it send the buttons flying. I was that way sometimes, I had to disagree with whatever Jonah said" (143). Resisting his own puritan upbringing, Johnnie ignores the voice of his conscience, Jonah. Their

disagreement is not surprising, for Jonah, under the influence of his "bible training" (69), entertains a very one-sided view of life. Like one of Rabelais' agelasts, he succumbs to a moral seriousness which blinds him to what Bakhtin calls the "joyful relativity" (Dostoevsky 124) of all ideologies and discourages him from leading a life of laughter and intemperance. Jonah's denial of the ambivalent nature of the world (in which everything is constantly dying and being reborn) is reflected in his refusal to enter Johnnie's funeral home. Having learned the lessons of Christianity only too well, Jonah fears death and the body. Unwilling to accept that death is a part of life and that the body and the world are in a constant state of flux, Jonah cannot escape a conception of time as static and closed. Thus, after getting laid off at work, he complains "I'm serious, Johnnie. I should have gone east when you did. It's too late" (19). Jonah's "reckless optimism" (53) has vanished, leaving him without the capacity to dream or imagine a world any different than the present one. Whereas Johnnie's memory of his journey to the lush, Edenic East bolsters his faith that rain will soon transform the land into "one big garden" (20), Jonah, who has never travelled beyond his parodic seventy-two-and-a-half-mile quest to Coulee Hill and back with the railway, can remember only the death and destruction of the West. Jonah cannot believe in Johnnie's vision of future plenitude, of wheat trains "so long you won't be able to see from one end to the other" (20); he cannot see, as Johnnie can, that in this carnivalesque world "all endings are merely new beginnings" (Dostoevsky 165). Johnnie's continual confusion of beginnings and endings stems, in large part,

from his acute sensitivity to the simultaneity of life and death in both his body and his world. A sense of time's ambivalence is so deeply engrained in Johnnie's thinking that he promises the people not an ordinary shower but a flood of almost apocalyptic dimensions.

Reluctant to incorporate change into his ordered and static world, Jonah commits suicide by drowning himself in Wildfire Lake. His grotesque body fully merges with the world in death, becoming what in Bakhtin's words would be one with the cosmic:

The unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth and being born) is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects. It is cosmic, it represents the entire material bodily world in all its elements. (Rabelais 26-27)

Although Johnnie's prodigious appetites do take on decidedly cosmic dimensions, ironically it is Jonah, a man who has resisted the connection between the earth and the body in life, who (at least in Johnnie's mind) unites with the cosmic in death. Johnnie, perhaps with a touch of envy, imagines Jonah lying at the bottom of Wildfire Lake, finally freed of the struggle between body and world:

Now, I guessed, Jonah's whole body would be tugging at that rope and anchor down where Wildfire Lake was supposed to have no bottom. . . . There it was, cool and light and safe on a hot day like this. A flower in full bloom, the arms and legs like petals rising and moving and falling in the liquid air, the white of the plaster cast a conundrum to

perch and pickerel alike. The hair on end. (143)

Jonah merges not only with the cosmic element water, but also with earth (he is a "flower"), fire (he drowns in "Wildfire Lake") and air (he floats in "liquid" air). Furthermore, the lake's hidden current (merging lake and river), and "bottomless" (65) depths, establish water itself as a carnival element of flux and becoming ("Carnival and Violence" 102). Refusing to defeat death through consuming the world, Jonah is himself consumed by the undifferentiated chaos of the cosmos. The fertility of this union with the cosmos is evident in Johnnie's imaginative transformation of Jonah into a flower. Jonah's body returns to the natural world as the seed which will bring forth new life; it blooms like a flower in a watery garden, symbolizing the rebirth which Johnnie envisions for the entire prairies.

Jonah's death initially devastates Johnnie, catapulting him into an emotional abyss of guilt, depression and self-hatred. Feeling responsible for Jonah's death (he unintentionally broke Jonah's arm, and thus provided him with an "alibi" to make his suicidal drowning appear accidental), Johnnie longs to die, to join Jonah at the bottom of Wildfire Lake. Yet Johnnie emerges from this emotional chaos and morbid longing with new strength and a feeling of rebirth. In a sense he replicates Jonah Bledd's passage into restoration, as he experiences renewal while waiting for the police to drag the lake:

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. That's a God's fact. I was so certain I had drowned that a lot of things that once bothered me didn't

seem to matter. I felt cleansed. (70-71)

By feeling that he too has drowned, Johnnie transgresses the border between spectator and performer, life and death. This transgression is typical of carnival, which is, as Bakhtin states in The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, "a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators" (122). Johnnie's imaginative descent into the underworld to merge with Jonah brings about an exchange of identities (characteristically fluid and incomplete in the carnival world). Sensing that Jonah has come back to life and is knocking on the rear window of the hearse, Johnnie assumes the mask of Jonah to hurl abuse at himself. With Jonah no longer physically present to tell him he is "a meathead, a fathead and a shithead" (10), Johnnie speaks for him, calling himself "a no-good useless loudmouthed blowhard son of a scarlet bitch" (73). Johnnie's day of reckoning has arrived early, and he holds himself strictly accountable for all the injustices he has committed against others. This self-judgement, however, paradoxically frees Johnnie from the guilt of his "uneasy conscience" (90) in that it ultimately enables him to forgive himself. The same water that consumes Jonah baptizes Johnnie into a new life, a transformation Johnnie actually identifies: "A reformation was in order, a genuine attempt at a new beginning" (73). Johnnie drives away from Wildfire Lake like a man who just received a reprieve on his death sentence, vowing to convert his political rhetoric into actions which will help his beleaguered people.

The doppelganger motif (paired images being typical of carnival) becomes more explicit in Johnnie's relationship with Doc Murdoch (even

his name--Doc/doch--is doubled). The differences between the two rivals, some of which we will consider in greater detail later on, are manifold. Doc is short, old, and wealthy. He is a representative of the moral and social order derived from the past and the East, and is both father and doctor. Johnnie, on the other hand, is tall, poor, and rebellious. He is associated with the present and the West, and is both son and undertaker. In a struggle which recalls the symbolic death and rebirth Johnnie undergoes after the drowning of Jonah (his other primary doppelganger representing moral restraint), his triumph over Doc's authority also follows the life-through-death pattern. At the beginning of the novel, Doc humorously reminds the voters that he brings people into the world while his "worthy opponent" (3) buries them. Toward the end of the novel, however, a reversal takes place. Exhausted after his delivery of a still-born child, itself an emblem of death in life, Doc is slumped over in a death-like sleep on the wagon. Even as Johnnie by his mere presence is implicated in the baby's death, it is Johnnie, hailed for making good on his promise of rain, who delivers Doc from the chaos of mud. This inversion of roles--Johnnie's association with dominance and renewed life, and Doc's with submission and death--conveys the transition from old to new, from death to life.

Kroetsch's fascination with the doppelganger motif, as Robert Lecker suggests in "Bordering On: Robert Kroetsch's Aesthetic," often involves a meeting of two opposites which effects a transformation (128). The transformation in The Words of My Roaring seems to involve the death or decrowning, first of Jonah and then of Doc, and the

renewed life or crowning of Johnnie. This connection between the doppelganger motif and the carnivalistic ritual of decrowning/crowning finds confirmation in The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics when Bakhtin considers the role of the parodying double: "Parodying is the creation of a decrowning double; it is the same 'world turned inside out'. . . . Everything has its parody, that is, its laughing aspect, for everything is reborn and renewed through death" (Dostoevsky 127). Although Johnnie himself is the parody of the official world, he too is parodied in another double--the unwashed prophet. The prophet inverts Johnnie's promise of rain, continually announcing that the world, blowing away in dust, will end tomorrow. Though Johnnie abuses the prophet for his smug self-assurance, when it does rain the prophet's presence undermines Johnnie's pretensions to having caused it: "I was overwhelmed by a terrible realization. . . . I had not a thing to do with the coming of the rain" (192). The sudden appearance of the prophet, occurring when Johnnie stands at a literal crossroads between political ambition and moral obligation, in a way propels Johnnie towards accepting greater social responsibility.

This doubling intimates Johnnie's inner fragmentation--he is, after all, both Christ (he is 33) and Judas (his middle name), redeemer and betrayer. The fragmented self, from the Bakhtinian perspective, does not exist in isolation from the other but, like the body, functions in a dialogic interaction with otherness (Dialogism 19). The self is created through its ambivalent relation to the language of the other. Just as Johnnie decrowns the other and crowns himself, then, so does he borrow and destroy the words of others to

create his own voice. Though his speeches draw on Applecourt's ideas about the "Fifty Big Shots" (110) of the East, for example, his smashing of the radio out of which Applecourt's voice booms symbolically destroys and renews the words of his mentor. Therefore, Johnnie's voice and consciousness are constructed not only out of the destruction of silence, as John Clement Ball points out in "The Carnival of Babel: The Construction of Voice in Robert Kroetsch's 'Out West' Triptych," but also out of the destruction, perhaps the cannibalizing, of the words of others. Johnnie's inner fragmentation, through which he unites the voices and consciousnesses of others within himself, in the end enables him to function as a true representative of the people.

The transition from death to life played out in the relations between doppelgangers is similarly conveyed through the image of the grotesque double body, which Bakhtin deals with in Rabelais and His World:

One of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated and born. This is the pregnant and begetting body, or at least a body ready for conception and fertilization, the stress being laid on the phallus or the genital organs. From one body a new body always emerges in some form or other. . . . It is dying and as yet unfinished; the body stands on the threshold of the grave and the crib. No longer is there one body, nor are there as yet two. Two heartbeats are heard; one is the

mother's, which is slowed down. (26)

As the wife of an undertaker, Elaine is, appropriately enough, "on the threshold of the grave," at least from Johnnie's perspective:

I wanted to cough. If you cough in Elaine's presence she begins to make funeral arrangements. It is one of the calamities of my mortal existence that I married a woman who is in perfect accord with my profession. (38)

She is also on the threshold of the crib, however, and Johnnie humorously describes her pregnancy:

My wife was fond of saying not only that she was eating for two, which excused her gluttony in a time of hardship, but also that she was sleeping for two, praying for two, passing water for two. By God, some days I couldn't buy my way into the bathroom. (175)

We may be encouraged to suppose that a new child will be generated out of chaos and death, thereby ensuring that Johnnie will live on through the historic immortality of the people.

Johnnie's speech inverts the official language of the establishment, employing double words to unhide the limitations and injustices of the present government's perspective. Doc has claimed that relief food is "good in the way of vitamins and minerals; Murdoch was always pointing this out, reminding us that malnutrition was rampant. I use his own unfortunate phraseology. Starvation was a word the good doctor did not know" (42). Johnnie's "unhiding" of Doc's distance from the real plight of his constituents bears a distinct resemblance to Bakhtin's description of the upending of

official language in the Renaissance:

Thought and word were searching for a new reality beyond the visible horizon of official philosophy. Often enough words and thoughts were turned around in order to discover what they were actually hiding, what was that other side. The aim was to find a position permitting a look at the other side of established values, so that new bearings could be taken. (Rabelais 272)

The double words, "malnutrition" and "starvation," also indicate that Doc is "so determined to maintain" (141) life that he cannot fully accept the body's mortality. Yet the bodily life which Doc affirms, in its isolation from the renewing capacity of death, ironically becomes sterile and stagnant.

Johnnie challenges Doc's order more directly through the use of what Bakhtin calls "billingsgate," unofficial elements of speech based in the grotesque concept of the body (Rabelais 27). Abuses, curses, and profanities, Bakhtin tells us, "were and are still conceived as a breach of the established norms of verbal address; they refuse to conform to conventions, to etiquette, civility, respectability" (Rabelais 187). Johnnie's transgression of the linguistic code of etiquette threatens the socio-political hierarchy when, speaking to potential voters in the bar, he hurls abuse at the incumbent, Doc Murdoch: "Duncan L. Murdoch . . . is tighter than a hen's ass on a frosty morning" (11). The high and respectable Doc is thrust irreverently, bawdily, down to the region of the lower body. Johnnie's abuse of Doc perfectly illustrates Bakhtin's notion of

degradation, which lowers "all that is high, spiritual, ideal" and "abstract . . . to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (19). The grotesque concept of the body in Johnnie's degradation of Doc, however, is present only through its absence. Murdoch's tight ass reveals his lack of openness to and interchange with the world and people. His face, a "slab of gauged and polished granite" (5), as opposed to Johnnie's gaping mouth, further identifies him with the official world of closure and stasis. These bodily images, combined with the association of Doc with water and riches in times of drought and poverty, seem to indicate that Doc represents neither the land nor the people. Indeed, Doc parades around at Coulee Hill "as if drought and hard times and mortgages were just something those three hundred people had dreamt about last night" (3).

The reader, like the voter, must, however, take Johnnie's political rhetoric with a grain of salt as his presentation of Doc sometimes seems limited and suspect. Although Doc may not be as open to the people as Johnnie, by Johnnie's own admission "Old Doc never locked a door" (24). Similarly, his underestimation of Doc's sense of the public good surfaces when, knowing rain would all but seal Johnnie's victory, Doc's first response to the rain is to say "Just what we needed" (199). Moreover, though Doc promises the people material prosperity rather than natural fertility and abundance (as Johnnie does), his lush garden and his position as doctor reveal that he too is a pro-creative figure.

Nevertheless, Doc is showered with abuse because in a way he does represent the old, dying world that must be destroyed before a new age

is born. Doc wants to solve the current economic crisis without changing the status quo. As with Jonah, then, Doc's closed body is intimately connected to his perception of time as closed. Convinced that the past determines future possibilities, Doc tells the voters the situation is so serious that "only experience, only a close familiarity with the long and painful past can guide our decisions" (5). His finished self also seems resistant to change, for he refuses to forgive Jonah for committing suicide. The image of Doc's garden, which in certain ways is positive and inviting, captures the convergence of historical and personal past as closed and static. Fearing the destructive force of winter, he would wrap up his shrubs, bushes, and trees "in his botanic versions of winter underwear" (158). The garden, a past Eden and "a little bit of the [Canadian] East" (158), is separated in its closure (and linked to Doc's tight ass through the metaphor of the underwear) from the "authentic" history of the West. Johnnie violates the garden's false and closed history with the present moment of becoming. He brings an early "winter" to Doc's garden of life, decrowning him in the act of seducing his daughter, Helen, in that Edenic garden.

The energy of Johnnie's abuse further transgresses the hierarchical structures of the past which have determined the accepted mode of address between patient and doctor, citizen and M.L.A.. On the most basic level, Johnnie's act of calling Doc "Duncan L. Murdoch" dethrones him from his prestigious position as doctor and relates to him as equal. Since Doc has been like a father to Johnnie ever since his own father died in the war, Johnnie's abuse also opens a rebellion

of son against father. It finds an antecedent in Goethe's account of a Roman carnival in which a boy blows out his father's candle, crying "death to you, sir father!" (Rabelais 251). Finally, Johnnie's comparison of Murdoch to a hen's ass breaks down the hierarchies between man and animal and man and woman. The implied questioning of Murdoch's masculinity inherent in such a comparison becomes more explicit in Johnnie's subsequent statement: "Duncan Murdoch, M.D . . . would not be man enough to walk into a beer parlour and buy himself a glass of beer" (11). Johnnie turns the tables on Doc, transforming a vice for which Doc moments earlier had abused him, this in front of a "mob of raving teetotalers" (9-10), into a virtue which allows him to abuse Doc before a group of rowdy drinkers.

This outrageous abuse, which Johnnie repeats in different ways on several occasions, is so personal that it offends Doc. Confronting Johnnie over the violation of some unwritten rule of political decorum, Doc asserts "I'd never blacken another man's good name . . . no matter what he did to me" (152). Johnnie's ribald abuse, however, is thoroughly ambivalent, a fact which may escape Doc and which in any event would provide no consolation. Still, it is worth noting that in Bakhtin's explanation verbal debasement does not imply the utter negation of the degraded person:

[Debasement to the] lower bodily stratum, the zone of the genital organs . . . signifies destruction, a grave for the one who is debased. But such debasing . . . expressions are ambivalent, since the lower stratum is not only a bodily grave but also the area of the genital organs, the

fertilizing and generating stratum. Therefore, in the images of urine and excrement is preserved the essential link with birth, fertility, renewal, welfare. (Rabelais 148)

In Johnnie's similar perception of the grotesque body, the ass and excrement still retain their link to reproduction and renewal (a link which Bakhtin claims has been lost in modern times): Johnnie refers to excrement as being "fertile with hope" (17) and "wholesome-smelling" (104). The "lower stratum" of a hen is, after all, an extremely generative zone. Further support for the renewing quality of Johnnie's abuse can be drawn from the fact that it is immediately followed by his promise of rain and several rounds of joyous drinking, acts which affirm life and promise to conquer death.

Johnnie similarly threatens religious order and common propriety with his numerous profane oaths. The particular forms his oaths take is especially instructive. The dismemberment of the sacred body, a characteristic feature of oaths when considered together (each oath verbally seizing the Lord or sacred person by a different bodily part), can be glimpsed in Johnnie's inventive swearing by "holy baldheaded Moses" (15) and the "great burning testicles of Peter and Paul" (189). Commenting on an empty bar, Johnnie serves up one of his more colorful oaths: "By the sweating balls of Abraham, that's hard times for you" (11). This oath degrades sacred Abraham down to the profane lower body, and, as with Johnnie's abuse of Doc, resounds with ambivalence. The affirming quality of Johnnie's deriding oath becomes apparent upon consideration of the role Abraham plays in the Bible. He is 100 years old when he, as we say in our biblical way, copulates

with 90 year old Sarah in the desert, to become, as God had promised, "the father of many nations." This image of death, or imminent death, perpetuating life is an appropriate oath for an undertaker who promises rain. Though "hard times" threaten to engulf the people, even in his oaths Johnnie promises revival through contact with the body. Furthermore, as in Bakhtin's account of "Cyprian feasts," in which biblical passages about eating and drinking serve to parody the sacred, Kroetsch's reference to Abraham (a somewhat lascivious figure) undermines Christianity's authority by uncovering traces of the grotesque body in the Bible.

Johnnie's profane outbursts can also be seen as his private rebellion against his wife's strict and uncompromising moral authority (Kroetsch frequently depicts women as the collective voice of moral and social order). Johnnie, contemplating his own maniacal shouting and swearing at the voice of Applecourt, considers how Elaine would have responded to this:

If my wife had been home she'd have barged in at that point, in anger and feigning tears. She's very troubled about my language. She has taken some oath at church to improve my language, a promise the irony of which needs no explaining.

(96)

The carnival laughter present in Johnnie's profane oaths revitalizes, compliments, and makes whole the seriousness and solemnness of Elaine's oath (which obviously has not been successful).

Johnnie's subversive desire liberates him from the moral shackles of orthodox Christianity. The church's repression of the body as

sinful causes people to feel guilt and fear for any indulgence in their own bodily pleasure, a pleasure which, Kroetsch seems to suggest, bears the promise of mankind's true salvation. Johnnie, rather than accepting the church's vision, rejoices in his bodily appetites, particularly at Jonah's burial mass when, overcome with lust for Helen, he develops an erection: "I felt a stirring right in church at a burial Mass, a return of the old longing, and I was almost embarrassed. Stiff in life; stiff out of it: how can we win?" (143). His boundless and amoral desire conquers Jonah's death with its promise of the body's life and vitality. He enacts the parodic resurrection, one might even call it the resurr/erection, of Christ-like Jonah's absent, rotting corpse. Furthermore, we see here how the lower body upends the upper body, for the seemingly permanent erection, in its immunity to control, has almost detached itself from the body to "lead an independent life" (Rabelais 317).

Johnnie escapes a debilitating fear of the Christian hell through embracing what Bakhtin calls the "joyful hell" (Dostoevsky 133) of carnival, a hell which "simultaneously destroys and renews the world" (Dostoevsky 126). The fertility of Johnnie's chaotic hell, linked in carnival to the "lower stratum" of body and earth, comes to fruition in his sexual rebirth with Helen in Doc's garden. Though Johnnie's whole life consists of a series of ups and downs, crownings and decrownings, his experience with Helen can be considered, if you will, climactic. The garden, most obviously a modern version of Eden, doubles as a kind of hell. Johnnie, an undertaker, rules the dead as a pluto figure. He takes under earth and body the beautiful

Persephone (Helen's middle name), who, in the midst of their sexual play, puts an asphodel (the flower of the underworld) in his hair. This paradisaal hell comes to symbolize "another world" (156) for Johnnie. Spending his days campaigning and his nights seducing his political opponent's daughter, Johnnie begins to live a double life, an official life with his wife and a carnival life with his mistress. Yet this foolishness, rather than destroying him, actually rejuvenates him. Sex, which for Johnnie was merely another form of instinctual gratification, becomes an act which also involves love and tenderness. Overwhelmed by his feelings for Helen, he now understands that, at the risk of sounding overly sentimental, "any port in a storm" (163) will not save his sinking ship. Wanting to cry out of sheer joy (extreme happiness borders on extreme sadness in carnival), Johnnie's heart floods with the release of pent-up emotion. He overcomes lingering thoughts of death and social responsibility to celebrate yet another rebirth: "Helen . . . it's all gone, and a good riddance of bad rubbish. I'm going to start over, from the ground up, from my birthday suit out" (166). Appropriately, body and earth form the basis from which he will begin life anew.

Whereas Johnnie's descent into the carnivalized hell makes him "whole again" (165), Jonah's descent into Wildfire Lake results in his being figuratively torn apart. Bakhtin describes the decrowning of the carnival king, emblem of an old and fixed order (here Jonah figures as a representative of orthodox religion), as a "tearing to pieces" or a . . . "carnivalistic 'sacrificial' dismemberment into parts" (Dostoevsky 162). Much the same effect occurs when the

children of Notikeewin go swimming in the very water in which Jonah has drowned. They overcome their fear of Jonah's watery grave (while, paradoxically, betraying their fear of the body) through what Bakhtin calls "carnival anatomy":

The little kids, tired of waiting, went in swimming again.

They squealed at each other, "Guess what I stepped on?"

"A foot," somebody said.

"A thumb," somebody said.

They'd shout and scramble for shore. They scared each other by naming the parts of the human body, which was something I did not understand.

"A kidney."

"An eye." (137, 138)

More than child's play, this "sacrificial dismemberment" of Jonah Bledd signifies his actual role as sacrifice, a role which Kroetsch further establishes by giving him the first name of a sacrificial figure in the Bible and a last name which identifies him as a bleeding victim. In the Bible Jonah's reluctance to play the role of prophet angers God, who sends down a storm to afflict him and his ship's crew. The crew is saved only after it reluctantly throws Jonah overboard. He is then swallowed by leviathan, three days later to be forgiven and released by God. Kroetsch's Jonah is similarly consumed by the "bottomless" depths (65) of Wildfire Lake but, unlike the fate of his biblical namesake, Kroetsch's Jonah finds no just and merciful God to reward his innocent suffering. Jonah is sacrificed by a government that refuses to support the unemployed and a religion whose values--

the passive will that submits to being consumed by the world, the ferocious moral standard that consumes its believers, and the ascetism that denies the physical world--force his hand in committing suicide. Johnnie, however, refuses to isolate any one group as being responsible, embracing instead a more Dostoevskian notion of universal guilt: "that one good man is forced to die by a conspiracy of greed and selfishness, by the betrayals of his dearest friends, by the connivings of the constipated rich, by the collaborations of the deceived poor" (146).

In his essay "Carnival And Violence" Kroetsch refers to the "scapegoat figure who, through his encounter with violence, saves us" (105). Jonah's suffering, unlike his biblical counterpart's, does not save the community; rather, the herculean burden of communal salvation falls on Johnnie's shoulders. Though God appears to have forsaken the suffering Westerners, Johnnie emerges as a Christ figure who offers them mercy (water) instead of punishment (fire). Johnnie, the same age as Christ when he died (33), at one point encourages a crowd to "make a cross for Backstrom" (15) come election day. The terms of Johnnie's election speak not of higher visions but of bodily awareness. Whereas Death remains an absence for others, Johnnie's enormous size makes it a constant presence for him. As he explains to Helen, "I've got more mortality than other people. That's the basis of the trouble. Christ have I got mortality. I've got mortality to burn" (161-62). For his people to rejoice, Johnnie must take their death and suffering upon himself. He longs to be this propitiatory sacrifice, as at the farm auction he imagines headlines for his death:

"JOHN J. SAVES HUNDREDS WHILE PERISHING ALONE" (89).

Yet with his constant undermining of the old religious order, Johnnie at times seems more like the prodigal son than the son of God. Embracing the body which Christianity has rejected, he in effect builds his "own church versus the official church" (Rabelais 88). The claim holds particularly when he assumes a private mask, essential to carnival in its celebration of the incompleteness of identity (Carnival and Violence 116), at the burial mass in order to show the "young punk of a priest" (139) how to conduct a sermon:

Yes, my dear brethren, I scratch in the morning, I'm human, and my wife shortly thereafter in her limited vocabulary reprimands my humanity. My manhood. But I rise to cups of fresh coffee. To the smell of toast, burnt or otherwise, to gobs of melting butter and strawberry jam and to the question, Why must the good be hammered and nailed into oblivion? (145)

Although the passage trails into a certain solemnity, its playful irreverence laughs away the divisions between priest and congregation, spirit and body. It recalls the role of the priest in the past tradition of *Risus paschalis* (Easter laughter). During the Easter season the priest could tell bawdy jokes and stories in church. "Following the days of lenten sadness he could incite his congregation's gay laughter as a joyous regeneration" (Rabelais 78). In both instances the fool/priest would revive the people's spirits and conquer their fear of death through carnivalesque humour based on the acceptance of the positive, grotesque body. Such acceptance would

enable them to "celebrate a burial mass" (141) instead of mourning for the deceased. Johnnie wishes to replace, or at least supplement, a religion of the spirit with a religion of the flesh, for the former, rather than uniting the people, supports the socio-hierarchical structure that prevents them from entering into intimate contact. Mr. Gunn is embarrassed to enter the church, for example, because he is shabbily dressed and reeks like a "pigpen" (154). Christianity's repression of the body further isolates the individual, as it results in the body's closure and removal from the larger corporation. Conversely, Johnnie's wild sexuality and communal drinking enable him to connect with the "people who are constantly growing and renewed" (Rabelais 19).

Johnnie fulfills his longing to be savior not through his own death but through the death of the rodeo clown, who is killed while trying to distract a bull from a fallen cowboy. In Labyrinths of Voice Kroetsch associates the rodeo clown with the carnival fool:

The notion of the fool comes in too, doesn't it; everybody gets to participate in that reversal of order upsetting the king. The greatest example in our culture is the rodeo clown who often does a parody of what the cowboy is doing out there, the clown risking life and limb to parody the cowboy, who is risking life and limb. (36)

The rodeo clown in The Words of My Roaring similarly decrowns or parodies the cowboy, but is himself subsequently decrowned by the bull. Such reversals are typical of carnival in which the crowning of the fool as carnival king inevitably gives way to his decrowning

through thrashing and travesty (Rabelais 197). The thrashing of the rodeo clown in Notikeewin similarly brings about a travesty or change of costume:

[the clown's body was] mangled and ripped by those gauging horns, the innocent figure mutilated, rolled and trampled in the stinking dust. . . . His bulbous nose had come off, showing a human nose that wasn't painted or anything, except that blood was coming from it. He was bleeding pretty freely somewhere beneath his torn clown's costume; the red was stained a cleaner red. . . . Another thing I noticed, the clown was very thin. His costume was baggy and had billowed when he ran, but he was skin and bones. (106-107)

Stripped of his disguise, as comedy turns to tragedy, the clown appears very human and vulnerable. Whereas Johnnie's abuse of Doc exposes his distance from the people, the bull's thrashing of the clown affirms his connection to the Westerners who, as Johnnie later points out, are innocent victims gauged by the rich Easterners.

The rodeo crowd, drawn to the trampled clown by feelings of identification and empathy, follows Johnnie into the chaos of the corral. Yet this transgression of the actor/audience barrier, like Johnnie's guilt-ridden identification with drowned Jonah, also focuses the spotlight on the audience's guilt. The crowd, with its insatiable hunger for bloodshed, ultimately bears responsibility for the innocent clown's death, as Johnnie later tells Helen "we all killed him. All of us there, wanting to be amused. Wanting to be entertained" (127).

The clown's death touches Johnnie deeply because, in a way, he

too is a clown or fool. This situation is evident in the first pages of the novel. Doc publicly humiliates Johnnie at Coulee Hill for his lack of political experience and the people initially ridicule him for his irrational promise of rain. The people's laughter decrowns the "best undertaker in the whole constituency" (6), one who is accustomed to receiving deference and respect (44): "There I stood, humiliated; a man who cannot bear humiliation" (7). A similar public decrowning occurs when Johnnie later speaks to a crowd waiting in line for food rations. Just after he realizes that his expensive hat makes him stand out among the poor people (he is in effect dressed like a king), Johnnie has an embarrassing confrontation with the walleyed farmer, who "had to make sure all those strangers knew who the fool was under the expensive black derby" (47). Johnnie's eccentric behavior reinforces their perception of him as the town fool: he frequently sleeps on the floor, drives around electioneering in a hearse, passes out at his own wedding, and wins his embalming licence from an ad in the newspaper. Johnnie, as carnival fool, defies order to embrace the chance and chaos of the ordinary world turned upside-down.

It is important to remember, however, that the fool--generally linked to the "lower stratum" of body and earth--plays a very ambivalent role in carnival (Rabelais 260). The decrowning of the rodeo clown, with whom Johnnie identifies himself by telling the crowd to "vote for the clown" (112), marks Johnnie's transition from fool to carnival king. The crowd responds to his heart-felt speech and his promise of "one Jesusly bumper of a crop" (103) by raising him on their shoulders and making him the center of festive celebration:

That place just went wild. I'm a big man, standing nearly six-four in my stocking feet, but that crowd picked me up as if I was a bag of feathers. They carried me around inside the corral, shouting and whooping and their hats or whatever came loose, and they busted through the corral gate and carried me out to where all the good food was piled up and the booths were set in rows. . . . For some reason people started handing me free food. . . . I was given a whole graham-wafer flapper pie, not a slice missing, which I lit into right on the spot. . . . A lot of people wanted to treat me. . . . I was trying not to refuse any drinks, which would have appeared discourteous and somehow a betrayal on the part of a man of such great appetites. (116)

Johnnie's immense size and prodigious appetites make him the focus of the people's hopes and prayers. Like the seventeenth-century figure Gros Guillaume, Johnnie is "the incarnation of the people's utopia and feasting, the 'age of saturn returned to earth'" (Rabelais 292). These carnivalistic elements inherent in Johnnie's rise to power do not escape the notice of Peter Thomas, who observes in Robert Kroetsch that "the election of Backstrom takes on parodic features of the crowning of the clown/king" (39).

Johnnie's personal transformations through carnival are mirrored in the renewal of the social body of Notikeewin through the chaos of the rodeo celebration. The rodeo clown's death gives way to the people's feast as, according to Bakhtin, the dismembered body serves as the link between thrashing and the kitchen (Rabelais 193): "The

blood is transformed into wine; ruthless slaughter and the martyr's death are transformed into a merry banquet; the stake becomes a hearth" (Rabelais 211). Johnnie's people defeat their "cosmic fear" of a drought of seemingly apocalyptic proportions through conquering the world in feast. Their faith in Johnnie's rain liberates them from oppressive thoughts of past and present. The men's response earlier in the bar, another place where communal drinking occurs and chaos appears renewing, lends credence to Bakhtin's assertion that the "festive occasion inevitably suggests looking into better days to come" (Rabelais 286):

People started talking to each other. Of a bumper harvest and where they could get extra help in a hurry. Of shopping trips to the city and winter clothes for the wife and kids. Of paying off the interest on the mortgage for another year. . . . We all talked at once. (15)

Johnnie's vision of future plenitude and prosperity unites and heals his suffering people.

The rodeo day sanctions temporary violations of social and moral prohibitions. The crowning of Johnnie as carnival king ushers in a communal celebration of bodily life. The ritual initiation of adolescents into the pleasures of the lower body, inherently involving the transgression of parental authority, is evident outside the community hall:

But people, I knew, were drinking, necking. Fumbling in the back seats of cars, saying no and meaning yes, struggling to make the old contact, moaning in the darkness and lying

still and feeling comfort and joy and guilt and sorrow and shame and fear. Having a good time, as I had recommended.

(135)

While girl and boy establish "the old contact" with the chaos of desire, inside the hall the older people are becoming reacquainted with their own animal spirits through their imitation of birds in the square dance.

The dance itself provides the occasion for the suspension and inversion of social hierarchy. The structuring distance normally maintained between men and women is suspended during dance ("The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction" 79). In the "Ladies' choice," however, the male/female hierarchy is actually inverted. "Famed as a hella with women" (4), Johnnie becomes the object of desire for a mob of aggressive, lustful women. Their seemingly harmless requests for a dance quickly turn violent, as they threaten to tear Johnnie apart (following the tradition of the Orpheus story) as their sacrificial victim:

They were screaming now; maybe sixty women were pushing, waving to get my attention, calling, trying to get past the women in front. The women in front were hesitating, somewhat embarrassed, but the women behind them were pushing and pulling at each other, getting red-faced and rowdy. . . . And all of a sudden twenty women were grabbing at me, not too careful where or how they took hold. I had a terrible impulse, an embarrassing impulse, to cup one hand over that part of my anatomy which I least wanted to see mutilated (133).

The women escape their socially-defined passivity to express their secret desires and to establish a "new mode of interrelationship" (Dostoevsky 123) with men. The struggle between the consuming body and the consuming world is once again paramount, all-consuming one might say, as a veritable "avalanche" (131) of women threatens to engulf Johnnie and he becomes, in his own words, a "drowning man" (134).

3. WOMEN ON TOP IN WHAT THE CROW SAID

Kroetsch's What the Crow Said, a postmodern funhouse, confronts the reader not merely with carnival moments but with a completely topsy-turvy world. In the town of Big Indian carnival eccentricity is the norm: Liebhaber, the printer, remembers the future; Father Basil, the priest, who speaks, typically, to an empty church, is a free-thinker whose one orthodox sermon stands out as an anomaly in his career; the weather repeatedly fluctuates from one apocalyptic extreme to another; and a black crow speaks as the prophetic voice of degradation. Socio-hierarchical structure--understandably unstable in such a chaotic town--is consistently undermined and inverted. The overturning is particularly notable in male/female hierarchies. While the text resists and frustrates strict binary readings, at the same time it seems to invite the interpretation of gender differences as they follow a sky/earth hierarchy. The men's consistent desire to enter the sky signifies their need to control their own destiny through the domination of woman, body and earth, to possess a higher vision or unitary truth, and to attain immortality as creators or gods. Below the sky lies the earth, with which the women are closely linked through their work in the garden. The earth is the zone of gossip and the illogical, mutability and mortality, and (though the men to their detriment deny it) renewed life and fertility. The carnivalesque inversion of the male/female hierarchy, as we will see, lowers man from his sky-oriented position as self-proclaimed founder of order and creator of life, and it establishes woman--with her link

to the generative body and earth--as a more creative life force. Kroetsch's text, then, participates in intertextual dialogue with the large "imaginative revolution" (15) which Northrop Frye has discerned in its turn away from the patriarchal myths of sky gods towards mother-centered myths, a literary and cultural movement which Frye claims in A Study of English Romanticism began with the advent of Romanticism and is still very much alive in modern times.

The town's ice-cutter, John Skandl, exemplifies a male disposition to assert the phallus as the sole source of order and life. Faced with the prospect of endless and to his mind chaotic winter, he conceives of the need for a "simple marker on the endless reach of endless snow" (34) as a means of restoring order to the community. In the process of construction, however, this "simple marker" becomes a phallic symbol of male power, a lighthouse made of ice, which Skandl erects "in the middle of the river, in the middle of the town" (46). The men's sexual desire compels them to seek a position of dominance in the sky, for they build the lighthouse higher and higher in an effort "to get to heaven" (50). Skandl, envisioning himself as the "giver of light" (49), would crown himself ruling sky god. In his view the universe would revolve around his phallus as life source, just as it now revolves around the sun. Though the men rally around the lighthouse as a symbol of sexual potency and life, its actual attributes--it is cold, inanimate, static, and temporary--associate it more with impotency and death. It is, as the women tell each other, "a kind of tomb or monument" (47) to the men's narcissistic desire.

That the men cannot succeed in imposing this oppressive order is evident throughout the novel. Vera Lang, appropriately present when the lighthouse, failing phallus, later falls, threatens male virility and patriarchal order at the very outset of the novel when she is seduced by the swarming bees. On the threshold of womanhood, lying naked in an April field, she engages in a startling sexual "mesalliance" with the sky's bees. In this parodic inversion of the sky god Zeus' rape of Danae while he is disguised as a golden shower, Vera is hardly a passive victim. The bees arouse her and her desire transforms her. This story stands in opposition to the patriarchal myths in which the male sky god (noticeably absent here) is the shape-shifter:

Vera . . . lifted her body against the pressing bees. Her not daring to resist became the excuse, the cause of her slow yielding. . . . Vera herself swarmed into a new being. . . . the whole nectar of her world-old virgin body poured into their instinct to begin again. (10, 12)

Vera's unhides women's sexuality by crying out in orgasmic ecstasy, a cry which flows from the heights of joy to the depths of despair. The men, listening a mile away in town, all realize instantly that no "mortal man would ever satisfy her" (13). She will remain unsatisfied because, though her body is mortal, her desire (with its link to the sky's bees) is not. Although the builders of Skandl's lighthouse lay claim to the permanence (and therefore immortality) of man's erection, it proves very mortal and flaccid when compared to "woman's bowels [which] are inexhaustible" and in the story Bakhtin tells, at least,

"never satisfied" (Rabelais 242). The Cree Joe Lightning reveals men's fear of women's inexhaustible sexual capacity in this comment to the schmeir players: "Without booze, the women aren't getting laid. . . . Their men can't screw when they're sober" (118-119). Kroetsch inverts the notion that men are sometimes "too drunk to fuck" in order both to underline male anxiety and to put into question male potency. Similarly, in the midst of satisfying a long-sustained passion for Tiddy in a "mail-order bed" (212), Liebhaber "felt a fleeting sympathy for Martin Lang [Tiddy's first husband]; he suspected, briefly, why Martin spent so much time in the Big Indian beer parlour" (212). Liebhaber begins to feel a new "weight . . . [or] burden on his shoulders" (17), for he must from this time forward diligently try to satisfy Tiddy's every "return of desire" (214). The bed is the site, therefore, not of man's sexual domination of woman but of the subversion of male order. The men's fear of women's awakened and often aggressive sexuality seems to confirm Erica Jong's insight in Fear of Flying that the flaccid penis is definitive in structuring male/female relations. Frequently denouncing men as "a bunch of useless bastards" (14), Vera escapes male domination and, in her service as Great Mother to the queen-oriented bees, represents a possible matriarchal society.

Vera's transgressive sexuality enables her to unite with nature, to celebrate the female body and the earth as sources of life. Though the narrator consistently undermines the town people's suggestions that Vera's seduction is the cause of their misfortune, in a way she is the origin of everything. The whole story can be seen as

generating out of, and later returning to, her womb. It is clear that her generative capacity links her to the fertile earth, for she is "the world's vulva and fulfillment in one" (199). In her sexual "mesalliance" with the bees, her open body merges with the newly awakened earth to become cosmic:

Her nipples swelling and throbbing to the kiss of wing and leg, her belly tightening to the push and rub of her myriad unthinking lovers. She was enveloped. Her eyelids wore each a bee. Her armpits opened to the nuzzling bees. They found the spaces between her fingers, between her toes. Her body was not hers now, it moved with the surge of the grass in the wind, a field of green oats, a flowering of clover. Her moving crushed the blue-purple petals of the crocus bed, broke the hairy stalks, the blossoms, into the dizzying sweetness of her own desire. The hum of wings melded earth and sky into the thickness of her skin. (10-11)

Unlike Skandl's suggested division of earth and sky as the "giver of light" (49), Vera's surrender to the cosmos (which dissolves her sense of self) leads to the union of sky and earth in her body. Her body unites opposites in a way that seems to suggest a transcendent return to a moment prior to creation, prior to the separation of opposites from the cosmic whole.

As the incarnation of the "lower stratum," woman is also an instrument of degradation, the lowering of the high, ideal, and abstract to the level of body and earth. Theresa, for example, lowers the men's fear of the immaterial and supernatural to the level of her

fertile body through her sexual encounter with the ghost of her grandfather, Martin Lang. Similarly, she degrades the sky-ward aspirations of a hailstone-chasing seminarian, Darryl Dish, bringing him down to the passion of her body. Kroetsch's depiction of woman as a "degrading" force bears a remarkable resemblance to Bakhtin's brief discussion in Rabelais and His World of woman in the "Gallic" popular comic tradition:

The popular tradition is in no way hostile to woman and does not approach her negatively. In this tradition woman is essentially related to the material bodily lower stratum; she is the incarnation of this stratum that degrades and regenerates simultaneously. She is ambivalent. She debases, brings down to earth, lends a bodily substance to things, and destroys; but, first of all, she is the principle that gives birth. She is the womb. (240)

Kroetsch's women are similarly ambivalent; they are the incarnation of a world that both consumes and brings forth life. The generative quality of Vera's acts of degradation can be seen even when, while sailing down the river and past the town on a floating granary, she confronts the people with a gesture signifying her fertility and abundance: "Obscenely, Vera Lang gestured. She raised up her full breasts, like skeps, like two perfect beehives, to the startled onlookers" (198). Yet she is also the embodiment of death, as she lowers men from their dominant position in the sky and puts them into the earth and body. A black widow figure, she marries three men--all of whom commit suicide soon after the wedding night. Her

first husband, Ebbie Else (Else suggesting his role as other, as somebody or something "else"), is an AGT worker who buries cables for a living. Else frequently confesses in the Big Indian beer parlour, "I'm so horny I could fuck a McCormick reaper" (167). This aggressive stance changes dramatically, however, when he actually fucks one: "Else was completely changed. He listened as if every rustle of a leaf, every drip of a tap, contained a message. He was nervous, uneasy, timid" (167). The experience transforms Else into a more "feminine," sensitive person who acknowledges nature as symbol rather than mere object; it forces him to acknowledge something greater than himself. Initiated into the mysteries of womb and earth, and unable to embrace either because of the restrictive code which demands that he be in control, Else kills himself by charging a bull (ironically, the symbol of male sexual power). He, like the other men, is fatally "imprisoned on the sky" (180) in the sense that he cannot embrace the life force below.

The repeated references to Vera and her bees as the cause of the town's misfortune, and the outrageous suggestion during the plague of salamanders that Old Lady Lang looks "vaguely like a lizard" (150), unhide women's roles as scapegoats. Yet, Vera inverts the stereotype of woman as passive victim, sacrificing the men to increase the fertility of her own body and of the earth. Fearing for her life at one point, and apparently devoid of any maternal instinct, she heartlessly throws her son to the wolves. It is in her bizarre elegies to her dead husbands, however, that the men most fully appear as ambivalent carnival sacrifices. Keeping in mind that carnival

praise borders on abuse, we might consider Vera's words about Ebbie Else:

When she praised her dead husband--and she did so almost generously at times--she praised the bones of his body. She spoke, softly, erotically, of the full shape of his cranium, under the tangle of dusty hair. She admired the sharp, almost obscene beauty of his hip bones, the symmetry of his ribs, under the delicate skin. Then other suitors, the failed ones, attracted by news of the tragedy, remembered her gentle, firm hands and how she would caress the bones of a wrist, the line of a collarbone; how she would lift the knuckles of a thumb to her mouth and tongue. And none of them returned to the farm, not one. (169)

This "'sacrificial' dismemberment" (Dostoevsky 162) reduces the male body to a series of erotic parts, and thus parodies the similar and more common male reduction of the female body. Although Vera previously goes through a period in which she closes her body to the world and represses her desire, the death cry of Joe Lightning and the sacrifices of her husbands arouse her, once again, to celestial heights of sexual passion.

The men want to fix the women in stereotypical roles, to keep them under, to stop them from moving. Marriage is one way in which the men attempt to dominate the women as sexual objects. It defines the woman in relation to the man--Cathy and Joe are "man and wife" (107)--and encourages society to think of the woman as a possession by assigning her his name. Vera, however, refuses to conform to the

specified role as other or object of desire. Like Rita, who writes erotic letters to prisoners but refuses to read their replies, Vera acquires a desire of her own (and therefore a subjectivity of her own) and relegates men to the position of other or object of desire. The men, as the reaction of her potential suitors indicates, are clearly not comfortable with this new arrangement. Women, as subjects of their own desire, can "uninvent" the male symbolic order to create themselves and their world anew. This is exactly what Gladys does, for example, at the end of the novel. As if taking inventory to test the changing world in its relation to the body--a joyous inventory which Bakhtin claims Rabelais performs "at the end of the old and the beginning of the new world history" (Rabelais 376)--Gladys "rubs the warm egg between her legs" (217). Kroetsch seems to resolve the chicken-egg riddle of creation by valorizing the egg, which he consistently associates with the fertility of the women, as the ultimate source of life.

It is during the schmeir game, in particular, that the women undermine the men's attempts to control their sexuality. When the men are all at the game, the women refuse to wait passively for their return, choosing instead to seek out sexual companions in the few men who are also marginalized. Like the albino, with whom women say sex doesn't count, is one such companion: "which sweethearts and wives of the schmeir players found their way down his lit steps, no one ever knew" (99). Women's sexual transgression of male authority through cuckoldry is further advanced when Joe Lightning informs the players that, since their wives are suffering neglect, the Indians are

entertaining the "horny women" (119) of Big Indian: "the women aren't getting laid. They're up at the reserve half the time, pretending to buy fenceposts or blueberries" (118-119). Inexhaustible female sexuality, according to what Bakhtin says in an illuminating parallel, plays an equally subversive role in the "Gallic tradition":

[Cuckoldry] is the uncrowning of the old husband and a new act of procreation with the young husband. In this system of images the cuckolded husband assumes the role of uncrowned old age, of the old year, and the receding winter. He is stripped of his robes, mocked, and beaten. (Rabelais 241)

Though in What the Crow Said women are also generally associated with spring and a new age and men with winter and an old age, the women's cuckoldry unhinges the very conception of time itself. Almost every marriage in Big Indian occurs only after the woman becomes pregnant by 'another' man (or bee, or ghost, etc.). The backwards order of these events means that these men all acquire horns the instant they take their wedding vows.

This widespread cuckoldry undercuts the predominantly male disposition to stave off death and achieve immortality through the production of heirs. Even Gus Liebhaber--who marvelously cuckolds Tiddy's recently deceased husband, Martin Lang, and (given the reverse order of events in the novel) her present lover and future husband, John Skandl, in one brief but passionate liaison with Tiddy near the start of the novel--finds both his physical and his symbolic link to his child put into question. Tiddy becomes pregnant after sleeping

with Skandl and Liebhaber, so she names the child John Gustav after both men. The father's ritual assigning of his name to his child, an act intended to efface the mother's role in creation and "to call a halt to uncertainty about the identity of the father" (Sarup 19), clearly fails miserably in this case. Similarly, the men's attempt to possess the womb by assigning their last names to their wives also fails. Woman's name, and hence her identity, is as fluid and uncontrollable as her sexuality for, after the death of Martin Lang and the disrupted marriage and prolonged absence of Skandl, Tiddy's last name becomes uncertain.

The men feel a need to control transgressive female sexuality, because it threaten's the men's perceptions of themselves as creators and rulers. Liebhaber, significantly "stranded between the sky and the earth" (26) at one point in the novel, in his sky-mode passionately pursues control over women's procreativity. He not only replaces Martin Lang in Tiddy's bed but also adopts the latter's role as father. Hitting "on the notion that he might evade death by telling the truth" (67), Liebhaber seeks to enforce his truth as "patriarch" (73) of the community. Armed only with the identification of truth and reason with man and the phallus, he tries to impose that vision on Tiddy's six daughters. When Tiddy needs a hired man to help out on the farm, Liebhaber, concerned about the vulnerability of the women, hires Mick O'Holleran, a war veteran missing his right leg and private parts. Yet this calculated act fails fantastically as Mick still somehow manages to get Rose pregnant, confessing comically afterwards that sometimes "he not only felt the presence of his

missing leg and private parts, but could actually use them" (67). Similarly, Liebhaber becomes a hockey referee in order to mete out justice and truth, to order the world's chaos as the "civilizing man" (72). Calling the "first night game" (72) in Big Indian, he resolves a huge fight involving players and fans by turning out the lights. Like Skandl, then, Liebhaber would control light or reason, he would be God. It is only appropriate, therefore, that, when Tiddy later informs Liebhaber that during the moment of darkness everybody got Gladys pregnant, he falls (from sky and reason) to the earth. These magical pregnancies associate the women with the illogical trickster who subverts rational order. The female body remains extremely fertile despite the death, plagues, and war which afflict the community, and its parthenogenetic quality, once again, diminishes male privilege in procreation.

Liebhaber, obviously not one to give up easily, attempts simultaneously to control procreativity and usurp the role of creator through his temporary obsession with cattle breeding. As Tiddy continually defers the ultimate consummation of his desire, he sublimates it into his pseudo-scientific study of cattle production:

He'd figured out a way to make Tiddy rich and independent by developing a new breed of cattle. He'd set stories about the need for a dairy cow suited to the rigors of the northern climate; Tiddy was persuaded by his arguments and statistics to name the breed in his honor, Liebhaber. That was all he expected in return. . . . Liebhaber began to conduct experiments in artificial insemination in order to

speed up the genetic process. He invented gadgets for the collection and dissemination of the semen of widely scattered bulls. (69-70)

Liebhaber's vision of himself as creator/scientist is, to return to Frye's argument in A Study of English Romanticism, a product of the historical shift away from the mythology of the mother as creator towards the male sky god as "divine artisan" (Frye 6). Indeed, Liebhaber's desire to be at the origin of creation as "artisan" is evident in his building a boat or ark which would replace the woman's body as "the container of all life" (Frye 8). He fails to recognize that Vera is the ultimate receptacle of life, as the bodily hive of the bees and as the "seedhouse" (199) of male fulfillment. In his desire to give birth to the world, Liebhaber--significantly associated with 'female' cows while the other men are associated with 'male' horses--exhibits unmistakable womb envy.

Like Skandl with his lighthouse, Liebhaber intends to win Tiddy over with his creation, a creation which will reflect his mastery and sexual potency. Yet while Tiddy's decision to name the original breed after him is an acknowledgement of paternity which he didn't receive in the conception of J.G., it is a dubious honor at best. The inability of his pseudo-scientific "arguments and statistics" (70) to control the mystery of birth becomes evident years later when he discovers that he has "perfected the three-titted cow" (70). Liebhaber's monstrous offsprings--the three-titted cows and the silent J.G., who can only express himself by shitting his pants--underline, at least at this point, his failure and impotence as creator. As we

will later see, he must embrace mother, body and earth as originary life forces before he can triumph over death. In any event, the attempt of scientists to control birth distances modern man from the fertile life source, from the natural rhythms of the life/death cycle; if successful, it would only result in death and sterility.

Kroetsch's The Studhorse Man raises similar concerns, as it ends not with the perfection of the Lepage stallion but with the stallions' indiscriminate impregnation of mares for the sterile purpose of extracting their urine in the later months of pregnancy to produce birth-control pills. Life and death are still linked in such images, but death threatens to emerge victorious.

Christianity's repression of the body and denial of the corporeal world in What the Crow Said is, surprisingly enough, in league with science's attempt to order and control the world. Science and Christianity are linked in the figure of Father Basil. A fool crowned priest, he gives quasi-scientific sermons which suggest, for example, that the calamities afflicting the town are a direct consequence of the world's inability to turn on its axis. Christianity also reflects Liebhaver's aspiration to be creator/scientist in its worship of a male sky god. Though Skandl's lighthouse does degrade the church--it is "twice as tall as the church steeple" (51), and thus in effect lowers it to the very body which it has repressed--this only serves to highlight Christianity's complicity in patriarchal authority. The church, promoting a more respectable version of phallic worship, also asserts control, as if threatened by woman's creative capacity in giving birth. Father Basil encourages Tiddy to mourn the men's

deaths: "He hit on the notion that mourning was a legitimate form of birth control: the only way to keep men from dying was to keep them from being born" (142). Yet, like Liebhaber's acts of control, the priest's produce a result completely opposite to what he intended. Far from conquering death, both men deny the women's capacity to defeat death through the miracle of childbirth, and thus tear themselves away from the rhythms of the life and death cycle. The frozen wine in the chalice symbolizes the sterility and stasis of the Christian ritual, a ritual that, because of its denial of the life-affirming body and earth, offers little hope for renewal. It is not surprising, then, that by the end of the novel Father Basil proves no more successful than Liebhaber, as Tiddy finally discontinues her mourning. She rediscovers the rejuvenating bodily pleasures, indulgence in which on the Lang farm seems inevitably to result in birth, and resolves "to live for the moment" (203) in an affair with Liebhaber. The rhythm of their bodies in sexual union reaffirms their ties to the natural rhythms of the world.

In What the Crow Said technology becomes an equally perverse and destructive version of religion: instead of praying to God, the people at one point pray to Jerry Lapanne's "invisible machine in the sky" (196). The sky-oriented men use modern technology to control the fertile earth, hoping to defeat death. Just as they attempt to dominate the women, so do they try to rape the earth: "Seeding followed hard on tilling and harrowing" (62). Farming and sex for the men are mechanistic actions devoid of passion and love. We find confirmation for this in references to the train's "coming" and Nick

Droniuk's accidental insertion of his penis into the artificial insemination machine. These are monologic acts of domination which "purely mechanistic relationships" (Dostoevsky 40) beget.

Yet nature, like woman, resists domination and eventually conquers man. The simultaneous crowning and decrowning of the carnival king (here symbolizing the upending of an oppressive and outdated male order) emerges in Nick Droniuk's death. Aspiring to crown himself as the world's conquerer, he himself is conquered and decrowned by the consuming world:

Nick Droniuk had won a prize as the best farmer in the district; he aspired to become wheat champion of the world.

He fell into his threshing machine while raging at the sky because the huge field of wheat proved to be all straw without grain. His testicles were blown into the granary, the rest of his body into the strawpile. (40)

The mechanistic penis is torn from its sacred status. Although the men wish to rule the earth as sky gods through the use of technology and machinery, this grandiose desire and misplaced faith contributes to a number of other grotesque deaths: O'Holleran chokes to death on an oil derrick, Martin Lang freezes to death on a snow plow, and Skandl crashes in a plane. They are unwitting victims of their own technology. The women need not actively overthrow them, evidently, for the men decrown themselves.

The men continually flee from the women, whose domesticity they associate with stasis and death, to establish exclusively male societies and male versions of house (the lighthouse, and Heck's

tarpaper shack), but in doing so distance themselves from the very sources of life. Their separation from and attempted domination of woman and earth results in the unequivocally negative degradation of their bodies. The male grotesque body appears again and again as deformed, unfinished, and incomplete: Leo Weller has the "imprint of a horseshoe . . . stamped on his forehead" (58), Bill Morgan is missing an eye, Skandl's corpse has its ears chewed off by animals, and Droniuk is castrated and killed. In contrast to Johnnie Backstrom's grotesque but intact body, which in dying affirms life, the male body here--frequently cut off from the life-affirming acts of eating, loving, and birthing--is only dying. Furthermore, the openness of the men's bodies, rather than uniting them to the life and death cycle of the cosmos (as it does for Vera), merges them with the inanimate world. Such is the case with Andy Wolbeck, whose artificial toes are comprised of billiard balls, or Marvin Straw who, after burning himself on the furnace in the Church of the Final Virgin, suffers "in mortal pain, the blisters on his burned ass breaking, the dried puss glueing his spent body to the beer parlour chair" (114). In short, the men's mechanistic relationship to the world precludes renewal of any kind.

At the start of the novel, the men's reluctance to depend upon capricious mother earth for their livelihood leads them to harvest ice--instead of eggs, cream, and crops--as "the mainstay of the community" (49). In doing so they lose touch with the reviving earth and unrestrainedly curse the world. The women, whose praise of the world would complement and temper the mens' abuse, are ignored and

kept silent. While the men attempt to freeze time and harvest death itself for a profit, the women, continually performing ritualistic acts, accept change and thus in a sense escape time.

With the onset of the schmeir game, the men completely sever all ties to the sources of life. Unable to solidify their hierarchical position as founders of order and creators of life in the presence of the women's illogical pregnancies, the schmeir players seek to affirm their identity through sceptical negation of the physical world. Isador Heck, the game's unacknowledged leader, is the main proponent of a universal scepticism that eventually overtakes the whole community. Heck's scepticism is so far-reaching that it extends to the actual input of the senses, as he reasons ludicrously "that if anything did in fact exist there was no reason to believe it was visible" (77). The degradation of the body, then, is also partly the consequence of the men's repression of bodily sensation in favour of the intellect. Denying the power of body and earth, the men are quite literally consumed by shit. Since Droniuk is castrated and killed in trying to conquer the world, it appears that denial of the world is not much safer.

It is the men's narcissistic desire which inhibits them from maintaining dialogic relations with nature and women. Liebhaber's pocket pool and Skandl's wetting himself with urine exemplify the self-enclosed life which men must relinquish if they are going to embrace earth and woman. The men want to bear their own seed, to create themselves, but this self-love only produces death: during the game, the men appear "seedy" (91), leave Tiddy's house in the wagon

Martin Lang used "for hauling grain" (96), and ultimately end up stored in Skandl's granary. The women, on the other hand, are not obsessed with dominating otherness. Tiddy exemplifies women's acceptance of the world: "Tiddy accepted his [J.G.'s] existence as she accepted the stinkweeds, the grasshoppers, the green grass in the spring, the sun" (69).

The play in Kroetsch's text between the central and the marginal, which seems to undermine the very possibility of locating a center, articulates an inversion of hierarchy which culminates in the schmeir game. The women, no longer merely in charge of just the household, now turn to "running the world better than had the men" (80). The men, removed from their position of power, and in trouble with the authorities for their excessive drinking and gambling, hilariously set up camp on the margins of the town:

They'd suffered frost bite, in the earlier days of the winter, one of the coldest on record; the feet of some of the men smelled of rotting skin and gangrene. They'd tried cooking an old set of harness and the smell of boiled leather and sweat mingled with that of dead flesh and dirty socks. Earlier, they'd cooked dogs and cats; then, when the people of the town began to protect their pets, they'd taken to breaking into muskrat houses, to cutting snares for disease-weakened rabbits. They knew now where to find garbage cans before the garbage was picked up on a cold morning, how to dig through the nuisance grounds, how to steal firewood from a woodpile . . . (126)

This simultaneous crowning of women and decrowning of men intimates "the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all (hierarchical) position" (Dostoevsky 124).

The ambivalent life-through-death pattern played out in carnival is evident in those moments when the dying men come into contact with the life-affirming women. Tiddy, convincing the players to quit playing schmeir and return to the farm, literally brings them back to life:

The table was set. . . . Tiddy's daughters . . . had sliced long strips off a slab of smoked bacon. They were frying eggs and pancakes. . . . Old Lady Lang was pouring coffee from the huge pot that was used during threshing time. She poured the rich, steaming coffee into cups set in a row beside the cream pitcher; the aroma seemed to lift the frost from the frozen cheeks of the gasping and puffing men. (128)

The women are providers of the earth's bounty, the men's link to the generative earth.

Contact with women's bodies is also a source of renewal and rejuvenation. Liebhaber experiences first-hand woman's capacity as sexual healer. After rescuing him from a winter storm, Tiddy nurses his grotesque, dying body back to life:

He lay . . . in Martin Lang's own bed, his ears wearing huge blisters, his face peeling down to flesh, the skin raised clear of his feet by pockets of water, his lungs seared, his fever raging, his body lost in its own swelling. . . . He was incontinent: he pissed the bed every few hours, shit

himself once or twice a day. . . . Tiddy took to putting
 diapers on the man. She rubbed his frost-burned skin with
 baby oil, dusted his behind with baby powder. Some nights
 she slept in the same bed. . . . Liebhaber, in love,
 remembered his sore hands healing onto Tiddy's body,
 remembered finding the full of her breasts to warm his cold
 mouth, the softness of her thighs to ease the itch of his
 frost-blackened skin. (37,39)

Liebhaber, here uniting the opposites of death and life within
 himself, is, as is typical of the grotesque body, "on the threshold of
 the grave and the crib" (Rabelais 26).

The inversion of the male/female hierarchy signifies the male
 need to embrace woman, and, through contact with her as provider of
 the earth's bounty and sexual healer, earth and body as the ultimate
 sources of renewal. Confirmation of this notion comes from a rather
 unlikely source, V.V Ivanov's discussion in "The Semiotic Theory of
 Carnival as the Inversion of Bipolar Opposites." Regarding the
 inversion of the male/female binary in southern and central Bantu
 tribes, Ivanov reports:

The welfare of the tribe is restored by addressing those who
 are normally thought of as beneath the battle for jural and
 political status. But beneath has two senses: it is not
 only that which is structurally inferior; it is also the
 common basis of all social life--the earth and its fruits.

(12)

Ivanov's understanding of carnival inversion as a means of releasing

pent-up tension and eventually "restoring" order would, however, most assuredly find an opponent in Kroetsch, who seems to invoke carnival as an almost anarchic force of perpetual revolution.

Liebhaber momentarily restores the welfare of the community through his quixotic embrace of woman, body, and earth. He defeats death for a moment and finally fulfills his desire to be creator in the war against the sky. The men engage in an utterly destructive conflict with the natural sky as the external projection of everything which they feel controls them. Although earth and sky are indissolubly linked in the Kroetschean cosmos, the war symbolizes the men's fatal tendency to separate them, just as they separate body and mind, men and women. Liebhaber, an androgynous figure who mediates between the men and women and at one point is, rather appropriately, "stranded between earth and sky" (26), adds an entirely new dimension to the war when he unexpectedly enters it. Just as his playing to lose in the schmeir game changes the direction of the game away from death towards the affirmation of life (they save Jerry Lapanne from his date with the hangman), so does Liebhaber's firing the cannon full of bees into the sky--in the face of war, plagues, and general chaos--celebrate the triumph of life evolving out of death. In the process of "uninventing" his rational mind and recreating himself through embracing bodily pleasure, Liebhaber fires the cannon as a symbolic gesture affirming the fertility of his body:

He fumbled into the cannon another charge of bees. . . .

Liebhaber, that night, was set on gaining a victory over death itself, there in the manure in Heck's yard. . . .

[He], in the sweat of his need, stooping and rising,
stooping and rising, would fertilize the barren sky. (182)
While the other men try to "figure out how to stop the turning wheel"
(178) of time, Liebhaber embraces it, perhaps even accelerates it, as
he returns Vera's bees to the sky. He no longer seeks to control and
create as sky god, but acknowledges the creative power of body, mother
and earth.

A similar inversion, also intent on unveiling an oppressed
people's positive relation to the cosmos, occurs in the White/Indian
binary. Joe Lightning, the Cree, represents the trace of mankind's
past harmonious relationship with the world. His name, Lightning,
underlines his cosmic role as intermediary between earth and sky and,
other than Liebhaber, he is oddly the only man not at war with the
sky. Unlike the white men who try to dominate and control the world,
Joe believes in the "union of the elements" (156). This preference
also extends to his relationships with women. He establishes close
relations not only with Cathy, whom he marries in a "mesalliance" that
shocks the schmeir players, but also with Tiddy, who confides only to
him that J.G. sang in her womb. His job cutting down fenceposts
succinctly symbolizes his attitude towards people and nature: he
opposes both the erection of social barriers and the white man's
enclosure of the once-open prairies. Furthermore, it also represents
his repudiation of the phallic order, marking him, like Liebhaber, as
an androgynous character.

Despite the fact that Joe is a marginalized figure (he lives
either in town in a car body or on the reserve), he is the

carnavalesque king of the upside-down world of sports: people idolize him as "the shuffleboard champion of the Great Plains" (159). Although his ascent into the sky is, as with the white men, motivated (at least in part) by Icarian pride and leads to a subsequent decrowning and fall, Joe's flight, nevertheless, is somewhat unique. Aware that everyone is slowly dying because of the dust storm, Joe wishes to learn the sky's secret to save them: "Everyone was slowly dying by the hour. It was that calamity that drove Joe Lightning into his resolve to act" (156). Joe plans to trap an eagle to communicate with it, but his plan backfires when, in a scene reminiscent of Chaucer's The House of Fame, the eagle carries him high over the town: "He was surprised at how small the town looked, the once immense town where he'd been ignored, insulted; perhaps that recognition occasioned his first laugh" (157). Just as Vera escapes from the oppressive gender-based hierarchy through her sexual encounter with the bees and her orgasmic cry, so Joe momentarily escapes the racial hierarchical structure through his vision and laughter. Joe's carnival laughter is directed towards what in concert with Bakhtin we might call a "shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders" (Dostoevsky 127). Like Vera's cry, Joe's carnival laughter in the face of death is transcendent in its union of opposites; it contains both death (negation) and the promise of rebirth (affirmation), the sacred and the profane:

The laughter of his falling was heard over most of the district. It was more a laugh than anything like a cry of terror. . . . It was a simple laugh of pleasure and yet it

was a kind of scream too, a scream of release. Joe, in his mile-high fall, with his arms spread like wings, his torn hands bleeding--perhaps, after all, he did learn something of the eagle's secret. . . . Some people, years later, believed they heard from the sky a version of prayer, a kind of holy laugh. Others, when insanely drunk, or on their death beds, admitted to hearing a laugh of such obscenity they'd refused, for a whole lifetime, to acknowledge it.

(158-160)

Christ-like with his vision of peace, outstretched arms, and bleeding hands, Joe falls into the ladies' outhouse pit. Though he is still alive, the hypocritical churchgoers nearby, not wanting to dirty their sunday clothes, refuse to help him. Joe's degradation symbolizes the white man's humiliation and rejection of the Indians. Whereas the women represent the cosmic fertility of earth and body, Joe epitomizes the higher vision and communal spirit of the Indians. Tragically, the last vestiges of the Indian's mythological vision of the world as whole and unfragmented die with Joe.

The white man's dream of himself as creator leads him destructively to deny his own origins. Just as he refuses to accept woman's creative role in childbirth, so does he ignore the Indians' rights as Canada's first inhabitants. Though the town is ironically named Big Indian, all the Indians (except Joe) are banished to the reserve, the margin. Kroetsch's undermining of fixed stereotypes (Indian as drinker, gambler, and law-breaker) and condemning of oppressive laws occurs, as in his case for the women, through the

inversion of hierarchy. The dissolution of social and moral order subsequent to the player's horrifying discovery of Martin Lang's corpse, a discovery which causes every white male to be "hell-bent on getting blind drunk" (113), reverses the roles of the white men and the indians:

every white male over the age of twenty in the Municipal District of Bigknife had been put on the Indian list; not one of them could, legally, be served an alcoholic beverage. . . . [Conversely], the indian males over twenty were now the only people . . . who were allowed to purchase alcoholic beverages. (114-115, 119)

This decrowning of white males frees Indians from debilitating stereotypes. Like the women, these marginalized people maintain contact with the cosmos, a contact which must be renewed if anyone is to triumph over death.

4. THE GROWTH OF A POET IN SEED CATALOGUE

Although Bakhtin focuses on carnivalistic folklore in the evolution of the novel, one of carnival's essential characteristics is its transgressive energy that crosses all borders--including borders separating genres. In Kroetsch's long poem Seed Catalogue (if it can be called a poem, with its mixing of prose and poetry) the energy of carnival transforms the world as thoroughly as it does in his novels The Words of My Roaring and What the Crow Said. Kroetsch most fully acknowledges, and thereby attempts to recover and revitalize, his own artistic origins in that poem. As in his other fiction and criticism, he there links procreativity with the act of writing. Those elements which elsewhere he upholds as the sources of life and renewal--particularly woman, body and earth, as we have seen in What the Crow Said--he not surprisingly in Seed Catalogue lauds as the origins of his own poetic creativity. In the poem, then, Kroetsch pays homage to these seeds which give his poetry life, while simultaneously uprooting the weeds (namely, orthodox Christianity, male order, and false history), weeds which would, if allowed to flourish, inhibit his creative growth. However, Kroetsch's desperate longing sexually to embrace his poetic origins ultimately goes unfulfilled, and inversions of creation become necessary and more appropriate metaphors for the poetic act.

Sexual desire is the primary subversive force in Kroetsch's carnival, and in Seed Catalogue it undermines the repressive dictates of Christianity. Kroetsch's narrator, recalling his first initiation

into the carnal pleasures, highlights the priest's terrifying admonition in catechism against wayward sexuality:

This is the God's own truth:
 playing dirty is a mortal sin
 the priest told us, you'll go to hell
 and burn forever (with illustrations)

The priest, instilling fear and guilt into the teenagers, also ensures that they are separated by gender in church: "the boys had to sit in pews on the right, the girls on the left." Young Kroetsch and Germaine, however, repeatedly defy the priest to explore each other's bodies. Their sexual play in a granary, scene of seeds and seeding, suspends the distance usually maintained between boys and girls in the church, permitting them to establish forbidden contact. The granary, like Skandl's lighthouse of ice, can be seen as the official church turned upside-down, for it replaces a negation of the body with an affirmation. Yet, unlike the lighthouse, the granary symbolizes the body's fertility as it is "full of wheat." The children's sexual play further conveys this sense of the granary as a topsy-turvy world: Germaine wears her clothes in reverse, "her dress up and her bloomers down;" and they use binder twine in an unusual manner, not to bind (as Christianity does) but to free, since the sacks serve as liberating bedsheets.

The persona's repeated and irreverent claim to "the God's own truth" mocks the priest's pretension to know the single will of what he considers to be the only God. Though the priest disguises his monologic truth in a question and answer format, catechism, it is a

false dialogue which, as Bakhtin says of the diminished Socratic dialogue, only asks questions to elicit predetermined, monologic answers. In other words, the Christian dialogue, rather than being a free exchange of ideas which could lead to the discovery of new "truths," concerns itself only with dispensing a fixed, uncompromising ideology. The dialogic structure of Seed Catalogue challenges such accepted truths. Constructed as a series of questions with unresolved and multiple answers, it presents a fragmented vision which frees the reader to create meaning.

The repetition of "God's own truth" also functions as an anaphora or repeated beginning, which in a way belies the single, sinful origin of mankind which Christianity traces back to Adam and Eve. The priest, while tormenting the children with threats of hell, warns them that "Adam and Eve got caught playing dirty" and were banished from Eden. The primal couple's act of rebellion--through which they transgress God's law in their refusal to subordinate desire to reason, and woman to man--is, without question, the first and ultimate carnivalistic act. Though the priest decries this transgression as sinful and deathly, it is, in fact, the very act from which all life was generated. The teenagers, in replicating Adam and Eve's sin, not just once but several times, refuse a paralysis between the guilt of original sin and the fear of hell. They collapse the ultimate beginning and ending in the Christian conception of time into the present moment of becoming, as they frequently decide to "do it just one last time and quit." The death of Adam and Eve at the end of section three symbolizes the lover's (and, implicitly, the poet's)

liberation from centuries of inherited guilt: "Adam and Eve and Pinch-Me/Went down to the river to swim--/Adam and Eve got drowned." The future poet's baptismal rebirth in water, a carnival symbol of change and becoming, marks his passage from fixed Christian truth into a world of moral uncertainty and ambivalence. Freed from stories of Adam and Eve's sin, he can now embrace his own multiple, personal origins through his sexual play with the appropriately named Germaine. The word Germane means of the same parents and of Germanic descent, and thus marks his desire as a force through which he comes into contact with his personal (his incestual desire will be discussed later) and ancestral origins.

The children's fall from grace is not the consequence of their sexual curiosity; rather, at least from Kroetsch's point of view, it is the priest's negating words which cause their fall. Christianity historically has always laid claim to the life-giving word in Christ, the Word made flesh. However, in Seed Catalogue Christianity offers only destructive, negating words which fatally deny access to the positive, life-affirming body. As in William Blake's poem "The Garden of Love," the priest's "Thou shalt not" transforms a beautiful garden of innocent sexual play into a graveyard of repressed desire (to continue the analogy, a graveyard is the site of a boy's defiant masturbation in the joke underlying the "I don't give a damn if I do die" song). Though the Bible, like the seed catalogue, comes "with illustrations," these particular biblical illustrations, rather than promising life's ritual triumph with each return of spring (as the seed catalogue does), promise the eternal death-in-life which awaits

all sinners in hell. Hell fire, far from generating new life as the Heisler Hotel fire does for Kroetsch, represents an eternity of unmitigated suffering. In contrast to the biblical Adam, who in a sense names the world into being, the priest in Seed Catalogue literally names the lovers' Edenic world "out of existence":

We had discovered, don't ask me
 how, where--but when the priest said
 playing dirty we knew--well--

he had named it he had named
 our world out of existence
 (the horse was standing still)

The priest attempts to impose the order of his words, his official language, on what for him is a moral chaos. However, the very name which he intends as an unequivocal condemnation of promiscuity contains within itself the moral ambiguity of the world: "playing" is by definition beyond order or fixity, and thus undermines the pejorative connotations of "dirty."

The priest's inability to fix the meaning of words becomes more evident with the persona's parodic confession. The persona assumes a carnival mask, which celebrates the incompleteness and multiplicity of identity, to play the roles of both penitent and priest:

--This is my first confession. Bless me father I played
 dirty so long, just the other day, up in the granary
 there by the car shed--up there on the Brantford Binder
 Twine gunny sacks and the sheets of paper--Germaine
 with her dress up and her bloomers down--

--Son. For penance, keep your peter in your pants
for the next thirteen years.

The unofficial word "peter" (a slang term for penis), placed in the priest's mouth, ruptures the seriousness of his harsh judgement. He cannot suppress the profane laughter which bawdy words evoke, and which, as Bakhtin explains in Rabelais and His World, emancipates us from religious guilt and fear:

Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power. It unveils the material bodily principle in its true meaning. (94)

The priest's use of the word "peter" also in effect decrowns him from his lofty position as healer of the soul and demotes him to the level of the repressed body. Further evidence that Kroetsch is degrading the sacred can be drawn from the word "peter" itself, an implicit degradation of Saint Peter (whose name also functions as a synonym for the penis). Kroetsch would not contest Christianity's assertion that Saint Peter holds the key to paradise, he would merely add that this paradise, like Saint Peter himself, should be brought down to the physical world. The trickster-like penis appears in Seed Catalogue under various other names and guises ("Pete Knight," "Lebensgliebes," "radish," etc.) to elude censorship and subvert religious authority. It defies the priest's attempt to fix and control meaning, celebrating

instead the dissemination and multiplicity of meaning. The sheer wealth of euphemisms for the penis here testifies, in a way similar to the inventive cursing of characters like Hazard LePage in The Studhorse Man and Web in Badlands, to the strong relationship between desire and creative word play.

Christianity has in many respects rejected the body, silenced it, and denied it meaning. A Christian hierarchy has opened a gap between body and word, and, as Bakhtin explains in "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," this has resulted in an unequivocally negative view of the body as crude, dirty, and bestial. Reacting to this "higher" perspective, Kroetsch speaks the body's silence, closes the "immeasurable abyss" ("Forms" 171) between body and word, and restores to the body its ancient, positive meaning. What Bakhtin says about Rabelais seems equally applicable to Kroetsch:

"He wants to return both a language and a meaning to the body, return to it the idealized quality it had in ancient times, and simultaneously return a reality, a materiality, to language and to meaning" ("Forms" 171).

The "materialization" of world and word is a project which lies at the very core of Kroetsch's art.

Kroetsch consistently inverts the Christian conception of creation, celebrating the vitality and energy of the flesh made word. His intertextual dialogue with Rudy Wiebe on the limitations of poetry can be seen as a microcosm of his poetic vision. In response to Wiebe's contention that the Canadian writer must "lay great black steel lines of/fiction, break up that space with huge design and,

like/the fiction of the Russian steppes, build a giant/artifact," Kroetsch counters with a moment from their shared experience which illustrates the birth and power of song:

February 14, 1976. Rudy, you
 took us there: to the Oldman River
 Lorna & Byrna, Ralph and Steve and me
 you showed us where
 the bloods surprised the Crees
 in the next coulee/ surprised
 them to death. And after
 you showed us Rilke's word
 Lebensliedes.

Rudy: Nature thou art.

The sacred site of Oldman River links life and death, as the German slang word lebensliedes, meaning penis or "life-member" as Daniel Lenoski notes (130), survives the Cree's massacre. The poetic word, vital in its connection to the body, thus enacts the carnival process of creation through destruction. Furthermore, "Lebensliedes" brilliantly merges the primary origins of Kroetsch's writing: it signifies his faith in the energy of the scandalous oral word, his insistence that "the body writes the poem" ("The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues" 11), and his interest in uncovering the mystery of his personal and collective past (here his ancestral roots in Germany and Canada's historical roots in Indian culture).

The parodic quality inherent in Rudy's "showing" the group the word lebensliedes, an act which suggests exhibitionism, in a way he

neither perhaps intends nor appreciates, decrowns him as a fool. The final line in the quote--"Rudy: Nature thou art"--confirms Rudy's role as fool, as it perfectly illustrates Bakhtin's concept of praise/abuse:

Praise and abuse are, so to speak, the two sides of the same coin. . . . The praise . . . is ironic and ambivalent. It is on the brink of abuse; the one leads to the other and it is impossible to draw the line between them. Though divided in form they belong to the same body, or to the two bodies in one, which abuses while praising and praises while abusing. (Rabelais 165)

In a similar way, Kroetsch seems to offer high praise to the prairie fiction writer by calling him "Nature" and respectfully addressing him as "thou," but his praise becomes equivocal and slides into abuse with the word "art," nature's opposite. Unlike Kroetsch who employs artifacts such as a seed catalogue or a stone hammer to break down the barrier between nature and art, Wiebe declares that the novel itself is an artifact, seeks to impose his own artistic order on the world and to disguise that order as natural. Instead of allowing the prairie silence and absence to speak through him, as Kroetsch does, Wiebe imposes his monologic vision onto the world by laying down "great black steel lines of fiction." In effect Wiebe becomes a target for Kroetsch's cunning praise/abuse, which is often directed at "the representatives of the old, dying world and ideology" (Rabelais 165). Wiebe suffers this fate because, as the archaic language implies, he represents an antiquated view of literature. Wiebe is so

far behind the times, specifically the insights of postmodern literary theory, that even his distinction between prose and poetry appears outdated.

Kroetsch's father similarly imposes his own order on the land, through farming rather than writing prose, and denies the power of poetry. While he is himself a bit of a bullshitter and a storyteller, he prohibits his son from writing poetry:

First off I want you to take that
crowbar and drive 1,156 holes
in that gumbo.
And the next time you want to
write a poem
we'll start the haying.

The only forms of creation acceptable for men are those enclosures which "give form to the land" or, through the erection of buildings, separate them from it. As in What the Crow Said, the men desire to transfer to themselves women's role as creator. Uncle Freddie, for example, builds womb-like horse barns with rounded roofs. It is possible to argue, however, that Kroetsch himself escapes the definitive male code to experience "a kind of human-sexual intertextuality" (Labyrinths 21). The point is most evident when he falls from his still horse while harrowing the garden, an act which symbolizes his fall from male order. With his acceptance of the creative power of woman and earth, Kroetsch does not insist on being recognized as the sole creator of his art; in fact, he foregrounds the intertextuality of Seed Catalogue to acknowledge the many voices which

speak to him and give his poetry life.

In Kroetsch's work sex functions as a metaphor for the act of writing. He conceives the long poem, in particular, as a product of the poet's love-making with words. In the long poem, he supposes, desire is never consummated or concluded but always delayed. The numerous instances of frustrated sexual relations in Seed Catalogue, then, could very easily represent the heightened but unsatisfied desire of the poet. However, delay in desire's fulfillment borders on its failure, a possibility of both sex and writing which excites Kroetsch ("An Interview With Robert Kroetsch" 11-12). The poet longs to embrace a female muse, to plant his poetic seed, but all his relationships fail. The woman at the airport bar spurns his sexual advances, the one who promises to let him kiss her nipples if the Edmonton Eskimos win the Grey Cup never returns, and the absence of a condom dispenser prevents him from screwing an "old Blood whore."

In Seed Catalogue Kroetsch acknowledges the presence of a strong maternal influence in his writing, an influence which also resonates with erotic overtones and ends in a failed union. At the beginning of the poem, he remembers his mother's loving voice:

My mother said:

Did you wash your ears

You could grow cabbages

in those ears.

Whereas in the Bible the holy spirit enters the prophet's ear to inspire him, Kroetsch here brings spiritual inspiration down to the natural world--cabbage. It is his mother who teaches him to love

nature, and he fuses her voice with nature as the inspiring force behind his art. The incestuous quality of his desire can be glimpsed when, after he falls from the horse in the garden, his mother whispers "Bring me the radish seed." "Radish" is a slang term for the penis (and is phonetically similar to ravish), and the word play linking vegetable and human "seed" occurs throughout the poem. Since his father discourages his poetic ambitions, Kroetsch's incestuous longing also functions as a form of rebellion against his father. Like the badger that infuriates Kroetsch's father by digging holes in the potato patch, Kroetsch would trespass on his father's "property," he would cuckold his father by fecundating his own birthplace.

Such a return to the oedipal stage would effect the poet's certain death, however, as the second time his mother calls him not from the generative garden but from her grave:

This is what happened--at my mother's wake. This
is a fact--the World Series was in progress. The
Cincinnati Reds were playing the Detroit Tigers.
It was raining. The road to the graveyard was barely
passable. The horse was standing still. Bring me
the radish seeds, my mother whispered.

Her return to elemental chaos, which the "barely passable" road suggests, gives rise to new life: she fantastically "wakes" to whisper from her deathbed, and her death is set against the revelry and communal celebration of the World Series. Furthermore, though the fatal seeding which she calls for does not take place, this bizarre image of death inseminating Mother/Earth finds a parallel in Bakhtin's

discussion of Rabelais:

Death, the dead body, blood as a seed buried in the earth, rising for another life--this is one of the oldest and most widespread themes. A variant is death inseminating mother earth and making her bear fruit once more. This variant produces a flowering of erotic images (of course, not in the narrow, specific sense of the word). Rabelais speaks elsewhere of the "sweet, much-desired embrace of . . . Mother Earth, which we call burial" (Book Three, Chapter 48). (327)

Ironically, Kroetsch's erotic relationship with his mother is, at least partially, consummated only after her death. The section describing her death is entitled "How do you grow a gardener?" Thus, it seems that gardening, like poetry, becomes a way of expressing his love for his mother, of finally planting his seeds.

Though his mother later inspires his writing, when he is younger she consistently denies the fulfillment of his bodily appetites (and the body, we must remember, is another primary life force of Kroetsch's work). She gives him cod-liver oil to assuage his appetite and Sunny Boy Cereal to regulate his bowels. Thus, she asserts domestic order which, like Christianity, will regulate or repress bodily desire. Yet, as with the Schmeir players in What the Crow Said, rebellion against domestic order takes the form of an uninhibited revelry in bodily functions. The bean song, a classic example of degradation, appears following his mother's first call for the radish seeds, which she herself will plant and order:

No. 25--McKenzie's Improved Golden Wax Bean: "THE MOST PRIZED OF ALL BEANS. Virtue is its own reward. We have had many expressions from keen discriminating gardeners extolling our seed and this variety."

Beans, beans,
the musical fruit;
the more you eat,
the more you virtue.

The bean song is, of course, supposed to end with the word "toot." The substitution of "virtue" for "toot" degrades the abstract concept of virtue to the profane lower body. Virtue is an attribute of the higher faculties which, through its close association with strict religious codes, erects a barricade of guilt between mind and body. The priest's unintentionally comic attempt at simplifying a definition of the soul for the children--"Souls were like underwear that you/wore inside"--provides a similar degradation. The role which the concept of "soul," like the concept of "virtue," plays in denying access to bodily fulfillment is unhidden through its "mesalliance" with underwear. The degradation of the concepts "virtue" and "soul," however, rather than enacting their complete and utter negation, merely tests them in relation to the body. Freed to consider virtue in this new light, we can also see that the passage "Virtue is its own reward" expresses an ideology which discourages people from seeking socio-political changes in the present. People are implicitly advised to concern themselves only with their own moral revolutions; they must deny themselves laughter and physical pleasure and wait patiently for

their true reward in heaven.

Though Kroetsch's portrayal of the ass destroys the concept of virtue, the ass also creates, both in the "musical" quality of the fart and in the sense that it inspires the bean song. With the failure of sexual relations in Seed Catalogue, such inversions of creation become more appropriate metaphors for the act of writing. Kroetsch explicitly degrades self-expression in Seed Catalogue when, with self-deprecatory humour typical of Canadians, he compares his poetry to "a pile of rabbit/turds." The comparison reveals Kroetsch's conception of the poetic word as an organic, physical entity which creates through destruction. This ambivalent quality, not always discernible in the metaphor of sex, becomes more obvious in the metaphor of defecation. According to Bakhtin, images of urine and excrement are ambivalent when they preserve their link with the generating sexual organs. The "turds" similarly retain a link to new life through their association with the very fertile rabbit.

The poet's frustrated sexual relations result in the emergence of masturbation, another inversion of creation, as an equally compelling metaphor for the act of writing. For the Canadian poet, desiring to make love to his or her reader, "ABSOLUTE NEGLECT" is a way of life. Wanting desperately to be heard, Kroetsch and Al Purdy, whose use of the oral voice strongly influenced Kroetsch, shout poems at customers in an Edmonton restaurant:

The waitress asked us to leave. She was rather insistent; we were bad for business, shouting poems at the paying customers. Twice, Purdy galloped a caribou horse

right straight through the dining area.

Their eccentric behavior erases the borders between life and art, actor and audience, yet the listeners remain reluctant to enter into dialogue with the poets. The distance between author and reader is at least artificially bridged in the dialogic structure of the text itself. Kroetsch's carnivalization of literature--his use of bawdy jokes, anecdotes, and folk sayings--presents a shared experience which draws the reader into the text. The reader must actively participate in the poem's creation in the bean song, for example, as it is only through his or her memory of the absent "toot" that the song can be understood.

The Canadian poet must, like the boy in the joke underlying the "I don't give a damn if I do die" song, spill his seed onto the earth, create himself through his dialogue with his own land. Yet, just as the harsh Canadian climate minimizes plant growth, so too does Canada's short history and negligible culture threaten the poet's growth. Even language itself provides no safe haven for the poet, since, as Kroetsch suggests, the strong presence of British and American language in Canada distorts Canadian's perceptions of themselves and their world. Kroetsch is particularly intent, then, on destroying Canada's cultural inheritance from Europe and America. For Canadians to create their own unique identity, they must first free themselves of foreign influence and create themselves from the ground up. Entertaining the question in Seed Catalogue "How do you grow a past/to live in," Kroetsch responds with a formidable list of absences--including philosophy, literature, high culture (the ballet

and opera), and even the history of Western civilization (Aeneas)-- which seem to leave the poet with no material. Without memory, as he later says, there is "no meditation/no song." However, interspersed with the absences are personal memories, which through their bawdy and eccentric nature emerge as the vital force of his poetry. The list ends with the Strauss boy:

the absence of the Seine, the Rhine, the Danube, the Tiber
and the Thames. Shit, the battle River ran dry
one fall. The Strauss boy could piss across it. He
could piss higher on a barn wall than any of us.
He could piss right clean over the principal's
new car

It is possible to argue that the Strauss boy's grotesque body--open to the world in the act of pissing, and cosmic in its release of a hyperbolic quantity of urine--symbolizes hope, as Johnnie Backstrom's body does in The Words of My Roaring, that the barren earth will once again come to life. The other boys' action is also creative, one might even say poetic, when they play a game to see who can piss highest on the barn wall. Such mock-heroic feats retain a destructive, defiant element, however, as the boys, overcoming their fear of authority, debase the symbols of power and hierarchy (the father's barn and the principal's car). In drawing on such bawdy material as a primary source of his poetry, Kroetsch demystifies the status of poet. Given that we all participate in the "culture" of the body, he suggests, we all possess the potential to become poets.

Kroetsch debases socio-hierarchical structures in ways similar to

the Strauss boy, particularly when he lists British royalty in a "mesalliance" with his crude account of a hangover:

the absence of Lord Nelson
 the absence of kings and queens
 the absence of a bottle opener, and me with a vicious
 attack of the 26-ounce flu

The destruction of a false hierarchy inherited from Britain proves liberating with the fortuitous burning down of the Heisler Hotel. The hotel--a place for visitors, foreigners--will be replaced by a building more suited to life on the prairies: "Rebuild the hotel when it burns down. Bigger. Fill it/full of a lot of A-1 Hard Northern bullshitters." The destruction of hierarchies would permit the men to relate to each other as equals, to create their own history and identity through bullshitting. The newly crowned "bullshitters" immediately find their hierarchical privilege threatened, however, by the joke about the woman who buries her husband "with his ass sticking out of the ground" so she can kick it every time she walks by.

Though Kroetsch's fiction does not conform to the strict conventions of representation, the "carnival sense of the world" in his writing mirrors the world in as far as he perceives Canada to be a carnival place. It is not accidental that the "bullshitters" communal celebration takes place in a bar, for example, as Kroetsch elsewhere describes the prairie pub, where the oral tradition still survives, in thoroughly carnivalistic terms:

To look at the interior of a prairie pub is merely a
 pleasure; to listen is to recover our story, is to dwell at

the center again . . . a beer parlour is a sacred place. The True Drinker knows that to enter in through those doors, off the street of a small town, is to enter a place where time is suspended. In the sacred place of the beer parlour, we are allowed to change identities--in our laughter, in our silence, in the stories we tell, in what we remember from the past. In a beer parlour we are as equal as our politics insist we are--or as equal as the price of draught can make men be. We are God's blessed creatures, seeking a version of ecstasy, sharing the poet's divine madness. ("The Moment of the Discovery" 18)

His perception of a bar, usually considered profane, as a "sacred place" where we can "change identities" and discard hierarchies to become "equal" unveils it as a Western Canadian version of carnival. It would seem, then, that Kroetsch's comment on the world which North American writers confronted in the nineteenth-century--with its collapsing hierarchies and "mesalliances"--still holds today: "Perhaps North American culture itself became a kind of carnivalesque response to the 'authority' of European cultures and European versions of history" ("Carnival and Violence" 104). Although Kroetsch--unlike Rabelais, Bakhtin, and the nineteenth-century North American writers--does not witness a revolution in his own country, he literally calls for one with his repudiation of foreign influence and authority.

In Seed Catalogue Kroetsch seems to suggest that we must simultaneously destroy and renew our origins. He illustrates the danger inherent in entirely forgetting our roots with the bizarre

death of his cousin, a navigator. Kroetsch's cousin returns to Germany, the birth-place of his forgotten great-grandmother, not with seeds, as Kroetsch does with his mother, but with bombs. The "strange muse: forgetfulness" incites him to destroy but, forgetting his own origins, he fails to see that he is destroying himself in the process. Though an ardent nationalist, Kroetsch realizes that we were all, at one point in the past, foreign seeds planted in local soil. Playing the role of "gentle anarchist" (Labyrinths 35), then, he prefers fortuitous acts of violence, like the Heisler hotel fire, to wars. Through his song he attempts a loving embrace of his origins--earth, mother, and body--as, paradoxically, the seeds of his self-creation. The failure of sex in the poem, however, exposes the poet's inability to embrace completely his creative muses, and so he resorts to alternative acts--defecation, masturbation--as more appropriate metaphors for poetic creation.

5. CONCLUSION

Kroetsch's use of carnival in The Words of My Roaring, What the Crow Said, and Seed Catalogue transforms official ceremony and decorum into a wild, libidinal dance through the graveyard of our inherited intellectual tradition. The sexual energy in these texts defies the sacred and serious structures of the official world, and gives birth to carnival laughter which celebrates the life of body and earth. Yet Kroetsch's humour at times emerges as darker and more cynical, particularly in What the Crow Said, as he seems less willing to transcend a vision of human existence as muddled in a quagmire of urine and excrement. Despite such occasional lapses into absolute cynicism, the dance to which he invites the reader is ultimately joyful and life-affirming. As Kroetsch topples established hierarchies, draws linear time into cyclic becoming, abandons reason to celebrate the animal passions, ridicules and parodies accepted truths and fixed myths, and destabilizes and fragments the very concept of identity, in a very real sense he pulls the epistemological rug right out from under the reader. Although the reader, thrust into such chaos, might initially feel uncomfortable and disoriented, Kroetsch suggests that the death of the old world should not be mourned. Kroetsch promises renewal through contact with the elemental forces--earth and body--and, equally important, through ritual laughter directed at the old, dying world. Freed from the old truths, the reader, left without an "alibi," must leap from Kroetsch's texts to the world of his own words and author himself into existence.

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