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Canadian Literature and Robert Kroetsch: A Case of Canonization¹

“We are now in the process of retelling the story of modern,” says Robert Kroetsch in a collection of essays published in *Open Letter* in 1984 (“Standards”, 41). Likewise, we are now in the process of retelling the story of Robert Kroetsch—or collaborating with his telling of that story—at the same time as we are in the continual process of retelling the canon and, at least occasionally, self-consciously examining our processes of canon-making in Canadian literature, a topic Kroetsch himself has addressed.² The case of Robert Kroetsch in Canadian letters is interesting and important, both in itself and in the contrast it provides to other canonical figures and texts in Canadian literature. It is also particularly instructive regarding our processes of canon-making. In this paper I will look at that case, and attempt to account for some of its peculiarities and for its significance for Canadian literature and criticism.³

One uses the term “canon” to describe a list of standard texts, to describe the “best” works in a language, a national culture, or a genre, and to identify the collective work of any single major author. Canons are national and transnational, and most critics agree that canons shift; that is, they collapse and disappear as well as re-form. The important questions are why this is so, under what pressures, and what we, as intelligent readers, should make of the phenomenon. The canon I have most in mind here is that of anglophone Canadian literature, although Kroetsch participates in canons beyond that national and linguistic boundary.

The term “literature” implies literary institution rather than simply texts—we tend to make the identification of literature with its textual products (Even-Zohar, 7). It also raises the question of status rather than value. Culture and canon are integrally and tautologically related:

"[t]he classical is what is preserved precisely because it signifies and interprets itself" (Gadamer, qtd. in Smith, 33). Texts become classics because they have already been thoroughly mediated—evaluated as well as interpreted—for us by the culture and cultural institutions through which they have been preserved and by which we ourselves have been formed (Gadamer, qtd. in Smith, 33). Our construction of the canon is connected to our construction of our own reality—and what we recognize as speaking directly and truly to and of that reality. That reality, of course, is constructed by those in positions of cultural power, which is where we can locate Robert Kroetsch. His cultural power lies in his academic canonical status and his acts of interpreting the social group or culture to itself, which he does on a regional, and perhaps national, scale.

Frank Kermode says that canons are essentially strategic constructs by which societies maintain their own interests, since the canon allows control over the texts a culture takes seriously and the methods of interpretation that establish the meaning of serious (qtd. in Altieri, 42). Certainly we take Kroetsch seriously; his writing is taken seriously as well because it is part of a contemporary and international trend in literature which he has participated in and promoted with his editorial work on *Boundary 2*. If Charles Altieri is right when he says that "[c]anons are simply ideological banners for social groups: social groups propose them as forms of self-definition, and they engage other proponents to test limitations while exposing the contradictions and incapacities of competing groups" (43), then the phenomenon of Robert Kroetsch can be explained as well by his participation in a particular literary movement. This also explains in part why we grant him authority to speak of us and to us, and it is authority, much as I expect he would dislike the word, and the idea. Gerald L. Bruns writes that

the whole point of canonization is to underwrite the authority of a text....the distinction between canonical and noncanonical is thus not just a distinction between authentic and inauthentic texts...but between texts that are forceful in a given situation and those which are not. From a hermeneutical standpoint, in which the relation of a text to a situation is always of primary interest, the theme of canonization is *power*. (67)

Since I will argue that the Kroetsch phenomenon, not the Kroetsch texts, has been the subject of canonization, this quotation is rather significant. Kroetsch's repeatedly announced anti-Aristotelian and anti-theological position, his preference for multiplicity and fragmentation to Unities, for the voices of Babel to the prophetic Voice

(*Labyrinths*, xi) is something of a contradiction to his position in the Canadian literature canon. He can count on being heard and on participating in a repeated and essentially conservative process as he shapes the canon: in a relatively short time he has become part of Canada's old literary guard. His speaking against tradition has served only to place another tradition based on post-structuralism, narratology, intertextuality, and the theories of deconstruction and reader-response criticism.

Kroetsch's canonization is unlike that of many of his colleagues and contemporaries in Canadian literature. The process of his canonization is simultaneous with his living and writing: there is no recuperation of early or forgotten texts occurring here, no project of rediscovery as has happened with *Tay John* or *Roughing It*. This is not always the case, for writers either in Canada or elsewhere: Leavis defined a great tradition of earlier writers; later writers often direct attention to earlier writers, as Eliot did for Donne; forgotten or unpublished texts change literary reputations, as does ideology—in the late twentieth century many texts by women are being seriously studied for the first time.

More interesting is the fact that Kroetsch's position in Canadian letters is significant and official, and not generally questioned: he has received the Governor General's Award for his fiction and a Killam Fellowship to write a major work in Canadian literary criticism; his work is taught in undergraduate survey courses, Canadian literature courses, special studies of the picaresque, and courses of twentieth century writing and metafiction. He is invited to participate on panels, in keynote sessions at academic conferences, and at writers' gatherings, as well as to give readings, to edit special editions, to give interviews, and to participate in dialogues. This is in addition to his position as Professor of English at the University of Manitoba. Kroetsch's attainment of this status appears, at least from the outside, to have been accomplished fairly readily: although he talks about the "necessary doing of violence in order to get a space [for one's books] on the shelf" he also admits that "when one has been incorporated into the tradition, and appears on the shelf, then somebody else has to come along and do violence" (*Labyrinths*, 42). Certainly considerable violence would have to be done to get him *off* our shelves now.

There are a number of reasons, in fact, to suggest that this canonization should *not* have occurred as it has. His literary reputation was established first as a fiction writer in a country which claims women as its best fiction writers, although it does not always act on that claim.

He was living outside the country while he was writing the work that gained him this reputation. He writes rather uncommon books: we can't "do" with *Studhorse Man* or *Gone Indian* what we were doing with Margaret Laurence's, or Ethel Wilson's, or Gabrielle Roy's novels in the mid-seventies, when Kroetsch's works were bursting into prominence and onto university reading lists. Further, Kroetsch sets his works in a part of Canada that defines itself as being misunderstood and unacknowledged by the centre—where most of the books in the country are produced and sold. Much of Kroetsch's work writes Alberta: many of the references, and certainly the jokes, are specific to the place. The physical siting involves a conceptual siting/citing which Kroetsch both uses and relies upon.

The diversity of Kroetsch's literary activity, which speaks to the energy of his imagination, has resulted in a long list of novels and volumes of poetry, as well as critical articles, commentaries, and dialogues on his own and other Canadian writing—a list which is genuinely impressive in many ways. The protean quality which Kroetsch exhibits in his writing has made him difficult to classify, a fact which seems to have worked for rather than against his position in the Canadian canon. And related to that issue of classification is the distraction of the voice—the labyrinths of voice, the voice that delivers the words of Kroetsch's roaring, the voice that uses itself as reference and referent. Despite his preference for the voices of Babel to the prophetic voice, there is a unity and an authority attached to the Kroetsch voice which is alternately and simultaneously that of novelist, poet, critic, and Canadian cultural commentator.

This voice has a large influence in Canadian letters; in this regard Kroetsch's case calls to mind that of Sheila Watson. In Watson's case the number of published texts is in inverse proportion to her influence on a generation of Canadian writers. Kroetsch says that Canadian literature "evolved directly from Victorian into Postmodern" (*Boundary 2*, 1) and links that direct evolution to Watson's *The Double Hook*; despite his hankering after the Modern, Kroetsch clearly is closer to postmodernism, which challenges the notion of canonicity. Linda Hutcheon's description of postmodernist art is useful at this point:

This art's often parodic echoes of past works signals its awareness that art is made...out of other art....it is precisely this seeming narcissism that brings about a direct confrontation with the issue of the relation of art to the world outside it—the world of those social, cultural, and ultimately ideological systems by which we live. (34)

The canon, I argue, is one of those ideological systems which post-modernism confronts. And Kroetsch's predilection for resisting system is as well-known as his self-conscious imitation and parody of the conventions of story and story-telling (MacKendrick, 17).

This admittedly brief summary of the Kroetsch case should, I think, cause us to interrogate our processes of canon-making—how we decide what writers and texts we value, and why. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* the definitions of "canon" include that sense of the term, but also range from church law to a size of type, an inventory not unlike that which Kroetsch compiles and explores in "The Ledger." That similarity points up the reflexivity which Kroetsch cultivates in his own work and in his commentators, as his poetry and fiction and critical work circle back on themselves to make a w/whole into which the reader and the silent poet threaten to disappear. And that reflexivity makes it difficult to consider one aspect of his work without being drawn into a discussion of all the rest, which may well *not* lead to the naming that occurs in the darkened cave in *Alibi*. Reflexivity is part of the work of many people writing about Kroetsch, partly because Kroetsch and his reflexive critics come to writing with common presuppositions and critical/theoretical positions. It is also, I argue, because the people who are interested enough to write on Kroetsch are interested precisely *because* they are influenced by him; a self-perpetuating cycle occurs as they find more to explore in Kroetsch's writing as they explore their own. As critics write about Kroetsch, the text they are interrogating in turn interrogates them—the assumptions, the method, the discipline itself. The subject and object of the study blur, a slippage that speaks to the reflexivity of my own enterprise here. Kroetsch's reputation, I argue, exists in part because the criticism his work invites shapes his reputation as it is itself shaped by the work it seeks to criticize.⁴

We see this effect in Robert Lecker's assessment of Kroetsch's critical influence:

The recent proliferation of criticism allows us to gauge the extent to which Kroetsch's own novels and narrative theories have influenced his critics; indeed, recent criticism of Kroetsch's poetry, unlike the early commentary on his novels, tends to be inspired by Kroetsch's current critical pronouncements. (123)

Lecker tries to correct that tendency in his chapter on Kroetsch's poetry in which he emphasizes "the traditional forms of meaning and traditional forms of arriving at critical meaning" (123) that innovative

criticism on Kroetsch ignores. This innovative criticism, Lecker says, is inspired by Kroetsch himself:

We find poststructural and deconstructionist readings of his early poems, phenomenological rereadings of his long poems, reader-response critiques of his intertextual narratives, talk of fragments, *differance*, and meaning deferred. My (partial) list is meant to suggest the extent to which an accomplished writer-theorist can instill a new critical vocabulary in a receptive audience. (123)

The structure of his own book, however, shows that Lecker himself is a receptive audience. His discussion of *Gone Indian* accomplishes the closure that he argues Kroetsch and Jeremy are not freed from, while the study of *Badlands* uses Kroetsch's chapter divisions to tell Lecker's story of Anna Dawe becoming trapped in her own circular and reflexive story: "disputing the traditional role of Woman she is actually reinforcing the stereotype by playing it out" (81). Kroetsch's borderline metaphor and his "doubled-up life" (149), which Lecker argues form the aesthetic centre of Kroetsch's work, form the thematic centre of Lecker's work; he concludes by emphasizing the ordering of Kroetsch's creative work *in relation to* his critical publications, and explaining the creative work in terms of the critical problems the essays explore. Lecker is no more free of Kroetsch's influence than are the critics on his list.

Kroetsch's critical influence exists, then, in the theoretical approaches and vocabulary his works inspire; it also exists in the criticism of his creative work which shortens the distance between the study and its object. An example of this kind of criticism comes from Shirley Neuman, who has written extensively with and on Kroetsch, notably *Labyrinths of Voice* and shorter pieces on his poetry. In her 1983 article on autobiography in *Field Notes*, after some ten pages of following with Kroetsch the metamorphosis of the "I" in the poem she says: "All this, those unfriendly to Kroetsch's methods could remark with justification, is a convoluted and indirect approach to autobiography" (114). Her comment reads two ways: both the critic and poet might be accused of a convoluted and indirect approach to autobiography, and the defence of the critic and the defence of the poet *by* the critic are difficult to distinguish. Whether this blurring occurs deliberately or accidentally, the result is the same: objections to Neuman's critical approach can be countered by its identification with Kroetsch's poetic approach. A second example from Neuman's work comes from a later essay on *Field Notes* in which Kroetsch's attention to notation—"notation...is the reader in the text"—becomes *her* atten-

tion to *the poem's* notation. In very simple terms, Kroetsch writes a poem about notation, while Neuman writes about notation in a poem which is itself about notation: "This essay too must disclaim the tyranny of the critical voice. It is only one of any number of responses to *Field Notes* predicted or assayed by the poem's notation. It exists only in the response of the poem itself, and of other readers, to it. Your move, Dear Reader. Double or nothing" (193). She ends her essay with an extension of Kroetsch's own punning on noting/nothing and performs a standard move in reader-response criticism; in Kroetsch's terminology, Neuman reinvents the text in the subjective process of reading. She also draws on her earlier exchanges with Kroetsch to perform precisely the one-upping—the reader out-playing the author across the text—which she and Kroetsch discuss in *Labyrinths of Voice* (60).

Other critical essays echo Kroetsch's critical rather than his creative works. We have essays which *sound* like Kroetsch's essays as Frank Davey characterizes them: eccentric, refusing to complete the implied argument or to build the implied system, replacing argument with perception, insisting on the necessity of misreading, playing on word and system (7)—more, I suggest, than a shared deconstructionist approach. One example is Donna Bennett's "Weathercock: The Directions of Report" published in the 1984 *Open Letter* edition on Kroetsch. Her essay is based on the notion of weathercock, a play on Kroetsch's discussion of the Canadian novel in the *Open Letter* companion volume, and his "American Poetry Now: Making Room for the Weather" which is published in the same 1984 collection and ends with: "The weather, for the moment, is heavy. But ahead is, again and always, the open road" (46). Bennett ends the introductory paragraph of her essay with "[a] weathercock, sensitive to each changing currents [*sic*], he points out the ever varying directions one must take to break free" (116), and then takes the directions the weathercock Kroetsch defines: the four divisions of her essay are subtitled West, South, East, and North. The final section, "North: Unnamed Country," consists of a number of statements from Bennett interposed with comments Kroetsch has made in other contexts:

His chosen roles: The writer who takes risks, who works on the edge of convention, who is the finding man in hostile territory. The reader who faces tests and temptations. The critic who refuses criticism. His text: the labyrinth.

I can almost visualize the labyrinth that I have to make, both for myself and for a reader...it is life or death. The wrong turn...you throw it all away. (LV, 180)

The writer is a transformer and recorder, opening up the site and leaving it intact.

The reader is a witness and an excavator, under pressure, under threat: *Why guarantee safe passage for the reader?* (LV, 180)

The critic is the metonymic namer, describing the text, but never exhausting it.

All three of them telling their own autobiography, the ultimate risk.

(140)

Bennett plays on Kroetsch's archeology and labyrinth metaphors, and on his interest in autobiography; the form is very like *Labyrinths of Voice* from which Kroetsch's comments are drawn, where insight is generated from juxtaposition; the Bennett voice and the Kroetsch voice come close to converging. Bennett ends her essay with "Fig. I. *An Archaeology of Kroetsch's Criticism.*" Its final passage indicates something of its direction and nature:

The Acts (of writing and reading)

Everyone's a hero: what happened to Virgil: Hem., old friend,
how long do I have to be brave

The Nature of the text

The way out: there isn't
any why do you think you're here

As always New Directions

(get out the seed book, Mable, it's
planting time again)

(142-143)

The passage both sounds and looks like Kroetsch's *Field Notes*: the "directions one must take to break free" are away from conventional critical argument and toward a discourse for which Kroetsch supplies both model and content.

A second example is Aritha Van Herk's biocritical essay in *The Robert Kroetsch Papers: First Accession*, an inventory of the Archive at the University of Calgary. She begins by glossing the text she has not yet written: "Any attempt to bio-criticize Robert Kroetsch into position can only end in frustration. This writer [once again a blurring of the critic and the subject of criticism is possible] distrusts coherent story, sees closure as a self-imposed death, mistrusts the author/himself so much he over-glosses his own text" (ix) —as she may well be doing to her own text. She concludes her general comments with: "Thus, to enter Robert Kroetsch, it might be best to proceed backwards, upside down, inverted, *mirror the man and his work*" (my italics, x). This en-trance and mirroring she then proceeds to do by

the artist him/her self:

in the long run, given the choice of being God or Coyote, will, most mornings, choose to be Coyote:

he lets in the irrational along with the rational, the pre-moral along with the moral. He is a shape-shifter, at least in the limited way of old lady Potter. He is the charlatan-healer, like Felix Prosper, the low-down Buddha-bellied fiddler midwife (him/her) rather than Joyce's high priest of art. Sometimes he is hogging the show instead of paring his fingernails. Like all tricksters, like Kip, like Traff, he runs the risk of being himself tricked. (100)

But Kroetsch also uses the paradigm of trickster himself, not only to open up Watson's work and the discussion of the postmodernist artist, but to define his own role in his own creative writing: as Kroetsch explains the paradigm he seems also to participate in it, creating a resonance which works for Bowering in this essay. Kroetsch's "Old Man Stories" are about the trickster of Blackfoot mythology; the trickster-artist becomes a metafictional device. Bowering draws on both Watson and Kroetsch, and on Kroetsch's work on Watson, to cast Watson as a postmodern trickster-artist within her novel: "the 'intrusion' of the author is generally in our time a matter of wit. In this case it is the laughter of a coyote" (106), a laughter which is heard in Kroetsch's work also. An essay on Watson becomes an essay on Kroetsch's account of Watson and himself as Coyote as well. Bowering's collection is dedicated to Sheila Watson and Robert Kroetsch.

This is not an exhaustive survey of Kroetsch criticism. But these examples of criticism of his texts do reveal a tendency of Kroetsch criticism, and are interesting in another way. Although Kroetsch inspires a variety of theoretical approaches, we have not yet seen a rigorous feminist analysis of his works.⁶ This is despite the fact that many of his characters rely heavily on male myths, and many of his texts invite an interrogation of gender and language, which feminist criticism is especially able to perform. Feminist criticism also, with other contemporary criticism, raises the question of the nature of the relation of author, text, and critic, and of literary criticism itself. The question of feminist criticism and Kroetsch texts and of feminist critics' attention to Kroetsch texts deserves more attention, and is beyond the scope of this paper.

Aside from the approach and style of criticism and commentary upon him and his work, Kroetsch's influence is exercised in his own comments on Canadian writing other than his own. In the Canadian *Issue of Boundary 2* in 1974 Kroetsch outlines his criteria for Canadian writing, and lists the poets who meet these criteria:

The Canadian writer must uninvent the word. He must destroy the homonymous American and English languages that keep him from hearing his own tongue. But to uninvent the word, he knows, is to uninvent the world. He writes, then, the Canadian poet—Atwood, Bissett, Bowering, Helwig, Lee, Nichol, Ondaatje, Zieroth—knowing that to fail is to fail, to succeed is to fail. Poets under forty, more or less. Not those major figures, Earle Birney, Irving Layton, Raymond Souster, Al Purdy.... (K's ellipsis 1-2)

In a review of several collections of poetry from Longspoon Press he gives us further indication of his critical standards. The collection he finds "perhaps the most exciting" is *Writing Right: Poetry by Canadian Women*. This is how he supports that judgement: "the work...states its own validity, yet contributes surprise, contrast, confirmation, kinds of illumination, in the course of the reading experience" and "allow[s] the reader to participate in the heady pleasure of anthology-making" (31). We are reminded of Kroetsch's statements about the reader's role in his own texts.⁷ Wilfred Watson's *Mass on Cowback*, which he discusses in the same review, "is literally a book of poems and a book as an art object.... The poems and drawings represent Watson's immediate responses to his environment and to the workings of his own mind, a tabulation not only of place and idea, but of sound and sight as well, for most of the poems are written onto or against a number grid" (31-32). A telling comment, certainly, with his own use of the map in "The Ledger" and the seed catalogue in "Seed Catalogue" as palimpsest in mind.⁸ In an article on Grove and ethnic writing he chooses these issues in Grove's work, and this language to discuss them—tension between signifier and signified, retelling of stories, rewriting of myths, movement against silence, the finding of new story forms if the old forms are inadequate to the new experience, the stretching of the story, the making of the tall tale—issues and language which he uses in the discussion of his own work.

Further quotations from Kroetsch's critical comments reveal similar interests and vocabulary: Kroetsch often notices and mentions other works which have something in common with his own, which is not very surprising or problematic. But as he insists on doing violence to the form of criticism because form forces resolution (*Labyrinths*, xx) he nonetheless builds a new form—both a tradition and an authority. He privileges literature that allows a kind of criticism which can share aspects of the creative process and, with the text, be subject to retelling. Kroetsch calls criticism a version of story (*Labyrinths*, 30). He is certainly making his own version of the story of Canadian literature in his own essays⁹ and comes very close to making the

Canadian literary canon in his own image. He asks questions to which he attempts his own answers—answers which he admits are tangential, evasive, and fictitious (“Writer”, 70). Ann Mandel puts the case very astutely when she says that his essays creatively turn Canadian writers and texts into voices preparing a way in the wilderness for his own coming. He arrives by coming first (55). As he acts in the multiple roles of novelist, poet, critic, and as the voice is made accessible in various forms, Kroetsch and his work are made central to the canon.

Access and attention to his writing which are necessary for Kroetsch’s position in the canon are facilitated by the periodical publication of reviews both by Kroetsch and on his work, and of his criticism and commentary. *Gone Indian* and “The Ledger” and *What the Crow Said* are described in reviews as “serious” or “fine” or “chaotic and outrageous” (positive terms in context);¹⁰ Kroetsch *himself* is described as a “major novelist,” “one of our finest writers,” with a “unique perspective,”¹¹ and “one of the most interesting and most challenging of the very considerable number of excellent Canadian novelists currently in mid career....and an important writer in the English language” (Surette, 109, 111).

More important than these reviewers’ descriptions of Kroetsch and his work is the fact that they so often *insist* on the connection between Kroetsch the poet and Kroetsch the novelist and Kroetsch the essayist. In particular *Open Letter*, an avant garde journal of writing and sources, has facilitated access to Kroetsch’s work in its publication of two special editions: a collection of his essays in 1983, and a collection of critics’ essays in 1984. Those collections allow Kroetsch to be read, but also affect *the way* he is read, as they encourage the connection of the creative and the critical work: Frank Davey introduces the collection of Kroetsch’s essays by emphasizing, in his second sentence, that the essays “serve as background to Kroetsch’s work as novelist and poet” (7); the critical volume contains the first publication of Kroetsch’s “Delphi: Commentary” and Smaro Kamboureli’s interview with Kroetsch on *The Sad Phoenician*, as well as commentary on American poetry from Kroetsch. The contents of the two volumes emphasize the reflexivity of the Kroetsch canon, upon which their publication is based. The practice is not limited to *Open Letter*: Leon Surette, in his review published by *Canadian Poetry* of Robert Lecker’s study of Kroetsch, draws approving attention to the fact that Kroetsch “has written much to explain what he is about” (109). His mention of Kroetsch’s practice of writing around and about his own work is not simply to point out an interesting aspect of his career, but

to show that one serves as exegesis of the other. Kroetsch, as well as Lecker's book on Kroetsch, becomes the subject of the review.

As Kroetsch performs as novelist, as poet, and as critic, and as his use of each genre reflects his practice in another, the phenomenon of Robert Kroetsch in Canadian letters occurs. The canonization has been of that *phenomenon* of Kroetsch, caused largely by the multiplicity and variety of his textual products, rather than any of his texts in particular and in themselves. He has become significant precisely because he does it all, with a particular flair and with important ramifications in Canadian and postmodern literature, and in literary studies. Robert Kroetsch has become a literary icon; his works have not become our classics.

I think the Kroetsch phenomenon, as I call it, is accounted for as well by the fact that his work—creative, critical, and other—is distinguished by a consciousness of European literary theory which was not occurring frequently when Kroetsch began to publish, and which does not now characterize all Canadian writing. Critics of Canadian literature look at Kroetsch in part because, not unlike critics of other literatures, they are increasingly interested in literary theory and in writers who use literary theory. E. D. Blodgett links Kroetsch's use of theory to his use of the Canadian West as a signified (12), a process of signification I have discussed elsewhere. Blodgett states that Kroetsch dominates literary theory in Canadian critical discourse (12) and is virtually alone among male Canadian critics in his use of European theory (13).¹² I suggest rather that it is Kroetsch's use of theory—which makes his work postmodern, avant-garde, and contemporary—*plus* his concern with the cultural and physical entity—which puts him within a familiar tradition—that account for his privileged position. In his work this concern with the cultural and physical entity is expressed in the archeological metaphor—what Blodgett calls the Foucaultian prairie (12)—which signals his interrogation of origins, of language, of oral narrative. All of those elements converge, on various levels, in the Canadian West: the prairie *grounds* and *places* Kroetsch's critical system, and also informs his fiction. He is not unaware of that fact: in an early interview with Margaret Laurence he says that his Canadian experience has shaped his fiction writing (*Creation*, 53). As Stanley Fogel puts it, Kroetsch incorporates the concerns both of traditional and avant-garde critical camps: he recognizes the demands for voice and identity, for a cultural framework, but cannot capitulate to system, stability, or framework; his attempts to balance those demands account for the pervasive irony in his works (80). Kroetsch's protean

quality, in another sense, allows him to be many things to many people—or at least to many critics and readers.

All writers in so far as they form part of or slip from a canon enjoy canonization because of their participation in an ideology: realism, for instance, is an ideology as well as a set of conventions, as is Leavisism. Canons also promote themselves, and change as writers exemplify particular ideologies. I suggest that we be precise about whether we are canonizing Kroetsch's poetry, his fiction, or his critical work, and for what reasons: if we agree to accept and promote the Kroetsch phenomenon rather than Kroetsch texts across the field of Canadian literary activity, then we must also deal with the more complex ideological implications which will involve those of postmodernism for our accounting of literature, history, and culture itself. Kroetsch's challenge to the Canadian literature canon can be seen as a particular version of postmodernism's larger challenge: Kroetsch is providing the texts that are consistent with the radical theories of contemporary criticism. As his texts both exemplify and comment upon contemporary criticism, that criticism in turn demands a more rigorous scrutiny of the notion of the canon itself and of Kroetsch's position. Robert Wilson's "The Discourse of Museums: Exhibiting Postmodernism" looks at Kroetsch's and the Australian Murray Bail's play on the concept of a collection and their comment "upon the nature, scope, and limitations of human conceptuality"; (93) Wilson's essay plays upon the concept of canon, the "collection" foregrounded in this essay. Wilson shows how postmodernism challenges traditional ways of looking at literature, which includes making collections of texts, at the same time as he, with Kroetsch, asks if anything—including his own essay—is ever anything more than a collection. If postmodernism shows that the act of collecting is a certain kind of game, then "the human propensity for imposing schematic organization in the form of compartmentalizing discourse" (106) is called into doubt, especially when "discourse is a verbal collection, a lexical museum" (106). By showing how Kroetsch's work deflates the way of thinking about literary texts that groups them into collections or canons, Wilson makes our inclusion of Kroetsch in the canon of Canadian literature (or regional or transnational canons) doubly ironic. And by pointing out that what Kroetsch is doing in his text is precisely what he is doing in his essay, Wilson provides a sophisticated illustration of my argument.

To understand our decision, if it is one, to use Kroetsch as a basis of both a literary and critical tradition we must interrogate not only

Kroetsch's work, but our own as readers and critics as well. This requires more consciousness of our own processes, and the implications of those processes for the practice of literary criticism. I have argued that we need to re-view Canadian literature not simply in terms of a canon, but rather as a field of social and cultural activity (Kerman, 177) in which the process and the activity, rather than simply the object, is examined. This has been one attempt to do so. The title of Leon Surette's review of Lecker's book—"Lecker's Kroetsch"—is apt. Despite his attention to place, Kroetsch may be not so much writing Canada or Alberta as simply *writing Kroetsch*; in our reading and writing of him and his texts we participate in his performance of story-making. Here is Kroetsch on literary history: "I think it is very radically storymaking—what we do is tell a story that makes us heroes; we tell a story that gives us a point of origin" (*Labyrinths*, 196). Kroetsch finds that origin in the prairie and in story, oral and written: "there is no difference finally between written text and spoken text" (*Labyrinths*, 39). The author undoes his own authority within the text at the same time as he reinforces his authority in the text of Canadian literature: his insistence that criticism is a form of re-telling the story (*Labyrinths*, 109) makes his critical commentary a form of metafiction (Blodgett, 12). Kroetsch exists in multiple versions corresponding to his and our multiple voices and multiple stories: as the critics attempt to recuperate the deconstructing story, place the shifting author, and tell the literary story, we collaborate in Kroetsch's act of self-invention, which in light of the argument I have just made, must amuse him greatly.

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NOTES

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1. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Association of Canadian and Quebec Literatures, 28 May 1987.
2. Notably in "Contemporary Standards in the Canadian Novel."
3. In this paper I am referring to English language texts.
4. My discussion here is limited to a consideration of critical work, although Kroetsch's influence on a generation of creative writers could be looked at as well.
5. It is also suggestive of the influence of Brossard and Marlatt.
6. Larry MacDonald, in conversation.
7. See, for example, *Labyrinths* 57, 180.
8. This was apparent in the original editions.
9. See "Contemporary Standards in the Canadian Novel," "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: an Erotics of Space," "The Exploding Porcupine: Violence of Form in English-Canadian Fiction," "Carnival and Violence: A Meditation" in *Open Letter* 5th ser. 8-9 (1984).
10. Susan Patrick, rev. of *Gone Indian*. *Canadian Book Review Annual* 1982; Betsy Struthers, rev. of *The Ledger*. *CBRA* 1979; Mary Fowler, rev. of *What the Crow Said*. *CBRA* 1978.
11. Maureen Bradbury, rev. of *Badlands*. *Canadian Book Review Annual* 1975; Peter Carver, rev. of *But We Are Exiles*. *CBRA* 1977; Mary Fowler, rev. of *What the Crow Said*. *CBRA* 1978.
12. Blodgett argues that the other theoretical critical approach used by Canadian critics is feminist and, accordingly, deliberately ungrounded, refusing to privilege a signified because it is engaged in interrogating language itself; it therefore does not exist as alternative approach for many critics who will not allow either feminism *per se* or what that theoretical position requires.