

Simonson, Sheila C. *Playing Dirty on the Prairies: Bod(il)y/Bawdy Language in Robert Kroetsch's Back-Door Poetics*. Thesis (MA [English]), University of Manitoba. Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 2008. (Publication No. MR49069)

Abstract

The prairie problematic is one of pre-scription and the prairie writer is forced to reckon with a literature and language which, even if resisted, precedes and inevitably informs it. Robert Kroetsch has argued that prairie poets are born into a world that is already written within another experience, necessitating an alternate mode of expression by which they might recognize, understand and write their space and their selves. My hypothesis is that the 'prairie' of Kroetsch's poetics is constituted from bodily/bawdy experience and the adoption of a Bakhtinian model of carnivalesque humor, subversion, circulation and exchange that enables Kroetsch, as a prairie poet, to be 'grounded' in the physical experience of the local, exploring language and forms appropriate to the prairie landscape, while entering the landscape of language itself. I propose to call this practice his 'diss-course of bod(il)y/bawdy language,' and to read it as a response to conventional literature and poetics in its inherited and pre-scribed language and forms. The intervention ultimately becomes a means of re/visioning a new material and 'local' wor(l)d for Kroetsch as a prairie writer, empowering him, as a literary rogue operating on the margins of polite discourse, to interrogate inherited assumptions about identity, textuality, and language. Such a poetics ultimately seeks to diss/place the official, abstract and inherited Word with word-play and ex-centric ways of wor(1)dmaking. For Kroetsch, then, bod(il)y/ bawdy language represents a fortunate fall 'down to earth' from the elevated and transplanted notions of poetics, enabling the poet to relocate himself in 'the particulars' of a local experience and language.

Although critics have sought to address postmodern theory in broad terms and in some cases the context of a national Canadian Literature – as does Linda Hutcheon, for example – few, including Hutcheon, have undertaken a close investigation of the prairie postmodern as a regional and ex-centric aesthetic. As a result, the works of Robert Kroetsch are often studied as examples of prairie literature or as instances of Canadian postmodern literature, but rarely have they been examined as representative of a *postmodern prairie aesthetic and practice*, though he himself has made a point of that connection. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnival/carnavalesque and establishing connections with the subversive linguistic strategies of French feminists Lucy Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, while engaging with the discourses of several Canadian critics and theorists, including Linda Hutcheon and Robert Kroetsch himself, I have examined the long poems *Seed Catalogue* and *The Hornbooks of Rita K* as representative examples of Robert Kroetsch's 'diss-course of body/bawdy language.' Moreover, seeking a response to Robert Kroetsch's poetics that is flexible and in many ways informed by his own example in *A Writing Life*, my own text attempts aesthetic and theoretical engagement through an answerable style that enables me to simultaneously occupy the positions of poet and critic. Interweaving analysis and creative response, this 'hybrid thesis' engages in a two-pronged and genre-b(1)ending approach particularly suitable to studies in postmodern literature where the breaching of

established boundaries and challenging of master-narratives is key, and the postmodern author and critic is drawn to an experimental approach to theoretical developments. I have re-envision the relationship of the critical to the creative, demonstrating, as Geoffrey H. Hartman has argued in *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today*, that criticism can also be creative, coming from “within literature” rather than necessarily positioning itself on the outside looking in (1,6).