

CARNIVAL AND VOICE: THE NOVELS OF ROBERT KROETSCH

by

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ABSTRACT

Canadian writing, particularly up until the 1940's, has relied far too heavily upon literary models borrowed or adopted from extra-Canadian sources such as Britain, the United States and Europe. Extra-Canadian influences, more often than not, have stifled or repressed authentic literary expression in Canada. The novels of Robert Kroetsch demonstrate concerted, often radical attempts to subvert or undermine borrowed literary frames of reference. What Kroetsch strives for is authenticity in Canadian writing and the often irreverent and comic portrayals of setting, character, action, language and literary form in the four Kroetsch novels examined here clearly demonstrate the success of his efforts. Kroetsch's resistance to inherited literary systems and his ability to write in an authentically Canadian manner coalesce in the pervasive carnivalesque perception of his fictive writing.

The term carnivalesque, as used in this paper, derives from the writings of the Russian literary critic and theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin whose work, *Rabelais and His World*, presents a detailed and extensive theory of the carnivalesque in literature. Bakhtin outlines the influence of European medieval and renaissance popular festivals upon the novels of Francois Rabelais. Bakhtin demonstrates how carnival and its attendant laughter serve to subvert, if only temporarily, established social power structures, to turn the world "topsy-turvy," changing the positions of king and clown, high and low, top and bottom. He also examines the grotesque realism which attends the carnivalesque perception of life. Grotesque realism strongly emphasizes the paradoxically regenerative degradation of the thrust down to the lower stratum of the human body or its cosmic equivalent, the underworld.

The following paper examines Kroetsch's fictive portrayal of Canadian prairie versions of the popular festival as manifested in the beer parlour, rodéo and dance episodes of his novel *The Words of My*

Roaring. The novel celebrates the oral tradition and festive activities so central to both Canadian prairie life and the popular people's carnival. *The Words of My Roaring* also presents an overturning of the social and political order wherein Johnnie Backstrom, the protagonist defeats his once established political rival, Doc Murdoch.

Popular festive forms and images couple with elements of grotesque realism in Kroetsch's third and fourth novels, and they both move in content and tone somewhat beyond the more literal carnival occasions presented in *The Words of My Roaring*. In *The Studhorse Man* and *Gone Indian*, Kroetsch depicts elements of grotesque realism such as human-animal connections, figurative descents into the underworld, and also places a strong emphasis upon the female figure as representative of the bodily lower stratum. All of these features are central to the carnivalesque perception.


In *What the Crow Said*, Kroetsch takes elements of grotesque realism, with their stress upon excrement, disfigurement and death, to their farthest reaches and, at the same time, carnivalizes almost every established convention of novelistic form. This novel, in many ways, demonstrates Kroetsch's most uncompromising deployment of carnival.

Aspects of the carnivalesque, as they are outlined in Bakhtin's literary theories, apply to a great deal of Kroetsch's writing and provide an effective and illuminating perspective from which to analyze this Canadian writer's work. An examination of the carnivalesque in Kroetsch's writing amply demonstrates his significant contributions to an authentic Canadian literary voice.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE CANADIAN LITERARY VOICE AND BAKHTIN'S THEORY OF THE CARNIVALESQUE

Any man aspires to be at home where he lives, to celebrate communion with men on earth around him, under the sky where he actually lives. And to speak from his dwelling—however light or strong the inflections of that place—will make his words intelligible to men elsewhere, because authentic.

— Dennis Lee, "Cadence, Country,
Silence: Writing in Colonial
Space"

Since the late 19th century, and particularly in the past forty years, numerous Canadian writers and critics have recognized and vigorously addressed the need to speak and write from their own "place." More and more these writers have become involved in a struggle for identity which has indelibly marked the Canadian literary consciousness. They struggle to speak from their own time, from the past, present and unseen future of the land where they dwell. They also strive to speak (write) in the language or languages of their dwelling places rather than those which are the products of external cultural and literary traditions. Ann Mandel points out that many of these writers have consequently embarked upon a new sort of search:

A search for the lost poems of the Canadian past, a digging through history for the skeletons of stories, facts and legends which return Canadians to their origins.¹

To illustrate Mandel's point, one need only invoke the writings of major Canadian writers and critics who have, particularly in the past forty years, focused their artistic and critical attention upon Canadian history and language. Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* and *Two Solitudes*, Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, Sheila Watson's *Double Hook*, Rudy Wiebe's *Temptations of Big Bear*, George

Grant's *Lament for a Nation* are but a few well-known examples of Canadian works which, in one way or other, draw specifically upon a Canadian place and time and, with varying degrees of success, exemplify indigenous modes of language. In the process, these writings also subordinate a reliance upon non-Canadian cultural and literary traditions. These works, as well as dozens not mentioned, have greatly facilitated the emergence of authentic Canadian literary expression.

Long imposed constraints, however, are not easily broken, particularly when they have been tenaciously internalized by those upon whom they have been imposed. In Canada, what Northrop Frye terms the "garrison mentality" has refused to dissipate with any great alacrity. Robertson Davies describes the current state of the struggle in his 1977 address "The Canada of Myth and Reality." Speaking of Canadians who yearn for a clear sense of national identity, he writes:

[I]t is in poetry and fiction that the questers repose their greatest hopes. A Canadian literature, recognizable as such at home and abroad is what they want. But the creation of a national literature is almost as slow as the building of a coral atoll; toil as we may, the recognizable island will not rise above the waves in any very great hurry. But we are working at it, and we have made rather more progress than some of our most anxious Canadian watchers seem to understand.²

Davies accurately notes our ostensible desire for an authentic literary voice but, more importantly, he also recognizes the agonizingly slow emergence of this voice and our paradoxical reluctance to acknowledge and applaud the progress which has already been made toward it.

Any authentic regional or national voice invariably illustrates a temporal and linguistic "grounding" peculiar to the region or nation from which it emerges. The term "grounding," which incorporates here both temporal and linguistic components, also denotes qualities somewhat beyond both. "Grounding" implies, certainly, a sense of geographical place, but it just as certainly does not imply that authentic regional or national literature must be set, literally, within the geographical boundaries of the area in question. A narrow definition such as this would clearly, and absurdly, render Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Melville's

whole story "non-authentic" as British or American literature. Rather, what is meant here by "grounding" is addressed in the following passage:

Ground. That word so much in use today. What does it mean beyond the dirt farmers use to grow wheat? Some kind of uncondition, existence itself before any naming. The stuff before the stuff that is history or culture or society or art. That which *is* before the self, even. The stuff of which 'place' is made. By dwelling on place we hope to get back through the naming to *ground*.³

It is, perhaps, appropriate that this term, which has been bandied around so much in Canadian critical discourse, does not lend itself well to non-poetic definition. Again, it must be stressed that "ground" does not exclusively mean geographical landscape but, at the same time, the term can never be separated from this aspect. This seeming paradox is, again, poetically portrayed in Gwendolyn McEwan's poem "The Discovery":

when you see the land naked, look again
 (burn your maps, that is not what I mean)
 I mean the moment when it seems most plain
 is the moment when you must begin again.⁴

In spite of its stubborn resistance to more clinical definitions, the term has become ubiquitous—almost indispensable—in Canadian writing and two recent collections of critical essays entitled *Figures on a Ground* and *Divisions on a Ground*⁵ become just two more examples of this fact.

The temporal component of this "grounding" requires that the writers involved be able to draw upon an indigenous literary and extra-literary tradition which they may then incorporate into their present act of writing. As Mikhail Bakhtin observes in *The Dialogic Imagination*: "every great and serious contemporaneity requires an authentic profile of the past, an authentic other language from another time."⁶ Further, this confluence of past and present must also, explicitly or implicitly, address and move toward a predicted but unseen future. As regards this latter point, Bakhtin asserts:

The present in its so-called "wholeness" (although it is, of course, never whole) is in essence and in principle inconclusive;

by its very nature it demands continuation, it moves into the future, and the more actively and consciously it moves into the future the more tangible and indispensable its inconclusiveness becomes. (D.F., p. 30)

Within this temporal trichotomy, the past includes the literary tradition peculiar to the region or nation, with its store of literary works, conventions and forms, but this past also encompasses the extra-literary, or the socio-historical, political, mythological past of the region or nation.

The language component of a distinctive literary voice requires that the literature produced reflect the written and oral language native to the region or nation in question. This component obviously intersects and merges with the temporal one as indicated by Bakhtin's notion of "another language from another time." Language, however, because of its central importance in any discussion of authentic voice, merits individual attention. Robert Kroetsch borrows the terms "langue" and "parole" from Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist vocabulary to put forth his views of the difficulties which face anyone seeking authentic expression:

THERE ARE THESE TWO SIDES TO LANGUAGE: *Langue* and *parole*. *Langue* is the great-given, and the sum total of words and grammar and literature and concluded speech. *Parole* is what one of us says, the uniqueness of the speaking (writing) person. If you are unlucky, the great-given swamps you, and even when you speak you are silent. If you are incredibly lucky, and if you work your ass off, the great-given sounds, not over, but *in* your unique speaking. If that happens, then you have found a Voice.⁷

With these basic requirements of authentic Voice in view, the particular problems of establishing a distinctive Canadian literary Voice come into clearer relief.

It becomes a moot point to state that Canadian writing cannot, perhaps should not, attempt to entirely dispense with the "langue" which is ours by virtue of our historical, cultural and literary ties to Britain, Europe and the United States. Canadian writers, however, who choose to "ground" their writing in a temporal framework and language

which are specifically Canadian resist, of necessity, the content and forms of extra-Canadian literary and cultural traditions. This resistance is essential if Canadian literature wishes to overcome the powerful "silencing" influences which outside "paroles" have imposed upon it since its inception. E.K. Brown, in his 1943 work *On Canadian Poetry*, laments: "Canada is colonial not only in its attitude toward Britain, but often in its attitude toward the United States."⁸ Much progress has been made toward authentic Canadian literary expression since these words were written, but the difficulty faced by authors in this country continues to be at least twofold. The arduous search for temporal and linguistic "grounding" must be continually accompanied by a rigorous, even aggressive, resistance to the literature and concluded speech" which persistently threatens to "swamp" our own authentic literary Voice.

The foregoing observations on the requirements and problems of authentic Voice in Canadian literature do not boast of novelty. Numerous Canadian writers and critics have expressed similar concerns, and many have created works of literary art which directly address these concerns. It has become apparent, however, in view of the difficulties which have been encountered in these endeavours and the sluggish emergence of a truly authentic, independent mode of literary expression, that even more radical methods must be employed if Canada's literary umbilical cord is to be finally severed. There are at present in the Canadian literary realm just such radical methods afoot, and nowhere do they find more vivid expression than in the novels and poetry of Robert Kroetsch.

Throughout his career, Robert Kroetsch has displayed an abiding interest in all of the issues addressed in the preceding discussion. A writer who particularly cherishes discussions of writing and literary theory, Kroetsch has advanced—in numerous essays, interviews, letters, and published diaries—his personal views regarding the difficulties which have plagued, and continue to plague Canadian writers. His perceptions of these problems have been garnered from various personal, occupational and geographical viewpoints.

Born on the family farm in Heisler, Alberta, in 1927, Kroetsch, a second generation Canadian, was the only boy in a German Catholic family of five children. Kroetsch's family history and his youthful days in rural Alberta constantly find voice in his writing, most directly in poems such as "The Ledger" and "Seed Catalogue."⁹ Kroetsch attended the University of Alberta, majoring in English with an emphasis on 19th century literature. Too young to fight in World War II, but clearly affected by the return of veterans in 1945, he compensated by adventurously striking out into Canada's North, working on Mackenzie river boats for three years. The North continued to figure strongly in Kroetsch's life as he went from river boat work to a brief sojourn at a camp on Hudson Bay and then on to a two-and-a-half year job as director for the Information and Education Programme at the U.S.A.F. base at Goose Bay, Labrador. In the summer of 1954, Kroetsch attended graduate school in Middlebury, Vermont, and in the fall of the same year enrolled in Hugh MacLennan's course in the development of English prose at McGill. In 1961, he was awarded his Ph.D. in Iowa for his unpublished novel *Coulee Hill*.¹⁰ Kroetsch then returned to the Mackenzie and began what was to be his first published novel, *But We Are Exiles*.¹¹ In 1961, Kroetsch also accepted an academic position at the State University of New York, where he remained until 1978. In that year, he moved to the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. Kroetsch is still at the University of Manitoba, but he has also been writer in residence at the Universities of Calgary and Lethbridge.

Since the publication of *But We Are Exiles* in 1966, Kroetsch has written six more novels and is presently working on another. In chronological order they are: *The Words of My Roaring* (1966), *The Studhorse Man* (1969), *Gone Indian* (1973), *Badlands* (1975), *What the Crow Said* (1978), and *Alibi* (1982).¹² Kroetsch has also written a significant amount of poetry, a good portion of which has been collected in his ongoing long poem entitled *Field Notes* (1981).¹³ Nineteen sixty-eight also saw the publication of *Alberta*,¹⁴ an illustrated monograph of Kroetsch's home province. From 1972 to 1978 Kroetsch co-edited *Boundary II*,¹⁶ a journal of post-modern literary criticism published

out of the State University of New York, Binghamton. Numerous interviews with Kroetsch have been made available, the most extensive entitled *Labyrinths of Voice* (1982).¹⁶ *The Crow Journals*,¹⁷ a diary journal, appeared in 1980. Most of Kroetsch's critical essays have been collected in the Spring, 1983, edition of *Open Letter*.¹⁸

Kroetsch's varied experiences have allowed him to view Canadian writing from both inside and outside of Canada's national boundaries. His perspective as someone who grew up and worked on Canada's prairies and in her northern regions is juxtaposed with his views as a writer and teacher who has spent extensive periods of time within American and Canadian academic communities. He often refers to this academic/non-academic dichotomous perspective as a "coyote-taught man" binary opposition.¹⁹ The literary views which Kroetsch has developed throughout his life and writing career are strong ones, and he does not hesitate to express them strongly. Kroetsch's essays and interviews provide, perhaps, the most succinct and direct vehicles for his literary thoughts and suggestions, especially as regards authentic voice in Canadian literature.

Kroetsch's critical essays vary in tone and style from formal academic to beer-parlour confessional, and they often refuse to adhere to accepted traditional modes of critical literary discourse. As Frank Davey points out in his introduction to Kroetsch's collected essays:

In terms of the prevailing rhetorics of Canadian and Anglo-American criticism, these are eccentric essays. They are provocations, incitements to read or reread the texts they respond to. Far from seeking logical coherence, they refuse to complete their implied arguments, to extend the reading of a chapter into a chapter-by-chapter reading of a book or, in speaking of historical periods or national literatures, to build the implied systems. (*Essays*, p. 7)

In these eccentric, thought-provoking writings, Kroetsch addresses the reasons for the lethargic emergence of authentic literary expression in Canada and, perhaps more importantly, puts forth radical, defiant alternatives and suggestions for establishing authenticity. He agrees wholeheartedly that any literary expression must "ground" itself in the

time and language from which it comes, writing in one essay: "you must find the universal in the local" (*Essays*, p. 12). Echoing Bakhtin's words on contemporaneity, Kroetsch observes: "To find ourselves in the present, we must to the edge of madness dream backwards" (*Essays*, p. 27). An abiding concern with our own Canadian history finds expression throughout Kroetsch's fiction and poetry, notably in his poem "Seed Catalogue" where the question "How do you grow a past / to live in" becomes one of the major structuring motifs (*F.N.*, p. 54).

It is, however, upon the matters of language and form in literary expression that Kroetsch concentrates a good deal of his critical attention. He fully recognizes the profound influence that outside literary and linguistic traditions have had and continue to have on Canadian writing. In his essay "Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction," Kroetsch identifies the subtle but powerful systems which restrict the development of our literary Voice:

The Canadian writer's particular predicament is that he works with a language, within a literature, that appears to be authentically his own, and not a borrowing. But just as there was in the Latin word a concealed Greek experience, so there is in the Canadian word a concealed other experience, sometimes British, sometimes American. (*Essays*, p. 17)

Not content to simply posit the Canadian writer's "intolerable" dilemma (*Essays*, p. 17), Kroetsch suggests solutions, or at least directions, which he feels Canadian writing must take if it wishes to finally find its own Voice. These suggestions are not always gentle, nor do they in any way release the Canadian writer from his/her responsibility in "renewing" this Voice. In an essay provocatively entitled "The Exploding Porcupine: Violence of Form in English-Canadian Fiction," Kroetsch openly challenges Canadian writers:

The renewal does not come from outside, cannot be brought about by introducing of new materials into the form. This creature is a porcupine that can only be violated from within. The porcupine of ego. The porcupine of the Safeway novel. The porcupine of English-Canadian self-righteousness. . . . And boredom. And self-congratulation. And timidity. And self-deception. (*Essays*, p. 63)

It is not that Kroetsch fails to recognize the worthy efforts of Canadian writers who have actively and imaginatively asserted their own "parole" in the face of an almost overwhelming extra-Canadian "langue." On the contrary, he voices high praise for the liberating works of many authors from F.P. Grove to Margaret Atwood. The passage above—and it is unusual in neither content nor tone—does serve, though, to illustrate Kroetsch's vehement stance regarding the authoritative literary, linguistic and cultural systems which he asserts must be radically resisted by all serious writers in this country.

Kroetsch maintains that an authentic Voice in Canadian writing has been stifled—almost completely until the 1940's—by our subservience to, and internalization of the literary models of a completely inappropriate "high distant culture."²⁰ This culture emanates variously from Britain, Europe and the United States. Canadian writers who enjoy at least some success in resisting these "distant" but highly influential cultures do so "by the radical process of demythologizing the systems that threaten to define them. Or, more comprehensively, they uninvent the world" (*Essays*, p. 17). It becomes helpful at this point to delineate more specifically what Kroetsch means by the "systems that threaten to define" and, to take a more detailed look at what manner of "uninvention" he is prescribing and practising in his criticism and literature.

Kroetsch calls our inherited systems of language "mandarin," and insists that the only way in which we may free ourselves of a stilted use of such language is to replace or "renew" it by drawing upon a language which is genuinely our own (*Essays*, p. 11). For the prairie writer, this renewal of language must be closely tied to an oral model: "The great subtext of prairie literature is our oral tradition" (*Essays*, p. 75). A defiant resistance to "mandarin" modes of language, and a concomitant aggressive assertion of our own "talking," occasionally flashes to the surface in Kroetsch's writing:

In a culture besieged by foreign television and paperbacks and movies, the oral tradition is the means of survival. The bastards can't keep us from talking. (*Essays*, p. 30)

Systems of language become, of course, the fictive and poetic vehicle for presentation of character, and here too Kroetsch sees the need for "uninvention" of character types and characterization essentially alien to a Canadian context. Almost all of the characters in Kroetsch's novels work against the traditional sense of closed and defined individuality. Those who possess such traits are treated in a deprecating manner (Mark Madham in *Gone Indian*, for example). Kroetsch's characters tend to be profoundly ambivalent and the recurring Trickster figure in Kroetsch's novel provides perhaps the best example of this ambivalence. Paul Radin in his work on the Trickster explains:

The Trickster knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being.²¹

The ambivalence of the Trickster ties directly to Kroetsch's desire to undermine and subvert controlling systems: "a trickster breaks down systems. There is no logic to his actions, or only an antilogic" (*L.V.*, p. 99).

Kroetsch's writing also reacts against the traditional inclination in Canadian literature towards a conservative, Victorian mentality:

The audience wants old-fashioned characters in old-fashioned stories—an audience for which good language means no expressions like shit or cock. This makes for a literature written by writers who on the one hand long for approval; they grope for the great tit of security. On the other hand, they long to be artists; they long to discover the integrity of their own language and their own forms. (*Essays*, p. 41)

The foregoing passage encapsulates in both subject and style what Kroetsch means by a "radical uninvention" of prevailing, imported systems. It is not only the content of these systems, replete with character types and particular versions of morality, which must be resisted or "uninvented"; it is, as importantly, their language and their very form which must be dismantled in Canadian writing. Kroetsch writes and speaks against systematized and restrictive literary forms such as rigid temporal linearity in narrative or the "privileged . . . single mono-

logic voice" inherent in 19th century fiction and high Modernist literature,²² and what he considers the confining mode of the traditional realistic novel. For Kroetsch, none of these voices or forms are appropriate in the Canadian context. For him they lack authenticity; consequently, they must be continually subverted if a distinctive Canadian Voice is to speak through.

Central to most of Kroetsch's suggestions for "demythologizing systems" as they are put forth in his critical discourse, and at the heart of the literary "uninventions" in his novels and poetry, lies a pervasive and far-reaching comic vision. To say that such a vision characterizes a good deal of Kroetsch's work is to speak the obvious. To specifically examine, as few of Kroetsch's critics have, the nature of this comic vision and its key role in replacing borrowed literary models with modes of authentic literary expression, becomes a somewhat more complex task. It is this task which provides the central focus of the present essay.

Any general discussion of humour or comedy in literature or elsewhere presents tremendous difficulties. Perhaps this may best be explained by invoking Dr. Johnson's astute observation that "Comedy has been particularly unpropitious to definers."²³ The difficulties which usually attend discussions of humour and comedy arise from the simple fact that what is wildly comic or humorous to one individual may not garner even the faintest smile from his fellow. An analysis of the comic vision in Kroetsch's writing is by no means exempt from these inherent pitfalls. Many difficulties may be circumvented, however, if one approaches this comic vision via the avenue of the "carnavalesque," a pivotal concept in much of Kroetsch's fiction and poetry.

Kroetsch states in a recent interview: "In the 20th century humour is resistance . . . it's the only thing we have left to do against systems."²⁴ Speaking of Canadian writing, he tempers this general statement with a somewhat more specific observation: "The only way we can hear our own voice or voices is through that carnivalesque upsetting of the established voices, the voices of authority."²⁵ The term "carnavalesque" does not appear in Kroetsch's critical vocabulary until approxi-

mately 1982 at which time, in his essay "Carnival and Violence: A Meditation," he acknowledges his borrowing from the Russian critic, Mikhail Bakhtin (*Essays*, pp. 111-122). In a July/84 letter, Kroetsch describes the impact which Bakhtin's writing had upon him: "Bakhtin was a discovery late in my life, but he came like a thunderstorm on a dark night, with lots of lightning."²⁶ In a subsequent interview, he adds: "When I read it, it sort of confirmed and structured what I'd been thinking."²⁷

It is not only Kroetsch's self-proclaimed indebtedness to Bakhtin which prompts my heavy reliance upon the latter's literary theories in the present paper. It becomes clear that Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque in literature, expressed most fully in his books *Rabelais and His World* and *The Dialogic Imagination*,²⁸ does speak in a direct and immediate manner to Kroetsch's fictive writing from *The Words of My Roaring* to his most recent novel *Alibi*. Elements of the carnivalesque also figure largely in Kroetsch's *Field Notes*, the continuing long poem which he began in 1975. Further to this, however, a number of literary critics are just now beginning to recognize the important implications of Bakhtin's theories not only for Kroetsch's work but for an entire corpus of Canadian writing.²⁹ One such critic, Barbara Godard, writes: "Kroetsch's interest in Bakhtin is a natural extension of his critical practice," and later:

That Bakhtin's work is useful in illuminating Canadian literature in its attempts to overthrow the authority of English literature was illustrated at the recent international conference on Bakhtin where papers were delivered on the fiction of Jack Hodgins, Robertson Davies, and Bakhtin's theory was applied to the Canadian long poem, a novelized genre.³⁰

Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque in literature provides a valuable, and hitherto unavailable, critical approach to the comedy and humour in Kroetsch's writing by furnishing a framework for examining the complex relationship in his works between the pervasive comedy and the passionately expressed concern with authentic literary Voice. A clear understanding of this relationship requires a closer examination of

Bakhtin's theory and a brief look at Bakhtin himself.

Michael Holquist, in his introduction to *The Dialogic Imagination*, provides detailed biographical material on Bakhtin (*D.I.*, pp. xv-xxxiii). Included here are some of the more important points relevant to the present discussion. Bakhtin was born in Orel, Russia in 1895 and died in Moscow in September, 1975. He did most of his writing during the time of tremendous upheaval in Russia, the time from 1917 to 1940. His strong ties to the Russian Formalist school are perhaps most clearly demonstrated in his book *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*³¹ written in 1929, but as Michael Holquist is at pains to point out, Bakhtin's theories carefully avoid the rigid systematization which often characterizes the work of some of his contemporaries. Holquist accurately notes: "Bakhtin's motivating idea is in its essence opposed to any strict formalization" (*D.I.*, p. xviii). In the 1930's, during "the long Stalinist night" Bakhtin, an eccentric and controversial writer, disappeared from the scholarly scene for almost two decades. It was during this time that he wrote *Rabelais and His World*.

Rabelais and His World, written in 1940, marks a distinct shift in Bakhtin's critical stance. This study of Rabelais still illustrates Bakhtin's almost exclusive emphasis on the novel as a genre. It also reflects his abiding concern with verbal language or "discourse" in literature within which a word is the key component in a dynamic inter-relationship between speaker and listener. In *Rabelais and His World*, however, Bakhtin, while outlining in minute and sometimes repetitive detail his theories of the carnivalesque, broadens his view to other metalingual sign systems such as the pictorial and gestural. This broader semiotic approach affords a greater sociological perspective than does a purely linguistic methodology and, in many ways, anticipates the critical inclination of the present paper.

Kroetsch has expressed keen interest in many of Bakhtin's theoretical concepts noting, for example, that *The Dialogic Imagination* speaks directly to Canadian writers who are "capable of many kinds of discourse individually."³² Kroetsch's literary output indicates his predisposition towards the novel as a genre, while his poetic writing also mirrors what

Bakhtin terms the "novelization" of other genres. All of these related aspects find a place in the present discussion.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin describes the essence of the "principle of laughter" and the "carnival spirit" upon which his entire theory of the carnivalesque turns. These two aspects combine to form a force which

destroys this limited seriousness and all pretense of an extra-temporal meaning and unconditional value of necessity. It frees human consciousness, thought and imagination for new potentialities. For this reason great changes, even in the field of science, are always preceded by a certain carnival consciousness that prepares the way. (*RHW*, p. 49)

According to Bakhtin, the carnivalesque arises directly out of European folk tradition of the Middle Ages. Characterized by a deeply ambivalent laughter, the carnivalesque celebrates the open-endedness and multiplicity of the ever-changing and constantly renewing life of the people. Bakhtin notes the complex nature of this carnival laughter:

It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival. (*RHW*, pp. 19-20)

Implied in the passage above, and explicitly stated elsewhere in *Rabelais and His World*, is the notion that carnival and its attendant laughter serve to subvert, if only temporarily, hierarchical power structures; to turn the world "topsy-turvy," changing the positions of king and clown, high and low; it opens things up. Godard notes: "In the work of Bakhtin, the challenge of openness and scepticism is against the closed forms of a ruling ideology."³³ This inversion occurs during carnival time because people are released not only from the persistent oppression of social power structures but equally important, they are freed from their internalized fear of these powers:

Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years; fear of the sacred, of the past, of power. (*RHW*, p. 94)

What clearly emerges from even this brief discussion of the carnivalesque is its essentially radical and rebellious nature. It becomes a means by which the status quo may be undermined, possibly overthrown.

Bakhtin's concept manifests itself in many forms. Again, one must cull from his detailed writings those central attributes of the carnivalesque most germane to the discussion at hand. To this end, I have appropriated two major features of Bakhtin's theory: "Popular festive forms and images" and "Grotesque realism." Within the framework delineated by these two features fall many of the elements of the carnivalesque found in Kroetsch's writing. It must be stressed from the outset that a consideration of language, an integral and central pillar in Bakhtin's theory, lies at the heart of both "Popular festive forms and images" and "Grotesque realism."

"Popular festive forms and images," as the term would imply, differentiate the forms and images of festival/carnival from other social and literary forms and images. Festive forms and images include considerations of the physical setting of the carnival, the occasion or motivation for it, the characters such as the fool or clown intimately associated with these activities, the atmosphere engendered during carnival time and, finally, the general social behaviour of the participants.

According to Bakhtin, the popular festival invariably centred on the marketplace in medieval or renaissance Europe. The marketplace during these times was set off, both physically and metaphorically, from the established church and state. It was the people's natural environment, the focal point of their day-to-day interactions. Crowded, hectic and noisy, this setting emphasized the social generic body of the people and subordinated the notion of the private, enclosed individual. The marketplace—by virtue of its chaotic, amorphous nature—effectively suppressed the actor-spectator division which characterized formal

theatrical presentations or church and state officialdom. It was the natural setting for carnival because it dispensed with what Bakhtin calls "footlights":

Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts there is no other life outside it. (*RHW*, p. 9)

The occasion of the festival often coincided with official ecclesiastical or state occasions but was, at the same time, distinct from them in significant ways. Carnival "equivalents" of these more official ceremonies were most often a parody or travesty of them. The *Corpus Christi* celebrations, for example, found their carnival counterpart in the "feast of fools" or the "feast of the ass" (*RHW*, p. 36). Formal activities more secular in nature, such as the transfer of feudal rights or the initiation of a knight, were mimicked and travestied during carnival time. These festivities also celebrated agricultural occasions such as the harvest of the grapes. Particular carnival forms like the "charivari" often marked weddings. The bacchic atmosphere of these celebrations joyously recognized the people's close observance of seasonal changes, their dependence upon the fruits of the earth, and the "fruits" which conjugal unions potentially afforded.

Perhaps most important, however, was the fact that carnival festivities did not have to correspond directly to any officially recognized occasion. Bakhtin points to the independence of the people in this regard:

It is a festival offered not by some exterior source but by the people to themselves. . . . This festivity demands no sanctimonious acknowledgement or astonishment such as official occasions usually expect. There are no brilliant processions inviting the people to pray and admire. Instead a signal is given to each and every one to play the fool and madman as he pleases. (*RHW*, p. 246)

Although everyone was invited to play the "fool or madman" during carnival time, there were designated individuals who specifically served

this purpose. Their role as fools or clowns, however, did not begin and end with carnival time per se:

They were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival . . . they were not actors playing their parts on a stage . . . but remained fools and clowns whenever they made their appearance. . . . They stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar midzone as it were; they were neither eccentrics nor dolts, neither were they comic actors. (*RHW*, p. 8)

These characters, symbolically and literally, represented the subversive, radical nature of the carnivalesque at all times. They were the constant proponents of an ambivalent, rejuvenating carnival laughter for the people, reminding them always—in true "trickster fashion—of the alternatives to their normally oppressed day-to-day lives.

Finally, for the duration of the festival, all hierarchical precedence was suspended as familiarity and equality became the order of the day. This familiarity was characterized by abusive verbal and physical exchanges which recognized the centrality of the physical body and the oral tradition in the carnivalesque. Feasting, drinking and game-playing of every sort were intimately interwoven in the saturnalia of the carnivalesque event. All classes of society participated, and significant role-changing occurred, a changing which usurped the power of the king and church and their representatives and crowned instead the clown and the common man. All occurred within the sound of laughter which celebrated the "gay relativity" of life:

Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed. (*RHW*, p. 10)

The other term of Bakhtin's used here, "grotesque realism," requires clarification for several reasons. The word "grotesque" has been utilized in remarkably different ways and been understood differently by people throughout its etymological history, and the term "realism" is fraught with similar difficulties in that its various usages in art and literature have rendered it almost meaningless as a critical term.³⁴ Bakhtin asserts that his use of "grotesque realism"

differs sharply from "the aesthetic concept" which has grown up around the term since the renaissance (*RHW*, p. 18). He writes:

The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is the lowering of all that is high, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity. (*RHW*, pp. 19-20)

Elaborating further, he coins the term "material bodily lower stratum" (*RHW*, pp. 18-19). This term points to the emphasis in "grotesque realism" upon the physical, material body, the leading themes of which are "fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance" (*RHW*, p. 19). The motifs of degradation and the "material bodily lower stratum" merge into a concept which is the essence of "grotesque realism":

To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. (*RHW*, p. 21)

This passage also suggests the carnivalesque emphasis upon death and images of death common to both grotesque realism and popular festive forms and images. Death is, of course, the ultimate "degradation" but, in the carnivalesque perception, death is always attended by rebirth and life. The seeming paradox of regenerative death is only one of the factors which prompt Bakhtin's insistence upon the often ignored ambivalence of "grotesque realism" and the carnivalesque in general. Activities and images associated with these concepts are too often considered "ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of 'classic' aesthetics, that is the aesthetics of the ready-made and completed" (*RHW*, p. 25). Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque clearly reflects its duality or the destructive *and* reconstructive nature. This ambivalence has been largely overlooked by many writers who concentrate almost exclusively on the relationship between the grotesque and the negative, darker side of life.³⁶

Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque arises from his particular brand of semiotic structuralism and becomes the means by which he

approaches and finds meaning in literature, particularly the novel. His theories are eccentric in that they present a non-traditional view of literary and social history and often draw upon obscure literary works or writings that he feels have been largely misunderstood ("Of all great writers of world literature, Rabelais is the least popular, the least understood and appreciated" [RHW, p. 1]). His close study of the carnivalesque leads him to make tremendous claims for the novel. For Bakhtin, the novel could never have developed to its present state without some version of the carnivalesque as its driving force. Other literary genres striving for contemporal validity must, he boldly asserts, in some form or other, be "novelized." As has been mentioned, the Canadian long poem lends itself well to this sort of "novelization."

Every aspect of Bakhtin's theory discussed thus far finds expression somewhere in Kroetsch's novels, particularly from *The Words of My Roaring* onward. As might be expected, however, certain works lend themselves more readily to particular aspects of the carnivalesque than others. With this in mind, the following discussion focuses first on the popular festive forms and images in Kroetsch's second published novel, *The Words of My Roaring*, and then moves on to a discussion of festive forms and images and grotesque realism in *The Studhorse Man* and *Gone Indian*. It must be stressed that both of these aspects of the carnivalesque may be found in any of Kroetsch's works studied here.

My closing discussion will move somewhat beyond Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque as outlined in *Rabelais and His World* to examine how Kroetsch, particularly in *What the Crow Said*, while presenting elements of the carnivalesque in the subject matter, also "carnivalizes" the very forms, language and literary conventions of the "great-given" within which he must work. It must be constantly borne in mind that Kroetsch employs a carnivalesque approach in his attempts to radically resist or "uninvent" what he considers the powerfully restrictive literary traditions which have inhibited and all but "wiped out" unique Canadian literary expression. In the process he hopes that his Voice, and by extension the native Canadian Voice, will speak through.

CHAPTER TWO

POPULAR FESTIVE FORMS AND IMAGES:

THE WORDS OF MY ROARING

Canadians seek the lost and everlasting moment when chaos and order were synonymous.

— Robert Kroetsch, "Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue"

On a number of occasions in *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin suggests that true carnival laughter, born of folk humour, has become alien to modern times. Modern equivalents, he claims, lack the essentials, "the all-human character, the festivity, utopian meaning, and philosophical depth" (*RHW*, p. 16). Kroetsch, however, invoking his own boyhood experiences, insists that versions of carnival and its attendant laughter were still vital and salient aspects of life on the Canadian prairie of his youth. He explains:

I grew up in a rural part of Western Canada, where a trace of carnival, if not the carnivalization of literature, was vital and alive. We measured time by wedding dances and sports days and rodeos. (*Essays*, p. 120)

Popular festive occasions such as the ones noted in this passage abound in Kroetsch's second published novel, *The Words of My Roaring*. Various versions of the carnival site, in fact, become the primary setting in this novel and a festival aspect finds expression in numerous situations and characters.

A chaotic atmosphere inherently pervades the carnival site, and in *Words*, Kroetsch first allows this aspect of the carnivalesque free play. As Peter Thomas points out: "In *The Words of My Roaring*, Kroetsch began to give chaos its say."¹ Kroetsch concurs with this appraisal, stating in one interview: "*The Words of My Roaring* is one of those places where the [carnavalesque upsetting] is literally happening."²

This statement points to a central aspect of the carnivalesque in *Words* and also anticipates important differences between this novel and Kroetsch's subsequent works. In *Words*, the bacchic carnival activities, found in various situations and settings (the beer parlour, an auction sale and especially on rodeo day) work to *literally* overturn the social order. On the most obvious level, this overturning supplants the incumbent MLA, Doc Murdoch, stoic representative of reason and order, and thrusts the younger, more vital Johnnie Backstrom—local undertaker and clown—into political office. This literal overturning of the social hierarchy reflects the relatively direct and unmediated quality of the carnivalesque vision in *Words* but it is this directness which paves the way for the more subtle and complex deployment of this vision in Kroetsch's later works.

Words presents the story of Johnnie Backstrom's surprising provincial election victory in depression-ridden, 1935 Alberta. Kroetsch "grounds" this novel in an era, the "dirty thirties," which has fascinated a number of prairie novelists from Sinclair Ross to W.O. Mitchell. *Words* is set in the fictional Coulee Hill/Notikeewin region, the area which becomes the setting for the remainder of Kroetsch's Outwest "triptych,"³ which includes *The Studhorse Man* and *Gone Indian*. This fictive landscape, particularly in *Words*, exhibits qualities which Bakhtin finds in the settings of Rabelais' novels. It possesses "extraordinarily concrete, obvious, and vivid traits, strictly localized and technically precise" (*RHW*, p. 185). Within this setting, Johnnie Backstrom, a priapic, self-deprecating braggart ("pretty well hung and famed as a heller with women" [*WMR*, p. 4]) decides to run for political office against his father-figure, Old Doc Murdoch. Ironically, it was Doc Murdoch who first brought Johnnie into the world (*WMR*, p. 23), and his role as Johnnie's father-figure effectively prepares for the Oedipal overthrow which occurs in the novel—an overthrow which Northrop Frye and others view as a salient feature of traditional comedy.⁴ Bakhtin also notes that the son's "uncrowning" of the father is a recurring feature in carnivalesque writing but he explains how this carnivalesque

overturning differs from its more traditional comic counterpart: "The son does not merely repeat the youth of his father" which would simply perpetuate the pattern of the preceding generation. In the optimistic carnivalesque view, "the father's new flowering in the son does not take place on the same level but on a higher degree of mankind's development" (*RHW*, p. 406).

Johnnie's literal political victory over Doc Murdoch also operates on symbolic and metaphoric levels. Johnnie eventually establishes a sexual relationship with Murdoch's daughter, Helen Persephone, further usurping his elder's power. Moreover, although Murdoch has practised medicine and politics in the area for many years he comes, significantly, from "edenic" Ontario, a decidedly non-prairie place (*WMR*, p. 57). Ultimately, Johnnie—embodiment of the carnival spirit—subverts the entire paternalistic, eastern "civilized" order represented by Doc Murdoch.

During the electoral campaign, thirteen days of which are covered in the novel, Johnnie moves frenetically through the constituency expounding the ludicrous promise of rain which he inadvertently makes to the drought-stricken populace in his first political "debate" with Murdoch. During this same time span, Johnnie's close friend, Jonah Bledd, loses his job, breaks his arm in a drunken ride with Johnnie, and, driven by a deeply engrained fear of financial and social failure, drowns himself in nearby Wild Fire Lake. Johnnie's final victory over the previously entrenched Doc Murdoch comes about, ostensibly, as a result of a timely and very coincidental rain storm which rejuvenates the prairie land and the people's hopes.

Aside from the fulfilled promise of rain which does not come about until election day, the most significant advances in Backstrom's campaign come about in prairie carnival settings where Johnnie "roars" into the hearts of the electorate. A significant relationship between these festival sites and the oral tradition is found in a number of prairie novels. As Kroetsch notes in his essay "On Being an Alberta Winter":

We see fictional characters going to stampedes and country dances and summer resorts—those places where we talk ourselves into existence. (*Essays*, p. 75)

Johnnie Backstrom's ascension to political power relates directly to his "talking himself" and, by extension, his prairie constituents "into existence." Here Kroetsch plays a variation upon the Cartesian theme "I think therefore I exist" by positing his tenet "We talk therefore we exist." The incorporation of oral speech into written literature so central to *Words*, lies at the heart of Kroetsch's notion of authentic literary Voice and becomes a pervasive motif in much of his later fiction and poetry. Through his talking ("roaring"), Johnnie Backstrom eventually triumphs—literally in the political arena and figuratively in the arena of western Canadian literature—and, once again, his most effective talking occurs within the carnival atmospheres of the Coulee Hill beer parlour, an auction sale and, most importantly, during rodeo day.

This emphasis upon the spoken word ties directly to Bakhtin's insistence that the oral tradition is an indispensable feature of the popular festival and its carnivalesque equivalent in literature:

The familiar language of the marketplace became a reservoir in which various speech patterns excluded from official intercourse could freely accumulate. In spite of their genetic differences, all these genres were filled with the carnival spirit, transformed their primitive verbal functions, acquired a general tone of laughter, and became, as it were, so many sparks of the carnival bonfire which renews the world. (*RHW*, p. 17)

Foregrounding the prairie oral tradition and attempting to capture the "essence of the prairie experience in language"⁵ serves, in Bakhtin's terms, to undermine the "unconditional voice of authority" represented literally in *Words* by Doc Murdoch and his attendant "plutocrats." It becomes Doc Murdoch's very language—his non-prairie voice—much more than Murdoch as a man which represents the "high distant culture" against which Backstrom must assert his "grounded" prairie voice.

Words opens upon an "official" festival encounter (Murdoch's campaign speech in the town hall) which dramatically emphasizes the

distinction between Johnnie's "vulgar" prairie language and Doc Murdoch's academically polished and literary speech. Murdoch, rephrasing Antony's speech from *Julius Caesar*, upbraids his "worthy opponent," claiming that Johnnie has come to "bury not praise" the electorate. He eloquently elaborates:

Whereas he comes to bury our province in debt and grief and misery—he himself, thirteen days hence; he himself shall be buried—in a landslide of votes. (*WMM*, p. 4)

This speech works to silence and humiliate Johnnie, and it is not until later, in the genuinely festive environment of the local beer parlour, that Backstrom's orally grounded rejoinder to Doc Murdoch erupts. Johnnie cannot marshal the flowing and educated rhetoric of his opponent. He can only speak with the language which is his by virtue of his prairie roots:

"When I say it's going to rain it's going to pour. And I say it's going to pour. So if I was in your boots I'd start shopping for a boat. You lazy pack of stubble-jumpers. I'd start building an ark." (*WMM*, p. 15)

Unlike Murdoch's speech, Johnnie's illustrates many of the qualities of "billingsgate," a term which Bakhtin uses extensively to describe the typical language of the popular carnival. The term "billingsgate" derives directly from the famed London fish market, and delineates forms of language which are invariably ambivalent. "Billingsgate" speech allows the speaker, simultaneously, to abuse and to establish a familiar, warm relationship with his listeners. Bakhtin explains that the abuses of "billingsgate" speech, "while humiliating and mortifying" at the same time revive and renew: "It was precisely this ambivalent abuse which determined the genre of speech in carnival intercourse" (*RHW*, p. 16).

"Billingsgate" expressions are intermixed with the carnival marketplace and festival situation with stronger verbal oaths and profanities called "jurons" (*RHW*, p. 188). Clear examples of both these oral forms abound in *Words* and will be discussed in due course. For now, it is enough to recognize the effect which Johnnie's "billingsgate" exhortations have upon the patrons of the Coulee Hill beer parlour:

Things seemed to bust loose. Bedlam. . . . People started talking to each other. Of a bumper harvest and where they could get extra help in a hurry. (*WMMR*, p. 15)

Johnnie's words trigger a temporary release from the fear and worry of drought and depression-ridden prairie life. The talk turns to "abundance and a brimming over" (*RHW*, p. 9), and utopian consumption and revelry ensue. Through Backstrom's words—his "talking into existence"—the spirit of the popular festival is released on the Canadian prairie.

The carnival atmosphere engendered in this early episode of *Words* continues to build and flourish throughout the novel in various festival settings all closely tied to rural Albertan life. Johnnie, seeking to uncrown Doc Murdoch and the "agelasts" (*RHW*, p. 212) and compelled by his trickster-like disposition, is constantly drawn to carnival/festival sites; the beer parlour, auction sales, stampedes and dances are the places which evoke his "roaring words" and, in turn, release the people around him. Johnnie almost instinctively gravitates toward these sites in his search for the "old chaos" of the carnival. At one point, he comments:

That mysterious thing seized me; that longing for the old chaos. That old earth, without form and full of void. . . . Sometimes it seems that chaos is the only order. The only real order. (*WMMR*, p. 101)

Johnnie's propensity for the "old chaos" places him squarely within Bakhtin's definition of the carnival clown or fool, the "accredited representative of the carnival spirit." As the clown or fool, Johnnie personifies a number of popular festive aspects. He is ambivalent, subversive and one with the participants of the carnival. He becomes, in effect, the clown-king of these carnival occasions.)

Johnnie Backstrom also portrays many qualities of the trickster, a figure which Bakhtin never specifically names but whose qualities are clearly amendable to Bakhtin's theory of carnival characters. Kroetsch remarks: "In a certain way the trickster was my way into this carnival-esque thing. . . . It's not a very big leap from the trickster to the

notion of carnival."⁶ The ambivalence and duality which attend Backstrom's actions, language and thoughts illustrate the essence of the trickster figure. They illustrate how Johnnie embodies, even as he fails to completely understand, the nature of life on the often cruel Canadian prairie. He recognizes that "you've got to be half goofy—just to stay sane" (*WMR*, p. 53). J.J. Backstrom, both John and Judas (*WMR*, p. 45)—the one who loves and the one who betrays—is plagued by the "old dualities," and often bewildered by his own paradoxical and ambivalent nature:

I am fascinated by innocence. . . . And I am a ravening lustful beast. I cannot resist beauty and innocence, I cannot contain the hungering of my own flesh. I must foul and stain beauty wherever I find it. I must corrupt and destroy. (*WMR*, p. 63)

This passage might almost serve as a credo for Bakhtin's notion of what the deeply ambivalent carnival may accomplish. Johnnie does corrupt and destroy, but his behaviour, in the manner of the true carnivalesque fool or the trickster figure, paradoxically effects renewal and regeneration for both himself and his community. Joseph Campbell's observations on the trickster accurately characterize J. Backstrom: "Although he embodies the principle of disorder, he is nevertheless the culture-bringer also."⁷ It is of fundamental importance, however, to recognize that the renewal which Johnnie helps to engender is not only a narrow political renewal. Johnnie's drive for political office remains, in many ways, a peripheral concern. Appropriately, Johnnie boasts of no abstract, altruistic motives, stating that he really only seeks his own material comfort or "five solid years of good green indemnification" (*WMR*, p. 7). Johnnie's lack of insight into the nature of his own actions and their effects reflects his trickster-like role. His deflation of what political power may afford also echoes Bakhtin's comments upon the antagonism between political victories/defeats and the true principle of carnival laughter:

A change in the politics of the court and ruling class was but of little importance for this laughter, filled with a thousand-year-old wisdom. . . . A political crisis was nothing more than a tempest in a teapot, the crowning and uncrowning of a clown. (*RHW*, p. 138)

The deeper importance of Johnnie Backstrom's actions and words lies in their power to subvert the hierarchical, enclosed mentality represented variously in the novel by Doc Murdoch, Jonah Bledd and Johnnie's in-laws, the Burkhardt ("work hard") clan. Backstrom presents an alternative to the despair of the isolated, alienated individual or to "the life of responsibility, caution and dogged faith in the rightness of the social and economic order,"⁸ exemplified by Jonah Bledd. At the various carnival sites, particularly at the rodeo, Johnnie's words help to free the people from their internalized fear of a harsh environment and a deterministic sense of social order.

As has already been pointed out, Johnnie Backstrom embodies a number of popular festive forms and images, particularly those which surround the carnival fool or clown, but *Words* provides many clear examples of the other forms and images which Bakhtin delineates in his theories of the carnivalesque. The rodeo episode in the novel provides abundant evidence of these forms and images and is, at the same time, a key section in the overall work. This episode covers the span of one day in *Words*, beginning with Johnnie's early morning arrival at the stampede grounds and ending that same evening with Johnnie and Helen Murdoch making love on the ground of the rodeo corral. This day of prairie festivities is marked by a number of significant occurrences including the violent death of the rodeo clown, unbridled carnival celebration, and the first act of physical love between Johnnie and Helen. Paradoxically, the clown's death precipitates the more positive festive events of the day. This seeming anomaly finds explanation in Bakhtin's comments upon the relationship between death and the carnival spirit: "Moments of death and revival, of change and renewal always lead to a festive perception of the world" (*RHW*, p. 9). The events which unfold in this episode of *Words* bear out the accuracy of this observation.

Johnnie, compelled by his search for the "old chaos" is one of the first to arrive at the stampede grounds situated, significantly, on the outskirts of Burkhardt. The carnival, inimical to any ordered or repressed mentality, is separated geographically and metaphorically from this bastion of the puritan work ethic, temperance and piety. From the

outset of rodeo day, a carnival spirit is always near at hand. People waiting in the line-up at the gate, in typical "billingsgate" fashion are "shouting and cussing at the delay" (*WMR*, p. 101). A literal marketplace of food materializes, emphasizing the carnival celebration of abundance and consumption. Backstrom, a man of great appetites, in a manner reminiscent of Rabelaisian cataloguing (*RHW*, p. 177), lists the fare which is spread before him: "I saw chocolate cake with thick white icing and chocolate cake with fresh sticky icing; angel-food cake and marble cake and ginger-looking cake . . . and every kind of cake you want to think of" (*WMR*, p. 102). Nor do the smells of the prairie festival escape him. These odours, an earthy conglomeration of food, human and animal smells attract and rejuvenate Johnnie who notes: "I'm not ashamed to say that somehow or other I enjoy the smell of horseshit once in a while. It's wholesome smelling" (*WMR*, p. 104). Not only do narrative comments such as these prefigure the human-animal connections so central to Kroetsch's later novels such as *The Studhorse Man* and *Gone Indian*, they also serve to graphically demonstrate the profound relationship between the common people's popular festival and the elements of "earthly" life. They illustrate the "lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract" and the "transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (*RHW*, pp. 19-20).

The graphic account of the rodeo clown's violent death becomes a pivotal point in this episode and in *Words* as a novel. This "designated" clown is clearly Johnnie's "doppelganger," a fictive technique which recurs often in Kroetsch's novels and poetry.⁹ Like Johnnie, the clown is "crowding six-three or six-four" (*WMR*, p. 106), and is approximately the same age (*WMR*, p. 122). In the course of his ensuing speech, Johnnie also asserts: "'Yes, my good friends. I'm the first to admit it. Johnnie Backstrom is a clown all right'" (*WMR*, p. 112). The rodeo clown's circumstances are thus closely tied to Johnnie's and are characterized by the same marked ambivalence. In the act of saving a young bull-rider, the clown receives the bull's first blow in the "rump" (*WMR*, p. 106), a part of the anatomy which clearly falls into the "lower

bodily stratum." The crowd, thinking this part of the clown's act roar and applaud. The laughter and applause, however, are immediately silenced as the bull proceeds to gore and mutilate its victim. The clown dies in the act of saving a life. The tragicomic ambivalence which surrounds this death scene, though, certainly does not end on this literal level. Johnnie, prompted by the clown's death, leaps into the arena and delivers the speech which catapults him into the position of local hero and, eventually, M.L.A.

A fictive death such as this takes on a new and deeper meaning when approached via Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin's observations on death scenes in Rabelais's novels illuminate their paradoxically regenerative nature:

Death is an ambivalent image for Rabelais and for the popular sources from which he drew his material; therefore death can be gay. While depicting an individual body in the throes of death, this image also shows a glimpse of another youthful body being born; even if it is not shown or directly named, it is implicit in the image. Where death is, there is also birth, change, renewal. (RHW, p. 409)

In the rodeo episode in *Words*, one clown is brutally uncrowned, but another takes the throne and, subsequently, dethrones the official ruler, Doc Murdoch. The rodeo clown's death operates on both literal and figurative levels, as does the attendant revival or renewal. The clown, of course, literally dies, but it is here that Doc Murdoch's chances for re-election receive their death blow. On the other hand, the young bull-rider's life is literally saved. Further, Johnnie's ensuing "hind-tit" speech enormously enhances his political stature and, more importantly, figuratively renews the spirit of the people attending this day of festivities.¹⁰

Johnnie's "hind-tit" speech transforms a quite ordinary prairie rodeo into a day and night of genuine saturnalia and carnival. Backstrom's speech, laden with "billingsgate" expressions, celebrates the prairie oral tradition and, at the same time, parodies the Bible-pounding rhetoric of Applecart ("Bible Bill" Aberhart),¹¹ the leader of Johnnie's political party. This parody is not the "formal literary and negative

satire of scholarly wisdom" foreign to the carnival spirit however (*RHW*, p. 83). While Johnnie's scriptural borrowings *do* parody Applecart's and are aimed at the "bunch of Bible-pounders" whom he addresses, he also parodies himself as someone who, by his own admission, has been deeply influenced by extensive Bible study. Recalling his childhood, Johnnie remarks: "I nearly wore out my eyes on the small print, sometimes against my will. But it stuck" (*WMR*, p. 108). The parody here thus becomes universal in a genuine carnivalesque fashion.

The graphic and physical quality of Johnnie's speech prompts an equally physical response in the people who surge forward to listen. One is reminded of the lack of "footlights" or actor-spectator separation in the carnival atmosphere as Johnnie urges the people to "crowd a little closer" (*WMR*, p. 109). The praise-abuse duality of typical carnivalesque speech also sounds through Johnnie's words which, at once, deride and uplift:

"If you *enjoy* sucking the hind tit, you prairie chickens, then close your ears. Pretend you didn't see that beast. Run over and suck on a bottle of Big Orange. If you still have a nickel—after six years of being rolled in the dirt and dung by the plutocrat millionaires." (*WMR*, p. 109)

Again, Johnnie's words release the carnival spirit. Festive laughter reigns supreme as the people "split their sides laughing" (*WMR*, p. 111). The ambivalent verbal abuse of Johnnie's speech is paralleled by the physical abuse which he suffers at the hands of the boisterous crowd. He receives the treatment appropriate to the true carnival king:

They threw me in the air and damned near broke every bone in my body when they couldn't stop me coming down; but they set me up on my feet and somebody whipped a mickey out of the rags he called trousers and said have some pain killer, and, may all teetotalers roast in hell, I had it. (*WMR*, p. 113)

From this point forward in *Words*, the prairie version of the popular festival gathers increasing momentum. People, released, at least temporarily, from their fear of "wells going dry" and "cattle without water" (*WMR*, p. 116) create a festive atmosphere which

subordinates the isolated and anxious individual to the all-encompassing social generic body. All manner of popular festive activities which defy propriety and social decorum occur. Various games, all reflecting the physical, at times violent, nature of the people's festival abound:

And then the egg-throwing . . . those people hurled eggs at the face sticking through that old bed sheet as if they expected to destroy Satan himself. (*WMR*, p. 115)

Consumption of vast amounts of food and liquor characterize every moment of these festive celebrations recalling the centrality of food and wine in Bakhtin's description of Rabelaisian carnival ("wine becomes the leading image; it confirms the victory of life over death" [*RHW*, p. 383]). The Rabelaisian propensity for drink finds a direct parallel in the Canadian prairie popular festival. As Robert Allen points out in the "Western Whoop-up" section of *A Treasury of Canadian Humour*: "Drink was dealt with as a fact of life, not just for characters in jokes, but for everyone."¹² Not surprisingly, then, characters in Kroetsch's carnivalesque fiction chronically head for the beer parlour¹³ and, typically, the carnival crowd in the rodeo episode of *Words* soon repairs to the bar.

The popular festive atmosphere generated in the beer parlour serves as a more than adequate synopsis of the carnival activities which round out this day of stampede celebration:

Money wouldn't buy a chair in that beer parlour. It was jammed to the rafters; the tables almost disappeared under heaps of bodies. Smoke shut out the light, and the stink at first was breath-taking; the stench of spilled beer and cigarettes and sweating people, some of them cowboys; customers jam-packed into a swarming room. . . . The noise was deafening. (*WMR*, p. 119)

Within this chaotic din, the wall-eyed farmer, peeved at Johnnie's failure to pay for the Model-A which he "purchased" at the farmer's auction sale, hurls "jurons" at Backstrom calling him a "horse's petunia," "a meathead . . . and a farthead" (*WMR*, pp. 118-119). No genuine animosity may prevail long in such an atmosphere, however, and the farmer's words become merely one more example of the abusive praise

which dominates carnival discourse. The noise, smells, laughter and close physical contact of this bar scene also prevail at the dance which follows. Anyone who has ever been in a small-town prairie bar on the afternoon or evening of a rodeo, sports day or similar festive event, will agree that Kroetsch exaggerates here only slightly, if at all. Such scenes also bear out Kroetsch's uneasiness with Bakhtin's claim that the carnival spirit has been lost to modern times. Clearly, versions of this spirit still exist on the Canadian prairie.

One important facet of the rodeo episode which has been ignored thus far is the apparently contradictory feelings of despair and isolation voiced by Johnnie Backstrom as narrator. Although he boasts that he is "not the sort of man who would let on that he is undergoing an ordeal" (*WMR*, p. 114), it becomes clear that his actions and words, which have helped to generate the carnival atmosphere, have left Johnnie himself inwardly unmoved. In the beer parlour, he laments:

I was a beer bottle flung into darkness. A cob bereft of corn.
A peanut shell. Maybe I brooded on my grief, I don't quite
remember. But the fact is undeniable: I did not stir. (*WMR*,
p. 124)

Johnnie's feelings and attitude at this point may be explained, at least in part, by his basically ambivalent character traits. In keeping with his trickster-like nature, Johnnie remains largely unaware of the deeper effects of his actions and words upon the members of his own prairie community. Paul Radin reminds us:

Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer,
giver and negator. . . . *He wills nothing consciously.* At
all times he is constrained to behave as he does from impulses
over which he has no control. [*Italics mine.*]¹⁴

But Johnnie Backstrom is only trickster-like. He does possess some notion of the reasons for his rejuvenating effect upon the people attending the rodeo but, nevertheless, is not genuinely released himself until he makes love to Helen. The explicitly sexual nature of Johnnie's "renewal" raises an important question concerning the role of the female figure in the carnivalesque vision of Kroetsch's writing.

Helen Murdoch, anticipating many of the later female figures in Kroetsch's fiction and poetry, embodies—in a subtle but profound fashion—the essence of the deeply carnivalesque spirit. Helen seems to work against Johnnie's unbridled subversiveness but, at the same time, she returns him to the rejuvenating, renewing earth. Significantly, Johnnie and Helen return to the original carnival site—the place of the clown's death—to make love. They enter the stampede grounds "free of charge" (*WMR*, p. 136), as a sort of symbolic king and queen of the carnival and, in the place where the clown died, demonstrate how death is inextricably united with love, copulation and regeneration in the carnivalesque perception of life. Helen, as the female representative of the "bodily lower stratum" literally brings Johnnie "down to earth," to the place of death *and* renewal. Johnnie's fumbling hands explore "her breasts," then "the flat of her belly" and "her pretty behind" (*WMR*, p. 136), areas directly associated with the female motif of birth and reproduction so important to carnivalesque forms and images. Through his contact with Helen, Johnnie is symbolically freed, at least momentarily, from the confines of his own narcissistic self-preoccupation into a realm where such concerns are diminished; where "nothing at all mattered. Nothing" (*WMR*, p. 136). Helen Murdoch represents the ambivalent, renewing "material bodily principle" of the carnivalesque.

Kroetsch's fictive celebration of the popular prairie festival, which finds its first comprehensive expression in *Words*, draws in a profound way upon the temporal and linguistic Canadian prairie experience. In such portrayals as the rodeo episode, Kroetsch works to establish the authentic Canadian Voice and to subvert, by means of the carnivalesque, modes of "inherited literature, the literature of our European past and of eastern North America," which is "emphatically the literature of a people who have *not* lived on prairies" (*Essays*, p. 74). Kroetsch has also remarked: "I would rather have anarchy. I would rather go back to carnival" (*L.V.*, p. 126). *Words*, with its literal depiction of the prairie carnival site, marks the beginning of Kroetsch's extensive use of the carnivalesque literary modes which he feels enable

Canadians to recognize that they are, in fact, "living in the midst of *story* material." As Kroetsch points out: "This is surely a problem for a people who seldom see images of themselves in literature or art" (*Essays*, p. 73). The literal carnivalesque situations which Kroetsch puts forth in *Words* serve to prefigure much of his later and, in many ways more complex, carnivalesque writing.

CHAPTER THREE

THE POPULAR FESTIVAL AND GROTESQUE REALISM:

GONE INDIAN AND THE STUDHORSE MAN

For a moment at the frontier, the bonds of custom are broken and unrestraint is triumphant.

— Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History"

Popular festive forms and images and the carnivalesque vision in general are deeply imbued with elements of what Bākhṭīn terms grotesque realism. *The Words of My Roaring*, with its emphasis upon the overtly optimistic prairie carnival, clearly indicates the inextricable tie between the popular festival and the grotesque images of the material bodily lower stratum. The popular festival always illustrates the paradoxically regenerative nature of the thrust downward to the lower regions of the body and the earth. These festivals never fail to celebrate the capacity of degradation, bodily dismemberment and death to renew and revitalize. Not until *The Studhorse Man* (1969) and *Gone Indian* (1973), however, the two novels which complete the Outwest triptych, does Kroetsch bring carnivalesque grotesque realism to the fore in his writing.¹ In the process, he explores the positive *and* negative aspects of the carnivalesque vision in 20th century Canadian life.

Seven years separate *Gone Indian*, Kroetsch's third published novel from *Words*, and although there are some strong similarities between these two works, the later one clearly demonstrates shifts and developments in Kroetsch's fictive deployment of the carnivalesque. In *Gone Indian*, Kroetsch is as involved as ever in a carnivalesque type of "upsetting," but the more literal nature of the carnival in *Words* is replaced in this later novel by a somewhat more complicated and subtle deployment of the carnivalesque approach. While over one-half of the novel does, in fact,

take place on the day of a designated popular carnival—the Notikeewin Winter Festival—the carnival scenes in *Gone Indian* do not subvert or overturn a specific social hierarchy such as that represented by Doc Murdoch or Jonah Biedd. Instead, the popular prairie carnival affects the psychic and emotional metamorphosis of Jeremy Sadness, the protagonist. Jeremy's metamorphosis directly parallels the overturning of the closed and defined "high distant culture" represented by his dissertation advisor, Mark Madham and, concomitantly signals the carnivalesque triumph of the dialogic, Canadian prairie Voice over the deterministic, monologic literary voice that Madham exemplifies.

Ostensibly, *Gone Indian* traces the journey or quest of Jeremy Sadness, a graduate student at the State University of New York, as he goes to Edmonton, Alberta, for a job interview. Notikeewin, however, not Edmonton or the University of Alberta, becomes the major setting of the novel as Jeremy misses his interview and becomes embroiled in the Bacchanalia of the Notikeewin Winter Festival. The straightforward first person narrative of *Words* is replaced in *Gone Indian* by a more complex amalgam of Jeremy's first-person voice, garnered from the tape recordings which he makes while in Alberta, and the first-person voice of Mark Madham, the cynical and hypercritical editor of these fragmentary tapes. Once at the winter festival, Jeremy replaces Roger Dorck, local lawyer, as festival king. Dorck, whose parodic name and physical condition suggest Jeremy's own frustrated phallic condition, has been rendered comatose by a snowmobile accident. Jeremy, having abandoned all attempts to attend his job interview, assumes the role of festival king, wins a showshoe race and suffers a "shit-kicking" at the hands of local festival participants (*G.I.*, p. 96). Recovering from this beating in the back of a half-ton truck belonging to Daniel Beaver (his Indian "guide"), Jeremy dreams "the scalping of Edmonton" in which he couples with "Buffalo Woman" and has his name changed from "Antelope Standing Still" to "Has-Two-Chances" (*G.I.*, pp. 96-108). Emerging from this dream, Jeremy reluctantly assumes his role as judge in a beauty contest where he chooses as queen Jill Sunderman, the first woman who Jeremy

makes love to in the novel (*G.I.*, p. 59). Two hooded and rather sinister figures, who turn out to be Bea Sunderman's father-in-law and the local gravedigger, then "guide" Jeremy to a truly carnivalesque party held, significantly, in Johnnie Backstrom's funeral parlour. Jeremy, by this point totally exhausted, is invited to stretch out in a coffin originally intended for Roger Dorck, wherein he achieves an erection while lying down, something which he has previously been unable to do. From here, Jeremy moves to the bed of Bea Sunderman, Jill's mother, at her ranch named "Worlds End" (*G.I.*, p. 145). Jeremy's prairie adventure ends (at least according to Madham's conjectures) when he dies, driving a snowmobile carrying himself and Bea Sunderman off a railway bridge.

Even this skeletal synopsis of *Gone Indian* indicates the emphasis in the novel upon shamanistic metamorphosis within a carnivalesque atmosphere. Jeremy Sadness, "shaped and governed by some deep American need to seek out the frontier" (*G.I.*, p. 5), is irrevocably transformed from an anxious, confused, sexually dysfunctional young man to a released and fulfilled "frontiersman." This transformation occurs within the chaotic sound of the deeply ambivalent carnival. As Peter Thomas remarks in his analysis of *Gone Indian*: "The frontier metaphor is the place of unmaking, of the reconstitution of self."² The frontier in this novel is depicted as carnival site, the place for "the renewal of clothes and of the social image" (*RHW*, p. 81).

Through the setting of the winter festival and through the language, actions and characterization of Jeremy Sadness, Mark Madham, Bea Sunderman, Daniel and Mrs. Beaver, and the rodeo cowboy who first takes Jeremy to Notikeewin, Kröetsch establishes the undeniable connection between shamanistic images of death and resurrection and the forms and images of the popular festival. Jeremy's frontier "initiation"—his descent into the carnival underworld—obviously embodies elements of both of these motifs. As Bakhtin points out, enactments and images of descent permeate carnivalesque writing: "This downward movement is also inherent in all forms of popular festive merriment and grotesque realism" (*RHW*, p. 370).

The setting of *Gone Indian* closely parallels that of *Words*, but there are important differences between the two. *Gone Indian* depicts the fictive area of Coulee Hill/Notikeewin approximately forty years after the "dirty thirties" of the earlier novel (unlike *Words*, the year is never specifically indicated), and it becomes clear that this prairie region, while retaining many of the rural traits of the 1930's Alberta, has achieved a more cosmopolitan air. Binghampton, New York, and Edmonton, Alberta—two non-rural places—are also incorporated into the setting of the novel. Binghampton, the home of the "caged and fenced" Mark Madham (*G.I.*, p. 2), is often typified in the novel as restrictive and stifling.³ At one point, Madham complains to Jeremy's wife, Caroline, with whom he is having an affair:

It's this fucking Binghampton weather. This endless overcast. I feel that I'm suffocating—we're all suffocating in this place, saturated, walled in, drowning. (*G.I.*, p. 152)

The repressive environment described here is the one from which Jeremy must be released. Edmonton, on the other hand, although possessing a certain urbanity, is described as a place of beginnings, an entrance to the frontier, "The last city north. The Gateway" (*G.I.*, p. 103). Jeremy moves from the oppressive world of Binghampton and Madham toward this "Gateway" and through to the liberating carnival site of Notikeewin. He learns later, from the Indian couple who "adopt" him, that the ski-jump hill of the winter festival site is the historic site of Fort Duhamel, the place of "the last sun dance where the fasters tortured themselves to win a vision" (*G.I.*, p. 100). The connection between the popular festival site and the place of shamanistic metamorphosis is here made explicit.

Another important difference between the setting of *Words* and *Gone Indian* is the time of year. The latter novel takes place in the winter, a fact which reinforces the affinity between this carnival site and the often less than hospitable environment of the shaman's initiation. The wintry prairie setting, juxtaposed with the chaotic social warmth of the festival activities, bears out Laurence Ricou's observation that

Kroetsch "articulates new comprehension of the prairie landscape, both embracing the destructive nullity of his environment and defying it by a comic ebullience which celebrates man and life."⁴ Within this festive wintry landscape, Jeremy can finally sever his ties with the condescending, monologic voice of Mark Madham, epitome of the authoritative "languge" which the authentic, Canadian prairie "parole" must resist. His name, aside from suggesting the obvious "mad ham" (insane egotism and arrogance) is, as Jeremy points out, representative of the ultimate paternal progenitor, "the old mad Adam of the original day" (*G.I.*, p. 91). This echoes the oedipal "uncrowning" of *Words*, but it also speaks to Kroetsch's assertion that the literary models which Canadian writing must resist are essentially paternalistic in nature ("I never liked the paternal models, I never felt easy with the—literally—great paternal figures of writing" [*L.V.*, p. 23]). Through the language and character of Mark Madham, Kroetsch parodies and deflates this paternalistic literary voice. Jeremy refers to Madham, variously, as "Dr. Tragic Vision in Modern Prose" (*G.I.*, p. 48) and "mind fucker" (*G.I.*, p. 49). The professor's association with the tremendously influential voice of high Modernism becomes undeniable. At one point, he attempts to account for Jeremy's emotional anxiety by deferring to T.S. Eliot:

At any rate, the afflicted person, quite commonly, senses the presence of another who is not there. Mr. T.S. Eliot, to take a literary example, attributes the experience to the members of Shackleton's Antarctic Expedition: those explorers, at the edge of exhaustion were deluded into believing there was amongst them *one more member* than could actually be counted. (*G.I.*, p. 124)

This passage provides a typical example of Madham's language, his deference to "high distant" literary traditions and his arrogant dismissal of what actually transpires for Jeremy at the Notikeewin Winter Festival. Madham's narrative voice is the antithesis of the carnival voice and, consequently, is consistently undercut or subverted.

Kroetsch's portrayal of Mark Madham, the man who has shunned the open and multiple possibilities of his "coyote-self" and embraced all of the restrictive trappings of "taught-man," illustrates Kroetsch's

divergence from more traditional modes of humour such as those put forth by Stephen Leacock. As Beverly Rasporich notes in her essay "The Leacock Persona and the Canadian Character," Leacock often presents the "lettered doctor" in a deprecating light but, nevertheless, essentially holds him in esteem.⁵ Kroetsch's comic vision, deeply imbued with the carnivalesque, allows no such sanction for the professorial figure in *Gone Indian*. Mark Madham's narrative voice which, to use Bakhtin's words, represents the "tendency toward the stability and completion of being, toward one single meaning, one single tone of seriousness" (*RHW*, p. 101) is parodied and, finally, overturned by the dialogic carnival voice which emanates from the prairie winter festival—the festival which releases Jeremy Sadness from the whole notion of ordered completion so inimical to the carnivalesque perception of life.

Jeremy, unlike Johnnie Backstrom, is anything but a native of the Canadian prairies. Like Backstrom, however, he is "a man forever attracted to the Maelstrom" (*G.I.*, p. 114) or the "old chaos" of the carnival site. Jeremy's choice of language reflects, simultaneously, the voice which is his by virtue of his non-prairie, "taught-man" background, and the voice which reflects his move toward the orally grounded language of the popular festival. Jeremy's narrative in the novel, unlike Madham's written version, derives from his *oral* tape recordings. This reliance upon the spoken word, so prevalent in *Words* and pervasive throughout Kroetsch's writings, dominates much of the narrative in *Gone Indian*. The spoken word, in many ways, releases Jeremy from his sexual problems and the writer's block which have plagued him. This is not to say Jeremy becomes a prolific writer—he certainly does not—but by the end of the novel, his *speaking* voice begins to express his own authentic feelings and thoughts. Thus, lying in bed with Bea Sunderman he may announce:

I am going to lie here for the rest of my life, talking, recording everything. Until I can think nothing I do not speak. Speaking. Until the inside and outside are one, united. (*G.I.*, p. 149)

This emphasis upon spoken language echoes a similar emphasis in *Words*, but differs in that Johnnie Backstrom must only learn to assert his voice; when he does, carnival ensues. Jeremy Sadness, however, must "uninvent" the consciousness contained in his former "taught-man" voice. He must suffer through the stages of shaman-like initiation; his old confining voice and consciousness must die in order that his new identity be born. The carnival experience allows this to happen.

Jeremy is guided through what Mircea Eliade terms the "suffering, death and resurrection"⁶ of shamanistic initiation and metamorphosis by several characters, one of whom is the rodeo cowboy whom he meets upon leaving the Edmonton International Airport at the beginning of the novel. Jeremy meets this "guide" after a ludicrous encounter with Customs officials, an encounter which prefigures his eventual transformation of identity. Jeremy and the rodeo cowboy hurtle toward the carnival site in a wild car ride which has become almost obligatory in Kroetsch's novels. The cowboy's "billingsgate" expressions or "jurons" ("She's a pisscutter for cold"—"Everything along here is closed up tighter than a bull's ass in fly-time" [*G.I.*, p. 15]) exemplify the prairie oral tradition celebrated in *Words*. The cowboy's unrestrained language—paralleled by his mad, carnivalesque actions—have a contagious effect upon Jeremy. Later, watching the cowboy's death-defying ski-jumping, Jeremy is irresistably drawn toward this parody of the stereotyped western character. He remarks: "That's why I had to *talk* to that bronc buster" (*italics mine*; *G.I.*, p. 76).

The cowboy's language and action coalesce in a dialogic manner with those of other characters associated with the carnival site, most notably those of Jeremy's other "guides," Daniel Beaver and his wife.⁷ These two literally lead Jeremy and Jill Sunderman to the festival site and away from Jeremy's job interview in Edmonton: "We followed our Pied Piper out of the City of Edmonton. . . . By 9:30 a.m. on the dot we were walking into the decorated basement of the First Presbyterian Church" (*G.I.*, p. 63). Daniel, one of the trickster figures in *Gone Indian*, helps to release Jeremy from the prison-like confines of his old identity

into the open-ended atmosphere of the carnival.

The Notikeewin Winter Festival in *Gone Indian* shares many popular festive forms and images with the carnival occasions in *Words* but, once again, displays marked differences in emphasis and tone. This may be largely explained by the greater stress in this later novel upon the shamanistic underworld motif which pervades the winter festival. As I have already mentioned, this underworld motif is in no way alien to Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque in literature. Speaking about the importance of the underworld in Rabelais's novels he notes:

The mighty thrust downward into the bowels of the earth, into the depths of the human body, is reflected in Rabelais' world from beginning to end. This downward movement animates all his images, all the leading episodes, all the metaphors and comparisons. Rabelais' world in its entirety, as in every detail, is directed toward the underworld, both earthly and bodily. . . . This downward movement is also inherent in all forms of popular-festive merriment and grotesque realism. Down, inside out, vice versa, upside down, such is the direction of all these movements. All of them thrust down . . . both in literal sense of space, and in the metaphorical meaning of the image. (RHW, p. 370)

This somewhat lengthy passage epitomizes the very nature of the winter festival in *Gone Indian* and also accounts for the carnival's metamorphic effect upon Jeremy Sadness. Jeremy must literally and figuratively thrust downward, away from the confines of all that is "ideal" and abstract in order to find his genuine identity—his own Voice. The carnival into which Jeremy is drawn provides actions and images which reflect this downward and ultimately regenerative movement. Jeremy must be released from his cerebral preoccupations and be reunited, literally and metaphorically, with the "bodily lower stratum." The emphasis upon this downward regenerative motion dominates the last two-thirds of the novel but may be amply demonstrated by examining two specific episodes of the winter festival: the beauty contest and the party in Johnnie Backstrom's funeral parlour.

Jeremy, in his role as carnival king, must judge the beauty contest and choose a carnival queen. He describes the carnivalesque/

underworld atmosphere of this contest held, significantly, in the basement of the local church.⁸ He enters "that seething cauldron of noise, sweat, carnality, venal selfishness, human ambition, vain hope, covetousness and prideful slander" (*G.I.*, p. 109). The animal-human theme so central to popular festive images is epitomized by the moose-calling contest which precedes the beauty pageant:

A guy up on the stage was calling moose. . . . "And now," he said, "a cow moose." And then he made the strange, attractive grunts and calls that would draw a rutting bull to his death. (*G.I.*, p. 110)

The animal call to love and death—eros and thanatos—exemplified here finds its ultimate expression in Bea (Bear) Sunderman's role as the festival's "bear-judge" (*G.I.*, pp. 71-74) and as the prototypical earth-mother in the novel. This human-animal motif recurs throughout *Gone Indian* and again calls to mind the carnivalesque "pulling down," the "transferring from a high mythical level to the gay level of popular festival degradation" implicit in the animalistic behaviour of Bea Sunderman and the other carnival participants.

Jeremy moves from the chaos of the beauty contest to the ambivalent "funeral games" (the novel's original title [*L.V.*, p. 35]) in Johnnie Backstrom's blood-red funeral parlour where the carnival spirit, characterized by a dualistic laughter and a cacaphony of voices, reigns supreme:

It might have been a dance of some sort, a strange beckoning and greeting and denying. The room was full of mouths. They gave a steady din, a drone: no voice was to be distinguished from any other voice, no laugh was more or less a laugh than any other. (*G.I.*, p. 127)

Jeremy here becomes immersed in the maelstrom of the carnival, replete with its dialogic discourse and grotesque images of death and regenerative feasting and drinking. This recalls Bakhtin's observation that the "image of the underworld is related from its beginning with that of a banquet" (*RHW*, p. 383). In the midst of this festive celebration, Jeremy, in a scene which parodies the shamanistic-underworld motif

itself, gets into the coffin (originally intended for his "doppelganger," Roger Dorck) which is placed, symbolically, in the centre of the room. Here he falls asleep and into the final dream of his metamorphosis. Upon awakening, he discovers that he has finally been released from his sexual failings. Jeremy recounts this episode which, in clear Rabelaisian manner, reveals his reunion with his own material bodily lower stratum:

What happened next is very important. I thought about my hands and then realized they were not folded on my chest but rather on my belly. On my slight beer gut. I thought about my belly. Then I thought down through the thicket of my own pubic hairs. . . . I had a hard-on. Yes. I was lying down, lying flat on my back. (*G.I.*, p. 134)

Within the tumult of the death-and-life giving carnival, Jeremy is physically and emotionally emancipated. He is released literally and metaphorically by the carnival spirit of the northern prairies into "the diffusion of personality" and "into a complex of possibilities rather than a concluded self" (*G.I.*, p. 152).

Seen from the perspective of Bakhtin's theory of popular festive forms and images, the conclusion of *Gone Indian* is totally in keeping with the far-reaching carnivalesque perception of the overall novel. In a manner reminiscent of Johnnie Backstrom and Helen Murdoch's rodeo-corral love scene, Jeremy couples with Bea Sunderman at her ranch named "Worlds End." Again the relationship between the female figure and the earth or "bodily lower stratum" is established. Bea gives to "the whole room the smell of earth: not of flowers only but the dark breathing silence of ferns in crevices of rock" (*G.I.*, p. 147). Sexual union with Bea Sunderman, the woman who "sunders" his old confining identity, finally prompts Jeremy's full recognition of the limits and inappropriateness of the voice and language which, until now, have been his:

To say that we were joined, Bea and I, would be once again to underline the failure of language. We were welded in the smithy of our mutual desire. Fused in the bellowed flame. Tonged and hammered. . . . No no no no no no no. I have ransacked my twenty-five years of education for a suitable metaphor. I have done a quick review of logic, called upon the paradigms of

literature and history. I have put to the test the whole theory of a liberal education. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. (*G.I.*, p. 148)

Ann Mandel's observations speak directly to Jeremy's release into "nothing": "Man forgets his interpretations of life only in the brief act of life, in the immortality of the flesh."⁹ Jeremy cannot find the desired interpretive words in the repertoire or consciousness of his former voice because he has been transformed or "healed" out of this voice. Kroetsch notes:

I suppose one of the healing acts that we engage in is the transformational act—the way in which you have moved out of yourself into other possibilities—Keep it open—re/dis/cover. (*L.V.*, p. 173)

Gone Indian is closely aligned with *Words* through its extensive depiction of popular festive forms and images, but the later novel displays more of what Bakhtin terms grotesque realism. Although these aspects of the carnivalesque are inextricably linked, grotesque realism moves somewhat beyond the activities, characters and setting of the carnival site itself and places more emphasis on the "material bodily lower stratum." The essential principle of grotesque realism, as Bakhtin points out, is degradation and a pulling down to the level of the physical human body all that is ideal or abstract. Both *Words* and *Gone Indian* provide, to varying degrees, examples of this particular carnivalesque aspect, but *The Studhorse Man* (the second novel in Kroetsch's Outwest "triptych") surpasses both of these other works in its emphasis upon grotesque realism.

Demeter Proudfoot, the first-person narrator in *Studhorse Man*, claims the story to be a "straightforward account of the life and death of Hazard Lepage" (*S.M.*, p. 172). This statement, of course, falls somewhat short of the truth but anticipates, in some ways, the following synopsis. *Studhorse Man* presents the story of the wild adventures of Hazard Lepage (the studhorse man of the title) as he travels around the Coulee Hill/Notikeewin area (with one near-disastrous trip to Edmonton) seeking mares for his "beautiful blue beast of a stallion" (*S.M.*, p. 7).

The action of the story occurs during the last months of World War II, a time when the shift from the small, pretechnological family farm to large-scale, mechanized agribusiness was just beginning on the Canadian prairies. Hazard's wanderings cast him into series of ludicrous encounters which draw as much upon his own phallic powers as those of Poseidon, his stallion, and which culminate in his death under the hooves of that same creature. This brief summary, however, falls far short of addressing the rich complexities of Kroetsch's novel.

The palimpsest effect of Kroetsch's fiction finds its first full expression in *Studhorse Man*. The actions of Hazard Lepage—protagonist—and Demeter Proudfoot, the narrator-biographer who usurps Hazard as protagonist, constitute two of the most important levels of the novel. As the story unravels, we learn that Demeter is writing from a mental hospital somewhere in Alberta where he sits naked in a dry bathtub. During the time of the story's action, Demeter was totally enthralled with Martha Proudfoot, his cousin, and Hazard's fiancee of thirteen years. Ultimately, neither man's quest for Martha's hand is successful, their rivalry ending with Hazard's death and Demeter's institutionalization.

The shamanistic motif upon which Kroetsch relies so heavily in *Gone Indian* and *Badlands* constitutes another level of *Studhorse Man*. This motif is illustrated by Hazard's numerous, literal and metaphoric descents—descents which thrust him into sexual encounters with some of the strangest female characters ever to populate Canadian fiction. The shamanistic motif also provides the vehicle whereby Demeter is transformed from a reticent but industrious handyman in his Uncle Timothy's hotel to a man who claims to be, "by profession," quite out of his mind (*S.M.*, p. 61).

A number of literal carnival occasions occur in *Studhorse Man*, establishing yet another level in the novel. These include the chaotic "overturning" of downtown Edmonton prompted by Hazard's liberation of nearly one thousand horses, all destined for the glue factory, an incident which transforms "fear into merriment" in true carnivalesque fashion: "The expected reaction of irritation and panic had given way to

a mood of jollity and, one must confess, 'abandon' (*S.M.*, p. 28). Later, a traditional country wedding affords the occasion for the feasting, drinking, carnival discourse and relativity of time which epitomizes the people's popular festival: "The noise turned every attempt at conversation into a sequence of hearty shouts. It seemed only a few minutes had gone by when the orchestra arrived. . . . Where had time gone?" (*S.M.*, p. 102). These occasions and others like them provide clear examples of the popular forms and images so central to *Words and Gone Indian* and, in conjunction with the indigenous setting and language of *Studhorse Man*, firmly "ground" this novel in the Canadian prairie experience.

Aspects of grotesque realism pervade all the levels of *Studhorse Man* delineated thus far. One of the primary manifestations of grotesque realism in the novel is the emphasis upon images of the grotesque body—images which reinforce and reflect the deep ambivalence of *Studhorse Man* as a whole. Bakhtin, using Rabelais as his example, demonstrates the profoundly ambivalent but essentially positive and optimistic nature of grotesque realism. Writing of the grotesque image of the body, he asserts:

The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. . . . This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body: the bowels and the phallus. These two areas play the leading role in the grotesque image. (*RHW*, p. 317)

The stress here upon the male phallus addresses an important aspect of *Studhorse Man*, but this emphasis on masculinity should not be misconstrued. The grotesque image of the body delineates a particular sphere of the human anatomy which is by no means gender-specific:

The main events in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of bodily drama, take place in this sphere. Eating, drinking, defecation, and other elimination as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body—all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven. (*RHW*, p. 317)

All of the aspects of the grotesque image of the body outlined in these passages find vivid expression in *Studhorse Man*, to an extent found nowhere else in Kroetsch's writing until *What the Crow Said*, published in 1978.

The far-reaching ambivalence of grotesque realism forcefully enhances the overall dualistic structure of *Studhorse Man*. The "old dualities" of *Words* or the paired opposites of *Gone Indian* (Jeremy/Madham, Jeremy/Dorck) find almost irresolvable counterparts in *Studhorse Man*. Kroetsch's works always display his imaginative predisposition toward dialectical structures, paradox and binary oppositions, but in *Studhorse Man* these dual structures almost threaten to fulfil Rosemary Sullivan's assertion that Kroetsch goes too far: "Kroetsch seems plagued by an inability to believe that energy can be incorporated without either destroying or being destroyed."¹⁰ Ultimately, though, Kroetsch steers clear of the nihilism Sullivan suggests. In *Studhorse Man*, he presents numerous elements of grotesque realism, demonstrates their inherently positive and optimistic nature, but goes on to illustrate how an increasingly dehumanized, technocratic modern consciousness threatens to deprive these elements of their regenerative, renewing potential.

The central elements of carnivalesque grotesque realism in *Studhorse Man* are: human-animal connections and images, a specific emphasis upon urine and a more general stress upon all bodily elimination, and, finally, the link between death and the female figure as epitome of the material bodily lower stratum.

Bakhtin points to the centrality of human-animal associations in carnivalesque grotesque realism:

The transformation of the human element into an animal one; the combination of human and animal traits is, as we know, one of the most ancient grotesque forms. (RHW, p. 316)

Studhorse Man posits explicit examples of the human-animal link, most notably the pronounced phallic connection between Hazard Lepage and his stallion, Poseidon. Hazard goes so far as to nickname his own penis "Old Blue," clearly linking it to his blue studhorse (*S.M.*, p. 11).

Parallels are drawn so closely between the phallic characters of Hazard and Poseidon that it becomes, at times, difficult to determine which one is being discussed. Demeter describes Hazard as a man of "inordinate lust" (*S.M.*, p. 31) who leads "his prick of a beast of a stallion" from one farm to the next in search of suitable mares (*S.M.*, p. 59). The ambiguity of this phrase illustrates Hazard's confusion between "his prick" and his "beast of a stallion" and also suggests that Hazard, in spite of himself, is driven as much by his own priapic tendencies as by the demands of his chosen occupation.

Kroetsch's emphasis upon human-animal connections directly expresses his desire to translate the essence of Canadian prairie experience into literature. For Kroetsch, fictive presentations of the affinity between man and animal effectively express an essential link between the two, a link which becomes particularly strong in primarily agrarian cultures. Ann Mandel comments on this aspect of Kroetsch's writing: "In Kroetsch's novels, the animal is the power and energy of sexuality, the image of freed nature—and it is the animal which Kroetsch sees as the true doppelganger of man."¹¹ Throughout Kroetsch's writing, literal and metaphoric connections are also drawn between humans and various birds and animals, including crows, owls, coyotes and pigs.

In *Studhorse Man*, a motif closely related to the human-animal one emerges from the stress upon urination, an activity for which both Hazard and Poseidon display a marked propensity. Poseidon is described as a "torrential pisser," a virtue which, as Hazard points out, "is never to be sneezed at" (*S.M.*, p. 62). Hazard also constantly urinates, often at very significant junctures in the novel. Such realistic depictions of bodily functions fulfil a number of purposes in Kroetsch's writing. First, they defy a Victorian mentality which would suppress discussion of such human activities. As Kroetsch has remarked, the *honest* artist or novelist will often be caught "observing the stains in his hero's shorts, watching his hero shave, checking to see if his heroine has menstruated this month."¹² In *Studhorse Man*, however, the emphasis upon urination serves broader, more far-reaching purposes.

Urine and other bodily functions figure intimately in Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque image of the body:

We must not forget that urine (as well as dung) is gay matter, which degrades and relieves at the same time, transforming fear into laughter. If dung is a link between body and earth (the laughter that unites them) urine is a link between body and sea. (*RHW*, p. 335)

The urine-sea link which Bakhtin posits plays an integral role in the grotesque vision of *Sturdhorse Man*. During World War I, an old French woman predicts Hazard's death by water:

"Mon pauvre soldat, inutile de te cacher," she whispered—or at least her old voice came like the hoot of an far-off owl against the thump of gunfire. "La mer sera votre meurtrière." The sea shall be your murderess. (*S.M.*, p. 12)

Peter Thomas insightfully notes the metaphorical word-play upon *mer* and *mare*, a metaphor reinforced by the alternating fleur-de-lis (French, Acadian Canada) and lions (English western Canada) on the wallpaper in Hazard's house (*S.M.*, p. 12). These symbols suggest Canada's national motto: "A marie usque ad mare" (from sea to sea). Thomas goes on to posit the Canadian historical theme which he feels is central to the novel.¹³ In terms of the grotesque realism in *Sturdhorse Man*, the urine-sea/mare connection provides even further metaphorical possibilities.

In spite of his "most preposterous fear of death . . . especially death at sea" (*S.M.*, p. 11), Hazard frantically pursues the literal and metaphoric *mare* of death. He also chronically performs the eliminatory act which figuratively connects him to that death. Both he and Poseidon are connected with bodies of water. Poseidon (sea-god) descends from a stallion literally delivered up from the depths of Wildfire Lake (*S.M.*, p. 67), while Hazard descends from "an island people, Abegwit, a Micmac word meaning 'cradled on the waves'" (*S.M.*, p. 112), and often finds himself "homesick for the sight of a little water" (*S.M.*, p. 67). Thus, the link between Hazard and water (*mer/mare*)—that for which he searches and that which also threatens his death—creates a profound paradox. His trickster-like, priapic disposition ties him closely to the functions of

the bodily lower stratum (urination and procreation) but, at the same time, he recoils from the metaphorical death associated with this ambivalent portion of the grotesque image of the body.

The human-animal and urinations motifs in *Studhorse Man* coalesce within a larger relationship between the novel's female figures and death. Bakhtin delineates the ambivalent death/rebirth aspect of the female material procreative principle:

She is the incarnation of this stratum that degrades and regenerates simultaneously. She debases, brings down to earth, lends a bodily substance to things, and destroys; but first of all, she is the principle that gives birth. She is the womb. (RHW, p. 240)

To varying degrees, the female characters in *Studhorse Man* fulfil this dualistic destructive/creative role. They represent, simultaneously, the material procreative principle and the "crone and succubus, the ancient fiend turned female that in the night of dream has fatal intercourse with men" (*S.M.*, p. 153). She is the "night/mare."

It is not surprising therefore, that the elements of grotesque realism in *Studhorse Man* find specific manifestations in Hazard's sexual encounters—encounters which centre upon the three main acts in the life of the grotesque body: sexual intercourse, death throes and act of birth (RHW, pp. 353-54). An examination of such encounters in *Studhorse Man*, however, reveals that Kroetsch, while portraying the deeply ambivalent nature of grotesque realism, ultimately chooses not to voice the *unqualified* optimism which Bakhtin claims for carnivalesque grotesque realism. This choice carries significant implications for the overall tone, structure and fictive vision put forth in the novel.

Early in *Studhorse Man*, Hazard is knocked unconscious while attempting to recapture Poseidon on the legislative grounds in Edmonton. He is carried under the "kind supervision" of Miss P. Cockburn, assistant curator and wax sculptor at the provincial museum, to her room and bed where he awakens around midnight (*S.M.*, pp. 31-32). P. Cockburn represents both old age and regenerative youth. Hazard describes her in equestrian terms—"a shade wrung in the withers"—which, as Demeter

explains, means she is "showing her age" (*S.M.*, p. 35), but other attributes of her body belie this assessment. Her breasts are compared favourably to "two great speckled eggs of a rare bird"—symbols of fertility and youth—and her fervent sexual desires are not those usually associated with elderly women: "She cried aloud a happy 'Hazard!' that set the halls to ringing, a 'Hazard!' that must have sent a blush into the cordon of wax ears" (*S.M.*, p. 34). P. Cockburn, embodiment of the ambivalent female material bodily principle presents Hazard with a terrible dilemma marked by both attraction and repulsion. She creates dead wax statues and is thus closely associated with death and the past. Hazard's fear of death and his "peculiar little aversion to history" both come to mind (*S.M.*, p. 32), but, for reasons which Hazard himself cannot understand, he is drawn toward this female figure who represents both vital libidinal life and metaphoric death. Cockburn wishes to make a wax model of Hazard, figuratively casting him into death and stasis. Although he resists this ("He would not be seduced, he was resolved, into that immortality" [*S.M.*, p. 34]), he does couple with this representative of bodily death; in his words, he "screwed the ass off her" (*S.M.*, p. 34).

Hazard makes his escape the next morning dressed, significantly, in the uniform of a North West Mounted Police officer, symbolic of the dead, historical past which he putatively abhors. On his way out of the museum he succumbs to a tremendous need to urinate:

Without further ado he aimed his golden stream at a commemorative garden a number of floors below. That moment was resonant with what the future held in store; but Hazard, unthinking, fumbled with the historic buttons, resumed his burden, then went in his cavalier way down the marble stairway. (*S.M.*, p. 38)

The wording of this passage reveals the degrading but revitalizing nature of Hazard's act. "Unthinking" and fumbling, Hazard releases the "golden stream" which, on one level, degrades the high, historical seriousness of his surroundings but which, on another, further unites him with the sea and earth—the garden below.¹⁴ Through his coupling

with P. Cockburn, whose name also carries overtones of urine (pee) and priapic exaggeration (cock burn), and by his act of urination, Hazard literally and metaphorically unites with the sea/mare of death which he ostensibly dreads. Significantly, he walks away from this encounter into a "reluctant spring" (birth and renewal) and, largely because of the uniform afforded by this encounter, recaptures Poseidon and makes good his escape from Edmonton. His fears of death and the past, represented by the ambivalent figure of P. Cockburn are, on this occasion, transformed to merriment.

Hazard's phallic powers are called upon again as the result of his arrest near a resort lake somewhere southwest of Edmonton—a lake which Demeter, as narrator, refuses to name: "Many of you have swam where Poseidon freely relieved himself" (*S.M.*, p. 62).¹⁵ Brought to trial, apparently for having Poseidon service a young mare free of charge, Hazard is sentenced to spend three days "assisting" a local widow-farmer named Mrs. Lank. The circumstances surrounding this episode are reminiscent of Hazard's escapades with P. Cockburn, but also exhibit important differences. Mrs. Lank is described as somewhat less than attractive:

Hazard turned to see a woman with slacks under her skirt pumping wildly at a short pump handle. . . . As she worked so violently her breasts bobbed up and down like cats put to drown in a sack. (*S.M.*, p. 76)

Dead animal imagery, coupled with the depiction of female breasts—the material procreative principle—produces a classic example of the dualistic grotesque image of the female body. Mrs. Lank is later described as a "lusting old sack of a woman" (*S.M.*, p. 82) bent upon becoming pregnant. She has "an uncontrollable urge to have the one thing of which she had been deprived by life: that is, the pleasure of being got with child" (*S.M.*, p. 81). Thus, in Mrs. Lank, "the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven" (*RHW*, p. 317). Although Mrs. Lank is not actually pregnant, her desperate desire to become so calls to mind Bakhtin's description of the "Kerch terracotta collection," comprised of figurines of senile pregnant hags:

This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its two-fold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body. (*RHW*, pp. 25-26)

Mrs. Lank is also associated with other elements of grotesque realism. When Hazard steps from the constable's car, he sinks up to his ankles in dung: "The manure pile, because it generated its own heat within, had not frozen" (*S.M.*, p. 76). This image directly parallels Mrs. Lank's condition as an old, decaying woman within whom burns a lusty desire for sexual union and procreation. Hazard also recalls "preparing a crock of brine in the small cellar under the shack, adding salt to the water in the crock until an egg floated" (*S.M.*, p. 80). Grotesque images of seawater (brine), an earthly womb (the small cellar) and fertility (the egg) combine here to augment the strong grotesque aspect connected with Mrs. Lank. The pig-slaughter, replete with dismemberment, bowels and the "swallowing up of another body" (Hazard and Mrs. Lank apparently eat the pig's heart for dinner), add to the grotesque theme. Death and dismemberment yield sustenance and revitalization. Hazard, however, cannot bring himself to kill the second pig (the first was dead when he arrived), associating it with Poseidon and his own phallic powers ("The pig. The horse. The horse. The pig" [*S.M.*, p. 81]). Again the link between the sex act and death (eros-thanatos) is made explicit as Hazard opts, ironically, for his only alternative—sexual union with Mrs. Lank.

This entire episode is deeply imbued with aspects of grotesque realism which degrade and thrust downward to the material bodily lower stratum and which, to a certain extent, transform fear to laughter: "'Two days and two nights,' Hazard said, his groan changing to a kind of helpless laugh" (*S.M.*, p. 83). The optimistic renewal which should attend such powerfully presented grotesque realism, however, is somewhat ambiguous. Mrs. Lank's desired pregnancy almost certainly never mater-

ializes (she goes back East and is not heard from again) and Hazard launches into a series of failed attempts at finding mares for Poseidon to cover. The sense of regeneration and the optimistic ambivalence of the genuine carnival spirit is displaced by an uneasy ambiguity.

Hazard's priapic misadventures culminate in his encounters with Marie Espheter and Martha Proudfoot and, once again, Kroetsch's propensity for binary opposites and "dopplegangers" is given scope. Marie and Martha (with the suggestions of "mare" in both names) are, in many ways, paired opposites representing the two sides of the ambivalent, female material bodily principle. The two possess, at once, diametrically opposed and very similar characteristics. Combining their traits effectively reveals the destructive/creative, death/rebirth motif so central to the female grotesque.¹⁶

Hazard is driven to Marie Espheter's bed by a wound to his own lower bodily stratum: "Hazard had been shot—'I was hit square in the arse,' was his way of putting it" (*S.M.*, p. 120). Marie's last name (ash-peter) echoes the phallic overtones of P. Cockburn's earlier, and Marie displays a similar fervour in her sexual advances toward Hazard. She quickly realizes, for example, that Hazard who could "neither sit, stand nor turn over . . . could lie upon her belly as well as on his own" (*S.M.*, p. 124). Marie's "nursing" of Hazard, however, does not produce very salubrious results. Rather, as Demeter points out, it seems to actually retard his recovery:

That Hazard did heal so slowly is one of the medical peculiarities of the case. He lay baby-like upon Marie's full breasts, upon her milk-white thighs; instead of appearing to improve, he seemed forever to be on the verge of a relapse. (*S.M.*, p. 124)

This, of course, reflects the paradox that is Hazard Lepage. He is most effectively seduced by those forces he fears most. Marie, however, does seem a powerful representative of the renewing bodily principle. Attention is called to her breasts, belly, thighs—all key areas in the material procreative principle—but her effect upon Hazard paradoxically counters any regeneration. She represents ambiguity, not ambivalence.

The Espheter ranch also clearly represents the shaman's underworld; Demeter suspects the presence of nothing less than a poltergeist (*S.M.*, p. 124). But, unlike Jeremy Sadness' shamanistic descent, Hazard's ends in fear and despair. Demeter notes "the flagging [of] Hazard's rebellious spirit" (*S.M.*, p. 124). Hazard learns to drive a car, symbolic of his resignation to the demise of the horse and all that it represents and, finally, he flees in fear upon his discovery of Marie's scientific and "progressive" plans to use Poseidon's semen for artificial insemination: "But as the horse lunged forward under the guidance of one man, a second raised—I blush to report something so unnatural—an artificial vagina to the erect member" (*S.M.*, p. 137). Marie Espheter, while putatively embodying many of the positive, regenerating aspects of the material procreative principle, actually embodies only an "artificial" and "unnatural" version of them. The ambivalence of grotesque realism is replaced by a sterile ambiguity.

Hazard's experience at the Espheter ranch drives him into a near-fatal sexual encounter with a Mrs. Laporte in Coulee Hill. Pulled from a house-fire and assumed dead by Demeter and the other townspeople, Hazard is laid out in Timothy Proudfoot's icehouse. Hazard's "death," or, more precisely, the townspeople's discovery of his horse-like phallic endowment, prompts a carnival spirit in the town: "The laughter was enormous; it rattled and smashed at my eardrums" (*S.M.*, p. 149). This carnival laughter emphasizes the insignificance of the death of an individual in the carnivalesque perception. Once again, Hazard must be "nursed" back to life and this time the task falls to Martha Proudfoot.

Martha, in contrast to Marie Espheter, has blue eyes and "honeyed hair" (*S.M.*, p. 154), and her thirteen-year resistance to Hazard's sexual advances indicates a somewhat more reticent sexual nature than Marie's. Martha's hesitation, however, diminishes markedly upon her discovery of Hazard's prostrate body:

Martha, in her disbelief that her beloved must be dead, put first a hand upon his bare foot. . . . The groping hand was to grope on, for what she could ignore in life, Martha could not ignore in death. Old Blue was next in line in that sequence. (*S.M.*, p. 152)

Martha's ministrations, at this point, become the epitome of the regenerating material bodily sphere:

In the chill hush of that August night she was all love and pity and concern, warming his naked body with her hands and kisses. On that death's mattress she, flinging off her clothes against the sawdust and the ice, took home her hero's body to her body's joy. (*S.M.*, p. 159)

Hazard's Lazarus-like return from the dead results directly from the link between Martha's bodily lower stratum and his own. This link affords a literal rebirth of "Old Blue" and, as we learn later, it results in the birth of "one child, a beautiful daughter" (*S.M.*, p. 174).

The details of this scene, however, reveal some very interesting overtones. For Martha, Hazard's *personal* resurrection is almost secondary; rather, it is the revival of a very particular part of his anatomy which evokes her joyous praises: "'Old Blue,' she cried. 'Old Blue,' she was laughing" (*S.M.*, p. 155). In terms of the carnivalesque, grotesque perception of life, Martha's reaction is entirely appropriate. The death of one individual in this perception is insignificant. It is "only one moment in the triumphant life of the people and of mankind, a moment indispensable for their renewal and development" (*RHW*, p. 341). Hazard's phallus, however, by this point, has accumulated all manner of metaphoric and symbolic baggage. Through its link with Poseidon and with Hazard's priapic experiences, "Old Blue" has come to represent the male component of the material bodily principle without which the procreative female principle would lose its regenerative power. In short, "Old Blue" has come to epitomize an indispensable aspect of life-giving force. Being governed by such a force, as Hazard's experiences clearly indicate, entails "a preposterous fate, to be at the mercy of something so rash, so reckless and fickle, so willful, unpredictable, stubborn—and so without morality" (*S.M.*, p. 60). These, though, are precisely the qualities of the carnivalesque vision—a vision completely inimical to all that is ordered, closed, completed and predictable. Seen from this perspective, Martha's cries and laughter at the resurrection of "Old Blue" become a celebration of the positive, regenerative force of the material principle and carnivalesque

vision in general.

Throughout *Studhorse Man*, Hazard's phallic prepotence collides and merges with the sexuality represented by various female characters in situations marked by a complex metaphorical relationship between the sex act and death.¹⁷ At the end of the novel all of the grotesque motifs outlined thus far come together in the violent, ambivalent but, in many ways, ambiguous death of Hazard Lepage.

The site of Hazard's death, his mansion-like house, provides a typical wealth of Kroetschean metaphors and symbols. It is described early in the novel as a stern-wheeler (a water vehicle; *S.M.*, p. 8), and its wall patterns of fleurs-de-lis and lions recall the "sea to sea" Canadian motto discussed earlier. Further, at the time of Hazard's death, it houses not only Poseidon but five of Martha's mares and Martha herself. The metaphorical combination of urine, sea (mer), mare, female sexuality and death is abundantly demonstrated. Hazard enters this house in the final stage of his quest which, unbeknownst to him, has been consistently toward the "night mare" of death.

Hazard's death, itself, exhibits strong aspects of the grotesque, at once violent and necessary, a combination of tragedy and a celebration of life. All of these qualities sound in his death-cry:

The exquisitely piercing mortal cry, the cry half horse, half man, the horse-man cry of pain or delight or eternal celebration at what is and what must be. (*S.M.*, p. 169)

Demeter cannot bring himself to shoot Poseidon, envisioning in his mind's eye the horse's death:

The stallion fell and rolled over, kicking at the air. A grotesque dance of love, as if the world had turned, not the stallion. The great penis shrank back into the body of the dying horse. The calks of the horseshoes, bright, flashed with the kicking at the lions and the fleurs-de-lis. (*S.M.*, p. 171)

In many ways, the world has turned and it is, of course, Hazard who performs the "grotesque dance of love."

To reiterate, in the carnivalesque vision an individual's death is an integral part of life, a necessary precursor to rebirth and

revitalization, and Hazard's, were he not such a representational figure, would be no different. Hazard's demise, however, marks a diminishing of the profound ambivalence of the grotesque, carnivalesque spirit itself.

The final chapter of *Studhorse Man* begins with what would seem a rather innocuous piece of scientific information:

PMU is an abbreviation that enables one to avoid saying Pregnant Mare's Urine. From the urine of pregnant mares (to be precise, from the urine collected during the fifth to ninth month of the eleven month pregnancy) scientists are able to extract the female hormone known as estrogen. With estrogen, in turn, they have learned to prevent the further multiplication of man upon the face of the earth. (*S.M.*, p. 172)

Estrogen, of course, is used in the manufacture of birth control pills. We learn that sometime after Hazard's death, horse urine is gathered from the farms of Martha Proudfoot and other "enterprising" farmers (*S.M.*, p. 173). It is sold, significantly, to an American firm in Montana (*S.M.*, p. 174). This piece of information, right at the end of *Studhorse Man*, has far-reaching implications in terms of the grotesque realism in the novel. The revitalization which should attend the death of Hazard Lepage is of a very dubious variety. Urine, the connection between man and the sea, the source of both death *and* life, has become a means by which mankind may be "delivered from itself" (*S.M.*, p. 173). Demeter, the "mad" narrator, waxes eloquent on this point:

Scurrilous, barbarous, stinking man would soon be able, in the sterility of his own lust, to screw himself into oblivion, to erase himself from the face of God's creation. (*S.M.*, p. 174)

Man has thus reduced his own procreative possibilities with the substance which should connect him to life and regeneration. The horse becomes, ironically, an accomplice in this commercial, technological "breakthrough." A dramatically increased demand for pregnant mares prompts a proportionate increase in the demand for studhorses, thus, Poseidon and his progeny "flourish": "It was the Lepage stallions (and they are renowned as pissers) that filled the vacuum left by the near extinction of the horse" (*S.M.*, p. 173). Demeter Proudfoot, the character who, during the course of the novel, slowly replaces Hazard as

protagonist, survives in a self-spun cocoon of "mad" stasis, a man who writes from a *waterless* bathtub, and who prefers "an ordered world," even if he "must order it through the posture of madness" (*S.M.*, p. 61). His metamorphosis, finally, contains little of the hopeful optimism which the genuinely ambivalent grotesque vision potentially affords.

In *The Studhorse Man*, Kroetsch puts forth a vision which draws upon many of the positive aspects of grotesque realism. Ultimately, though, Kroetsch—in this novel—affirms Bakhtin's assertion that, in modern times, the genuine carnivalesque vision is, if not completely lost, seriously threatened. Its ambivalence has "acquired an ambiguous nature; it presents a wayward, sensual, concupiscent character of falsehood, materialism and baseness" (*RHW*, p. 240). That this threat should emanate, even fictively, from the Canadian prairie is a final irony which truly threatens to destroy:

To end a discussion of grotesque realism in *The Studhorse Man* on this note would be to give undue emphasis to the novel's negative, pessimistic overtones. Attention must also be paid to what seems a minor footnote in the novel, the birth of Hazard's and Martha's daughter, Demeter: "D. Lepage, she now calls herself; and she has grown up to be something of a lover of horses" (*S.M.*, p. 175). By the end of *Studhorse Man* the revitalizing force of the carnivalesque may be under siege but it is not completely extinguished. Demeter (the daughter) obviously possesses many of the revitalizing traits of both of her parents. Further, she carries the first name of the character who tells the story, the one—regardless of limitations—who *writes*. *The Studhorse Man* is also followed by *Gone Indian* and, later, by *What the Crow Said*, two novels which amply demonstrate Kroetsch's renewed faith in the carnivalesque vision.

CHAPTER FOUR

CARNIVALESQUE VS. BINARIES / CARNIVALIZED

FORM: *WHAT THE CROW SAID*

One comes back to these damned binaries all the time.

— Robert Kroetsch,
Labyrinths of Voice

Kroetsch, commenting upon structures in Canadian life and literature, observes:

[I]n our normal binaries the sides are so evenly drawn that there is a danger of stasis. . . . But I don't find Canadian versions of equilibrium very exciting at all; I find them simply static. I would rather have anarchy. I'd rather go back to carnival. (*L.V.*, pp. 124-126)

This statement addresses two central features—the carnivalesque perception and binary oppositions—in *What the Crow Said* (1978),¹ Kroetsch's sixth published novel. Moreover, it anticipates the manner in which Kroetsch creates and then, by means of the carnivalesque, collapses a stifling male-female binary opposition in *Crow*. This opposition is presented through both the content *and* form of the novel and the emphasis which Kroetsch places upon this male-female binary opposition reflects a more general shift in his writing as regards the carnivalesque treatment of subject and form.

Popular festive forms and images, in conjunction with elements of grotesque realism, constitute the essential aspects of the carnivalesque perception and always lie at the heart of the subject-matter of writing which adopts this perception. As Kroetsch explains, however, these aspects do not exhaust the literary possibilities of the carnivalesque. In *Labyrinths of Voice* he comments: "So the carnivalization is what? It's happening to the characters and it's happening to the novel. It's double" (*L.V.*, p. 37). What Kroetsch addresses here is the distinction

in literary art between subject-matter and presentation—between content and form. The carnivalesque vision in Kroetsch's writing has progressively broadened and shifted from *The Words of My Roaring* onward and, increasingly, carnivalesque content such as popular festive forms and grotesque realism has been accompanied by a "carnivalizing" of modes of fictive presentation themselves.² This carnivalizing resists and subverts such entrenched literary forms as verisimilitude, conventional modes of realism, linear causality, consistent and easily identifiable narrative voice, and other established conventions of fiction. Carnivalizing deprives these conventions and hierarchical systems of their rigidity and tendency toward closure. Kroetsch remarks: "I want to open, not close. And the danger of systems is closure. They suddenly seem to explain everything and, of course, they don't."³ This carnivalizing extends also to the very language of the literary work. Kroetsch remarks: "And the doubled language that goes with it: a ritualized language and an abandoned language . . . carnival allows that" (L.V., p. 37).

The "double" sense of carnival which Kroetsch addresses occurs in both *The Studhorse Man* and *Gone Indian*, but it is not until *Crow* that the stress upon carnivalized form begins to equal and, at times, surpass the emphasis on carnivalesque subject-matter in Kroetsch's fiction. The following examination, of necessity, adopts a somewhat artificial approach in that it separates considerations of form and content in *Crow*. Such a separation runs counter to the indissoluble tie between these two literary aspects but, ultimately, facilitates a more analytically coherent approach.

Crow might well be the enactment of "The Plot Against Plot," one of Jeremy Sadness' proposed dissertation titles in *Gone Indian*. The labyrinthine and fragmentary story-line vigorously defies brief encapsulation or synopsis, but some sense of the major action may be conveyed. The story begins with the erotic seduction of Vera Lang (the eldest Lang daughter) by a swarm of honey bees, a seduction which triggers her deeply ambivalent outcry, "pain-filled and sweet, beautiful and terri-

x Please see THOMAS.

fied" (*WCS*, p. 12). This human-animal (insect) union initiates the strange set of events which comprise the story-line of *Crow* and, concomitantly, precipitates the carnivalesque overturning of verisimilitude in the novel:

People, years later, blamed everything on the bees. It was the bees, they said, seducing Vera Lang, that started everything. How the town came to prosper, and then to decline, and how the road never got built, the highway that would have joined the town and municipality to the world beyond, and how the sky itself, finally took umbrage. (*WCS*, p. 7)

The most direct result of Vera's seduction is the birth of her son (never named in the novel) who apparently dies when Vera, travelling in a horse-drawn sled, throws him to pursuing wolves (*WCS*, p. 60). He miraculously surfaces later in the novel, however, as a shaman-like "Coyote Boy" who speaks nothing but pig-latin. Shortly after Vera's coupling with the bees, her father, Martin Lang, freezes to death in spite of Gus Liebhaber's drunken attempts to save him. After Martin's death, Liebhaber courts Tiddy Lang, but she chooses to marry John Skandl, an ice-tower builder set upon connecting the municipality of Big Knife to the outside world by a network of roads and highways. During what becomes a fiercely competitive battle for Tiddy's hand, a confusing sexual encounter involving Tiddy, Skandl and Liebhaber leaves Tiddy pregnant. Tiddy subsequently gives birth to her only son, J.G. (John Gustav-Skandl/Liebhaber) whose name indicates the unresolved question of his true biological paternity. J.G., from the moment of his birth to his violent death later in the novel, never utters a sound: "[W]hen he cried he made no sound, a condition of silence he was to maintain throughout his life" (*WCS*, p. 62). The talking crow of the novel's title first appears at the time of J.G.'s birth and becomes an interpreter of sorts for the boy:

Whether or not the crow was speaking what was on the silent child's mind, that was never clearly determined. But there were those who insisted that the black crow sometimes spoke on behalf of J.G. (*WCS*, p. 64)

Just prior to the birth of J.G., John Skandl (to whom Tiddy is now married) leaves for the city to pursue his goal of linking the municipality to the world beyond. Upon Skandl's departure, Liebhaber imposes himself upon the Lang household, and initiates a 151-day card game of "schmier" which severs a large group of local men from all usual occupational and familial responsibilities and casts them into a desperate life style characterized by degradation, excrement and images of death.

In the course of "The War Against The Sky" which comprises the latter stages of the novel, numerous male members of the community, including John Skandl and three of the Lang girls' husbands, die violent deaths. In fact, every adult male in the area suffers some affliction. Significantly, not one of the female characters suffers a similar fate and, aside from Vera, all remain relatively unscathed by the sometimes apocalyptic happenings in the novel. Liebhaber, in a last-ditch manoeuvre in the battle between man and firmament, steals Vera's hibernating honey bees and blasts them into the sky to end the war. The novel closes upon Liebhaber and Tiddy Lang snugly ensconced in Tiddy's bed, with Liebhaber cast into the role of suckling child: "He was like a little boy" (WCS, p. 214).

Crow is set in and around the town of Big Indian in the fictive municipality of Big Knife which lies "ambiguously on the border between the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan" (WCS, p. 7). The split suggested by this cross-border positioning anticipates another important division in the setting between the town of Big Indian and the Lang farm. The town, "hardly a mile downstream and yet so distant from the farm" (WCS, p. 7), is literally and figuratively severed from the farm by the Big Knife River, their only connection (aside from boating or swimming) being the CN railway bridge. This geographic separation is figuratively reinforced by the river's name which carries connotations of both militaristic and surgical cutting.

These divisions in the setting of *Crow* reflect the almost fatal split between male and female characters in the novel. The Lang farm is

a decidedly feminine place populated by eight women including a grandmother ("She had been there from the beginning, Old Lady Lang" [WCS, p. 10]), her daughter Tiddy, and Tiddy's six girls. Martin Lang, Tiddy's husband, freezes to death just outside the house less than thirty pages into the novel, so the only male who actually lives on the farm is J.G., Tiddy's only son who also dies during the course of the story. The other major characters in the story—significantly all men—reside elsewhere and gravitate with various degrees of ease or difficulty toward the Lang farm.

The pronounced male-female binary opposition established in *Crow* speaks directly to Kroetsch's abiding concern with man-woman sexual relationships. This concern has characterized Kroetsch's writing from the outset, and in his essay "Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space"—published one year after *Crow*—Kroetsch articulates his view on its importance:

The basic grammatical pair in the story line (the energy line) of prairie fiction is house:horse. To be *on* a horse is to move: motion into distance. To be *in* a house is to be fixed: a centering unto stasis. Horse is masculine. House is feminine. Horse:house. Masculine:feminine. On:in. Motion:stasis. A woman ain't supposed to move. Pleasure:duty. (*Essays*, p. 49)

Kroetsch goes on to assert that these seemingly unassailable binaries have remained intact in both prairie fiction and prairie life largely because of the *male* figure. Discussing the dance scenes in the novels of Ross and Cather, he explains:

The failure of the male protagonists, at the center of each book, to enter into the dance, is symptomatic of what is wrong. The women can dance. Their appropriate partners cannot. The harmony suggested by dance—implications of sex, of marriage, of art, of a unified world—all are lost because of the male character. (*Essays*, p. 52)

The males feel a paradoxical love/fear, attraction/avoidance toward the female: "The geography of love and the geography of fear: on the prairies it's hard to tell them apart" (*Essays*, p. 50). In the face of this male ambiguity, the female figures are often "tempted by dreams of androgyny"

and, consequently, assume both male and female roles. They refuse to "accept the assigned role—the assigned 'name'" (*Essays*, pp. 53-54). Bakhtin also notes the importance of the androgyny motif in the carnival perception (*RHW*, p. 323).

The androgynous character of Vera Lang becomes one of the means by which Kroetsch collapses the male-female binary construct in *Crow*, but he also "uninvents" this structure by depicting radical enactments and images of grotesque realism. In fact, every aspect of grotesque realism found in Kroetsch's earlier novels finds expression in *Crow*, as well as grotesque elements hitherto unexplored, and all of these elements are related directly or indirectly to the male-female polarization. Grotesque realism assumes a number of forms, but the ones central to this discussion are manifested in a cosmic earth-sky antagonism, a concentration on regenerative death and dismemberment and, finally, in an almost obsessive emphasis upon excrement.

Crow, originally entitled "The War Against The Sky,"⁴ presents a cosmic parallel to the male-female binary construct which lies at the centre of this novel. Bakhtin outlines the importance of cosmic motifs in the carnivalesque perception:

It was in the material acts and eliminations of the body—eating, drinking, defecation, sexual life—that man found and retraced within himself the earth, sea, air, fire, and all the cosmic matter and its manifestations, and was then able to assimilate them. Indeed the images of the material bodily lower stratum have a prevailingly cosmic connotation. (*RHW*, p. 336)

As representatives of the material bodily lower stratum and the procreative principle, the female figures in *Crow* remain literally and figuratively attached to the earth, while the men desperately, and with disastrous consequences, attempt to gain or enter the sky.

In their attempts to gain the sky, the male characters strive toward abstraction and the ideal "world beyond." At the same time these characters—more notably Liebhaber—desperately fear death in both its literal and figurative female/death senses. In their frenetic attempts

to gain the firmament and victory over death, the men, variously, build ice towers, fly planes and other flying machines, scale trees, poles and windmills. They also ride horses, an activity which bears them up toward the sky and away from the female earth (Liebhaber: "Removed from the earth by his sudden ascent onto the mare's back" [WCS, p. 23]). The men also incessantly move and travel in the domain outside of the female house. Further, literal and symbolic depictions of bulls—powerful male images—abound in *Crow* and, significantly, one of these images appears in the sky: "It was a bull, head down, wearing the stars as ornaments; the bull in the sky" (WCS, p. 42). All of the men's efforts, however, to attain or conquer the sky and all that it represents culminate in violent death or dismemberment.

Conversely, the female figures in *Crow* are emphatically associated with the earth and water, elements which, in turn, are directly linked with the house and garden. Early in the novel—and again at the end (WCS, p. 217)—Old Lady Lang resides, literally, in the earth: "She was in the cellar breaking the sprouts off last fall's potatoes" (WCS, p. 10). The earth-garden becomes the place of female fertility but it is also the place of death as symbolized by J.G.'s fatal fall onto the burial crosses Theresa Lang has placed in the garden. The house becomes at times an impenetrable female bastion, unapproachable, and oddly threatening to the male characters:

The women stayed in the house. The house was full of women; now and then a face appeared in a window, pale, drawn, curious; a face appeared, hesitated before it withdrew. The women in the house were taking care of women in the house. They made coffee. They waited. (WCS, p. 178)

The Lang house is often characterized as dark and death-like: "The house was quiet as a tomb . . . he [Liebhaber] found the bedroom door; he groped his way around the dining room table, toward the far light. The kitchen went dark. The kitchen was pitch black" (WCS, p. 40)—the dark-house of the female earth is opposed to the often brilliantly illuminated light-house which Skandl builds toward the sky. The tomb-like house becomes—in keeping with the ambivalence of grotesque realism—the

place of disease, death, excrement (the female lower body principle) but, also the place of shamanistic resurrection and renewal. Early in the novel, Liebhaver almost freezes to death but is taken into the feminine womb of house and nursed back to life:

He lay in the Lang house, in Martin Lang's own bed, his ears wearing huge blisters, his face peeling down to the flesh. . . . He was incontinent: he pissed the bed every few hours, shit himself once or twice a day. The daughters of the Lang house turned all the pain of their loss into a concern for the suffering figure in their mother's bed. (*WCS*, p. 37)

Liebhaver recovers in the depths of his own excrement and at the regenerative, life-giving hands of the Lang women.

Bulls are also linked to the female figures in the novel but, rather than revering the male "bull in the sky," the women confront and attempt to domesticate it:

Tiddy Lang held the bull at bay with her shook skirt and apron . . . she stood against the red bull, its savage pawing, its snorted breath . . . [Old Lady Lang] saw her daughter, saw the bull. "Your cousin is in town," she said. "Put a chain on the ring," she said pointing to the brass ring in the bull's nose. (*WCS*, pp. 9-10)

Much is made of the antagonism of the male-female binary opposition in *Crow*, but this division must be balanced against the efforts—however preposterous—which the males make in attempts at reconciling the gap between themselves and their female counterparts. John Skandl builds his ice tower to gain the sky—to impose his own abstract referentiality upon experience ("a fixed point in the endless winter" [*WCS*, p. 33])—but he also builds this phallic tower in order to attract Tiddy Lang. Tiddy, the major earth-mother figure in *Crow*, is attracted by Skandl's "tower" (she subsequently marries him):

She stared at the glowing, tall tower, the vibrant tower, down in the valley. She had never seen anything so wondrous. "Isn't it beautiful?" she said to her mother. (*WCS*, p. 47)

The man, tempted and encouraged by the woman, "approaches the female. He approaches the garden. He approaches the house" (*Essays*, p. 55) in

genuine, if misguided, attempts at male-female union and harmony. Ultimately, though, the men cannot assimilate the female earth-figure, and they opt for desperate, death-defying attempts to gain the "ideal" and abstract sky. They consequently become caught up in what Bakhtin terms the "grotesque swing" in which the "accent is placed not on the upward movement, but upon the descent" (*RHW*, p. 371).

In *Crow* the men descend into the grotesque underworld characterized by excrement and images or enactments of death. The men involved in the schmier game (with the suggestion of "smeared" excrement) are cast down precisely in this way.

The schmier game in *Crow* represents the extreme example of the popular festivals depicted in *The Words of My Roaring* and *Gone Indian*. It quickly loses its more obvious positive qualities, however, and becomes a profound example of the carnivalesque descent into the underworld. Although the game retains a deep, grotesque ambivalence, it lacks the humour and laughter which characterize, for example, the rodeo day in *The Words of My Roaring*. The desperation and terror of the men's literal descent (they play at one point in the dark basement of the church) and the figurative thrust downward into the grotesque underworld deprives the game of the overtly optimistic quality of the people's popular carnival: "By the first dawn there was no humour left in the players. They were playing to win, and to win they had to lose" (*WCS*, p. 108). What they must lose, of course, are their restrictive male versions of self. During the latter stages of this prolonged "game"—another version of the male flight in which they have been "ignoring the weather, ignoring time, family, duty, season" (*WCS*, p. 90)—the players are visited by death in the form of Martin Lang's ghost:

The roar was an animal roar. Some remembered it, after, as a bull sound, ferocious, out of the dark earth itself, the sound of darkness itself. . . . Five of the schmier players, there in the church basement, had pissed themselves; two, unashamedly, shat their pants. . . . The smell of urine and excrement—and, according to some observers, sulphur—hung in the streets of Big Indian through the entire day. (*WCS*, pp. 112-113)

This is a powerful grotesque image, and one which dramatically uncrowns the males and their compulsive tendencies toward flight.

There are male characters in *Crow* who—unlike Skandl, for instance—strive to enter the sky against their own basic dispositions and better judgement. Joe Lightning, Cathy Lang's Cree Indian husband, is such a character:

Joe Lightning was opposed to the war against the sky; he believed in the union of the elements . . . he liked the elements, earth, air, fire and water. (*WCS*, p. 156)

Joe, however, finally succumbs to the almost irresistible masculine urge to "ascend." He, paradoxically, digs a pit—an eagle trap—in the *earth*:

It was Joe's intention to wrestle the eagle to earth and drag him into the pit. Somehow he would communicate with the eagle, as J.G. had communicated with the black crow. He would learn about the sky. That was his intention. (*WCS*, p. 157)

The eagle carries Joe up into the sky but Joe, of course, falls: "Nor was he certain whether he let go of the eagle or the eagle let go of him" (*WCS*, p. 158). Joe Lightning, however—unlike the schmier players—does not emit a roar of terror in the face of descent and death. Rather, he laughs:

The laughter of his falling was heard over most of the district. It was more a laugh than anything like a cry of terror. . . . It was a simple laugh of pleasure and yet it was a kind of scream too, a scream of release. (*WCS*, pp. 158-159)

Joe Lightning's laugh epitomizes the deep ambivalence of grotesque carnival laughter, at once deriding, self-acknowledging and renewing. He lands, significantly, in the *ladies* cess-pit behind the Church of the Final Virgin, splattering "a ton of shit and piss and catalogue paper over thirty-four parked cars" (*WCS*, p. 160). Joe Lightning does not merely land on the earth; he literally descends *into* the female earth's womb. This is a graphic depiction of the thrust down into the female bodily lower stratum, the locus of excrement but also of regeneration, fertility and rebirth. His own laugh as he plummets from the sky acknowledges the regenerative nature of his descent and burial.

"Cosmic terror" here is "degraded, humanized and transformed. . . . Terror is conquered by laughter" (*RHW*, p. 336).

Grotesque degradation and the violent descent, degradation, death or dismemberment of various male characters in *Crow* becomes, at times, almost overwhelming. A virtual catalogue of such occurrences in *Crow* might be constructed. Three of the men married to the Lang girls die grotesquely. Liebhaber also notes: "[E]very male over the age of sixteen in the Municipality of Big Knife had been injured or maimed or had suffered a related illness, in 'The War Against The Sky' (*WCS*, p. 178). The extreme emphasis upon excrement, dismemberment, violent death and other elements of grotesque realism in *Crow* has drawn, not surprisingly, some rather negative appraisals even from critics normally sympathetic to Kroetsch's iconoclastic writing. The treatment of the character J.G., for instance, tips the balance too far for Peter Thomas, and in his critical study of Kroetsch, he takes strong exception to *Crow*. Thomas faults Kroetsch for what he perceives as an unjustifiable preoccupation with excrement and death in the novel. He writes: "[T]he excremental motif is Swiftean in its ferocity," and further asserts: "J.G. is a gruesome creation, beyond farce, beyond a joke. Kroetsch's own ferocity here contains little hope."⁵ Thomas' predominantly mythopoeic reading of Kroetsch's fiction and poetry fails to recognize, however, the ambivalent and basically regenerative, optimistic nature of the novel's emphasis upon grotesque enactments and images of excrement and death.

Seen from the perspective of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, J.G.'s death in *Crow* is neither gruesome nor gratuitous. This death exemplifies—albeit in a very forceful manner—the overall attempt in the novel to collapse, through a radical deployment of carnivalesque grotesque realism, restrictive male-female binary opposition. J.G.'s parentage is divided between Skandl, Liebhaber and Tiddy Lang. Thus, he embodies both sides of the male-female binary opposition, an opposition which Kroetsch reminds us, may lead to the "danger of stasis." Until his death, J.G. remains perpetually in the female house and,

further, possesses the physical beauty normally associated with the feminine side of the man-woman binary ("the most beautiful baby ever born in the Big Indian General Hospital [WCS, p. 61]). This beauty, though, manifests itself in a narcissistic indifference which is reinforced by his perpetual silence. He articulates only through excrement ("J.G. sometimes filled his pants: it was the only way in which he could express himself" [WCS, p. 79]) and, at other times through the black crow. J.G. possesses none of the genuinely positive aspects of the ambivalent female. The male qualities which are his by virtue of his connection to Liebhaver and Skandl remain obscured until the day of his death. Significantly, just prior to his first departure from the house, J.G. was working on a jigsaw puzzle, "incomplete, in the middle of the floor: it was a picture of a tree in autumn colors, the air about it full of birds" (WCS, p. 148). Upon leaving the house, he almost immediately assumes a version of male flight: "Even before his right foot found the rotting step, he was moving" (WCS, p. 147). The incompleteness suggested by the jigsaw puzzle now manifests itself in J.G.'s one-half completion of a figure eight:

[He] continued all the while to complete the first half, the swing portion and its reversal, of his figure eight. It would have been the most magnificent figure eight of his life, the best ever; it might, it must, include in one circle the house, in the second the garden. (WCS, p. 147)

In the process, J.G. despoils the garden: "He tramped his way through the carrots . . . he knocked over a head of cabbage" (WCS, p. 147).

Before he completes this figure, however, he spots the tree:

J.G. had never seen a tree. He realized in the instant of his confrontation, it did not block his going at all; it was a pathway into the sky. (WCS, p. 147)

J.G. ascends this tree, attempts to fly and, of course, falls to his death.

Kroetsch presents here a typically complicated example of binary polarization and grotesque realism. J.G. is a male character who offers a potential assimilation of the female house and garden, but J.G.

finally succumbs to the disastrous, masculine compulsion to ascend. He proceeds with a typically distorted or incomplete view of the potentially regenerative quality of the male sky (represented by the unfinished jigsaw puzzle), and on equally incomplete incorporation of the female house-garden (the one-half figure eight) and, appropriately, is cast down into the garden of both life and death. Seen from the carnivalesque perspective, it is only by J.G.'s death that there exists the possibility for an "uninvention" of the negative male-female binary in *Crow*. From the same perspective, Kroetsch's own view of the novel—directly counter to Thomas'—may be better understood. Kroetsch asserts:

I think of my book as being sort of wildly optimistic; I'm sort of puzzled by people who don't see it that way. You don't become optimistic by avoiding that [excrement and death]. It's like Rabelais, you go with it all the way. It's hopeful in the simplest sense, it's a kind of wild hopefulness.⁶

The "wild hopefulness" of *Crow* emanates from the collapse of the destructive male-female dichotomy so central to the novel. This collapse is prepared for and prefigured by the descent/death of the schmier players, Joe Lightning, and J.G., but it culminates in the actions and characterization of Gus Liebhaber and Vera Lang.

Liebhaber, hearing Joe Lightning's laugh/scream as he falls from the sky, is accidentally trapped in the water beneath the overturned hull of his paddleboat: "Liebhaber, trapped in the absolute darkness under the boat, trapped into death" (*WCS*, p. 163). Figuratively, Liebhaber is entrapped in the death-like womb of the female house. He desperately fears drowning (Hazard Lepage's same fear) in the water of the Big Knife River. The water represents death but it is also the cosmic mediator between the feminine Lang farm and the decidedly masculine town of Big Indian. Moreover, water—as rain, snow or hail—mediates between the earth and sky. Liebhaber desperately thrashes around and, simultaneously, confronts and escapes death: "[H]e had escaped; he had recovered the night, and dream, and memory" (*WCS*, p. 163). He finally discovers the absurdity of his struggle against death:

Liebhaber's right foot touched the river bottom. The humiliation melted his arms. He shat himself. At that moment, against the constricting cold of the spring runoff, his sphincter opened; he felt the warm shit ooze softly into his underwear. (*WCS*, p. 164)

Liebhaber, in the "spring runoff" (fertility and rebirth), plummets down to the degrading but renewing cosmic and material bodily lower stratum represented respectively by excrement and mud. The regenerative quality of this occurrence is subsequently made clear. Liebhaber (Love haver [*WCS*, p. 215]) deploys Vera's bees (symbols of female fertility) as ammunition and ends "The War Against The Sky." Moreover, at the close of the novel he lies in bed with Tiddy considering the fear of death which formerly plagued him: "Liebhaber is happy. After all, he is only dying. Tiddy stirs. But she is only dreaming" (*WCS*, p. 218).

Vera Lang becomes the character in *Crow* who most freely traverses and, consequently, most completely collapses the male-female oppositional structure. Vera exemplifies the androgynous female or the female discussed in Kroetsch's "Fear of Women" essay who "refuses to accept the assigned 'name'" (*Essays*, p. 53). Unlike her mother or sisters, she travels extensively around the municipality caring for her bees and spends much less time in the traditionally female domain of house and garden. The bees, however, symbolize Vera's ability to draw strength and fertility from the firmament and, further, represent her female-procreative ability to bring earth, sky, life and death together. Her mediating abilities are nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in the episode late in the novel where she and Marvin Straw come together.

Marvin Straw's obsessive pursuit of Vera Lang has "wrecked his mind" (*WCS*, p. 129), and has reduced him to a "filthy, haggard scarecrow that hung in the crotch of a poplar tree . . . that lurked, knee-deep in a slough, in a stand of cattails, the wild hair wreathed in a cloud of dragonfiles" (*WCS*, p. 141). Finally, racing after Vera who floats down the Big Knife River in a bee-filled granary, Straw is thrown off his horse and the CN bridge into the water:

He swam like a man who had never in his life needed or known water, and yet who now in an act of creation born of water itself invented motion itself. He threshed his way toward the granary. And Vera Lang reached out a hand. Naked and beautiful and wild with her first desire, she reached a perfect hand to the swimmer. (WCS, p. 201)

Vera, "the seedhouse of Marvin Straw's dark need, the world's vulva and fulfillment in one" (WCS, p. 199), has tempted the "straw man" into an "uninvention" of his limited male version of self. They sail down the waters of the Big Knife River—the cosmic element which collapses the male-female binary poles—in the inconclusive present which, by its very nature "demands continuation [and] moves into the future" (D.I., p. 30). In their wake, the formerly hopeless division between male and female is symbolically destroyed. Liebhaber's paddleboat (minus Liebhaber)—representing the overly-restrictive female house—and the flying machine carrying Jerry Lapanne—sexually-obsessed escapee from a nearby penitentiary and prototypical representative of male flight—collide with the phallic bridge piling ("stiff and tall like a lighthouse" [WCS, p. 202]): "[A]t that same moment, they were in collision. They became one" (WCS, p. 202). This collision, in conjunction with Vera's and Marvin Straw's "sailing through" implies, not closure, but a collapse and subsequent moving out of the dangerous stasis of male-female polarization.

The collapse of the male-female binary structure in *Crow* occurs, to a large extent, in terms of subject-matter and by the deployment of elements of grotesque realism, but it also entails the carnivalizing of form—the pulling down or "uninvention" of a binary system which Kroetsch views as too rigid in traditional prairie writing. This "uninvention" of structure in *Crow* operates in conjunction with an overturning of language itself and a carnivalizing of traditional modes and forms such as verisimilitude and established modes of realism, conventional temporal frameworks, and monologic narrative methods. *The Crow Journals* contain, in an entry dated July 9, 1976, an interesting piece of verse:

O Word of Eliot
 we cannot believe you
 O Principle of Causality
 we cannot believe you
 O Verisimilitude
 we cannot believe you
 O Depth & Profundity
 we cannot believe you
 O Epiphany of Joyce
 we cannot believe you⁶

This piece of poetry encapsulates, in many ways, Kroetsch's attitude toward inherited literary language and modes of presentation, and also anticipates the extensive carnivalizing of language and form in *Crow*. Kroetsch says of the connection between the established system of literary conventions and the carnivalesque perception:

What the carnivalesque says is that you *see* it there, and you even honour it in a sense, but then you resist it somehow. For me that word—carnavalesque—does bring those things together and announces my stance.⁷

Carnavalesque content such as depictions of popular festive forms and images or grotesque realism appear much earlier in Kroetsch's fiction than does a carnivalizing of literary form. The latter aspect has emerged slowly over the course of his writing career. *The Words of My Roaring*—marked as it is by literal portrayals of the popular carnival—remains, in terms of form and structure, quite a conventional novel. The story progresses in a linear fashion through a first-person narrative voice which never really exceeds traditional boundaries and the novel, as a whole, adheres closely to established modes of realism. Such is not the case, however, with either *The Studhorse Man* or *Gone Indian*. Both these later works break with traditional novelistic forms, particularly as regards narrative voice. In *The Studhorse Man*, Demeter Proudfoot narrates Hazard Lepage's story but then enters the novel as a character. Mark Madham's implicitly unreliable narrative voice in *Gone Indian* is, paradoxically, subverted by its mediation of the story of Jeremy Sadness whose voice consistently undercuts Madham's narrative. These permutations of narrative voice affect other aspects of form in

these novels such as the temporal framework or verisimilitude. The resulting literary work demands that the reader be prepared to suspend traditional expectations and be willing to enter the carnival site of the novel itself, the site which, as Bakhtin points out, works

to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. (*RHW*, p. 34)

In *Crow*, Kroetsch carnivalizes both spoken and written language. "Grounded" billingsgate expressions abound which are particularly Rabelaisian in their emphasis upon disease and the bodily lower stratum. Early in the novel, Liebhaber hurls jurons to the world at large: "The world is a double hernia. . . . A cracked pot. A boiled lemon. A scab and a carbuncle. A mole on a mule's ear. A mouthful of maggots" (*WCS*, p. 20). Since their appearance in novels such as *The Words of My Roaring*, these verbal expressions have changed more in intensity and grotesque emphasis than in their basic nature, and they still serve much the same purpose. Such expressions uncrown all that is high, distant and unfathomable, and transform cosmic fear into ambivalent carnival laughter. At the same time, they bring language down from its "lofty heights" to the "ground" of Canadian prairie experience.

In *Crow*, however, Kroetsch's carnivalization of *written* language marks somewhat of a shift from his earlier preoccupation with oral expression. Liebhaber is, by profession, a printer "puzzling with his ink-stained fingers the intricate knot of language that bound him to death" (*WCS*, p. 54). Liebhaber works to free himself from "Gutenberg's curse" (*WCS*, p. 163)—the curse of having to work with a structured "langue"—by literally overturning or carnivalizing the act of writing. He attempts to deprive the basic components of written language—letters—of their seemingly immutable signification:

He thought of the letter O, from his collection of wood type. He tried to let it become a mere circle. A cat's eye. The perfect circle of a soap bubble. He would free the O from the O, let back into the world the zero of ought. (*WCS*, p. 74)

It is also through Liebhaver's play with letters that the relationship between the female mother-figure and water is explicitly established: "He imagined the word WATER; then in his mind, turned the W upside down" (*WCS*, p. 55)—water becomes mater. This is the sort of play with language that carnivalization allows, and it illustrates Bakhtin's point that in the carnivalesque perception words maintain their "openendedness, their inability to say anything once and for all or to think anything through to its end" (*D.I.*, p. 365). The aim is to break as much as possible with the language or forms which restrict authentic expression.

Kroetsch views conventions of realism as being particularly restrictive for Canadian prairie writers, largely because of the work of writers such as Sinclair Ross and F.P. Grove, two authors whom he nevertheless strongly admires. In *Crow*, Kroetsch breaks with modes of realism in a manner not found anywhere else in his fiction. He remarks in *Crow Journals* that the men in the novel are building a lighthouse "in the middle of my imaginary town that is not quite imaginary, in the middle of the river that you, possibly, if you insisted, visit."⁸ The verisimilitude suggested by this remark and by numerous "realistic" details of setting is quickly undermined, however, by the bizarre fact that there exist, except by railway or air, no normal connections between the municipality of Big Knife and the outside world. Unlike the Notikewin/Coule Hill setting of the Outwest novels or the easily identifiable southern Alberta setting of *Badlands*, the entire fictive location in *Crow* is literally enclosed and separated from the world beyond. Kroetsch has remarked: "The world would have destroyed my novel" (*L.V.*, p. 72).

Crow puts forth an atmosphere which is akin to magic realism, a mode which Kroetsch is attracted by, and one which also allows him to break with traditional format.⁹ At the same time, however, the novel remains "realistic" enough to afford a "grounded" sense of the Canadian prairie experience.

The carnivalization of established modes of realism and the overturning of language is further compounded in *Crow* by a "topsy turvy" temporal framework which resists any sense of linear causality. Kroetsch

states that he takes as a "given," in this novel, a "pretechnological Alberta" (*L.V.*, p. 72), but this appraisal does not account for details such as the D-8 caterpillars (*WCS*, p. 176) or F-104 fighter planes (*WCS*, p. 190). Time is constantly skewed or bent; seasons reverse and displace each other and refuse to follow their usual chronological order. The retrospective third-person narrative voice cryptically indicates a significant passage of time: "They were growing older. All the people in the municipality of Big Knife could feel themselves, each day, grow older" (*WCS*, p. 155) but such comments are undercut by contrary evidence. Certain characters do age (J.G. or the daughters of the Lang girls), but the majority of characters seem to show few signs of growing older either chronologically or physically. The ability of certain characters—notably Liebhaber and Vera's Coyote-Boy son—to predict the future further disrupts linear temporality. Liebhaber is also plagued with an inability to remember his own past: "He began to realize he could not remember something as simple as how he got to Big Indian or how he learned the printer's trade, or where he came from" (*WCS*, pp. 18-19).

All these temporal distortions and anomalies reflect the "relativity of the evaluation of time and space presented in its grotesque aspect" (*RHW*, p. 338). Liebhaber can only remember the future and by the end of the novel Tiddy who "remembers everything," decides to live for the moment (*WCS*, p. 203). The inversion of linear temporality directly parallels the overturning of repressive social hierarchies during the people's popular carnival. Just as the clown supplants the king during carnival, the immutable past loses all dominance in a carnivalized view of time. The focal point becomes the present and its continuous movement into an inconclusive future. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin addresses the ramifications of this "revolution of the hierarchies of time":

Every event, every phenomenon, every thing, every object of artistic representation loses its completedness, its hopelessly finished quality and its immutability. . . . Through contact with the present, an object is attracted to the incomplete process of a world-in-the-making, and is stamped with the seal of inconclusiveness. (*D.I.*, p. 30)

Temporal revolution emphasizes a "world-in-the-making," and this is precisely what is suggested by Vera Lang's seduction at the beginning of the novel and by her departure from the story. In both situations, and particularly in the latter, Vera is literally and figuratively becoming ("bee-coming") in both a sexual and temporal sense.

Narrative voice in *Crow* also falls under the influence of the carnavalesque-perception, in that it exhibits the dialogic discourse of carnival and, concomitantly, leaves itself open to disruption. The narrative method actively disallows any authoritative monologic narrative voice and presents, rather, the heterogeneous, dialogic voice exemplified by the conversational hurly-burly of the carnival site. A multifarious, social generic voice usurps that of the isolated individual. As a consequence, the flowing linearity and "logical coherence" of the monologic narrative voice is disrupted and replaced by a fragmentary and openended dialogic voice. Unlike conventional narrative methods, Kroetsch's allows for the possibility of narrative self-violation:

The turning of a page, in the reading of a novel, is a kind of violation of narrative. Traditional narrative glosses over the break by insisting on its own adherence to cause and effect to motivation, to verisimilitude. (*Essays*, p. 61)

The manner of story-telling adopted in *Crow* also serves two other important functions. First, by its third-person calm distancing, it accommodates an objective presentation of powerfully presented images and enactments of grotesque realism. The volatile and emotive grotesque occurrences in *Crow* are related in a fable-like fashion which effectively guards against initial negative over-reactions and allows the ambivalent and essentially positive qualities of grotesque realism their fair weight. This calm distancing is achieved by placing the story in the mouths of people who relate the events some years after they occur. This temporal distancing is established in the very first sentence of the novel: "People, years later, blamed everything on the bees" (*WCS*, p. 7).

Secondly, the narrative method of *Crow* reflects the multiplicity of discourse which Kroetsch views as such a positive aspect in the Canadian experience. In Canada, Kroetsch asserts—and particularly in Canadian writing—many writers (including, of course, himself) "want to recognize *all* of the voices instead of trying to organize them under that dominant [monologic] voice."¹⁰ This statement is reflected in *Crow* by the narrative amalgam of voices and viewpoints garnered from various sources. A typical example occurs at the beginning of chapter twenty-eight:

A few people always blamed misfortunes on the swarm of bees that had appeared out of nowhere some time in the past. Others were more specific and more vituperative. . . . One or two men, when Liebhaber was buying the beer, agreed with him that Vera's Boy was a wolf in sheep's clothing. (WCS, p. 146)

The narrative in *Crow* becomes the enactment of the "welcome dream of Babel" (*Essays*, p. 89), at once carnivalesque and authentically Canadian.

The play with language, defiance of verisimilitude, radical upsetting of hierarchical temporal frameworks, and the resistance to conventional narrative methods all illustrate precisely what is meant by the carnivalization of literary form. The novel itself becomes the carnival site where nothing is completed or stable:

He [the reader] has entered a world where possibilities not only co-exist but contradict. Where thesis inspires antithesis. Where day and light of chapter one becomes the night and darkness of chapter two, where the blind see and the seeing are fooled not only by the trickster and each other—but by seeing. ¹¹

CONCLUSION:

CARNIVALESQUE VOICE

The promise of the carnivalesque is a promise of renewal by destruction.

— Robert Kroetsch, "Carnival and Violence a Meditation"

This essay begins by specifically addressing the question of an authentic Voice in Canadian writing and must conclude by returning to that same question. The term "voice" carries connotations of singularity and homogeneity which, as Kroetsch's writing illustrates, are not applicable to the Canadian experience. A resistance to definition is, perhaps, one of our most identifiable traits as a country and a people. Kroetsch remarks in a recent interview: "We like that lack of definition. If somebody could say this is what a Canadian is, we'd all be terribly disappointed."¹ Any notion of an authentic literary Voice in Canada, then, must reflect this consistent antagonism toward simple definition; the emphasis must be placed not on singularity, but on multiplicity.

The far-reaching carnivalesque perception in Kroetsch's writing allows the profoundly dialogic Canadian Voice to speak through in an authentic manner. The Canadian Voice is never monologic and is, by its very nature, inimical to stasis or closure. Much like the voices of the "hawkers" in the carnival marketplace, diverse voices in Canada sound over, under, between and through each other. They interrupt and disrupt, react and interact, creating a continuous, inconclusive and chaotic amalgam which becomes, at once, the voice of carnival and Canada's national voice. Bakhtin—who in all likelihood never read, much less analyzed any Canadian writing—nevertheless, expresses in *The Dialogic Imagination* a notion remarkably applicable to the nature of the Canadian Voice:

Actual social life and historical becoming create within an abstractly unitary national language a multitude of concrete worlds, a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social

belief systems; within these various systems (identical in the abstract) are elements of language filled with various semantic and axiological content and each with its own different sound. (D.I., p. 288)

Canadian writing which strives for authenticity not only recognizes but celebrates the dialogic multiplicity which characterizes the Canadian Voice. Canadian carnivalesque writing works to break away from inherited, hierarchical literary systems. Through characters such as Mark Madham and the dialogic narrative method of *Gone Indian* or *What the Crow Said*, Kroetsch undermines the closure, self-absorption and inherent seriousness of these monologic systems. At the same time, Kroetsch's carnivalesque writing provides the open-ended, inconclusive and fundamentally optimistic viewpoint so necessary to late 20th century western life.

Of necessity, this paper has largely ignored Kroetsch's poetry but even a cursory glance in that direction illustrates the pervasiveness of the carnivalesque vision in all of his writing, fictive or poetic. *Field Notes*, Kroetsch's ongoing long poem, emphasizes the carnivalesque subject-matter and the carnivalized form found in his fictive writing. In the "Seed Catalogue" section, he directly addresses the problem of writing authentically from a "grounded" Canadian perspective. In Canada, exterior cultural and literary influences are absent in a concrete sense but still exert a powerful influence upon Canadian thought and writing. The Canadian poet or writer must contend with the paradoxical absence/presence of "Lord Nelson . . . Kings and queens . . . Sartre, Heidegger . . . ballet and opera":

the absence of Heraclitus
 the absence of the Seine, the Rhine, the Danube, the Tiber and
 the Thames. Shit, the Battle River ran dry
 one fall. The Strauss boy could piss across it.
 He could piss higher on a barn wall than any
 of us. He could piss clean over the
 principal's new car. (F.N., p. 54)

The Strauss boy—the youthful version of Hazard Lepage—with his irreverent carnivalesque act of urination, pulls the monolith of Greek, European and British western tradition down to the earth, down to the

"ground" of the Canadian prairie experience.

Kroetsch's poetry, however, in keeping with the ambivalence of the carnivalesque, does not seek only to destroy. The view, rather, is toward a "renewal by destruction." Canadian writers cannot deny the influence of extra-Canadian literary subject-matter and form but neither can they surrender to this influence. The aim must be toward an assimilation of the "great given, the sum total of words and grammar and literature" (*Essays*, p. 23) in a manner which allows the Canadian experience and Voice to speak through. The carnivalesque provides one avenue by which this "speaking through" may occur.

Kroetsch's later poetry, much like *What the Crow Said*, aims to transform the poem itself into carnival site. On the cover of *The Sad Phoenician* (1979) Kroetsch writes:

The poem as hubbub. Freed from the picture, into the pattern
and tumble of sound. Poetry as commotion: a condition of
civil unrest.²

This cover-note is an accurate assessment of the carnivalizing of language and form which occurs in poems such as "The Sad Phoenician" and "The Silent Poet Sequence." Stability and closure yield to contradiction, flexibility and open-endedness. The speaker in one poem admits: "secretly at night, I turn signs around, / I point all travellers in the wrong direction" (*F.N.*, p. 111). The carnivalesque perception pushes the poem towards "hubbub," "commotion," "the pattern and tumble of sound," and "civil unrest." These terms all point to a radical rebellion against established forms and poetic language. Kroetsch says of carnival: "It is a drama located in language. It is a drama of rebellion" (*Essays*, p. 114).

Field Notes, as a long poem, falls into what Barbara Godard terms a "novelized genre,"³ and it becomes clear that "novelization" and "carnivalization" are closely linked if not synonymous terms. Bakhtin's explanation of the salient features of "novelization" of other genres speaks directly to what Kroetsch does in much of his long poem. Through "novelization," Bakhtin points out, other genres such as poetry

become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and "novelistic" layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humour, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality (the openended present). (D.I., p. 7)

From 1975 onward, Kroetsch's output of poetry has significantly increased but recently he has turned his attention back to the novel. Nineteen eighty-three saw the publication of *Alibi*, his seventh novel, and he is presently working on another. *Alibi* is the first Kroetsch novel set outside of Canada's national borders, although a significant portion of its action occurs in the Calgary-Banff area of Alberta. *Alibi*, however, clearly maintains a link with Kroetsch's earlier novels through its carnivalesque subject-matter and carnivalized form. The protagonist, William Dorf (Dorf) is employed by an eccentric millionaire recluse and he spends his time accruing for his employer all manner of rare and exotic artifacts and possessions. The novel presents Dorf's search for the perfect spa—the place of eternal regeneration. The search involves Dorf in a number of situations which clearly exemplify grotesque realism replete with its emphasis upon the human and cosmic material bodily lower stratum. A central episode in *Alibi* finds Dorf in a mud spa in Laspi, Greece:

That day was, in many ways, the happiest day of my life. I played cards with my dearest friends out in the darling sun. And I was cool, for all the heat. I was feted; and I feasted and drank. When the hour came round I returned with my friends to the mud pit. And there we sang songs too, and were happy.
(*Alibi*, p. 177)

In this not untypical passage, numerous elements of popular festive forms—game playing, feasting, drinking, singing—are combined with a return to the earthly element—the lower stratum of the cosmos so central to carnivalesque grotesque realism. *Alibi* also presents a carnivalized and subverted version of the detective story and, at the same time, employs chapter headings which resist or subvert conventional plot

and narrative modes: "A Longish Chapter In Which Much Is Revealed" (*Alibi*, p. 86); "The Archeology of Hope: And These The Shards From A Journal That William William Dorfen Kept But Did Not Keep" (*Alibi*, p. 168). Obviously, Kroetsch in this most recent of his novels, has not abandoned the multi-levelled possibilities of carnival.

Although Kroetsch's work provides some of the best examples of carnivalesque writing in contemporary Canadian literature, he is not alone in his literary deployment of carnival. Kroetsch himself notes, for example, the carnivalesque qualities in the novels of Roch Carrier and Malcolm Lowry (*Essays*, p. 119) and, as Barbara Godard explains, Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque appears in the works of writers such as Robertson Davies and Jack Hodgins.⁴ Like Kroetsch, these Canadian writers put forth a carnivalesque vision in attempts to authentically express the Canadian experience.

Kroetsch, however, remains one of the most consistent and provocative proponents of the carnivalesque in Canadian writing. For him, the carnival site—be it the prairie popular festival or the literary work itself—provides an indispensable location for "uninventing" the inherited literary systems which constantly threaten to overwhelm authentic Canadian literary Voice. The carnivalesque approach does not aim to destroy literary modes, only to subvert the pervasive influence of literary traditions "that bind us into not speaking the truth" (*Essays*, p. 20). The carnivalesque vision clearly recognizes that this "truth" is not a static entity but, rather, something which is constantly changing, renewing and in the act of becoming. The same may be said for the authentic Canadian literary Voice.

ENDNOTES

CHAPTER ONE

¹Ann Mändel, "Uninventing Structures: Cultural Criticism and the Novels of Robert Kroetsch," in *Open Letter*, 3, No. 8 (Spring 1978), 62 (Toronto).

²Robertson Davies, *One Half of Robertson Davies* (Penguin, 1978), p. 281.

³Excerpt from Kroetsch's diary, Dec. 15, 1972, quoted in Peter Thomas' article, "Keeping Mum: Kroetsch's Alberta," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 2, No. 2 (Spring 1973), 55.

⁴Gwendolyn MacEwan, "The Discovery," in *Magic Animals* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), p. 69.

⁵Diane Bessai and David Jockel, *Figures in a Ground* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978); Northrop Frye, *Divisions on a Ground* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1982).

⁶Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin and London: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), p. 30. Hereafter cited as *D.I.* in parenthetical references.

⁷Robert Kroetsch, *Essays*, *Open Letter*, 5th series, No. 4 (Spring 1983), p. 23. Hereafter cited as *Essays*.

⁸E.K. Brown, "Canadian Poetry," in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1971), p. 41.

⁹Robert Kroetsch, "The Ledger" and "Seed Catalogue," in *Field Notes: The Collected Poetry of Robert Kroetsch* (Don Mills, Ontario: General Publishing Co., 1981).

¹⁰Robert Kroetsch, *Coulee Hill* (unpublished novel manuscript at the Library of the Univ. of Calgary).

¹¹Robert Kroetsch, *But We Are Exiles* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966; Macmillan, Laurentian Library, 1977).

¹²Robert Kroetsch, *The Words of My Roaring* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1966; Paperjacks, 1977). Hereafter cited as *Words* in text and *WMR* in

parenthetical references; *The Studhorse Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969; Paperjacks, 1977). Hereafter cited as *S.M.* in parenthetical references; *Gone Indian* (Toronto: New Press, 1973; Theytus, 1981). Hereafter cited as *G.I.* in parenthetical references; *Badlands* (Toronto: New Press, 1975; Paperjacks, 1976); *What the Crow Said* (Don Mills, Ontario: General Publishing Co., 1978; Paperjacks, 1979). Hereafter cited as *Crow* in text and *WCS* in parenthetical references; *Alibi*, A Novel (Don Mills, Ontario: Stoddart, 1983).

¹³ Robert Kroetsch, *Field Notes* (Don Mills, Ontario: General Publishing Co., 1981). Hereafter cited as *F.N.* in parenthetical references.

¹⁴ Robert Kroetsch, *Alberta* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1968).

¹⁵ *Boundary II* (Binghamton: State Univ. of New York), Vol. 1.

¹⁶ Shirley Newman and Robert Wilson, *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch*, Vol. III, Western Canadian Literary Document Series, gen. ed. Shirley Newman (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982). Hereafter cited as *L.V.* in parenthetical references.

¹⁷ Robert Kroetsch, *The Crow Journals* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1980).

¹⁸ Kroetsch, *Essays*.

¹⁹ This binary appears in the "Old Man Poems" in *Stone Hammer Poems*.

²⁰ Kroetsch, *The Crow Journals*, p. 60.

²¹ Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. ix.

²² Interview with Robert Kroetsch, University of British Columbia (UBC), Sept. 26, 1984.

²³ Samuel Johnson, "The Difficulty of Defining Comedy," in John Enck et al., eds., *The Comic in Theory and Practice* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1960), p. 10.

²⁴ UBC interview.

²⁵UBC interview.

²⁶A letter received by the author from Kroetsch in July 1984.

²⁷UBC interview.

²⁸Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1965). Hereafter cited as *RHW* in parenthetical references; Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas and London: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981). Hereafter cited as *D.I.* in parenthetical references.

²⁹Bakhtin's influence on an international level may be easily attested to by citing the studies done on him by such eminent critics as Julia Kristivá and Tsvetan Todorov (*D.I.*, p. xvii).

³⁰Barbara Godard, "Other Fictions: Robert Kroetsch's Criticism," in *Open Letter*, 5th Series, Nos. 8-9 (Summer-Fall 1984), pp. 19-20.

³¹Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, trans. R.W. Rotsel (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1973).

³²UBC interview.

³³Godard, "Other Fictions," p. 19.

³⁴In order to understand how these terms have varied in meaning and usage one may consult numerous sources. For the term "grotesque" Clayborough's *The Grotesque in English Literature* is a good starting point, while Margot Northey's *The Haunted Wilderness* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976) provides a study of the grotesque in Canadian literature. To see how the term "realism" has undergone similar broad changes in meaning and usage see Grant Damon's *Realism* (London: Methuen, 1970).

³⁵This is the aspect which Northey, for example, emphasizes in *The Haunted Wilderness*.

³⁶UBC interview.

CHAPTER TWO

¹Peter Thomas, *Robert Kroetsch* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1980), p. 38.

²UBC interview.

³"I really call it a triptych, though I find the word rather pretentious. But I don't like to call it a trilogy because its connections are not narrative ones, they are of another sort: juxtaposition, repetition, contrast" (Russell M. Brown, "An Interview with Robert Kroetsch," *University of Windsor Review*, 7 [Spring 1972], 2-3).

⁴Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy," in *Comedy: Plays, Theory and Criticism*, Marvin Felheim, ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), p. 237.

⁵Laurence Ricou, "Vertical Man/Horizontal World," in *Essays on Canadian Writing*, Vols. 6-8.

⁶UBC interview.

⁷Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 275.

⁸Thomas, *Robert Kroetsch*, p. 41.

⁹"Doppelgangers" or opposed doubles, occur with an astounding frequency in Kroetsch's fiction and poetry, epitomizing his predisposition for binary oppositions.

¹⁰Death and images of death appear time and again in carnivalesque writing. In *Words*, another example of the death-rebirth motif occurs with the suicide of Jonah Bledd who, unlike Johnnie, fatalistically accepts the "order of things." Jonah's body is never recovered from Wild Fire Lake and in the pages following the rodeo episode, local children, symbolic of the "youthful body being born" naively and innocently deflate the importance of his death as they swim in the lake where his body still lies:

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

"A foot," somebody said.

"A thumb," somebody said.

They'd shout and scramble for shore. (*WMR*, pp. 137-138)

This ancillary example of the regenerative nature of death belongs more properly, perhaps, to the forthcoming discussion of grotesque realism. It is important, however, to stress that images of death are certainly not alien to the popular festive forms of carnival. Scenes and images of death, all displaying the carnivalesque ambivalence of those discussed here, pervade Kroetsch's later novels, particularly *The Studhorse Man* and *What the Crow Said*. Moreover, the inherent connection between death and renewal in the carnival perception of *Words* is personified by Johnnie Backstrom who is both the trickster/clown "culture bringer" and the local undertaker, the one who "takes under" the dead (WMM, p. 54).

¹¹"Bible-Bill" (William) Aberhart became Premier of Alberta during the depression, swept in by his heavy-handed biblical rhetoric and vociferous speaking style. Kroetsch's variation on the name clearly suggests "upsetting the applecart" as Aberhart did in Alberta provincial politics and as Backstrom certainly does in *Words*.

¹²Robert Allen, *A Treasury of Canadian Humour* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967).

¹³"The True Drinker knows that to enter in through those doors, off the street of a small town, is to enter a place where time is suspended. In the sacred place of the beer parloer, we are allowed to change identities—in our laughter, in our silence. . . . We are God's blessed creatures, seeking a prairie version of ecstasy, sharing the poet's divine madness" (*Essays*, p. 31).

¹⁴Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. ix.

CHAPTER THREE

¹The following discussion approaches these two novels in reverse chronological order. Attention is paid first to *Gone Indian* which was, in fact, published four years after *The Studhorse Man*. The reasons for this inversion lie in the approach adopted here, that is, by the move from a consideration of popular festive forms and images to a more specific discussion of carnivalesque grotesque realism in Kroetsch's writing.

²Thomas, *Robert Kroetsch*, p. 69.

³It is interesting to note that Madham's home address coincides with Kroetsch's at the time *Gone Indian* was written.

⁴Ricou, "Vertical Man/Horizontal World," pp. 133-136.

⁵Beverly Rasporich, "The Leacock Persona and the Canadian Character," in *Mosaic*, 14, No. 2 (1981), 77-92.

⁶Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 33.

⁷In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin emphasizes the heterogeneity and multiplicity of discourse which characterizes the novel. The "dialogic" nature of this discourse points to the refusal to privilege any of the voices which explicitly or implicitly traverse the text.

⁸The church of course was one of the main objects of travesty and parody in the Middle Ages carnival that Bakhtin describes. Kroetsch's fiction consistently travesties the church also. In *Words*, for example, Backstrom spends the entirety of Jonah Bledd's funeral service daydreaming about his sexual exploits and, later, in *Crow*, a group of tattered and emaciated "schmier" players defecate in the basement of the local church.

⁹Mandel, "Uninventing Structures," p. 62.

¹⁰Rosemary Sullivan, "The Fascinating Place Between: The Fiction of Robert Kroetsch," in *Mosaic*, 11 (1977-78), 169.

¹¹Mandel, "Uninventing Structures," p. 63.

¹²Kroetsch, *The Crow Journals*, p. 51.

¹³Thomas, *Robert Kroetsch*, pp. 51-52.

¹⁴Later in the novel, the connection between the sea and garden is made explicit: "There was a garden in the sea," Hazard insisted. "The soil red and rich. The sea abounding in oysters, clams, mackerel, cod, lobster, halibut, trout and salmon. It lacked only the night" (*S.M.*, p. 112).

¹⁵The lake in question, for those seeking "realistic" verisimilitude, is almost certainly Sylvan Lake approximately 60 miles southwest of Edmonton, Alberta.

¹⁶This is certainly not to suggest some narrow binary dichotomy such as "virgin-whore." What this paired opposition presents is the

essential ambivalence of the grotesque female image within which both women serve positive *and* negative roles and wherein both transcend any such narrow stereotyping.

¹⁷Sexual activity becomes the field for numerous metaphoric and symbolic possibilities in this and other Kroetsch novels. One of these centres, in *Studhorse Man*, upon the character of Demeter and draws parallels between the sex act and writing. Poseidon, with all of his attendant phallic symbolism, is also called "Posse or Poesy or Pussy" (*S.M.*; p. 11). These names point to ancillary connections between Poseidon and pursuit and flight (Posse), writing and literature (Poesy), and female sexuality (Pussy). The metaphorical relationship between sex, grotesque realism and writing is certainly present in *Studhorse Man*, but is more clearly demonstrated in *Crow*, the focus of Chapter Four.

CHAPTER FOUR

¹Hereafter cited as *Crow* in text and *WCS* in parenthetical references.

²As Michael Holquist observes, the verb "carnivalize" has become "modishly transitive due to his own [Bakhtin's] own work on Rabelais" (*D.I.*, p. xvii) and in spite of its awkwardness remains an indispensable term in any discussion of the carnivalesque.

³UBC interview.

⁴*The Crow Journals*, p. 69.

⁵Thomas, *Robert Kroetsch*, p.

⁶*The Crow Journals*, p. 58.

⁷UBC interview.

⁸*The Crow Journals*, p. 76.

⁹Kroetsch has especially acknowledged the influence which Garcia Marquez has had upon him:

Marquez—has cracked the problem of how to tell a story in third person again. Voice: a calm distancing that enables him to forget the conventions of realism. (*The Crow Journals*, p. 29)

¹⁰UBC interview.

¹¹Robert Kroetsch and Diane Bessai, "Death is a Happy Ending," in *Figures in a Ground* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978), p. 210.

CONCLUSION

¹UBC interview.

²Robert Kroetsch, *The Sad Phoenician* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1979).

³Godard, "Other Fiction: Robert Kroetsch's Criticism," p. 20.

⁴Ibid.

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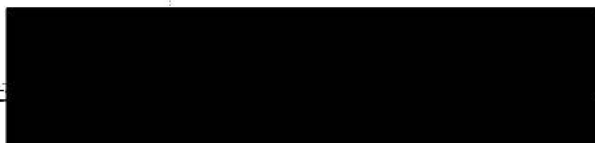
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