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**The Structural Horizons of Prairie Poetics: The Long Poem,  
Eli Mandel, Andrew Suknaski, and Robert Kroetsch**

Aunts, foreign lands, and the kitchen cabinet. In today's world of Canadian poetry this unlikely grouping suggests inspiration, renewed pride of place, and poetic process.

On the road to Estevan to see an aunt, but newly returned from Europe with the horrors of World War II emphasized by touring the overwhelming graves bequeathed by World War I, bearing news of cousin Jakie cut down at Normandy, Eli Mandel accepts the rôle of poet. He reads Dostoevsky's short novels at the halfway home of his favourite cousin, Gerty, taking to himself Nietzsche's description of the artist—the sick man who will make society well.<sup>1</sup> The outcome: the first poem, "Estevan". Twenty years of productivity led to a self-written corner.<sup>2</sup> Then six years of searching in the literary and "real" worlds found Mandel sitting in a square in Spain and writing of Saskatchewan. The very "validity of the enterprise of art itself" was in question. Some answers beckoned from the prairies, and Mandel returned.

In a house in Edmonton an aunt passes a treasure to her nephew—her father's, his grandfather's, ledger kept at a watermill in central Canada. A poem, "The Ledger," is born. The basement of an old archival building in Calgary is the scene of the next discovery and writing: an old seed catalogue, the poem "Seed Catalogue." "In a huge Victorian house in upstate New York, in a room overlooking the Susquehanna river (the same river on whose banks Coleridge and Southey planned to establish their Pantisocracy), [Kroetsch] wrote "The Sad Phoenician'."<sup>3</sup> The poem abides; the poet returns.

Younger by approximately twenty years, Andrew Suknaski is as caught in myth and memory as are his elders. Inspiring Mandel, by example Suknaski also points the direction to a new way of saying. "After seventeen years of transience and aberration in numerous Canadian cities," Suknaski finds "*Wood Mountain Poems* is a return."<sup>4</sup>

No matter how distant physically, "Every place [is] an extension (narrative) of Wood Mountain."<sup>5</sup> Of Suknaski's aunts, however, I know not.

Wood Mountain and Estevan separated by but one hundred miles, Heisler<sup>6</sup> seemingly but a few wheat fields away. The form the poets all share—the long poem form.

And Kroetsch muses, "Maybe the long poem replaces the old kitchen cabinet" (*LPA*, p. 312). The cabinet containing the food to sustain life, the herbs and spices to flavour it, the pots and mixing bowls to blend it. The cabinet witnessing the family gatherings, the country entertainments, but above all the story-telling, the voices. The cabinet: massive yet open, solid and beckoning.

Aunts, foreign lands, and the kitchen cabinet: regionalism, the long poem form, Mandel, Suknaski, and Kroetsch.

Although regionalism in literary terms seems to be as established in Canada as the literature itself, it is today as much a part of that phenomenon known as post-modernism as is the concern with structures, the breath line, deconstruction, the foregrounding of language, and the aesthetic of lingual failures. The natural extension is, of course, the long poem form—a form big enough to encompass such matters, open and free enough with which to experiment, or as Kroetsch says, "The poem as big as a continent" (*LPA*, p. 311), as Mandel says, "something big enough to hold the world and time, a space for the vast geography, a time for the hidden history of Canada."<sup>7</sup> Purely considering matters of length, the long poem has a noble tradition in Canada. In 1946 Northrop Frye, while "looking over the best poems of our best poets, ... was surprised to find how often the narrative poem has been attempted, and attempted with uneven but frequently remarkable success."<sup>8</sup> Just over twenty years later Dorothy Livesay re-appraised Frye's findings and wrote convincingly about the "documentary" poem, which she argued was topical, informative, and socially-oriented. She also suggested that "our narratives reflect our environment profoundly; they are subtly used to cast light on the landscape."<sup>9</sup> Milton Wilson has also noted "that the discontinuous long poem, the cyclical short poem, and the cycle of lyrics have always been the most fruitful cluster of genres in our poetic history."<sup>10</sup> The long poem of today is not Frye's narrative, as narrative itself is displaced by such propellant forces as place and time; story eschews the *tyranny* of beginnings, middles, and endings, as beginnings become endings and vice versa. Neither is the long poem of today exactly Livesay's documentary, as history is displaced by memory or mythologized history. It is more often like Wilson's more open-ended or discontinuous clusters or cycles. It certainly has much to do with a

differences as well, which counterpoint their purposes. Tackling the immediate problems of literature in the latter quarter of the twentieth century, they each come up with their own solutions.

Born on the prairies of immigrant parents, Mandel and Suknaski distanced themselves in miles and experiences from their beginnings. Although the son of second-generation Canadian parents, Kroetsch was likewise born on the prairies and driven to place a distance between himself and his past. World travellers all, Kroetsch settled in New York State for seventeen years, and Mandel, in Toronto for fifteen. Kroetsch has returned to the Prairies to live; Mandel spent a year in Regina recently. All have returned in their writing. All represent "the prairie writer" as Mandel defines him, "not necessarily the one who is in the west, or who stays here, but the one who returns, who moves, who points in this direction." He expands:

it is not place but attitude, state of mind, that defines the western writer—and that state of mind, I want to suggest has a good deal to do with a tension between place and culture, a doubleness or duplicity, that makes the writer a man not so much in place, as out of place and so one endlessly trying to get back, to find his way home, to return, to write himself into existence, writing west. (*AT*, p. 69)

This sense of doubleness, the tension New refers to, surfaces again and again in the work of these writers, in the form of guilt and inquiry, the impetus to remigrate and encounter beginnings, the endless questioning. Tackling important structural dilemmas, they fashion poems out of place and self. Kroetsch acknowledges the importance of the Prairies to his writing.

I'm very much involved in the significance of landscape, especially my experience of Western landscape: the kind of undefined vastness of it with points of reference within that vastness—like a house, for instance, or a river. The western landscape is one without boundaries quite often. So you have the experience within a kind of chaos, yet you have to order it somehow to survive. I'm particularly interested in the kinds of orderings we do on that landscape.<sup>17</sup>

And the orderings are new to meet new demands. "Structure is one of my real interests as a writer,"<sup>18</sup> says Kroetsch.

The poets are returning. The poets are inventing new forms. But how and why now? Mandel suggests: "In some ways poetry was not possible on the Prairies until the language was heard. The 'invented' poems got in the way....the 'vernacular' had to get into the poems, as it did with Suknaski and Kroetsch, though that's not the whole answer. There's something too about believing it's possible to write the poems, about believing you can be a poet. That it's an authentic way to be. I think that comes from writer to writer."<sup>19</sup> An interesting exchange

between critic Dennis Cooley and Kroetsch suggests some further answers:

DC: A period of high modernism looked for a poetry that could never be written on the Prairies: it wanted a tight metaphysical poetry celebrating irony, paradox, ambiguity—a poetry that is essentially European in its allusiveness. So what do you do? If this is the kind of poem you must write in order to be a poet in the '20s and the '30s and '40s and '50s, how do you write poetry out of the Prairie? I think you don't. A different aesthetic has got to emerge that will allow you to say "I can write poetry about these things." So that Suknaski can write his *Wood Mountain Poems* and you can say "Yeah, okay."

RK: I agree with your theory that they had to take that stance to be able to write poems.... But now, having found the stance, I think we have to start working with the formal problems.... We have to face some god-damned interesting formal problems right now.<sup>20</sup>

And just how exactly Mandel, Suknaski, and Kroetsch each face these formal problems is worth examining.

Mandel came to this new, open, and looser Prairie poetry by way of the tight metaphysical poetry of the '50s and '60s; Kroetsch came to it by way of his six novels; while Suknaski seemingly started into it at first writing.<sup>21</sup> All begin from "a local pride,"<sup>22</sup> listening to, remembering, and re-inventing the place in poetry: "an answer to pentametre and conceit in [their] bare hands, handling the telltale words."<sup>23</sup> Kroetsch and Suknaski particularly re-create the sounds in the authenticity of their vernacular and the outrageous quality of their tall tales. Estevan as poetic subject has fascinated Mandel for nearly thirty years, while now finally he has the true means at his command.

Questions about the poet's own prairie beginnings start to haunt him, and now he is ready to confront the ghosts. Thus he returns both physically and poetically to the Saskatchewan of his childhood. Mandel calls regional literature "a literature of the past," "surely...the essence of what we mean by a region, the overpowering feeling of nostalgia associated with the place we know as the *first* place, the *first* vision of things, the *first* clarity of things" (*AT*, p. 50). So with Mandel—sitting dazed and displaced in Spain, struggling with poems for *Stony Plain*, speaking of home and meaning Estevan, Saskatchewan, the home of his childhood, and convinced he had already returned although his physical body remained firmly in the Iberian sun.<sup>24</sup> But he had returned in spirit, and the next and necessary step was an actual return. The poetic outcome of this pilgrimage is *Out of Place*, a book divided into four sections with a preface and photographs by the poet's wife, Ann Mandel. The title is ambiguous, of course, for Mandel feels both created by and rooted in place and also out of place, awkwardly unfamiliar.

At the same time as Mandel was poetically recording his return, he was also investigating it critically, and the book of essays, *Another Time*, is very much a complementary commentary or gloss to *Out of Place*.<sup>25</sup> The "other" time of the title is the past, both actual and remembered, as well as the mythic time of literature, all counterpointed by the present, which in turn is both actual and fantasized. Three particular and interconnecting ideas are woven through *Out of Place* and *Another Time*. First is the idea of regionalism and Mandel's search for his roots in place or remembered place; second is the idea of doubleness or duplicity, the divided sense of the writer in relation to his surroundings and life; and third is the link between fiction and reality. In both poem and essay Mandel vividly describes his return to the Jewish ghost town of Hoffer, Saskatchewan: the heat of the day, the decaying remains of community in the overgrown grass, and the questions that haunt him. Gazing on the empty remnants of Hoffer, Mandel says

I was possessed not only by a troubling sense of transience, lost hopes, small human marks on a vast landscape, my own past disappearing, but by a question that had slowly been forming itself in my mind for the whole summer. Would this mute, intransigent place ever say anything? Was the only language one I imposed or whatever impelled my own speech? (*AT*, p. 74)

The answer he discovers articulates the essence of both these books and much of Mandel's previous writing: "The writer's subject is his own dilemma, writing west. For myself, it is the impossible divisions of gentility, vulgarity, Judaism, romance" (*AT*, p. 74).

*Out of Place* is at once the record of Mandel's return to the Prairies and the logical extension of his structural concerns. His first four books of poetry are intricate and intellectually concentrated. *An Idiot Joy* then represents a turning point, because "All the old terms were inappropriate, no longer adequate now" (*AT*, p. 13). Without turning his back on the old voices and methods, Mandel did begin to question "the value of traditional literary forms or even of form itself" (*AT*, p. 13). The poems of *Stony Plain* change in both structure and substance, focussing more directly on politics and geography in a spare and unembellished style. They represent the beginning of the poet's return to the place of his childhood, which return inevitably led to the writing of a *long poem*—the cycles of *Out of Place*. Stylistically gracile, these poems naturally stretch to provide Mandel with the necessary length for his present meditations. Ann Mandel's "Preface" sets the scene and presents the fictional reality: The Mandels travel west to his ancestral home, his prairie place of birth. They discover a doorless, concrete vault still housing the colony's papers: financial

records and transactions, religious papers, magazines, a diary, an unpaginated fiction. The juxtaposition of dark vault and jumbled records with the bright but door-framed prairie is emphasized. The fiction turns out to be the account of a couple's travels west to his ancestral home, his prairie place of birth. They discover a doorless, concrete vault still housing the colony's papers.... "The last pages were missing but we could see the end. We put down the story and turned toward the vault."<sup>26</sup> *Out of Place* is that "diary or fiction of a kind," a "strange-loop"<sup>27</sup> Mandel would call it, the essence of Kroetsch's remark which Mandel quotes: "In a sense, we haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real."<sup>28</sup> Writing *Out of Place*, Mandel "write[s] himself into existence, writing west" (*AT*, p. 69).

*Out of Place*, then, records Mandel's return in time and space, the most distinguishing feature of the book being the primacy of the mediating intelligence who returns with full awareness to observe the search, the return, and self. (As noted above, Mandel emphasizes "state of mind" over pure place in defining the western writer.) "The double himself appears in the book as intelligence, as he's both an id and a non-id figure. He's a child, he's the man as a child, and he's the man as an artist. He's aware of how much duplicity...there is in poetry, how much trickery."<sup>29</sup> And this further underscores Mandel's contention that "the regional world is essentially the world of childhood" (*AT*, p. 50).

*Out of Place* structures Mandel's journeys, "memories and rumours about the past...heroic tales" (*OP*, p. 75): "the jewish exodus from shtetl to the plains" (*OP*, p. 15), "grandmother/milking guts of shit for skins and kishke" (*OP*, p. 22), grandfather eating sour curds, the coal miners' strike, 1931, the end of the war, Saturday movies at the Orpheum, the sweet shop next door, copies of Tarzan and Doc Savage, a family of "breeds," petroglyphs cut in the rocks. The double guides Mandel on his quest for himself, for in Jewish lore the double doesn't lead to death but rather to renewed creativity. Relatives, friends, ghosts of the past haunt but also people the poems. Mandel quotes from *Land of Hope*, *Estevan The Power Centre*, letters, a document. The voices change according to speaker—child, man-child, artist—although the divers vernacular of Kroetsch's and Suknaski's characters is absent. Still, Mandel's power comes from authenticity as well, for the voices are authentic to his intent and purposes. There is intelligence, humor, synchronicity, trickery even, and what Mandel calls "syntactical ambiguity," for the structural solutions are crucial. "I am fascinated by process, and what I worked hardest at in *Out of Place* is to make things happen in poetry."<sup>30</sup>



The first poem gives title to the first section of the book—"the return"—in place, in time, in Mandel's own literature. It describes in the form of dream, reality, and photographs Mandel's return to the Estevan of the Prairies, his childhood, and his poetry. He invokes his own first Estevan poem and then recalls a dream of his wife photographing him in the Souris valley forty years later. In dream and poem relatives appear to sign the way, and the new religion of the land is evident as the valley is a synagogue, the coal mines, a covenant. This place of triple return is "the place/you reach/to name/remember and recite." Chanting a magical litany designed to draw him back in time, Mandel outlines the dilemma of his own past prairie life, "the impossible divisions" mentioned above. Here the recitation of magical, remembered objects ("the Hebrew alphabet/Invictus the first three/lines of Genesis" [*OP*, p. 14] serves to transport the poet back. The "return" is to the "first place" of Mandel's definition of regionalism, but Eliot-like it is to "know the place for the first time" as well. The ingenious reference to one of Mandel's earliest poems also emphasizes the stylistic transformation over the years. With no extraneous words in their spare and purified forms, the poems of *Out of Place* exemplify Mandel's devotion to craft and the principle of "syntactical ambiguity." Through such techniques as inversion and ambiguous modifiers, Mandel renders multiple the meanings of his words. For instance, the end of "Strange Places" can be read in two quite distinct ways: either "it was so/we did not choose it" or "it was so," pause, "we did not choose it" (*OP*, p. 62). Or in "badlands" a double reading gives you "simple/particulars amid/the endless treachery/that is remembering," and "simple/particulars amid/the endless treachery," pause, "that is remembering," as well as "neither difficult nor easy/crossings/happen/it appears," and "neither difficult nor easy," pause, "crossings/happen/it appears" (*OP*, p. 19).

The ambiguities thus built into the structure are but part of the doubleness Mandel intends in this poetry. Mandel's search is for home *and* self, with the concomitant comparison of place then and now, self then and now. He "look[s] on that prairie grid for a lost world of identities, for lost patterns" (*LS*, p. 55). The poem "doors of perception" emphasizes the association of time and place, with both history and prairies in motion, roads swooping and time curving "earth-measured on a western grid/place known through time time/measuring place." While voices create maps, and shadows create language, Mandel concludes that madness is not a geographical location: "Riel was hung in streets/I walked on every day to school" (*OP*, p. 15). So history is personalized, while landscape and mindscape coalesce.

The search for roots, the association of time and place, and above all the attempt to solve these dilemmas in structural ways are crucial to *Out of Place*. "And lodged in the notion of doubleness is a whole theory of art which links person with place, place with time, time with home, home with identity, identity with language, language with person."<sup>31</sup> The doubleness which for Mandel is crucial to the notion of regionalism is also inexorably associated with the whole enterprise of art. He questions, "When do language and place become identical?" (LS, p. 55). Notions of time and place, and of self in relation to these two, naturally evolve into questions of language and structural matters. "The true doubles" are those which declare the magical nature of language and the mutuality of poetry:

poetry consists in the doubling of words  
 doubled words are poetic words  
 this is the true meaning of duplicity  
 each poem speaks to another poem  
 the language of poetry is a secret language....  
 poetry is the naming of secret names (OP, p. 55)<sup>32</sup>

Even the Poet's name is a talismanic "doubled name": "Eli Elijah."

The remarkable and extremely conscious way in which Mandel highlights his words is, in post-modernist terms, a "foregrounding of language," as the act of expression itself becomes emphasized in the aesthetic use of the language. The sense of doubleness, syntactical ambiguity, and refined simplicity of *Out of Place* are all aspects of structuralist poetics:

By the use of complex inter-relationships, by emphasizing resemblances and by promoting through repetition 'equivalences' or 'parallelisms' of sound, stress, image, rhyme, poetry patterns and 'thickens' language, 'foregrounding' its formal qualities, and consequently 'backgrounding' its capacity for sequential, discursive and referential meaning. Words similar in sound are 'drawn together in meaning'; ambiguity is consequently favoured, and equivalence is promoted to the status of a 'constitutive device' of the art.<sup>33</sup>

Ironically, the very intellectual nature of Mandel's approach—the mediating consciousness, the careful devotion to craft—results in a poetry of a particularly tactile nature. If it lacks a "casually" yarning Mandel, it possesses much else, as is indicated by the sheer beauty of Mandel's description of "the double world":

Nothing on either prairie changes though the winds blow across immensities your heart would shrivel to imagine knowing they pass between the worlds and can be heard to do so on the road to Wood Mountain. (OP, p. 53)



Regionalism today is thus far from being merely a mimetic portrayal of external landscapes, but includes the poet in a landscape of then and now, a rendering of his individual mind- or soul-scape, a dream of the artist, his memories, and re-creations. The shift in concern from the prairie realism of the modern novelists to the prairie surrealism of the post-modern poets is clear: "The images of prairie man are images of a search for home and therefore a search for self. The question we have to come to then is not *who* is prairie man, but what *images* does he choose?" (*AT*, p. 52). The images Mandel chooses are of necessity duplicitous: He is marked by the land as well as leaving his own mark on it. Mandel projects onto the land ideas of hostility ("badlands"), redemption ("estevan 1934"), and continuity ("near Hirsch a Jewish cemetery"). He also receives knowledge from the landscape, as in "birthmark" and "souris river." The river running through Mandel's Saskatchewan valley is the imaginative link between time, place, and creativity:

seeing a mouse  
my mother struck her temple

he'll be marked at birth  
she said  
                  the women cried

I carry the souris  
on my brow  
                  the river  
in my head  
                  the valley  
of my dreams  
still echoes  
with her cry  
                                  (*OP*, p. 16)

In French *souris* means mouse, while in Yiddish *Tsouris* means sorrow, and so an actual birthmark on the poet's right brow is both mouse-mark and river-mark and the problems of his particular prairie-place. Continuing these linguistic puns in the companion poem, "souris river," Mandel links the river to Jewish custom and his own traditional upbringing, one tradition being to associate the landscape with language. Mandel pictures the river: "it runs through the province of poetry/it speaks in the barred hebrew syntax" (*OP*, p. 17). He also describes the river as the "book of years" in which all the possibilities of life are recorded, all the names and places of all the possible times. In "lost place" Mandel picks up this image, and in addition to picturing the land as relating and interpreting the Jewish traditions, he pictures it as replacing them. No longer does he turn to the

“book of years” for answers, he turns to the land instead. “I read the land for records now” (*OP*, p. 23).

Place doubled in time, both doubled in poetry. One of the basic criteria for regionalism today, a dedication to structural matters and questions of form, is thus crucial to Mandel. Thoughts recur: “find a structure. Or not *so* insistent and demanding: a question—what *is* the structure? Not self. Not *setting* in the simple-minded sense of place. But *lines* between, among, beginnings, endings. Lines to.” (*LS*, p. 117). A sequence of inter-connected poems consider and re-consider Mandel’s westering search for himself. The landscape is re-created: river valley, badlands, place names. History is personal (the horror of the young Mandel carrying a live chicken in an all-too-flimsy bag through the streets of Regina), relational (Mandel’s grandparents, parents, cousins), and collective (the strike, the war, the maintenance of an old Jewish cemetery). All relate, Mandel concludes, “it’s a physiological thing, the prairies. We fit spaces as our brain fits the world, the language mediates. It’s not a question of whether one is horizontal man or vertical man but of the way your mind fits” (*LS*, p. 113).

Mandel is justly proud of *Out of Place* because it is “a book that discovered a way of thinking about the Prairies.”<sup>34</sup> Suknaski and Kroetsch, with some similarities, as many differences, also discover “a way of thinking about the Prairies”—a way that leads them as well to the long poem form.

The regional aspect of Suknaski’s poetry is evident in the particularized re-creation of place, the understanding of history and tradition, and the accurate portrayal of people and their voices. Further, it exhibits many of the characteristics Mandel argues are also regional or western: a sense of doubleness, the importance of memory, a westering directionality, and the child’s vision. Writing of *Wood Mountain Poems*, Suknaski says he was “trying to find the meaning of home” (*WMP*, p. 124). As was Mandel’s, Suknaski’s search is the double search for place *and* self, trying to locate himself within a context and the context within himself. Place is also doubled by time in Suknaski’s poems (what Purdy calls “a kind of double vision” [*WMP*, p. 11]), but in an even more complex manner than in Mandel’s poems. Without a chronological sequence, the poems describe Wood Mountain scenes from Suknaski’s childhood and his recent return, stories of the ’30s drought, the original homesteaders, Indian history and even the pre-historic Sandia Man. The dualities of place then and now, time then and now, self then and now are all emphasized. As well, Suknaski talks of “a vaguely divided guilt; guilt for what happened to the Indian (his land taken) imprisoned on his reserve; and guilt because to feel this guilt is a betrayal of what you ethnically are—the son of a homesteader

and his wife who must be rightfully honoured in one's mythology" (*WMP*, p. 124). The dark vision that deals with "aberration," "guilt," "imprisonment," and "betrayal" creates not an historical pastiche of a particular Canadian locale, but "one's mythology," myth which is again part of Mandel's "distinctive prairie literature." Ironically, using the tools of documentary—the reportage of particular events, portraits of individuals, quotations, photographs—Suknaski succeeds in mythologizing Wood Mountain for all time. As important is the poet's own presence in his poems. Again, as for Mandel, Suknaski's "subject is his own dilemma, writing west" (*AT*, p. 74), and for Suknaski, the dilemma includes his Ukrainian heritage, his religious upbringing, his association with the Indian, his dedication to storytelling, and his absorption with death. Mandel and Suknaski also both use "the return" and "the leave-taking" to frame their poetic searches, while the honing of a definition of home goes on between. Mandel travels to Spain to discover that home means the Prairies, but while on the Prairies talks of train-time and his Toronto home (*OP*, p. 35). Suknaski wanders uncertain for seventeen years, muses on what is "always called...going home" (*WMP*, p. 115), and concludes "I am always leaving home" (*WMP*, p. 118).

Suknaski's poems, closer to narrative than are Mandel's or Kroetsch's, contain a surprising number of the features Mandel isolates as "typical" of prairie writing:

first...a particularized landscape or locale viewed with startling clarity and in minute detail; we have a child who observes or who is seen in the landscape; we have an adult who, either in himself, or in his stories, is a grotesque—the teller of tall tales, the story-teller; we hear the particular speech of a region—dialect; and because dialect is a deviation from standard English, and standard English is thought to be literary English, we have the sense of an anti-literary form; and finally, we have humour in the ludicrous, the grotesque, the tall tale. (*AT*, p. 49)

Wood Mountain and environs are re-created painstakingly, by Suknaski, and the child's view is incorporated with both original and renewed awareness. The accurate transcription of dialect is a particular achievement, and while the emphasis is more consistently on the grotesque than on the humorous, the recitation of tales, original and overheard, is one of the main narrative devices of the collection. In the Trail's End Pub or the West Central Pub we hear along with Suknaski, almost sipping the beer and unconcerned about closing time, myths of procreation, the tales of childhood and memory, the betrayals Indians suffered, and their stubborn pride. In Hoy's place we hear along with the boy Suknaski, watching the elders sip coffee, tales of homesteaders dried out by drought, a farmer driven pathetically to harvest thistles, a

ludicrous holdup botched by embarrassment. And always the voices sound authentically: Ukrainian, Yiddish, Indian, Chinese, contemporary slang. An Ukrainian boss tries to buy Suknaski's father off after a fall at work: "*you vill be okay meester Shoonatzki/dont tell anyvon about dis/commeh bek in coopleh veek time....*" (WMP, p. 19). A Jewish hide-buyer grades the goods he is shown: "*deez one iz primarry/deez one is ooordinary/and deez one iz jewst a fooking doog!*" (WMP, p. 96). Pride fills Sitting Bull's words:

*when did i ever ask you for provisions?  
before i beg  
i will cut willows for my young men to use  
while killing mice to survive (WMP, p. 69)*

Scorn fills those of a halfbreed guide:

*damnfool whiteman  
build big fire  
stand long way off—  
injun build small fire  
squat down close*

And grim humour: "*you hungry/you shoot good*" (WMP, p. 105). Jimmie Hoy, "owner of an archetypal, mythical real Chinese Cafe, an immortal prairie place" (AT, p. 76) complains

*all time takkie to much  
makkie trouble sunna bitch  
wadda hell madder wid you?...  
gee clyz  
all time slem ting (WMP, p. 28)*

The defiance of both father and son is evident, as the elder Suknaski exclaims,

*the last one [doctor] tried to shine a penlight up my ass  
now son  
no one's ever looked up my asshole  
and never will  
never (WMP, p. 19)*

The younger Suknaski cries out, "*for chrissake father/lemme carry the damn thing [flight bag] the/train's already too close!*" (WMP, p. 19). Some of Suknaski's observations seem "too close" as well, and the reader winces at the uncompromising authenticity.

One of the precepts of today's post-modern literature is a profound distrust of language, which has been diminished by the barbarisms of fascist and totalitarian regimes, the atrocities of Vietnam, and by its misuse in advertising and on cheap television programmes. What,

then, is the poet to do? Mandel writes profound critical essays,<sup>35</sup> purges his language of the extraneous, and concentrates on the foregrounding of language. Kroetsch, as will be discussed shortly, employs the often shock tactics of deconstruction to reinstill life into the words and forms. Suknaski, for his part, clings to the authenticity, the veracity of the voices of real people. In an essay he warns, "language can kill—can become a fascist act....**BEWARE THE LEADER. BEWARE THE POET. BEWARE YOURSELF**"<sup>36</sup>, and recommends a return "to the humanist word weavers," significantly listing writers and their long poems.<sup>37</sup> In the poem, "Loshka," Suknaski writes of the impossibility of the "perfect poem" "in a time/like this/when words falter and lag/seeming deadwood in the blood." Now "poets dream about beyond things." Talking both of love and poetry, Suknaski concludes

I only ask for faith  
greater care  
and gentle words when possible  
to cradle  
this fragile thing between us  
into the future (*WMP*, p. 42)

If poetry is to survive, then, great care must be taken by the poets themselves in the handling and arrangement of their words. The ear must be attuned to cadences; communication is precious.

Kroetsch calls it "Prairie to be uneasy about gentleness,"<sup>38</sup> and although Suknaski's words may be gentle in love, they are not always so in poetry. He writes of betrayal, suffering, guilt, death, as if by recording the bitterness of the past he can reclaim the language. Suknaski, the son of an Ukrainian homesteader, identifies with the early struggles: "and I try to imagine those who passed here so long ago/possibly becoming this dust/i breathe" (*WMP*, p. 79). He affirms his link with the Indian: "my thoughts are cast to sitting bull and a dream/where the lives of these people begin/where something in my life seems rooted here" (*WMP*, p. 66). In poetic terms, then, Suknaski identifies with the Indians ("goes Indian" to use Kroetsch's term<sup>39</sup>) in order to experience the disintegration of their world so that he can re-integrate his own. Oddly enough the cataloguing of death leads to creativity. Suknaski records destruction in order to re-structure. The poems are charged with death: by accident, by suicide, by disease, by massacre, by madness. Suknaski is direct and uncompromising, sparing no one, least of all himself. The pain of his most personal poems is evident, and despair still whispers to him, "who ever listened to the dreamer/or a poet" (*WMP*, p. 68).

*Wood Mountain Poems* is framed by particularly personal poems, the theme of return and leave-taking, and the double. "Homestead, 1914," the opening sequence, deals with Suknaski and his family, particularly the father, and balances Suknaski's relations then and upon "returning." The reality of Suknaski's childhood was often grim and painful, with the father leaving his wife and children after years filled with unpredictable violence. Suknaski's father's double personality is clearer than most:

you once warning us of the other man within you:  
*when these things happen to me*  
*do all you can and help one another save yourselves*  
*from me (WMP, p. 25)*

Upon returning to Wood Mountain, Suknaski faces the dilemma of loving his father and dealing with the memory of "the other man" and comes at last to an acceptance of the duality his father encompasses. One of the final poems acknowledges Suknaski's own duplicity: "i am one of them," "the dangerous...inhabited by two people" (*WMP*, p. 118). Suknaski is dangerous because he is so uncompromising. Although he distrusts language, he nevertheless uses it to recapture the suffering of others, to manipulate it for his own artistic purposes. This stimulates guilt in Suknaski, guilt that in the telling he is somehow betraying the privacy of the individuals, capitalizing on the misfortunes of others. And does language diminish experience? "Homestead, 1914" comes to acceptance but concludes:

silence  
 and a prayer to you shugmanitou [coyote in Dakota]  
 for something  
 to believe in (*WMP*, p. 26)

Suknaski is searching desperately for meaning and writes poems instead of embracing silence. He betrays the Indians because he is white like the white usurpers. He betrays his own people because he "goes Indian" and identifies with the native plight. The duplicity and ambiguity of the creative act haunts Suknaski. As Kroetsch says, "there's the sense in which we control the world by naming it and lose it by naming it. Because the name starts to replace the whatever else...."<sup>40</sup> As Patrick Lane says, "He who names must kill with the grace called language."<sup>41</sup> The "other man" in both Suknaski and his father is a latent killer. Exposure is a kind of death for the exposed, and Suknaski is the perpetrator. "By placing his people within poems...Suknaski captures their souls and limits their lives....though in remembering them he painfully grows toward a special wisdom of his own."<sup>42</sup> This is only half of the truth, however, for guilt may torture Suknaski, still he



realizes his power is to instil life as well. The Indians lived as an extension of their land, invigorating it with myth, and guarding the delicate balance of existence. The white man arrives and greedily bleeds the land of its riches, betrays the Indian, introduces disease, and “defies the gods” (*WMP*, p. 67). Suknaski attempts to balance matters somewhat, and as Isabella Valancy Crawford so many years before, he acknowledges the wisdom of the Indian and the appropriateness of their myths for poetry as well as the hardworking honesty of many of the homesteaders:

i claim these things  
and this ancestral space to move through and beyond  
stapled to the four cardinal directions  
this my right  
to chronicle the meaning of these vast plains  
in a geography of blood  
and failure  
*making them alive* (*WMP*, p. 78; emphasis added)

This poem concludes with a rare re-telling of Indian and white cooperation and their resultant success in triumphing over smallpox, at least in one area.

Wood Mountain is described at the end of *Wood Mountain Poems* as dying, and perhaps Suknaski’s guilt urges him so to describe it. In a later book (*the ghosts call you poor*) he realizes this is “a lie”,<sup>43</sup> and in a later one still he describes his continued need for a return “fix”:

suknatsky j bushed again  
in the hutch of urban despair  
and fleeing across prairie  
that becomes an incurable need  
at least twice a year<sup>44</sup>

He cannot remain, for “the last of his follies” was “believing i could return/and build a home” (*WMP*, p. 119). No home, but poetry. The last poem in *Wood Mountain Poems* concludes with acceptance, as did the first, but there is now also peace. The ghosts, for Suknaski, seem laid to rest—at least until the next necessary return:

time poet  
to put aside what you came to  
leaving all else  
behind

time to unsaddle  
this lame horse ridden  
into ancestral dust  
and cease living like an indian  
of old

\* \* \*

time to tie this dream horse to a star  
and walk  
ordinary earth (*WMP*, p. 122)

No ordinary earth, the Prairies of Mandel, Suknaski, and Kroetsch—they turn it into poetry.

The turning into poetry is relatively new for Kroetsch, at least in terms of his work overall. Published in 1981, the eight-part *Field Notes* is Kroetsch's continuing long poem, and marks his actual return to the Prairies. More clearly autobiographical than his novels, the poetry is profoundly regionalist in many of the expansive manners already noted. The sense of first place that Mandel describes is captured by Kroetsch in his absorption with beginnings; memory replaces history as a means to past; the story-teller is revered; and tall tales demonstrate a "humour in the ludicrous." Kroetsch goes back in memory but not to recapture and re-live as does Suknaski, or to comment on the going back as does Mandel, but rather to discover the appropriate forms and to comment on the processes of memory and creativity. Time isn't "elastic" in the way it is for Suknaski, or doubled by place as it is for Mandel, rather it is to be "uninvented" and then invented anew. The tension between culture and place is but one doubleness reflected clearly in the structures Kroetsch employs: time and place rather than narrative propel the lines, and a double-entry binary form is most common. In conversation with fellow-Prairie writer, Margaret Laurence, Kroetsch notes: "We are involved in this as Canadian writers: the *doppelgänger* thing. You meet yourself in another form."<sup>45</sup> The "other form" may be self as child, self as other poet,<sup>46</sup> or self as poetry. For Kroetsch identity is a fiction, and fiction, an identity; therefore, the forms of the literature become the very forms of self and a means to discovering self's essence: "to be defined by words somehow drawn from the very ground of identity."<sup>47</sup> New's exploration of the "landscape of language itself." "Every journey is a journey home," writes Kroetsch in *The Studhorse Man*.<sup>48</sup> The structural concerns are synonymous with the personal questing: "the examination of Kroetsch's own family past, the seeking after personal source, is also the discovery of the literary form."<sup>49</sup> The examination of landscape is equally the discovery of literary form. The boundaryless west, for Kroetsch, implies "experience within a kind of chaos". "For a moment, at the frontier, the bonds of custom are broken and unrestraint is triumphant" reads the epigraph to *Gone Indian*. "you must see/the confusion again/the chaos again/the original forest" reads "The Ledger." The structural solutions for Kroetsch are a finding of form in the chaos. The land for Kroetsch, as for Mandel and Suknaski, is also the

the “wilderness behind the eyes”, and so his exploration of prairie place is an examination of the poet’s unconscious, his imagination in the very process of writing. The metaphor of growth in “Seed Catalogue” is the appropriate one. Kroetsch questions: “Is not landscape an event as well as a setting? The place of mythology, of story, become action.”<sup>50</sup> So instead of describing the prairie fields of flowing wheat or his own westering return, Kroetsch concentrates, in “Seed Catalogue” for instance, on prairie cycles that include germination, growth, harvesting—the magical potency of seed. In “The Ledger” he repeats the words, “WHAT DO I OWE YOU?/ WHAT DO I OWE YOU?”<sup>51</sup>, as he tries to evaluate his debt to the past and his ancestors. Without recreating the entire world of prairie pub or Chinese cafe, Kroetsch nevertheless captures the “voice” of the prairie in the yarning tales:

- You ever hear the one about the woman who buried her husband with his ass sticking out of the ground so that every time she happened to walk by she could give it a swift kick?

- Yeh, I heard it. (*FN*, p. 55)

For the story-telling novelist the long poem form is the obvious one. Humorously, Kroetsch demonstrates the affinity:

Once upon a time in the village of Heisler—

- Hey, wait a minute.  
That’s a story. (*FN*, p. 57)

As Mandel asserts that the coherence of Western Canadian literature is in its “developing forms” (*AT*, p. 66), so Kroetsch’s regionalist position is accentuated by his devotion to structural dilemmas. In an early interview he associates place and process: “The whole business... is one of capturing process....things are actually shaping, being shaped, before our eyes in Canada. You’re literally discovering your landscape, literally discovering your myth.”<sup>52</sup> In the dozen years since uttering these words, Kroetsch has changed the second person pronoun to a very pronounced first person one, and is writing poems that live the claims of “environment,...time and place” which the lack of a literary past place on a Canadian writer.

what has come to interest me right now is...the dream of origins. Obviously on the Prairies the small town and the farm are no longer real places for most people, they are dreamed places....Remembered certainly. But memory alters things. When those towns were the actuality of our lives we had realistic fiction, and we didn’t have any poetry at all. But now that it’s a dreamed condition, a remembered condition, an explanation of where we came from, a kind of myth, now suddenly we

get poems about it. You know, Wood Mountain is a scrubby little place. But as a remembered place, as a dreamed place, it has great resonance.<sup>53</sup>

"The dream of origins" is at the core of Kroetsch's prairie poetics, as he attempts to re-capture beginnings in memory as well as process. The re-captured beginning places and people are the farm in Heisler, the mill in Ontario, the immigrant forebears. The beginnings of process are re-captured in the practice called deconstruction. Multiple names for this process all indicate the attempt to get back to beginnings by removing layers of meanings and conventions: deconstructing, demythologizing, un hiding, un naming, un inventing. This involves a re-living through the encrustations that build up over the years and attach themselves to words, word patterns, myths, so that originality and freshness can be re-instilled and released.

Deconstruction implies an operation involving the dismantling of something into discrete concrete parts and suggests the ever-present possibility of putting the object back together in its *original form* [emphasis added] ....deconstruction is really more of a technique of *de-sedimentation*,...a technique of de-sedimenting the text in order to allow what was *always already* inscribed in its texture to resurface.<sup>54</sup>

So the poet rehearses previous methodologies and myths, then by turning the tactic against itself, dislocates and finally deconstructs the system. Kroetsch at once builds on past traditions and myths (the quest, ledger, seed catalogue, oral tradition) and deconstructs the position just left—as if climbing a staircase and rolling up the stairs behind. "This operation is paradoxical in that the deconstructive movement is at the same time a close reading of texts and a commentary on its own practice of writing."<sup>55</sup> "The Ledger" is then a ledger; "Seed Catalogue," a catalogue; and both are poems about writing poetry. Says Kroetsch: "I'm always looking for sub-literary texts that tell us how to be literary."<sup>56</sup> The materials and methods at hand are used: "You take a given set of conventions and play with them in a certain way. I think some of the conventions of fiction control too much our way of seeing the world. It starts to get interesting when you take those conventions and both use them and work against them."<sup>57</sup> Again, the double thrust. Again, the renewed sight. The structural practice allows for both a new way of saying and a new way of seeing, each integral to each. For a prairie poetic to be possible, the new shaping was necessary, but always it is based on beginnings. "You poet, giving birth to yourself. The contemporary Canadian long poem as birth and trauma. The endless need to begin."<sup>58</sup> But just as the structural basis of Kroetsch's poetry associates creation with destruction, so too the long poem concerned with birth and beginnings is

concerned equally with death “the fascination with tombstones”<sup>59</sup>—Mandel’s Jewish cemetery, Suknaski’s many dyings, Kroetsch’s fifth definition of ledger. “It comes naturally to me,” says Kroetsch. “A loose generalization would have it that creation and destruction go hand in hand. But my destruction takes the form of trying to make an old story work, for instance, having almost to destroy the old story to tell it anew....the old stories, instead of illuminating the world, sometimes stop us from seeing it. It’s like a pair of glasses that don’t quite fit any longer.”<sup>60</sup> Kroetsch borrows Layton’s “new improved binoculars” and trains them on the Prairies, illuminating them for his readers. At the level of legend and myth, the *Odyssey* is endlessly replayed and reconstructed in Kroetsch’s literature, so too at the level of language new resonances have to be instilled in the words. Precociously aware of twentieth-century lingual misgivings—“even at the age of thirteen I saw the failure of language”<sup>61</sup>—Kroetsch now works, sometimes subversively, to reverse language’s powers for concealment. “One of the functions of honest writing is to make language reveal again....By repeating, by establishing images.”<sup>62</sup> And as Mandel directs, “The question we have to come to...is not *who* is prairie man, but what *images* does he choose?” (*AT*, p. 52). For Kroetsch they are images of beginnings: the dreamed and remembered beginnings of small town or farm childhood and the revelatory, structural beginnings of deconstructive tactics. He writes of “the new myth of beginnings...the Western Canadian myth: the artist from the distant place, from the bookless world.”<sup>63</sup> The personal remembering of this myth entails a one-room school, the stories of Joseph Conrad and Doc Savage, solitary farm work, gardening, Grove-like horse-and-buggy or horse-and-cutter rides to school, the talk and the stories. “In our myth: begin with the wonder of seeing.”<sup>64</sup>

If on the prairies realistic fiction is to give way to poetry, the necessary scope is found in the long poem form. Kroetsch teaches courses in the long poem form, and he writes about its theory. The three possibilities: “the short long poem, the book-long poem,”<sup>65</sup> “the life-long poem.”<sup>66</sup> For Kroetsch the only possibility is the last one. “The continuing poem: not the having written, but the *writing*. The poem as long as a life. The lifelost poem” (*LPA*, p. 311). This indicates the new relation for Kroetsch between his own life and his literary work as well as the ongoing nature of the enterprise. *Parts of Field Notes* were published over the six years preceding its publication as a book, and the title page indicates: “a continuing poem.” At present Kroetsch envisages all his poetry as partaking in this continuing long poem—“the poem as long as a life.” The emphasis on “the *writing*” also indicates the theoretical interest Kroetsch has in this form.

Inextricably linked for Kroetsch to a regionalist pride of place, the long poem form is equally involved with post-modernist literary concerns. It *is* the poem of our times:

The problem for the writer of the contemporary long poem is to honour disbelief in belief—that is, to recognize and explore our distrust of system, of grid, of monisms, of cosmologies perhaps, certainly of inherited story—and at the same time write a long work that has some kind of (under erasure) unity.

And yet the long poem, by its very length, allows the exploration of the failure of system and grid. The poem of that failure is a long poem.<sup>67</sup>

The duplicity that is at the heart of Western Canadian poetics is evident. If subject seems to negate system and questions writing, deconstruction is one structural solution; the long poem, the form. Unity becomes an obvious dilemma, and narrative no longer suffices, “but once you take out narrative what do you use instead in order to structure a long poem?”<sup>68</sup> Kroetsch’s solutions include time, place, the process of deconstruction, repeated linguistic patterns, the alphabet, colours. He discovers coherence in “juxtaposition, repetition, contrast.”<sup>69</sup> Movement in part forms the relationship between the sections of his ongoing poem: back through memory and invention into the past of “Stone Hammer Poem” and “The Ledger,” then to the all-inclusive present of creativity in “Seed Catalogue,” and on to a flight from restrictive time and space in “How I Joined the Seal Herd” and “The Sad Phoenician,” finally to an exploration of the absences and silence beyond language.

“Stone Hammer Poem” begins the backward journey with a stone “old as the last/ Ice Age” (*FN*, p. 15) “a million/years older than” (*FN*, p. 14) any hand of man functioning with creative intent. The stone was fashioned to hammer by an Indian, then bucked the plow of a homesteading farmer, and now weights papers and watches words on the poet’s desk. As symbol, the stone leads back to a memoried past—both actual and possible—and inspires the necessary muse of memory and meditation. As Kroetsch says in “Seed Catalogue”: “and you have/ no memory then/ no meditation/ no song” (*FN*, p. 56). The stone, with shaping and the addition of rawhide loops, was made more than primordial stone by an Indian ancestor. This is what happened. The stone hammer was then lost in play or use, beneath prairie grass or in buffalo skull. This is what might have happened. “I have to/ I want/ to know (not know)/?WHAT HAPPENED” (*FN*, p. 16). The binary-system structure and the strategy of deconstruction are evident: actual and possible pasts balance, and knowing through unknowing is impetus. The stone’s functions as hammer and as poem (“The poem/ is the



the catalogue blooming in a dark prairie January, promising fertility, virtue, singularity, superiority, wonder. Structured on the seed catalogue metaphor, the poem puts the questions: "How do you grow a gardener?...a lover?...a prairie town?...a past?...a garden?" The poet as gardener (read cultivator) and lover (read procreator), as product of prairie town and past (read model): "(there are no models) and always/ (there are only models)."<sup>70</sup> The seedtime/seektime of the poem is the course of the poet's life, from the "terrible symmetry" of "the home place" to the "terrible symmetry" of his present writings. The constant balancing of birth and death is emphasized by the story of cousin Kenneth, first family member to return to Germany, killed while trying to deliver death-dealing bombs (he, the navigator) to the city of his great-grandmother's birth: "a terrible symmetry."

"The seed catalogue is a shared book in our society," explains Kroetsch.

We have few literary texts approaching that condition. I wanted to write a poetic equivalent to the "speech" of a seed catalogue. The way we read the page and hear its implications. Spring. The plowing, the digging, of the garden. The mapping of the blank, cool earth. The exact placing of the explosive seed. (*LPA*, p. 312)

Important is both the "giving the form to this land" (*FN*, p. 58) (father's impulse to fence—possession, story, hunting—in order to sabotage "poetry") and the planting in this land (mother's impulse to seed—bestowal, song, renewal—in order to promote "poetry"). But this implies an old-fashioned notion of "poetry," just as a literary language used to be essential. Dialect now possible, the tall tale now possible. Writing of another prairie poet, Kroetsch describes the "endless talk" recorded—the listening in to "the laments, the tall tales, the ironies, the indignation, the resignation, the sentimentality...heard all together, finally."<sup>71</sup> The double attraction expressed in "Seed Catalogue" of paternal story (the father yarning on in the kitchen's warmth about hunting a badger, shooting a magpie) and maternal song (the mother planting radish seeds and whispering promises of fertility) leads to problems of form. As Peter Thomas describes Kroetsch's dilemma: "He continues to construct an elaborate symbolism of story's flight from song, rooted in the primordial female/male duality, bullshit's conflict with love in a deathly game of words."<sup>72</sup> The obvious structural solution to the dual claims of the oral and lyric traditions is the long poem, clearly demonstrated in the final (so far) section of *Field Notes*—"The Criminal Intensities of Love as Paradise," in which Kroetsch sets up a binary entry form in which the two impulses vie on the page. The oral tradition of stories, whether told in farm kitchens or

the local pub, is strong on the prairies, generating "debt and obligation" in the poet. To translate this tradition into poetry the only solution is the long poem—the appropriate poetic gallery for the prairie "characters."

As central character in his continuing poem, Kroetsch transforms himself into a "bull" seal (not a casual choice of disguise certainly) and "a kind of Phoenician, with reference, that is, / to my trading in language, even in, to stretch a point, / ha, my being at sea" (*FN*, p. 79). In "How I Joined the Seal Herd" Kroetsch gives in to the perplexity of "being at sea" and in an ultimate act of deconstruction, unhiding his human form and returns to a pre-literate animal state—"in order to know life before the distortions imposed by language."<sup>73</sup> The poem begins with a rejection of the intellectual stance—"my head did not please me" (*FN*, p. 71), emphasizes that his actions are conducted "without thinking"—but comes to realize finally "I was still a man, I had to talk" (*FN*, p. 73). This re-construction of past is ultimately "too far past everything," but still Kroetsch has hopes for the offspring spawned by his unlikely mating.

Language, meaning, mating, and silence are all continued concerns in "The Sad Phoenician" and "The Silent Poet Sequence," perhaps Kroetsch's most overtly post-modern poems in their attack on audience: "I turn signs around, I point/all travellers in the wrong direction" (*FN*, p. 111). The comedy is in the absurd; farce, in failure; and logic is scarce. Direction and place are again connected with language: "I peruse a linguistic atlas" (*FN*, p. 111). Parody, clichés, puns—"I have a few tricks up my sleeve"—(*FN*, p. 77) a repeated linguistic pattern (alternate lines begin with "and" and then "but") structure the lines. Entries of "The Sad Phoenician" are headed by individual letters, but the letters themselves are fragmentary, the alphabet breaking down. The difficulties of creativity are emphasized: "the poem must resist the poet, always" (*FN*, p. 82); "the poet must resist the poem" (*FN*, p. 85); "I live by a kind of resistance" (*FN*, p. 92). The resistances are sexual as well, with poet as lover once again. The female/male dichotomy is explored further. Kroetsch delivers the following to a conference at the same time he begins work on "The Sad Phoenician":<sup>74</sup>

How do you make love in a new country?

In a paradoxical way, stories—more literally, books—contain the answer. How do you establish any sort of *close* relationship in a landscape—in a physical situation—whose primary characteristic is *distance*? The telling of story—more literally, the literal closedness of a book—might be made to (paradoxically again) contain space.

Already the metaphor of sex, uneasily, intrudes. We conceive of external space as male, internal space as female. More precisely, the penis:

external, expandable, expendable; the vagina: internal, eternal. The maleness verges on mere absence. The femaleness on mystery: it is a space that is not a space. External space is the silence that needs to speak, or that needs to be spoken. It is male. The having spoken is the book. It is female. It is closed. How do you make love in a new country?<sup>75</sup>

"Not the having written, but the *writing*" (*LPA*, p. 311). The question of writing and the question of making love, then, become synonymous, the difficult sexual relations, metaphors for difficult writing. Still, the influence of prairie space is primary, and the absences Kroetsch catalogues in "Seed Catalogue" to answer "*How do you grow a past?/to live in*" (essential absences of prairie place—bases of foreign economies, historical and cultural figures or sites, books, particulars) become the post-modern absences of communication that the borderland "literature of exhaustion" exhibits.

And absence seems to be a peculiarly prairie component of all of these three writers' long poems—perhaps the logical conclusion here. Mandel muses, "it begins to seem to me that we define ourselves, as Canadians, in our absences, in our lapses" (*LS*, p. 95) and writes *Out of Place*, "a book existing in the gaps between its poems, its absences" (*LS*, p. 62). Kroetsch, looking at old maps of North America, notes the blank of Western Canada: "My imagination, fired out of all season by those blank spaces."<sup>76</sup> As we approach 1984, inching our way to oblivion or the twenty-first century, presence becomes particularly precious in the absence of meaning of today's frenzied misuse of language and in the face of possible annihilation. Absence/silence is at once a negation of art to be feared and the necessary pre-condition for creativity to be sought. ("Silence is one of the chief sounds of the Prairies,"<sup>77</sup> says Kroetsch.) The border of expression, approached in post-modern poetics, is also an absence/silence.

Place become space.

The beautiful blankness of the page.

Absence.

In the middle of the argument, of the journey, of the descent: where the traditional traveler, in the traditional story, traditionally receives the secret knowledge that enables him both to return and to go on:

we come to a dispatch of silence.<sup>78</sup>

The minimal poetics. The ghosts. Suknaski, haunted by the ghosts of Wood Mountain, goes on to write the *ghosts call you poor*, trying to

exorcise the guilt and betrayal. "Maybe that's a genuine Prairie melancholy," says Mandel: "the shared European stories, Jewish, Roumanian, Ukrainian, of loss. Soup and suffering. Dreams about what might happen? To get it right for once. To say it so it will not be forgotten. To find the words."<sup>79</sup> The notion of borderland, between the double possibilities, recurs. Kroetsch suggests "that the fascinating place is that place right in between the two."<sup>80</sup> Between time and place, then and now. Between self's history and land's history. Between daily language and poetic language, story and song. Mandel, in describing Kroetsch's "Seed Catalogue," describes for all three poets the turning into poetry of prairie absences:

out of the terror, out of the losses, out of the shards and fragments of lives, their letters, documents, memories, speech, stories, big stories and little stories, invocations and epilogues, first and last words, loves and deaths, emptiness, all that the prairie wasn't, could not be, its absences, emptiness and fulfilment, the plenitude of being. Seeds and catalogues, the books we read. The prairie emerges precisely out of its absences.<sup>81</sup>

The tension is explicit in the poetry, but the poetry does begin to fill the void. The lack of a definitive identity, then, becomes not a deficiency to mourn over but rather a source of endless possibilities from which to proceed. "The consequence of the northern prairies to human definition: the diffusion of personality into a complex of possibilities rather than a concluded self."<sup>82</sup> Language in Canada, foreign (read British, read American), needs authenticating ("To find the words") now to take the measure of place and time. The troubling dichotomy between the emergent Prairie culture (itself a hybrid of imported "schlock" and high art, nurtured by individual ethnicity) and the experienced reality of the place (flat, vast, boundaryless, with every so often seemingly insignificant human eruptions) which has begotten both the most fundamental and most radical in Canadian religion and politics fuels the literary evolution from regional romance to prairie realism to the post-modern prairie poetics of the long poem. Joseph Conrad and Doc Savage, the tension rife in beginnings: ethnic, literary, vernacular.

And voice is all-important, while here are some differences. The anecdotal vernacular of Suknaski is definitely "low culture," the impetus to story, while Mandel's literary awareness is "high culture," (LS, p. 63) the impetus to song. The tension between "high" and "low culture," between story and song, is most marked in Kroetsch's poetry. In another version, the "basic tension...in the Canadian long poem" becomes one between "the temptation of the documentary," to which Suknaski succumbs—the authenticity of voice in cafe/pub stories, the historical documentation, the archival photos—and "the skepticism

about history," to which Mandel yields—recording Mrs. Feldman's letter (*OP*, p. 36) and his own reply, "[I'm told] I've got the ghosts wrong" (*OP*, p. 37). Kroetsch elaborates on the consequences of the latter choice: "a kind of madness in the recording...a pressure towards madness. [Mandel's closing "Pictures in an Institution"?) And against it: photographs, collages, analyses, protests of accuracy and source, afterwards."<sup>83</sup> Mandel includes ghostly Prairie photos: himself faceless, gazing through a double frame, and again, himself with back to camera following a path out of the photo-frame. Kroetsch, himself, eschews documentary and photographs, trusting entirely to language and, if photos are an alternative to language, "something other than writing" (*AT*, p. 13). Kroetsch approaches the borders of communication through his post-modern techniques. Suknaski has written his *Wood Mountain Poems*; Mandel, his *Out of Place*; so Kroetsch can write his *Field Notes*.

To say that three Canadian poets return(ed) variously to their beginning places is not enough. That this was vitally necessary to their creativity is more, but it only hints at the fruitfully symbiotic nature of the life-poetry relation. The fundamentals of life and literature (form) are investigated in their searching poems. They question the role of art today and the implication of language in the inhumanities it is made to disguise or explain; the necessary structural solutions mediate. The ghost poems—Mandel's minimal poetics, Suknaski's ferocious authenticity, Kroetsch's deconstructive tactics—all attempt to come to terms with the alienation endemic in our day. The sense of dis-ease with self and therefore incompatibility with notions of "home" drive these poets to attempt to get back to beginnings in order to construct a past and a present consonant with their aims and ideals. Final answers are difficult to come by, as Kroetsch warns: "To understand the long poem of our time would be to understand our time."<sup>84</sup> Still, this does validate the search.

- You ever hear the one about the poet who returned to  
the Prairies and wrote poems?
- Yeh, I heard it.

Aunts, foreign lands, the kitchen cabinet. But not only the aunts: the cousins, uncles, parents, grandparents, as well. The foreign lands, the familiar lands, doubled by each other. The kitchen cabinet, but the garden as well—a prairie Eden.

Regionalism, the long poem form, Mandel, Suknaski, and Kroetsch.

## NOTES

1. "An Interview With Eli Mandel," by Margery Fee, *Essays in Canadian Writing*, No. 1 (1974), pp. 2-13. Personal interview with Eli Mandel, 31 May 1981.
2. *Another Time* (Erin: Press Porcepic, 1977), p. 13; hereafter cited as *AT*. All further references to this work appear in the text.
3. Robert Kroetsch, "Statements by the Poets: Seed Catalogue," in *The Long Poem Anthology*, ed. Michael Ondaatje (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1979), p. 311; hereafter cited as *LPA*. All further references to this work appear in the text.
4. *Wood Mountain Poems* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976), p. 124; hereafter cited as *WMP*. All further references to this work appear in the text.
5. Robert Kroetsch, "For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem," *dandelion*, Vol. 8 (1981), p. 81.
6. Kroetsch's childhood home in Alberta.
7. Preface, *Field Notes*, by Robert Kroetsch (Don Mills: General Publishing, 1981), p. 6.
8. *The Bush Garden* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1971), p. 149.
9. "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre," in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, ed. Eli Mandel (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 269.
10. "Recent Canadian Verse," in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, p. 199.
11. (Toronto: New Press, 1972), p. xxiv, as quoted in *AT*, p. 150.
12. Mandel says, "one of the most difficult critical questions is the fictional nature of literary reality" (*AT*, p. 7). Kroetsch says, "The fiction makes us real," *Creation*, ed. R. Kroetsch (Toronto: New Press, 1970), p. 63.
13. *Articulating West*, p. xi.
14. "Atlantic Possibilities," *Essays in Canadian Writing*, No. 20 (1980-81), p. 33.
15. Referring to himself and Suknaski, Eli Mandel, *Life Sentence* (Toronto and Victoria: Press Porcepic, 1981), p. 133; hereafter cited as *LS*. All further references to this work appear in the text.
16. Preface, *Field Notes*, p. 6.
17. "An Interview with Robert Kroetsch," by Russell M. Brown, *University of Windsor Review*, Vol. 7 (1972), p. 2.
18. "Uncovering Our Dream World: An Interview with Robert Kroetsch," by Robert Enright and Dennis Cooley, *Essays in Canadian Writing*, Nos. 18-19 (1980), p. 23.
19. "Interview with Eli Mandel, March 16/78," by David Arnason, Dennis Cooley, and Robert Enright, *Essays in Canadian Writing*, Nos. 18-19 (1980), p. 88.
20. "Uncovering Our Dream World," pp. 26-27.
21. Before *Wood Mountain Poems* Suknaski wrote some experimental poetry and published *on first looking down from lions gate bridge* (Coatsworth: Black Moss Press, 1976).
22. William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*.
23. Dennis Cooley, "rePlacing," *Essays in Canadian Writing*, nos. 18-19 (1980), p. 17.
24. "Locality," *Dreaming Backwards* (Don Mills: General Publishing, 1981), p. 69.
25. Twice in *Another Time* is even found the title of the volume of poetry, *Out of Place* (*AT*, pp. 69, 77).
26. Ann Mandel, Preface, *Out of Place*, by Eli Mandel (Erin: Press Porcepic, 1977), p. 8.
27. From *Gödel, Escher, Bach* by Douglas R. Hofstadter (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).
28. *Creation*, p. 63, quoted in *AT*, p. 55.
29. "Interview with Eli Mandel, March 16/78," p. 73.
30. "Interview with Eli Mandel, March 16/78," p. 70.
31. W. H. New, "Editorial: This Year Country," *Canadian Literature*, No. 77 (1978), p. 2.
32. The poet is still the "teller of secrets." The referentiality of the poems has changed over the years, but the theory still holds.
33. Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), p. 81; quoting Roman Jakobson.
34. "Interview with Eli Mandel, March 16/78," p. 81.
35. Particularly, "The Poet as Critic," *AT*, pp. 11-14; and "The Language of Silence," *AT*, pp. 35-41.
36. "The Prairie Graveyard," *Essays in Canadian Writing*, Nos. 18-19 (1980), p. 115.
37. For example, Williams, *Paterson*; Pound, *Cantos*; Olson, *Maximus*; Ginsburg, *Howl*; Kroetsch, *Seed Catalogue*.
38. "Uncovering Our Dream World," p. 30.



39. *Gone Indian* (Toronto: New Press, 1973); "Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, Vol. 3 (1974), pp. 43-45.
40. "An Interview with Robert Kroetsch," by Geoffrey Hancock, *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, Nos. 24-25 (1977), p. 40.
41. "The Poetry of Andy Suknaski," *Essays in Canadian Writing*, Nos. 18-19 (1980), p. 91.
42. "The Poetry of Andy Suknaski," p. 96.
43. (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1978), p. 2.
44. *In the Name of Narid* (Erin: Porcupine's Quill, 1981), p. 55.
45. *Creation*, p. 59.
46. Kroetsch and Mandel view each other as *doppelgänger*s; poetry reading, Toronto, October 1981.
47. Peter Thomas, *Robert Kroetsch* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1980), p. 17.
48. (Richmond Hill: Simon & Shuster of Canada, 1971), p. 155.
49. Thomas, p. 17.
50. *The Crow Journals* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1980), p. 56.
51. *Field Notes*; hereafter cited as *FN*. All further references to this work appear in the text.
52. Brown, p. 7.
53. "Uncovering Our Dream World," p. 29.
54. Josué V. Harari, "Critical Factions/Critical Fictions," *Textual Strategies*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 36-37.
55. Harari, p. 36.
56. Hancock, p. 40.
57. Hancock, p. 39.
58. "For Play and Entrance," p. 70.
59. "For Play and Entrance," p. 73.
60. "Uncovering Our Dream World," p. 28.
61. *The Crow Journals*, p. 16.
62. Hancock, p. 48.
63. "Taking the Risk," *Salt*, No. 16 (1977), p. 2.
64. "Taking the Risk," p. 5.
65. "For Play and Entrance," p. 63.
66. "For Play and Entrance," p. 65.
67. "For Play and Entrance," p. 62.
68. Brown, p. 3.
69. Brown, p. 5.
70. "F.P. Grove: The Finding," *The Stone Hammer Poems* (Lantzville: Oolichan Books, 1976), p. 46.
71. Introduction, *Prairie Pub Poems*, by Glen Sorestad (Saskatoon: Thistledown, 1976).
72. Thomas, p. 27.
73. Robert Lecker, "Robert Kroetsch's Poetry," *Open Letter*, 3, No. 8 (1978), p. 87.
74. The conference was held in April of 1978, while an entry in *The Crow Journals* for April 1978 says Kroetsch then started "The Sad Phoenician" (*CJ*, p. 80).
75. "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space," *Crossing Frontiers*, ed. Dick Harrison (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1979), pp. 73-74.
76. *The Crow Journals*, p. 28.
77. "Uncovering Our Dream World," p. 27.
78. "For Play and Entrance," p. 72.
79. "Interview with Eli Mandel, March 16/78," p. 89.
80. Brown, p. 16.
81. "The Border League: American 'West' and Canadian 'Region'," *Crossing Frontiers*, p. 119.
82. *Gone Indian* (Nanaimo: Theytus Books, 1981), p. 152.
83. "For Play and Entrance," p. 64.
84. "For Play and Entrance," p. 82.