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ROBERT KROETSCH AND ARCHIVAL CULTURE IN THE CANADIAN LONG POEM

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This paper will examine how the long poem has followed upon a strong narrative tradition in Canadian writing, and in doing so, worked to redefine the relationship between memory and the modalities used to fashion the poem as an agency of cultural consciousness. Through the example of Robert Kroetsch's archival poetics, it will be suggested how a postmodern vision of provisionality takes shape in the contemporary context alongside an inquisitive, epistemological direction to poetic creation that suggests ties between poetic and documentary strains of writing. As such, how the long poem in the work of Robert Kroetsch queries the relationship between poetic imagination, myth and memory will form the basis of our argument.

Dans le sillage d'une forte tradition narrative en littérature canadienne, il sera examiné l'incidence du poème long sur la relation entre la mémoire et la formation d'une identité culturelle au moyen de l'écriture. À travers la poétique de l'archive chez Robert Kroetsch il sera question de la rencontre d'une vision postmoderne du provisoire et d'un projet épistémologique qui creuse les structures du langage, dans laquelle se nouent des écritures contemporaines aux accents poétiques et documentaires. Notre argument s'appuiera sur le questionnement que pose le poème long chez Robert Kroetsch dans son articulation entre les écritures de l'imaginaire, du mythe et de la mémoire.

Interest in the textualization of memory in literature has grown since the 1990s and the pioneering study of Holocaust testimonies by Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman in their relation to the acts of writing and reading. In addition to a vast body of inquiry related to the function of memory in negotiating identity — social, political, historical — there have arisen efforts to conceptualize the interaction between literature and a broad range of testimonial cultures. The archive, as a tool devoted to ordering, housing and transmitting traces of the past has been at the forefront of such theoretical discussions linking text and memory. While its prevalence as a theme in literature is not especially novel (the encyclopaedic frameworks behind Melville's *Moby Dick*, Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet* or Balzac's *Comédie Humaine*, for instance) the archive has gained a newly important role as a process of cultural production. If we take the example of *Archive Fever* (*Mal d'archive*), Jacques Derrida's 1994 meditation on the notion of archiving, we will find a useful statement on how remembering and forgetting may be authored: the archive, Derrida argues, mirrors the processes of history and fiction when it performs its selections. The contents of the past are subject to the social and material structures according to which the archive is organized,

evolving both as a place of “consignment”, thus of preservation, and of “effacement” (26).¹

For poets of the twentieth century, the archive has functioned not only as a creative material or resource, but also as a cultural metaphor with which to extend meditation on the past. Indeed the relationship between what may be termed the historiographic impulse embodied in the archive and the creative impulse amongst writers, has spawned a complex of diverse archival poetics. Reading Robert Kroetsch is one illustration of the wealth of experiment amongst Canadian writers with respect to the archive, considered both as a discourse and as a material culture.

From the perspective of literary history, archival methods bring structural changes to a narrative tradition in Canadian poetry that has been persistently aware of its memorial function. In a broad sense, the archive saw poets in the twentieth century embrace memory not merely as a theme underpinning a national narrative of imperialism or celebrating an ethos, as in the epic². Through the archive, memory enjoyed a new point of entry into the poetic imagination. A western writer born in 1927, Robert Kroetsch came to the archive long after his modernist predecessors had begun to experiment ties between the aesthetics of poetry and the writing of history. For instance, from such poems as T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* or Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* came the defining view of the poetic enterprise as a “corrective” historiographic method for the present (JAY 1992: 125). The modernist poet retrieves the past in an effort to heighten our knowledge and understanding of the present: what T.S. Eliot for instance called “the historical sense” involves “a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (1920: 42-53).

In the contemporary context of the long poem, the archive takes up its place in a continuing conversation with discourses that help form our consciousness of the past. As with modernist predecessors, methods of appropriation with Robert Kroetsch remain creative, often implying a playful fragmenting of borrowed materials coupled with a search at the same time to elaborate upon former historiographic methods in poetry. In particular, the contemporary models of reading history that inform Kroetsch’s writing have

¹ « ... elle [la pulsion de mort] commande aussi l’effacement radical, en vérité l’éradication de ce qui ne se réduit jamais à la *mneme* ou à l’anmnesis, à savoir l’archive, la consignation, le dispositif documentaire ... *Point d’archive sans un lieu de consignation, sans une technique de répétition et sans une certain extériorité.* » Je traduis.

² See D.M.R. Bentley’s discussion of the evolution of the narrative form in Canadian poetry in the first half of the twentieth century, variously fashioned by a Romantic-Victorian sensibility associated with the pre-World War I period and the “aesthetic modernism” (as so defined by Brian Trehearne) of the so-called “cosmopolitan” poets.

greatly impacted what has been termed the “recuperative value” of the past in the literary field (JAY 1992: 124). In addition to its failure to provide a portion of “truth” or authority in the eyes of the contemporary poet, for some, as with Margaret Atwood, “the lure of the Canadian past ... has been partly the lure of the unmentionable — the mysterious, the buried, the forgotten, the discarded, the taboo” (2004: 205). In a similar sense with Robert Kroetsch, entertaining a consciousness of the past calls upon the poet to pursue a route delving into the realm of myth and of the supernatural – what he named “the dream of origins” (ONDAATJE 1979: 311). How archival methods employed in the long poem mediate the mythopoetic vocation this “dream” suggests is one striking feature of Kroetsch’s writing: what encounter is performed between the archive and the long poem and what relationship does it bear to the function of memory?

A Poetics of Recovery

Robert Kroetsch first gained attention as a novelist in 1969 with his award-winning book, *The Studhorse Man* and in 1973, as a poet with the first of his long poems, the “Stone Hammer Poem³”. This poem is a good place to begin, not only because it was one of Kroetsch’s first published poems and the first in a chronology of long poems that illustrate the reception of memory. The first two sections of the poem encapsulate the groundwork for a poetics of recovery that would shape Kroetsch’s writing up until his death in 2011:

1
This stone
become a hammer
Of stone, this maul

Is the colour
of bone (no,
bone is the colour
of this stone maul).

The rawhide loops
are gone, the

³ This poem was later to appear in the 1975 volume *The Stone Hammer Poems*, the first in a series of long poems assembled in a project called *Field Notes* (1981) that was ongoing until 1989 (*Completed Field Notes*). The author’s note at the back of *Completed Field Notes* indicates that “Stone Hammer Poem” first appeared in an anthology entitled *Creation* (Toronto: New Press, 1973). See p. 251. The poem was published as the “prologue” in the latest edition, *Completed Field Notes* (2000).

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hand is gone, the
buffalo's skull
is gone;

the stone is
shaped like the skull
of a child.

2

This paperweight on my desk

where I begin
this poem was

found in a wheatfield
lost (this hammer,
this poem).

Cut to a function,
this stone was
(the hand is gone —
(1975: 54)

Against the backdrop of the prairies is cast the central metaphor of the “stone hammer”. The theme of origins, tied to the cycle of life and death, proceeds from this image. The “stone”, the original presence, the talisman of a former world in the rural west, is summoned through the imperative mode to undergo a symbolic transformation (“This stone / become a hammer”). The memory of this world, as the poem suggests, is inseparable from the mind’s crafting of a myth of origins. Through the invocation of the “buffalo’s skull” and that of the child, an image of thought emerges, as though a skeleton or a ruin. The regenerative process from ruin to new beginnings is tied in the second section of the poem to the very activity of writing: stone, hammer and paperweight merge to form an image of an arduous and frustrated progress towards creation. This is staged in short, fragmented patterns of syntax — “found in a wheatfield / lost...” and in temporal ambivalence — “this stone was / (this hand is gone—”. In this fashion, the fate of memory with respect to the poet’s craft, and in a more general sense, in its relationship to language is framed in uncertainty. This is one instance where Robert Kroetsch performs textual and memorial excavations that recall his affinity for an archaeological

model of reading borrowed from the philosopher Michel Foucault, as alluded to in his essay, "On Being an Alberta Writer": "Archaeology allows [for] the fragmentary nature of the story, against the coercive unity of traditional history. Archaeology allows for discontinuity. It allows the layering. It allows for imaginative speculation" (1980; 1983 : 76). The premise that meaning is layered within the text and awaiting discovery, is put into play in different ways. First, syntactically, through the use of blanks and dashes that forestall meaning and foster the mystery associated with myth. Secondly, the archaeological design of Kroetsch's poetics is achieved metaphorically, since the stone is a "found" object, like the "paperweight" on the writer's desk. It stands as a weighted remnant of what once was: be it "the / buffalo's skull", "the skull / of a child", or the place for the writer where poetry began. Finally, the poem sketches an elegy for the stone, a tool that has been lost, whose agency escapes the practice of writing; though "cut to a function", designed for performance, the rite of craft is partly here and partly "gone".

While Kroetsch's legacy is shaped by a postmodern vision of provisionality and playfulness as in the latter example, it staunchly defends at the same time an inquisitive, epistemological direction to poetic creation. Importantly, it posits a scientific model for poetry as inquiry. It begs us to consider, along with Margaret Atwood, whether "this digging up of buried things began perhaps in poetry" (2004: 206).

A productive critic of his contemporaries, Robert Kroetsch was given to speculating on the development of the Canadian Long Poem in its relationship to an archaeological or archival poetics. For instance, in 1988 when discussing the work of such writers as Phyllis Webb, Michael Ondaatje and Dorothy Livesay, he describes the long poem as being simultaneously pulled in two directions: what he calls "the temptation of the documentary" and "[the] scepticism about history" (1988: 81). The doubleness of this epistemology is inherent to the writing life of Robert Kroetsch; in a broader sense, it calls forth a typology of the Canadian long poem famously and problematically explained in 1969 by Dorothy Livesay as the product of the "Canadian character" (1971: 269): the documentary becoming firmly associated at that time with the identity politics of Canadian writing. Robert Lecker, one of Kroetsch's foremost biographers and critics perceived in the duality of Kroetsch's sceptical documentary methods the figure of a "borderman", one who "chooses to live in two worlds, both of which he rejects" (1982: 127). Supported by post-structuralist and deconstructionist theories, the antitheses underlying Kroetsch's writing reveal a willingness to entertain contrasting theories of presence and

absence, form and formlessness⁴. As critics have abundantly noted, the dialectical epistemology that Kroetsch celebrates in his corpus, as a poet and as a critic in his own right takes shape as an effective metaphor for his poetics. Indeed, the structures of Kroetsch's poetry work upon the premise of constant renewal that duality may afford, the "borderman" travelling between fiction and reality, truth and untruth, invention and *uninvention*, creation and decreation.

The conflict underlying this structural metaphor demonstrates how the archival culture of the contemporary long poem in Canada takes the lead from such predecessors as Dorothy Livesay, whose work seeks to reconcile creative and documentary methods. Borrowing from an earlier modernist heritage, the interrogations of the "borderman" strike a chord with the design once suggested by the American poet Marianne Moore, whose imagery evoking "real toads" in "imaginary gardens" celebrates and queries at the same time a hybrid path for poetry (MOORE 1919: 131-132⁵). When Robert Kroetsch was writing his first poems in the 1960s-1970s, Canadian poetry was increasingly turning to archival strategies that continued to bring to light dualities engaging not only reality and the imagination, but seemingly non-poetic guises alongside the more traditional lyric posture: the poet as historian, journalist, archivist documentarian. Michael Ondaatje's *Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) is one such example; Don McKay's *Long Sault* (1975) or Roy Kiyooka's *The Fontainebleau Dream Machine: 18 Frames from a Book of Rhetoric* (1977) also demonstrate the variety of ways in which poetry approximates a form of cultural critique, blending lyrical meditation, the prosaic, dialogue and the rhetorical features of the essay. Perhaps the most conspicuous record of this in Canadian literary history is the essentially social and political vision for poetry adopted by Dorothy Livesay, remembered as an exemplar for archival experiment in the poetic domain (*Day and Night*, 1944; *Call My People Home*, 1950; *The Documentaries: Selected Longer Poems*, 1968). Poetry, as she famously defined at the 1984 "Long Liners' conference" at York University was to be "an archive for our times" (1985: 127). With Robert Kroetsch, the modality of the archive takes a less acutely social route, since it points more closely to the intimacy of the poet's mythmaking. His archive resembles an intricate web that delineates the threading of poetic craft into a literary

⁴ Kroetsch's affinities with post-structuralism and deconstructionist theories (that came to fruition in North America in the 1960s and 70s) indicate a debt to the thinking of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes, to name some of his principal philosophical groundings, as assessed by such critics as Robert Lecker and David Creelman.

⁵ "The / result is not poetry, / nor till the poets among us can be / 'literalists of the imagination'—above / insolence and triviality and can present // for inspection, 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them', shall we have // it."

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experiment grounded in myths with both personal and broader cultural resonances, as though to acknowledge the palimpsestic, layered texture of experience.

Memory and Myth

After the “Stone Hammer Poem”, other long poems by Robert Kroetsch appeared as part of a continuing project begun in the mid-1970s and later published collectively under the title “Field Notes” (1981). Among them were *The Ledger* (1975) and *Seed Catalogue* (1977). Through their titles alone — *The Ledger* and *Seed Catalogue* — we witness once again how poetry delves into the past while entertaining a prosaic, documentary strain. In each case, Kroetsch undoes generic expectations as he reaches into the past: first by drawing a comparison between a volume of poems and a book of sums, and in the second instance, by casting poetry as an inventory, a list of seeds for the farmer. The conceptualization of the poem’s mask as a seemingly impersonal and prosaic framework is an enabling step for a poetics so deeply rooted in processes of recovery. Thanks to the underlying archival context of Kroetsch’s writing, the poem functions as a physical site of collection or recollection partaking in an effort to reveal an imaginative site. While reliant upon the structural metaphor of the “catalogue” and the “ledger”, the poem welcomes the mediation of historical record as long as it fuels the agency of the imagination. With Kroetsch, this takes shape as connections are formed between a mythical world of creation and the referential landscape of the poet’s agrarian and familial past. For instance in *The Ledger*, an economic trope of debit and credit unfolds alongside imagery that ties the act of writing to an encounter between the living and the dead. This association is further compounded by the fact that the ledger is a veritable book belonging to Kroetsch’s great-grandfather, a miller in Bruce County, Southwestern Ontario (ONDAATJE 1979: 311). Carried over to the poem, the entries in this heirloom replicate processes of the psyche and of artistry. The words of the poem run down the page in two columns that self-consciously describe the creative mind:

EVERYTHING I WRITE
I SAID, IS A SEARCH
(is debit, is credit)

is a search

for some pages

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remaining

(by accident)

the poet: finding
in the torn ledger

the column straight
the column broken

FINDING

everything you write
my wife, my daughters, said
is a search for the dead

*the book of final entry
in which a record is kept.*

(1975; 2000: 12-13)

In *Seed Catalogue*, published two years later in 1977, Kroetsch interlaces the myth of the garden as a motif for literary creation and the descriptive language of agricultural taxonomy. Descriptions of seeds that recall his family's homesteading history in the west are interspersed with autobiographical lyric fragments that evoke a voyage of discovery reaching back to a mythical source of poetic imagination:

No. 339 — *McKenzie's Pedigreed Early Snowcap Cauliflower*: "Of the many varieties of vegetables in existence, *Cauliflower* is unquestionably one of the greatest inheritances of the present generation, particularly Western Canadians. There is no place in the world where better cauliflowers can be grown than right here in the West. The finest specimens we have ever seen larger and of better quality, are annually grown here on our prairies. Being particularly a high altitude plant it thrives to a point of perfection here, seldom seen in warmer climes."

But how do you grow a poet?

Start: with an invocation
Invoke —

His muse is
his muse / if
memory is

and you have
no memory then
no mediation
no song (shit
we're up against it)

(1977; 2000: 37)

Writing the long poem, Robert Kroetsch is consciously building a link to the past through a form that emulates the size and breadth of the epic model as it has been refashioned in North American poetry. Yet in a series of self-conscious false starts, the poem dismantles at the same time its foundational ties to memory and myth, by suspending the poet's invocation ("Invoke —") to an indefinite muse ("His muse is / his muse / if"). Indeed, unlike its modernist or late nineteenth-century predecessors, the contemporary long poem is at some remove from the unifying encyclopaedic ambition of Ezra Pound's 'tale of the tribe' (1938; 1968: 194) or Walt Whitman's song of brotherhood. As Cary Nelson has said of American poetry of the 1970s, specifically in the wake of the Vietnam War, "our history has made prophecy obsolete. Only if a poet can welcome the futility of the role, as Allen Ginsberg has, and turn prophecy into iconic lamentation, can he recopy Whitman's position" (1981: 63). However, as did Walt Whitman, Robert Kroetsch takes us back to the original garden, to the myth of creation and rebirth: "*But how do you grow a poet?*" (1977; 2000: 37). Indeed, the crisis of poetic agency echoes the symbolism of Whitman's long poem, *Leaves of Grass*: "A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands" (1885; 2005: 33). Poetry has never ceased to query its very origins and its resonance in the world. With Kroetsch, though parody has replaced prophecy, wry resignation has replaced boundless hope, the desire for "*inheritances*" (1977; 2000: 37) survives in the act of writing.

Craft and Cultural Consciousness

Writing recently about the Canadian Long Poem, the West coast poet Sharon Thesen explained that it was "more accurately approached as a culture than as a genre" (2014: np). This assertion stands not only as a comment on the blurring of generic boundaries and the ensuing formal indeterminacy that arises in the postmodern context. It sheds light on the intermingling of aesthetics and ideology and how this comes to determine the authority invested in the written word. As *auctor*, if we consider the latin root of the word "author", the writer's authority resides less in mastery of form than in poetry's relationship to a developing cultural consciousness. In the contemporary context, autobiographical modes, serial writing and procedures relying upon found texts and collage have long since challenged the notion of a law of genre. Theoretical approaches to the long poem have produced terminology to describe the "processive" poem, the "procedural" poem or in the case of Robert Kroetsch, the "carnavalesque" poem that dramatizes resistance to formal conventions. Michael Ondaatje, whose editorial efforts in the late 1970s and the early 1980s

were particularly instrumental in drawing attention to the preponderance of the long poem in Canada emphasizes this shift in the approach poets adopted towards craft. As he argues in his anthology, the long poem is reluctant to adhere to a typology other than an empirical one in so far as it “shows a process of knowledge, of discovery during the actual writing of the poem” (1979: 13).

Critical output since the 1980s has worked to show that the theoretical claims of such self-reflexive experiment function in counterpoint to the metaphysics underwriting the tradition established by narrative poetry in Canada. For instance, critics have observed how the discursiveness belonging to nineteenth century and early twentieth century precursors implicitly seals a bond between poetry, literature at large and a continuum of truth. In the Canadian context, this ideological premise has been widely discussed as a counter-model for much contemporary production (KAMBOURELI 1991; MANDEL 1985: 11-23). Literary history highlights examples abounding with heroic subjects and saga-like tales that weave a relationship between the rise of the Canadian long poem and the processes of imperialism (BENTLEY 1998: 7-29). Two such well-known examples are Isabella Valancy Crawford’s romantic narrative in blank verse about the settlement of the West, *Malcom’s Katie: a Love Story*, (1884) and E.J. Pratt’s historical narrative of 17th century French Jesuits and their heroic end as martyrs, *Brébeuf and his Brethen* (1940). These are noteworthy for their capacity to relate the chronology of the long poem to its initial discursive vocation, namely to memorialize pioneering ideals and colonial ambitions. In fact, any effort to detail the lineage of the long poem in Canadian literary history would require an appraisal of contemporary response to those narratives that seek to implicitly tie the beginnings of a national ethos in Canada to that of a body of literature.

While at some remove from the colonial saga, the “culture” of the long poem to which Sharon Thesen refers is no less concerned by the memorial function of literature. Changing conceptions of how memory works however have led the poet, along with the historian, to query its ethical resistance. As in the case of Robert Kroetsch, the aporia of memory has become a leading theme and formal impetus behind much contemporary critical thinking. Is memory synonymous with distortion and unreliability or has it advanced, as Geoffrey Hartman has suggested, “from a rival to a partner of historiography”? (2006: 261)⁶.

⁶ In the field of cultural studies, Geoffrey Hartman discusses how video testimony and other forms of oral testimony are approached as a new genre of memory and asks in a general sense, whether oral history has evolved into a “new art of memory.”

Conclusion: the Drama of the Long Poem

When poets like Robert Kroetsch incorporate documents drawn from local or family history, they are building upon an ethics of remembering that works to dissolve the boundaries between forms of discourse, historical and literary, public and private. Importantly, the poem as such is never quite finished. Robert Kroetsch may ask, “But how do you grow a poet?” (1977; 2000: 37). His poetry in turn appears to ask: *how do you grow a reader?* Reader reception is more than a matter of contemplating the paired complexity of spatial and syntactical arrangement. The shaping of the poetic archive is implicitly a form of action that involves the poet and the reader. They who negotiate the fold between the document and the lyric become in turn what others have called the historian, namely a “memory critic” (WIEVIORKA 2006: 395⁷). Poetry in the contemporary sphere is thinking through with the reader how representational aims stand up against what Jerome McGann has called the “archival, the factive, dimension of art” (1989: 131). In other words how poems may be construed as acts of representation and yet at the same time a forum wherein is displayed a “negative or critical awareness” of socio-historical circumstance (131). The theoretical position put forward by Robert Kroetsch in the mid 1980s aptly displays the contemporary poet at an ideological and formal crossroads: “The problem for the writer of the contemporary long poem is to honour our disbelief in belief ... and at the same time write a long poem that has some kind of (under erasure) unity” (1988: 91). This is Kroetsch acknowledging in one sense his evolution away from the post-structuralist anti-mimetic contention that neatly separates the signifier from the signified and in a more general sense, language from experience. The aim of the long poem, he appears to suggest, is to dramatize the tension between collapsing systems of belief and a mythopoetic strain of writing incumbent upon memory, no matter how marred or unreliable it may be. As such, there is no key or prescribed path for the poet partaking in archival methods, intent on displaying the threads of memory that form our consciousness. Echoing the derridean vocabulary of archive theory, “a kind of madness in the recording” is what awaits the Canadian long poem, if we are to heed the words of one of its foremost practitioners, Robert Kroetsch (1988: 81).

⁷ In “The Witness in History” (2006), Annette Wiewiorka quotes the cautionary words addressed to historians described as « trouble-mémoire [s] » by Pierre Laborie in his essay, “Histoire et Résistance : Des historiens trouble-mémoire,” (1993), a characterization underlining how the task of the historian has come to include a questioning of the epistemological authority of historical record.

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