

KROETSCH'S "TRAGICOMIC ROMANCE";

THE OUT WEST TRILOGY

By

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THE OUT WEST TRILOGY



THE FLATNESS OF THAT GREAT PROVINCE

Paul Hiebert, Sarah Binks  
Drawings by J. W. McLaren

"Here was the least common denominator of nature,  
the skeleton requirements simply, of land and sky--"  
W. O. Mitchell, Who has Seen the Wind

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## INTRODUCTION

Kroetch's Out West trilogy consists of three novels: The Words of my Roaring (1966), The Studhorse Man (1970), and Gone Indian (1973). The first novel has as its setting the fictional Cree constituency. This area is in Alberta on the open prairie somewhere to the southeast of Edmonton. It may be reached by travelling south along the Calgary Trail (which actually exists) and east along Highway 313 (which does not exist outside the trilogy). There are seven towns along this highway, as follows--from west to east, Notikewin, one nameless town, a second nameless town, Burkhardt, St. Leo, Roundhead, and Coulee Hill. The Cree River runs just south of the highway, widening at Burkhardt where it is called Wildfire Lake. In The Studhorse Man, the setting is expanded to include the city of Edmonton. In Gone Indian, Binghamton, New York, with its heavy industry and devotion to material progress, is introduced as a counterpoint to the Alberta landscape. However, most of the significant action in the three novels takes place within Cree constituency.

Cree constituency, along with its inhabitants, is explored in detail. The social relationships between the townsfolk and the agricultural community are revealed. The

dominant local families, the Burkhardts and the Proudfoots, are discussed. Traditions peculiar to the local ethnic groups and native peoples of the area appear naturally in the novels. The characters speak in the language developed in response to their environment. However, the setting of the trilogy is transformed into something which goes beyond regionalism. Kroetsch uses the experience of characters within Cree constituency as a metaphor for the experience of the individual in the contemporary world. Despite the regional references, Kroetsch's trilogy may successfully be compared with the fiction of Cervantes, Fielding, Sterne, and a host of other authors. It is a deliberately literary work. At the same time, Kroetsch's attention to detail makes the trilogy very much alive.

Kroetsch discovers a symbolic richness in the seemingly empty vastness of the prairie landscape. In his trilogy, as in the fiction of W. O. Mitchell and Sinclair Ross, the prairie is a landscape of elementals. Here the human being is confronted by uninterrupted space. The earth appears to stretch from one vacant horizon to another; the sky is a vacuum. Kroetsch's three protagonists, John J. Backstrom, Hazard Lepage and Jeremy Sadness, move within this landscape. They are overwhelmed by a sense of their own insignificance, for the prairie serves as a reminder to them of the infinite reaches of the universe. The prairie,

especially stricken with drought or buried in snow, seems to be a wasteland. Death is all around. All three of the protagonists live in terror of death. Their personal efforts to come to terms with death are depicted as an attempt to accept the prairie. There is a physical effort, manifested in the desire to create something within the prairie landscape, be it a garden, a horse, or a dissertation. There is also a spiritual effort. In this sense the landscape becomes a reflection of the self. When the self is in despair, the prairie is barren. When the self is hopeful, suddenly the prairie blossoms.

Organized religion fails each of the protagonists in turn, in the persons of Applecart, Father Lockner, and the anonymous priest who hears Sadness' confession. Each of the protagonists faces the universe alone, without God. Fundamental questions are raised as a result of their experiences, in particular, how can any creature, especially one that is born to die, have meaning? The three protagonists, as well as Hazard's biographer, Demeter Freudfoot, and Sadness' editor, (Professor) R. Mark Madhan, are looking for a way to order the chaos of life. They seek the significance of things. In other words, each one is trying to find a myth to explain his own existence. Backstrom's world is controlled by the Biblical mythology of Eden and the fall of man, the appearance of a saviour, and the advent of the Apocalypse.



bringing with it the new Eden. Demeter and Hazard are involved in re-enacting The Odyssey in which the protagonist is an exile wandering in the wilderness; he eventually returns home to rescue his rightful kingdom from the dangers besetting it. Madham and Sadness are fascinated by the mythology about the North American frontier, which apparently began with Columbus and continues until the present day. All three myths are similar. They feature a dissatisfaction with things as they are and a longing for perfection.

Each one of these characters appears to fall short of achieving a satisfactory state of being. Backstrom is searching for a new Eden, but he is continually thwarted. It seems as though he is the victim of a cosmic joke--the force which governs the universe (this could be called fate) appears to be deliberately manipulating events in order to frustrate him. No matter what Backstrom does, he fails. He is a powerful man, yet his strength means nothing. His vitality only serves as a reminder of its opposite, death. Finally, Backstrom is caught in a situation for which there is no solution. The reader leaves him struggling for the wisdom to do right, but the reader knows that success is forever lost to him. Demeter Proudfoot is unreliable. He persists in putting an interpretation on events which the reader must correct in his own mind. However, Demeter may be right when he points out Hazard's naivety. Hazard, he

says, has no idea of the import of his quest. Demeter literally destroys Hazard. After Hazard's death, his quest is re-interpreted, and his original goal is never achieved. Similarly, in Gone Indian, Madham is unreliable. Sadness dictates his opinions about his journey to the frontier into a tape recorder. These tapes are edited by Madham, who repeatedly warns the reader not to take Sadness seriously. The reader must hesitate to accept Madham's interpretation of events but, because of Madham's presence, doubts about the nature of Sadness' achievements persist in the reader's mind. Quite plainly, Demeter's and Madham's efforts to order their own lives have resulted in madness.

There is a difference between man's desires and his achievements--this, Kroetsch explains in his introduction to creation, is the "tragicomic romance" of the world. Northrop Frye, in his Anatomy of Criticism, would give this phenomenon another name, "irony". Frye's discussion of irony<sup>1</sup> lends insight into the way the Out West trilogy works. He defines irony as a parody of romance. He further defines romance as displaced myth, in which the gods are replaced by human heroes. If myth attempts to give form to the complexities of existence, then irony seeks to expose the complexities and to re-examine them. Kroetsch sets out to do just this

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<sup>1</sup>Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, New Jersey, 1973), pp. 223 ff.

in the Out West trilogy. He is looking for a myth which will explain the life of contemporary man, in particular, contemporary Canadian man. Kroetsch incorporates into this search an awareness of the limits of an exclusive attitude. He must allow for disparate ideas in his description of the human condition. "Tragicomic romance" is the form best suited to expression of this outlook.

According to Frye's observation of many works, romance takes dramatic form in the journey, or quest. There is a passage from struggle through a point of ritual death to a recognition scene. Involved in conflict are a protagonist and his enemy. The protagonist is analagous to a Messiah, or deliverer. He is associated with spring, dawn, order, fertility, youth, vigour, and so on. The enemy is analagous to demonic power and is associated with winter, darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life, old age. The central form of the quest-romance is the conquest of sterility, or the fallen order of nature. Frye draws analogies between the quest-romance and both dream and ritual. In dream terms, the quest-romance is the search of the libido, or desiring self, for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality, but will contain that reality. In ritual terms, the quest-romance is the victory of fertility over the wasteland. The symbolic death and rebirth of the protagonist may be presented in erotic

terms. Sexual fulfillment, in this case, imparts to him a sense of having arrived at the summit of experience in nature. The protagonist is, then, complemented by a woman, the wise-mother figure who sits quietly at home and waits for him to finish his wanderings and come back to her. The protagonist may, nevertheless, encounter many females during his adventures. These fall into the category of the siren, or beautiful witch.<sup>2</sup>

In each of the novels in question, the romantic/mythical patterns are applied to a more realistic context which fits them in unexpected and, therefore, humorous ways. If Backstrom is the protagonist of The Words of my Rearing, then his enemy should be Doc Murdoch. Backstrom himself should be the saviour of Cree constituency. Helen Murdoch should be his rightful lady, and her garden the Eden he seeks. However, Backstrom, by a cruel twist of fate, is his own worst enemy. The J. of his name stands for Judas, the betrayer. His love for Helen is complicated by the fact that he is already married. Hazard is the protagonist of The Studhorse Man, but the disparity between his mythical role and his personal earthiness transforms the story of his quest into a mock-heroic narrative. He is killed, his enemy wins both his lady and his mansion, and his biographer takes

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 186 ff.

all the credit for completion of the quest. Jeremy Sadness, alienated from his own "realistic" society, turns to romance for solace. He pictures himself as a great adventurer journeying to the outer reaches of civilization. However, things do not turn out quite as he had planned, and his quest threatens to end in disappointment. With his normal values thereby displaced, the reader is not sure what is the author's attitude, or what his own is supposed to be. It appears that the goal of the quest may not exist. The quest itself may be absurd.

In general, the critical attitude toward Kroetsch's work has been favourable, although little work has been done on the Out West trilogy as a whole. This positive reception of Kroetsch's work is not surprising. Once again, reference to Frye's Anatomy of Criticism proves useful. Frye describes the forms of prose fiction as novel, confession, romance, anatomy, and all possible combinations thereof.<sup>3</sup> The novel, he says, retains clarity of sense description. Characters are three-dimensional and fully developed; their dialogue is natural. In the confession, characters and incidents are revealed from a single point-of-view through the use of stream-of-consciousness technique. The essence of the romance is that the story and characters

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 303 ff.

are set against archetypal heroic patterns, as discussed earlier in this paper. The anatomy is characterized by a narrator who has a tendency to be encyclopaedic and exhaustive in technique and with subject matter, and to see both in highly intellectualized terms.

Frye further defines the complete prose epic as a work using all four forms of prose fiction. If the reader accepts Frye's criteria for the prose epic, he will recognize that they are satisfied by Kroetsch's trilogy, Out West. The three novels, taken together, present an intricate and resonant interweaving of the four forms of prose fiction. As was indicated in the brief discussion of regionalism in the novels at the beginning of this paper, Kroetsch pays particular attention to presenting details accurately. This observation is reinforced by the fact that the geography of Cree constituency may be mapped using the information provided by the three narrators. These three narrators are memorable characters, vividly depicted. Because of the various eccentricities of the narrators, the other characters may seem gross, exaggerated or two-dimensional. However, it is to be remembered that this is consistent with the particular point-of-view in question. Backstrom is exuberant and indiscriminating. Demeter Proudfoot and Professor Madham consciously alter observed reality in order to suit an intellectual purpose. Demeter, in particular, enjoys being

exhaustive in his treatment of the subject matter. The humour and endless variety of these novels provides delightful entertainment for the reader; at the same time, he is challenged to consider the serious problems of existence.

## II

### A CRY FOR HELP

In his traveller's guide to Alberta, Kroetsch describes what he believes to be the mental climate of the rural areas of the province. Although the census-takers may collect statistics indicating that over eighty per cent of the population belongs to an established church, many people attend revival meetings. Political gatherings with their high rhetoric and accompanying emotions, their neat categories of good and evil, can serve as a substitute. Religion and politics, then, are strongly bound to each other. Kroetsch finds in Premier Manning an earnest representative of the Alberta "Bible Belt", embodying in his person many of its attitudes. Manning is a critic of contemporary theology and ceremony; he calls for a return of Christ to this earth, seeing a desperate need for His presence in Canada as a whole and Alberta in particular. Kroetsch represents Manning as believing that the history of Alberta is a specific manifestation of God's universal and eternal plans. At one time, Alberta was supposed to have been rural and unspoiled. However, it fell prey to the evils of urbanization, so that a saviour is necessary to deliver its people. In the concept of Christ are united the organizing metaphors of Biblical symbolism, for Christ is simultaneously



the one God, the Shepherd, the sacrificial Lamb, the Tree of Life, and the rebuilt temple. The reign of Christ is represented primarily by pastoral imagery. As a result, a desire for the apocalypse is easily expressed as a nostalgia for a lost pastoral world. Justification is provided for a political outlook in which the rural is superior to the urban. As might be expected, in Manning's view, farmers are portrayed as having steadier judgement and sounder principles than urbanites. Industrialism and cities are described as the breeders of atheism, socialism, and appetites for dance, liquor and tobacco.

If this religious and political outlook is possible at a time when Alberta is prospering, and industrialism is bringing in its wake rapid economic growth, one would suppose it to have flourished during the Great Depression. This, as Kroetsch indicates, is exactly what happened, and William Aberhart was its principle voice. As there is no definitive biography of this man, Kroetsch himself supplies the reader with information.<sup>1</sup> Aberhart was born in Ontario. There he grew up to pursue a successful career as a school-teacher. However, during Easter of 1910, at thirty-one

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Kroetsch, Alberta (Toronto, 1968), pp. 22 - 26.

years of age, he moved to Calgary. A deeply religious man, he began to give lectures on the second coming of Christ and biblical prophecy, at the Calgary Prophetic Bible Conference. This religious activity continued until the Great Depression, when Aberhart became involved in politics. In 1932, one of his favourite students committed suicide in response to hopeless economic conditions. Soon thereafter, Aberhart began to read the social credit doctrines of Major C. H. Douglas. In the provincial election of 1935, Aberhart became a candidate for the premiership. He led the Social Credit candidates in a combination political battle and religious crusade. During this campaign, Aberhart extended his audience by broadcasting over CFCN, a Calgary radio station, "The Voice of the Prairies". It is estimated that at the peak of his popularity Aberhart's voice reached 350,000 people. William Aberhart was a dynamic figure, described by Kroetsch as "a man of great size and energy, humourous, delighting in talk and argument, longing for, and suspicious of, respectability, possessed of Christian humility, yet also a will to excel and dominate, distrustful of the Ontario from which he came, and living in anticipation of damnation for the wicked and rewards for the good." His victory in the 1935 election was praised as an "act of God", and his life in Alberta seen as a "fulfillment of the Divine Plan". As Kroetsch explains, during the hard

times of the Depression there was a great need for strong leadership, and Aberhart appeared as "the embodiment of the people's dreams and nightmares"--an economic wizard, a martyr, a voice of prophecy crying in the wilderness, a lone brave man standing up against eastern financiers, and a saviour who promised redemption from the woes of the Depression.

The Words of my Roaring is at once a shrewd and funny parody of this religious/political fervour and a serious exploration of the fundamental questions it raises. Because both the pastoral and apocalyptic imagery of the Bible are central to the various themes of the novel, it is appropriate that they provide the work with an organizing principle. Biblical knowledge is an inseparable part of the lives of the people involved. As John J. Backstrom puts it, no Bible, no breakfast. Their language is permeated with Biblical references. The very landscape in which they dwell is an example to them of God's works--a prosperous farm is a veritable Eden, an earthly paradise; a drought-ridden farm is the dreadful desert of the anti-Christ. According to the Book of Genesis, God separated the organized universe from chaos, also called the dragon. Dark was not apart from created light. Then He planted a garden in the east; there He put man. In the garden were found every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, including the tree

of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God put man in the garden to till it and keep it, not to exploit and corrupt it. The farms of western Canada had been bountiful. During the Great Depression, they became a useless wasteland. Quite naturally, the inhabitants of the prairies sought an explanation and a solution.

The man who thought he had the answer was William Aberhart, Applecart of Kroetsch's novel. Aberhart's troubled audience finds its fictional counterpart in the people of Cree constituency. The source of the problem, Applecart explains, lies in eastern Canada. The financiers, "money barons" of the east are identified by him (perhaps rightly so) with fallen man, man in league with the serpent of chaos. Applecart extends his investigations to the Book of Revelation, where he finds that the ancient serpent is also called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world. Consort of this vile beast is "the great harlot who is seated upon many waters", "Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations", which Applecart proclaims with enthusiasm to be none other than Toronto. For Toronto is seated upon many waters, and the merchants of the earth, the shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea have grown rich with the wealth of her wantonness. It appears obvious that the greed and sin of Ontario has brought the final judgement of God

upon the earth. It is frequently prophesied in the Bible that the Apocalypse will be preceded by the advent of the wasteland. Isaiah speaks of an earth laid waste by the Lord, scorched and desolate, bereft of gladness. Jeremiah affirms the prospect of a land of deserts and pits, a land of drought and deep darkness. According to Ezekiel, men shall lack bread and water, and look at one another in dismay.

"The fourth angel poured his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch men with fire; men were scorched by the fierce heat . . .".<sup>2</sup> In Applocart's view, it is time for the wicked to be punished and the righteous to receive the water of life: "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of them will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water . . .".<sup>3</sup> At a time when the need for water is such a great issue, these words are particularly apt. Applocart seems justified in assuming that the Great Depression is a manifestation of God's will and the beginning of the end.

Applocart, however, is finally made to appear ridiculous. The reader never actually sees the man in action. The only contact he has with Applocart is through

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<sup>2</sup>Rev. 16: 8 - 9.

<sup>3</sup>Rev. 7: 16 - 17.

Backstrom's reports of the radio program. His voice comes over the air, but no questions can be directed back to him. He cannot defend himself or his position. Thus, when he asks his impoverished and hard-oppressed listeners to send in their nickels and dimes to him, he seems a hypocrite-- feeding their souls to get their money. Even if he is sincere, the doctrine he preaches is doom; and one Applocart supported by nickels and dimes is not going to stop the Apocalypse. The person the reader does get to see is the nameless prophet. He mouths the same biblical phrases uttered by Applocart over the radio. But when this dirty and pathetic little figure is directly questioned, he fails miserably in providing any satisfactory answers. He is trapped in a vicious circle, and can only repeat himself. His faith (for his arguments have no logic) is absurd, and he is treated with disgust by the other characters.

John J. Backstrom provides the clue to Applocart's failure; the literal-mindedness of Applocart's program is too simplistic to account for the vagaries of existence. The reader first meets Backstrom in the role of J. B., John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of both a physical and a spiritual landscape. As Applocart's electoral representative in Cree constituency, Backstrom is fulfilling the words of the Old Testament prophets. He is preparing the way of a saviour, making inroads for him in

the desert. John Backstrom is also John the Apostle, devotee of Applecart and his political schemes, and faithful listener to Applecart's regular radio program. Significantly, the novel opens on the thirteenth day before the election. During this thirteen-day period, Backstrom rejects Applecart and comes to a personal understanding of the universe around him. A series of powerful events shatters Backstrom's former faith and leads him to ponder some penetrating questions: "End of the world be damned, who could believe such crap? Sinner be damned, who was a sinner? Was the water guilty that drowned Jonah? Was the wind guilty; the wind that turned the fields to dust? Was the sun guilty? Why should I answer questions? When did I get to ask questions? The sickle be damned and the reaper be damned. Who was the judge in the first place?"<sup>4</sup> While it is not possible for Backstrom to answer these questions completely, he feels that it is his duty to approach them honestly and without preconceptions.

It becomes only too obvious to Backstrom that in this world the good suffer needlessly while the bad prosper. Backstrom's friend Jonah Bledd is the first to succumb

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<sup>4</sup>Robert Kroetsch, The Words of my Rearing (London, 1966), p. 86.

to the forces of destruction. The biblical Jonah was an unwilling servant of God. In order that Jonah might learn a lesson of obedience to God's will, he was cast into the waters of the sea and devoured by a giant fish. Driven to despair, Jonah Bledd remains true to the example of his namesake and abandons his responsibilities. He commits suicide by drowning; his body is swallowed up by the waters of Wildfire Lake. He leaves behind him a widow and five children to a life of loneliness, humiliation and poverty. Jonah is guilty of cowardice, but the ultimate cause of his death is the depressed economic situation. He has been bled dry by the nameless rich. Did he then deserve his fate: "Existence itself had earned suspicion. Tough questions were raised."<sup>5</sup> Sitting in Our Lady of Sorrows Church, Backstrom has time to think: "I was not the only person who viewed Jonah Bledd as a basically good man. It was generally shared opinion. He had done everything the recommenders of morality have ever recommended. He lived by the Ten Commandments and when drinking sometimes recited them in lieu of song; he obeyed his wife and children as well as higher powers, paid his debts on time if possible, took care of his health when necessary, enjoyed, as much as

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 139.



is feasible, going to work--and there he was in the middle of the aisle. Or there he wasn't . . .".<sup>6</sup>

The shock of Jonah's death opens Backstrom's eyes to the plight of other unfortunate people around him. Originally, Backstrom had kept in mind the prospect of financial security as he prepared to run for office. As time passes, he recognizes how unworthy are his ambitions. His anger is aroused as he watches his acquaintances standing in line for rations of rotten apples and stinking fish to ward off starvation. Women who had formerly been lithe and attractive are awkward and skinny. Men have lost their pride and self-confidence. To Backstrom, the wall-eyed farmer who must auction his home in order to beat the mortgage collectors stands as a symbol of all the oppressed: "There it was. EVERYTHING MUST BE SOLD. Just as simple as that. One lifetime."<sup>7</sup> It becomes apparent to Backstrom that there is no just God, or He would not have sent this man a plague of eastern money-lenders. However, the source of evil begins to take shape in Backstrom's mind. It is the eastern harlot and its representative, Backstrom's political opponent, Doc Murdoch. Doc Murdoch who was born

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

and raised in Ontario. Doc Murdoch is surrounded by bankers on his electioneering platform. He drinks cocktails at the Queen's Cafe, rather than coffee at Wong's. He drives a shiny, new four-door Chevrolet. He can afford the water to support a lush garden on the premises of his home. Backstrom interprets the events of a local stampede day as a living parable. The black bull bursting from chute number three represents Murdoch and the Fifty Big Shots. The pathetic clown who stands up to the horned beast is Backstrom and his hungry neighbours. In an impassioned speech, Backstrom urges the members of his constituency to vote for his cause, the restoration of justice.

However, as Backstrom soon finds out, the relationships between suffering and justice, poverty and wealth, the east and the west, himself and Murdoch are complex. After accusing Applecart of being an ineffective windbag, and smashing his radio, Backstrom is left in a spiritual void. To fill his emptiness, he instinctively turns to Doc Murdoch for help. Murdoch brings life into being and helps to preserve it. He cures the sick and seeks to relieve their pain. In his devotion to becoming a doctor of others, he has undergone deprivation and hardship. As a result, he is both mature and experienced. People need Murdoch; they can depend upon him for help. The inhabitants of Cree constituency are, in effect, all his children. It is only natural

for him to use his abilities for their benefit and to be proud of the confidence they show him in return. The doctor is a truly good man. Murdoch brought Backstrom himself into the world. Because Backstrom was the doctor's first delivery, Murdoch took a special interest in him, becoming a sort of wise-father figure to him.

Therefore, Backstrom is not long able to sustain his association between Murdoch and the biblical dragon. His idealization of himself as an ordinary working man who knows what it means to endure the severity of poverty crumbles as he examines closely his own role in life. First and foremost, he is the undertaker: the taker under. He is a whiz at restoring the dead, at repairing the accidents of mortality and the ravages of pain: "Good grief, they told each other, old so-and-so is more himself now than when he was alive."<sup>8</sup> But to what avail? Backstrom lives with death and blackness. In contrast, Doc Murdoch brings vitality and greenness into his world. Backstrom's is indeed the last and most terrible duty. He is also the betrayer--John J-for-Judas Backstrom. No matter what course of action he pursues, he must fail in his obligation to someone he loves. To oppose Murdoch is to disappoint the hopes of an

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

old and dear friend, and in turn his daughter Helen, Backstrom's beloved lady. The constituents whom Backstrom desires to save would derive greater benefit from the wisdom of Murdoch than from his own chaotic enthusiasm. On the other hand, if Backstrom steps down and concedes the election to Murdoch, he will be depriving his own wife and child of the financial security they so badly need. Although, as Backstrom's mother recognizes, Judas too had a part in the grand design, his was not a very pleasant undertaking. The biblical Judas brought to completion the prophecies of Jeremiah and Zechariah: ". . . the scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David, concerning Judas . . . For he was numbered among us and allotted his share in this ministry."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Judas suffered great mental torment followed by a dreadful death.

Backstrom wants very much to do the right thing. His search for an earthly paradise can be compared to the romantic quest, which has as its consummation the union of the hero and his white lady. The names of Helen and Elaine, Backstrom's wife, both come from the same Greek root meaning "light". These two women represent the dual nature of

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<sup>9</sup>Acts 1: 16 - 17.

Backstrom's goal. They also demonstrate the incompatibility of its opposing aspects. Elaine urges Backstrom to seek personal success, to abandon the prairie and relocate his family in the east, the land of "the green lush of old Eden"<sup>10</sup> where water is abundant. Helen, on the other hand, praises Backstrom for his return to the west. She encourages him to self-sacrifice and humility. She, herself, is associated with water; she offers him a new Eden in the midst of the wasteland. Backstrom loves his wife, although she is severe. He feels himself devoted to care for her and the child she will bear him. However, Helen has captured his imagination. Until his affair with her, Backstrom had in a sense remained a virgin: ". . . it made me young. Each night I was a virgin again . . . I'd never been so happy before. I've never been so happy."<sup>11</sup> Unable to fulfill the wishes of both women, Backstrom must choose-- between one kind of happiness and another, between one kind of misery and another.

Dramatically, the situation remains unresolved. When Backstrom wanted to win the election, it appeared that he did not have any chance of doing so. Doc Murdoch had

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<sup>10</sup>The Words of my Roaring, p. 58.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 157.

only to point out his immaturity for an audience to laugh in agreement. Now that doubts are beginning to grow in Backstrom's mind, it appears certain that he will be elected. He has succeeded in turning the electorate against the doctor and his supposed connections in the east. In addition, he has promised enough rain to end the drought and bring about a bumper crop. The rain does not seem likely to arrive; however, as Elaine points out, Backstrom is in a position to win even if it does not rain. Backstrom becomes trapped by circumstances. When the hoped-for rain begins to fall, the people greet Backstrom as their saviour. The stronger Backstrom's feeling of unworthiness grows, the greater is their praise of him. As Backstrom drives through the rain, they stop to give him food and to touch him.

In contrast, Doc Murdoch is slowly overcome by defeat. For the first time, a child under his care is lost to death during delivery. Crushed, he turns to Backstrom for strength and support. Backstrom is ashamed of his misrepresentation of the doctor during the election campaign. He also realizes clearly that the rainfall has nothing to do with his own powers. It just happened, by accident. It embarrasses Backstrom that he is about to cash in on an accident. Inspired by Helen, Backstrom resolves to concede the election to Murdoch. He has every intention of making amends to the doctor and explaining his mistake to the

electors. But . . . but such a move would be an irreparable blow to his pride. It would disappoint his wife, who had already endured so much, and be unfair to their unborn child. Consistently, Backstrom has sought to do good, but all his efforts have finished in failure. As Helen explains to him, "I've watched you, Johnnie. You talk. You hunger and thirst. You stride and thunder and roar. You're never still. But in the end you smash."<sup>12</sup>

Despite Backstrom's lively and humorous narration of his own tale (he is given to liberal use of casual understatement well-seasoned with fanciful exaggeration), The Words of my Roaring remains a profoundly sad novel. Rejecting the simple faith of Applecourt, Backstrom dares to explore the complexities of life around him in a search for the truth. What he discovers is the meaning of absurdity, the victory of the wasteland over fertility. An enormously virile man, Backstrom has great appetities. He wants everything; everything in life is hardly enough. He consumes and consumes, but in the end he is consumed. His entire body is an aching reminder of his own ultimate doom. Desperately, Backstrom tries to hold off his own decline and decay. In the garden with Helen, Backstrom begins to think

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<sup>12</sup>ibid., p. 162.

that he has "outfoxed old Master Fate". Backstrom couples with her in Murdoch's goldfish pond. On the seventh night since the hour Backstrom felt himself created anew, he receives a two-fold baptism. He swears on this night of nights to put the past behind him, to emerge a new man. His destiny, however, does not change: "Good God, life is short. Life is short, short, my body cried. So live it said. Live, live. Rage. Roar."<sup>13</sup> Roar as he might, Backstrom is confronted only by a vast indifference. . . . the sun will not overnight snuff itself out. The earth turns on its axis. Galaxies explode, but very slowly. The flowers come and go, do what we will."<sup>14</sup> Helen herself will pass away. Beautiful Helen Persephone, belonging equally to death as to life. Backstrom's prayer is echoed in Psalm 22. It begins with a cry for help. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?", and continues with a plea for deliverance from mortal illness. To Backstrom, life is a mortal illness. And his prayer will remain unanswered.

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 192.



### III

#### NEW COASTS AND POSEIDON'S SON

In order to achieve an understanding of The Studhorse Man, the reader must first consider the nature of the narrator, Demeter Proudfoot. Although Demeter declares himself to be a biographer, his primary concern is not Hazard Lepage. It is to justify his own actions. He feels a need to explain those events which led to his confinement in an institution for the mentally unbalanced. He is convinced that those who labelled him legally insane did so unjustly. To be pronounced insane one must not have been aware of the nature and quality of one's actions. Demeter sets out to prove that he knew with "immodest clarity" what he was about. To do so he must tell the story of Hazard Lepage, for the two men were involved at one time or another with the same woman and the same quest. From this standpoint, The Studhorse Man can be read as a fictional confession with Demeter belonging to the same tradition as Tristram Shandy and Gulliver.

At first, the reader finds himself willing to identify with the narrator. Demeter's narrative, like that of Tristram Shandy or Gulliver, is conversational in tone. The reader is addressed directly and encouraged to sympathize with the narrator as he rambles through his tale,

often pausing to digress on a favourite subject. However, the normal expectations of the reader are transformed or undercut. He comes to realize that the narrator is not even trying to relate actual history but is, instead, inspired by an impulse to order events in his own favour. Demeter is a creative artist, selecting from his three-inch by five-inch cards those events and experiences which contribute to an integrated pattern. Moreover, he arranges the cards so as to present an order that was not necessarily present in Hazard's life. Sufficient evidence is given that Demeter has overstepped the bounds of the biographer's right to interpret, and that he is not merely priest to Hazard's long confession as he proclaims himself to be. The pattern Demeter assembles from fragments of the past reveals his identification with something of larger significance than himself. This could be religious, political, or artistic. In Demeter's case it is the perpetuation and perfection of the Lopage breed of horse.

Because the narrator is concerned with rationalizing his own role in the action, his work becomes introverted and intellectualized. The reader must become skeptical of Demeter's integrity. Other characters in his work assume a degree of stylization along "humour" lines, for they are primarily important to the narrator for the ideas they represent. This technique is underlined by the fact that

personal names are not realistic but, rather, closely connected to the sexual dimensions of the novel. In order to justify himself, the narrator must expose the evil and folly of others. A two-dimensional character has no chance to redeem himself. He must be what the narrator declares him to be, for there is no visible evidence to the contrary.

The shortcomings of the narrator himself are deliberately ignored, although they may be unwittingly revealed. Demeter's primary flaw is vanity. He believes that he is freed of vanity, and of the vanity that comes of being freed of vanity, all of which logic merely proves how excessively vain he is. In his mind, Martha speaks of nothing but her love for Hazard because it is crumbling and she must shore it up. Her true love, Demeter declares, is for himself. It appears to Demeter, as a consequence, that Hazard's reckless undertakings are motivated by jealousy. Demeter reveals himself to the reader as a professional madman coated naked in a bathtub surrounded by books. He attempts to convince the reader that he lives in an institution by choice, that his madness is only a posture. In fact, he explains, "The biographer is a person afflicted with sanity. He is a man who must first of all be sound of mind, and in the clarity of his own vision he must ride out the dark night, ride on while all about him falls into chaos. The man of the cold eye and steady hand, he faces for all

of humanity the ravishments and the terrors of existence."<sup>1</sup> Thus isolating himself from humanity, Demeter is able to assert that all of mankind including, alas, his readers lives in a veritable madhouse.

It becomes apparent that Demeter has lost any real capacity to understand or to love another human being. Such a narrator demonstrates enthusiasm for his theme not by analysis of human relationships, but by accumulation of an enormous mass of erudition about his theme. Demeter's absorbing passion becomes the sexual activity of the horse. His many digressions lead him to encyclopaedic discussions of such various topics as the horse's anatomy, the lineage of Arabian horses, the horses of Chinese art, the Przewalski horse, and The General Stud Book. This latter contains Demeter's guiding principles, becoming a Bible of sorts.

As the reader might expect, Demeter's narrative is extremely well organized, taking the form of a completed romantic quest. Demeter has been careful to preserve even the stylistic details of this form, including the epic simile: "Just as Boreas, the north wind, did not scruple to

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Kroetsch, The Studhorse Man (New York, 1971), p. 152.

mate with untended mares, so Hazard on impulse decided to service free of charge the unattended younger animal"<sup>2</sup>, or "But Martha strove against those seas of dust like Heracles against the hate of Diomedes and his man-eating mares"<sup>3</sup>.

In essence, The Studhorse Man as a whole is, just as Margaret Laurence describes it, a rediscovery or retelling, with a peculiar anguish and an ironic tone, of man's search for an earthly paradise, including the mythos surrounding the Golden West.<sup>4</sup> Hazard's specific purpose in life may be the blue stallion, but what he is really looking for is the promised land. Three main stages can be identified as the quest moves from its conception to a finish. The first deals with Hazard's perilous journey from Notikeewin to Coulee Hill by way of Edmonton, and his preliminary minor adventures en route. Significantly, these take place in the thirteenth year of Hazard's engagement to Martha. The journey reaches a climax in a final crucial struggle in which Hazard is killed. The goal is destroying Hazard even as he achieves it. Demeter then takes over his dream. In his own mind, Demeter has assumed Hazard's role as agent of

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>4</sup>Robert Kroetsch, ed., "A Conversation with Margaret Laurence", creation (Toronto, 1970), p. 55.

the quest; he brings about a conclusion. The final stage is that of exaltation of the hero. Naturally, Demeter, writing in his bathtub, is seeking the recognition which he feels is due him as performer of the quest and saviour of mankind.

The specific romantic quest which most closely parallels Hazard's journey is The Odyssey. The connection is first suggested by punning on the name of Hazard's blue stallion, Poseidon. "Poseidon" is the determining factor which sets the wanderings of both Hazard and Odysseus into motion. Appropriately, the nameless sire of Poseidon's line appeared as if by magic on the surface of a body of water, and was carried to shore where he was abandoned to Hazard's care by a mysterious Indian figure who rapidly disappeared. Furthermore, the subsequent stallions are possessed of nautical names--Scupper, Bluenose, Tiller, Poseidon. Suitably, "la mer" proves to be Hazard's undoing, just as it was for Odysseus, the difference lying in pronunciation. "La mer", the sea; "la mer", the mare. Colour symbolism reinforces the link. Martha has sea-green eyes. Her clothing is white and blue. Both the old woman at Passchendaele Ridge and Sister Raphael are identified by the sea-green glitter of an emerald ring. All the women encountered by Hazard, other than Martha, have blue eyes reminiscent of Odysseus' Mediterranean. The twin objects of Hazard's obsession, and the motivating force behind his

quest, are a breed of blue horses and "Old Blue".

More fundamentally, there is a similarity between the impact of a prairie landscape and a seascape upon the mind. The Canadian prairie provides an elemental world: "Only one other kind of landscape gives us the same skeleton requirements, the same vacancy and stillness, the same movement of wind through space--and that is the sea."<sup>5</sup> Henry Kreisel, in his essay "The Prairie: A State of Mind", explains more fully the extraordinary sensation of confinement within a vast, seemingly unlimited space produced by both the prairie and the sea. The discussion is particularly apt to Hazard's experience of the prairie, because a direct parallel is drawn between this landscape and the sea. Hazard is a modern Odysseus journeying to freedom from the imprisonment of meaningless space. His road appears to lead from nowhere to a blank horizon. Although Hazard practically grew up in the water, he finds the confrontation with more space appalling. As he travels from farm to farm with his horse, a fear grows inside Hazard which drives him ever closer to the shelter and security of life with Martha within the walls of her father's hotel. The sea comes to

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<sup>5</sup>Henry Kreisel, "The Prairie: A State of Mind", Contexts of Canadian Criticism, ed. Eli Mandel (Toronto, 1971), p. 258.

represent the absurdity of an indifferent nature. It is both the brine from which we are all issued and the seas of dust to which we return. It is precisely this indifference which Hazard's quest seeks to overcome. It is this comparison between the prairie and the sea at the centre of the novel which proves most useful in exploring the mythic dimensions of Hazard's quest.

Coulee Hill is Hazard's Ithaka, the physical destination of his quest. Martha Proudfoot, owner of the coveted Arab mares necessary to the consummation of the quest, is his Penelope, the white lady for whose sake the journey is performed. The conclusion of the quest should be the marriage of Hazard to Martha, and the union of the blue stallion with the Arab mares. Martha, true to her role, remains quietly at home in her father's hotel in Coulee Hill preserving her virtue and awaiting Hazard's arrival. Demeter, although no son to Hazard, is self-appointed guardian of Martha and heir to the quest. His function, then, closely resembles that of Telomakhos.

Like Homer, Demeter begins his narrative in medias res. Previous to the immediate action, Hazard had journeyed to the scene of his own Trojan Wars, the battlefields of World War I France. There he met a prophoress, a veritable Kassandra, "sitting blue-eyed between two naked corpses in a



flooded cellar." She delivers him a warning: "Mon pauvre soldat, inutile de te cacher . . . La mer sera votre meurtriere."<sup>6</sup> Hazard's mother, the reader later discovers, was compulsively drawn to the deportation of the Acadians from Ile-St.-Jean, which occurred in 1758: "The soldiers, in loading the boats, quite carelessly separated families. Mon pauvre soldat, inutile de te cacher."<sup>7</sup> The words echo in Hazard's mind. Quite naturally, he had translated the words of the prophetess; the sea would be his death as it had been the death of his supposed ancestors. Hazard flees to the prairies in order to avoid his fate. It is learned too late that Hazard has been mistaken in his interpretation of the matter. There is no Lepage family listed among the deported Acadians. All the resonant notes he finds in his past are false. It appears that some god is deliberately misleading Hazard in order to enjoy the joke of finally outwitting him. No matter how much Hazard fears death and seeks to evade it, he cannot hide from his destiny.

Demeter begins his account of Hazard's life with an encounter between Hazard and Tad Proudfoot. Tad Proudfoot can best be described as a lout, ignorant of civility, and

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<sup>6</sup>The Studhorse Man, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

bearing a strong resemblance to the Kyklop Polyphemos. From his misadventures with Tad, Hazard escapes only to find himself in Hades, the land of the dead. Confined in an exceedingly cold boxcar, Hazard lies prostrate on a "winter of bones", travelling rapidly into blackness. The lack of light in the boxcar renders Hazard's eyes useless. The extreme cold numbs Hazard. He becomes literally senseless. "Old Blue" is shrivelled, apparently gone and vanished, as death seeks triumph over life. In this place, Hazard consults with the spirit of the Cree Indian, now dead, who delivered to him Poseidon's ancestor. Messages are exchanged. The Indian produces a telegram for Hazard from Martha, who waits with her broad hips and large breasts in the world of the living. For all the possibility Hazard has of granting her requests for his physical presence, he might as well be dead. He is forced to reply: "CANNOT GET AWAY AM IN COFFIN VERY SORRY REGARDS HAZARD."<sup>8</sup> Liberated from this living death, Hazard awakes in a railway station. "Where in hell--", he asks. To which the brakeman attending him replies, "No . . . In Edmonton."<sup>9</sup>

Returned to the world of physical activity, Hazard

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

continues his attempts to complete the quest. In the series of bizarre adventures that follows, he must overcome a number of obstacles similar to those encountered by Odysseus. Wandering throughout Edmonton, Hazard becomes involved with the attractive P. Cockburn, a Kirke who holds him captive. Disabled by a pain in his back, Hazard finds himself unable to stir from the high old bed into which she has cast him. He is further disconcerted by the life-size wax figures of men which surround the bed. They have fallen into P. Cockburn's power, and she has imprisoned their bodies in a false form. She believes that she has created for them an everlasting memorial, but she has lost their essence. They have no spirit. They are what P. Cockburn wants them to be and nothing more. Upon her declaration that she will make a model of Hazard in shining wax, he comes to his senses. Realizing that this is a museum and that he himself might become an object of history instead of a living presence, Hazard flees. He effects his escape by changing costumes with a wax dummy which he then puts in the old bed in his own place. Predictably, P. Cockburn accepts the perfect and lifeless dummy into her arms without hesitation.

Thankful to have escaped such a dehumanizing fate, Hazard uses the new authority vested in him by the experience (a stolen NWMP uniform) to recapture his stallion, take a string of mares, and "borrow" an idle milkwagon. As

Odysseus discovered in his disastrous adventure with the Kikones, boldness can often lead to loss. While crossing the North Saskatchewan River via the High Level Bridge, in order to continue on his road to Coulee Hill with his new possessions, Hazard finds himself in a great battle with an angry truckdriver. The commotion arouses the interest of a policeman, who suspects Hazard of being the murderer of the owner of a human skull found in the Hades-like boxcar. He, in turn, calls reinforcements to the scene. Hazard finds himself in a dangerous situation. In a bid for survival, he loses his mares and flees.

His flight brings him to a barn on a sidestreet. He enters. Hazard might have made it safely to Coulee Hill at that time, but for arriving in a kind of land of Lotus Eaters. At the Home for Incurables, run by the Sisters of Temperance, Hazard begins to learn the meaning of comfort. His own family motto is: NOTHING IN MODERATION. It is this leaning toward excess which has given Hazard the energy to push on. However, the false security of the Home begins to tempt him. To pursue his quest means months of arduous travel, subsistence on the leftovers of other people's meals, rejection from human society. In contrast, the furnace room of the Home offers warmth, meals for himself and his horses, social contact. Hazard is lulled into viewing the quest as a preposterous fate; "to be at the

mercy of something so rash, so reckless and fickle, so willful, unpredictable, stubborn--and so without morality"<sup>10</sup> seems thoroughly ridiculous. As a result, Hazard soon loses his desire to report to Coulee Hill and longs to stay on forever browsing in the safety of the Home and the charm of Sister Raphael. All that is demanded of Hazard is his participation in a perpetual game of rummy. Five players at a five-sided table--Hazard's world seems complete.

However, he has not yet reached paradise for boredom begins to plague him. The other players are inept at the game, and Hazard wins continually. To offset the boredom, he purposely loses. Sister Raphael realizes that it is time for Hazard to be on his way. The emerald ring on her finger links her to the Cassandra figure. Her wisdom appears to come from the same source; she too is knowledgeable in the matter of beginnings and endings. Five is a number signifying completion: a man has five fingers, there are five vowels, a man has five senses, there are five points of the compass--north, east, south, west and centre, the wild rose of Alberta is five-petalled. When Hazard turns up the five of hearts, the end of his relationship with the Home is signified. Later, when Mrs. Laporte appears at the door

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

carrying the five of hearts in her hand, the reader is aware that something is about to end. In this latter case, it is Hazard's freedom of movement and choice.

Against his will, Hazard is forced to depart from the Home. As he leaves Edmonton behind him, Hazard once more finds himself in a predicament. En route to Coulee Hill, he accidentally strays into a riding stable where there is a young mare, creamy white and beautifully formed. Hazard on impulse decides to mate his stallion with the mare. A Mr. Running Post witnesses the act and informs the owner of the mare. The result of the entire action is that the local authorities, with the advice and consent of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, charge Hazard under an Act for the Enrollment of Stallions with an offense to HIS MAJESTY. Unable to pay the required twenty-dollar fine, Hazard is faced with a choice: "nine days in jail, or three days on the farm earning an honest dollar, helping the poor indigent widow."<sup>11</sup> Like Odysseus, Hazard must now select his course carefully. It is difficult to tell whether he chooses Skylla ("Her legs--and there are twelve--are like great tentacles, unjointed") or Kharybdis (" . . . Kharybdis lurks below to swallow down the dark sea tide: Three times from

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

dawn to dusk she spews it up and sucks it down again three times, a whirling maelstrom.")<sup>12</sup> At any rate, Hazard barely escapes from the Widow Lank with his life. During his encounter with P. Cockburn, Hazard's sexual activity is described as the striving for a distant shore. In a continuation of this conceit, the Widow Lank's husband is depicted as having perished at sea while undertaking a dangerous naval mission.

Hazard, however, has not yet seen the worst of his adventures. He falls in with a false friend, Eugene Utter, windbag and good-for-nothing, noted primarily for his ability to inspire others to excess. Resembling Antinoos, discourteous guest of Odysseus' household, he proves himself faithless to Hazard by finally usurping his place as Martha's suitor and husband. Together Hazard and Eugene Utter withstand the dangers to the completion of the quest posed by a flood, a fire, a Ukrainian wedding reception, and a coyote hunt. Nevertheless, Hazard at last alone and defenseless falls into the grasp of the beautiful Marie Eshpoter. Wounded by stray bullets during the coyote hunt, Hazard is helpless to resist Marie's offer of care and rest at her

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<sup>12</sup>Homer, The Odyssey, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1963), XII, 40 - 82.

ranch. Once established in her home, Hazard finds himself unable to leave this Kalypso-like woman. According to Demeter's own experience, Marie has control over the supernatural, and it is generally accepted that she has cast a spell over Hazard with her black magic. This dangerous nymph holds Hazard prisoner to her love.

When Hazard recognizes that Marie has used her power to pervert his purpose, he becomes terrified. Sensibly he rushes to a priest. However, religion fails to provide him with the necessary support to face his fears; Father Lockner is not at home. Factors beyond Hazard's control begin to take over. As indicated by the imagery, his doom is rapidly closing in on him. Hazard dreams that his life is a circus controlled by the malevolent Tad Proudfoot. Tad offers a perfect mare to Hazard on condition that Hazard will never have it bred. This has been the absurd situation of Hazard's life--he can have Martha if he will relinquish his intention of breeding the perfect horse; if he wants to keep his dream of the perfect horse, he must give up Martha. Hazard can never achieve his twin goal. He is a born loser. The dream climaxes in the ultimate horror, a leap through a ring of fire. Hazard is greeted at the priest's door by Mrs. Laporte bearing the fateful five of hearts. As he passes through the all too real fire in the priest's house, Hazard is twice likened to a drowning man.



His hopeless journey is nearing an end: "Art would have found a neat way out; life is not so obliging."<sup>13</sup>

Mrs. Laporte plays Nausikaa to Hazard's Odysseus. Through her, Hazard is finally brought to the hotel of Timothy Proudfoot in Coulee Hill. It is supposed that Hazard is dead, and he is put in the icehouse attached to the beer hall. This experience resembles his icy sojourn in the boxcar. However, this time Martha is present to restore her hero to life. She is the champion of death, of the crone and succubus, of the ancient fiend turned female. It appears that Hazard has reached home at last, after great adventures, and claimed the white lady for his bride, in a symbolic conquest of death and the absurd.

Demeter, in an attempt to lend his narrative high seriousness, has depicted events in an heroic manner. However, the subject matter itself is low. Hazard is uneducated, aging, and neither the handsome nor courageous stuff of which true heroes are made. His lady is a barmaid, albeit virtuous. The Seirones who seduce him along the way are generally past their prime. The battles in which he is engaged are low-down fistfights or crude verbal interchanges. The great temptations which lead him astray are a full stomach

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<sup>13</sup>The Studhorse Man, p. 142.

and a pitcher of beer. The result is an intricate mock-heroic tale. The discrepancy between the intellectual pretensions of the narrator and the true earthiness of his material makes for what appears to a delightful and funny novel.

However, the joke turns sour as the novel comes to a close. All the elements foreshadowing a bitter ending reach their appropriate conclusion. The characters become trapped in a fantastic nightmare,--brutal, horrifying and absurd. The wit of the novel culminates in a grotesque irony. In contrast to the comedy of Hazard's quest, its ultimate conclusion is black. Hazard is destroyed, trampled to death by his own stallion at the very moment when Martha is preparing to give herself to Demeter. In the name of life, Demeter stands by and allows Poseidon to kill Hazard; the horse is spared in order that the Lepage line might survive to reach perfection.

Unfortunately, Hazard Lepage lived and died in vain. As a result of Demeter's direction, the quest becomes thoroughly perverted. The ritual purpose of the true romantic quest is to express the victory of fertility over the wasteland. After the death of Hazard, Demeter learns of "a certain balm and ointment", pregnant mares' urine, which is necessary to the manufacture of birth-control pills. Poseidon's services are used, not for the perfection of a

breed of horses, but for the prevention of the further multiplication of man upon earth. Much to Demeter's delight, "Scurrilous, barbarous, stinking man would soon be able in the sterility of his own lust to screw himself into oblivion, to erase himself like a rotting pestilence from the face of God's creation."<sup>14</sup>

In his narrative, Demeter paints Hazard as a kind of irresponsible Yahoo, crudely satisfying his enormous physical desires. Hazard, however, appears the more deserving of sympathy, the more condemnatory Demeter becomes. Hazard's desire for the ability to create and to celebrate assumes three aspects, reflected humourously by his diminutive names for Poseidon. His search for the Golden West, the fertile paradise of the romantic quest, comes to the fore in the name "Posse". "Poesy" suggests an artistic search. While in Edmonton, Poseidon confronts the statue of a horse, a "poised and perfect bronze beast". Although Hazard finds the living horse to be superior, this is not to deny his own role as creator or the timelessness of Poseidon's beauty. By carefully selecting suitable mates for his stallions and by nurturing their offspring, Hazard has indirectly produced Poseidon. Repetition of the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

process would result in another stallion yet more perfect than the last, without the loss of vitality and living energy lacking in the mere inanimate replica. Consistent with Hazard's crude command of the English language, "Pussy" is the woman for whom he is looking. She is realized in the person of Martha, a woman of great beauty who appropriately proves to be marvellously fertile.

In contrast to Hazard, Demeter appears sterile and destructive. His large head and skinny body are paralleled by his over-developed intellect and his sexual impotence. Demeter's fidelity to the memory of Martha remains fruitless; even so was his first encounter with her astounding beauty: ". . . in the shelter of the growing darkness, all my senses sane and alive, there, caught in the fury of my own fist, I gave unwittingly a soft groan at my savage pleasure--or was it pain?"<sup>15</sup> By the time Demeter shouts to Hazard, "Traitor . . . You have betrayed your own cause," the reader has been given cause to doubt Demeter's understanding of the quest. It is a mistake for Demeter to believe that he has become Hazard: "I am the man who breeds horses. Who are you?"<sup>16</sup> Demeter is only a caricature of

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 161.

a studhorse man.

It is appropriate that Demeter finally rejects humanity and throws in his lot with the horses. His behaviour is reminiscent of Gulliver's as he embraces the Houyhnhm way-of-life. In this lifestyle, reason and intellect govern. Marriages are made "not upon the account of love, but to preserve the race from degenerating."<sup>17</sup> If one member of a group dies, "their friends and relations express neither joy nor grief at their departure."<sup>18</sup> Gulliver's rejection of the care and concern of both Captain Pedro de Mendez and his own family is closely paralleled by the physical and mental blockades Demeter raises against his friends and family. He isolates himself from mankind when he barricades himself in Hazard's mansion. Demeter's later confinement in an institution for the mentally unbalanced is only the recognition by others of a step he has already taken.

In Hazard and Demeter, the extremes of promiscuity and celibacy are presented. To Hazard, "love" can signify celebration and joy in being alive, concern for his horses, the purchasing of encyclopaedias for Sister Raphael,

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<sup>17</sup>Jonathan Swift, Gulliver's Travels, ed. Louis A. Landa (Boston, 1960), p. 217.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 227.

physical passion, admiration of a woman's body, or sexual satisfaction. In Demeter's mind, "love" can encompass masturbation and the ascetic contemplation of a woman's image from afar. It is tempting to interpret Demeter Lepage as the symbolic figure of a union between passion and intellect, the final ordering of the chaos of the novel. The prevailing statement of the novel would then be that the successful romantic quest can only be carried out by the well-balanced human being. Death and absurdity can be defeated by the fruitful love of such a person. However, the ironic form of the novel suggests that the existence of Demeter Lepage may only confirm the cruelty of the universe. Martha, her mother, is first introduced as a Venus-like symbol of fertility, virtuous and faithful. In the end she accepts Eugene Utter as her consort, and together they flourish in an extravagant manner on the profits of Poseidon's labour. This failure of her love for Hazard is further complicated by her naming of Hazard's daughter after Demeter. If Demeter had really completed Hazard's quest, it would be appropriate. But Demeter betrayed Hazard, and Martha betrays him in turn by her final act. In the context of Hazard's life and death and Demeter's narration of them, the epigraph is ambiguous: "Allas! Allas! that evere love was synne!" As the reader discovers upon examining the Wife of Bath's prologue and tale, the relationship between

"love" and "synne" is indeed complex.

#### IV

#### THE KINGDOM OF WINTER

In Gone Indian, Kroetsch is specifically concerned with the romantic expectations about the American continents. Dissatisfied with the known world, men have encouraged exploration of the unknown, ever hopeful of discovering a new Eden in space and founding a golden age in time. One of the more successful voyageurs was Christopher Columbus, who stumbled upon the Americas while looking for a convenient sea-route to the Orient. Despite the varying opinions of historians, the popular imagination has persisted in hailing Columbus as a hero. He passed into legend as a man of great courage whose many virtues led him to find two entire continents rich in exploitable resources, notably gold. Columbus' voyages apparently fanned the collective hopes of Europe to new heights. The English-speaking world, despite the competition of equally aggressive nations, focussed its attention upon North America; it became a widely held belief that in this land of promise any man of an ambitious disposition could free himself from the bonds of the past and begin a new life. The limitations of such an optimistic outlook have been consistently ignored. As a result, Columbus is lauded for opening up seemingly unlimited opportunity to the world. His life can stand as a



symbol of the hopeful traveller journeying from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge, from poverty to wealth and fame.

Once established in the new world, settlers turned their eyes westward to the land beyond the frontier, pregnant with possibility, where a man might yet hope to make his fortune. The first serious attempt to define this phenomenon and to gauge its effects was carried out by Frederick Jackson Turner. The result is an essay entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", from which Kroetsch quotes in his epigraph. Social scientists have widely divergent ideas about this paper, but the fact remains that it did much to shape the popular image of the west in American history. Turner advanced the thesis that American civilization could be explained by its unique environment. The most distinctive feature of that environment, Turner held, was the ever-advancing frontier of settlement. Because of the harsh wilderness conditions at the frontier, established norms lost their validity. Complex social structures no longer served a vital purpose, and a kind of primitive organization took over their functions. The behaviour of people at the frontier tended toward the anti-social and produced rampant individualism: "For a moment, at the frontier, the bonds of custom are

broken and unrestraint is triumphant."<sup>1</sup> The frontier has long been synonymous with the promotion of democracy, because it provides the opportunity for self-discovery and self-expression. Ideally, it is possible for a man to consummate his dreams of personal freedom at the frontier. In time, however, the United States became inhabited from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans: "And now, four centuries from the discovery of America . . . the frontier has gone . . .".<sup>2</sup>

For the purposes of Kroetsch's novel, the frontier has merely moved northward. The last edge of civilization is found at Edmonton, seated Janus-like at the Gateway to the North. Beyond the city, there is wilderness remaining, and the landscape still holds mysteries. Civilization is represented by the eastern United States, in particular the city of New York and the State University of New York at Binghamton. These examples indicate that efforts to found a new Eden have been unsuccessful, time after time, as men have filled the continent. In contrast to the wide-open spaces of the northwest, the east is "a labyrinth of streets and highways and corridors."<sup>3</sup> Here the wilderness finds a

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<sup>1</sup>Frederick Jackson Turner, The Frontier in American History (New York, 1967), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Kroetsch, Gone Indian (Toronto, 1973), p. 94.

parody of itself in the example of Ross Park Zoo. A cool breeze comes through the "unlikely oak trees". The far, high moon is "red in the smog". Throbbing on the air comes "a dull and distant roar of automobiles", which might have been silence itself, or thunder, but in fact is neither.<sup>4</sup> The beasts no longer have an affinity with man. He has assumed control of the environment, caged and fenced the animals. The wilderness once held man's imagination; man now keeps the wilderness in captivity. Romantic ideals have been lost. Life is governed, instead, by corrupted values in which having a baby is subject to the same considerations as buying a car.

In the eyes of this society, Jeremy Sadness is a failure. Born in Manhattan, he has spent his entire life in the east. Nevertheless, he remains unable to find his way through the maze it presents to him. Because he cannot identify with their ambitions, Sadness feels alienated from his peers. He suspects that his work at the university is meaningless. At the same time, he is, in his own mind, guilty because he cannot live up to the example of Jeremy Bontham, after whom he is named. Great debate rages about the nature of Bontham's personality and his achievements;

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

"Was he a shallow, unoriginal, and slightly comic philistine or a profound and serious creator?"<sup>5</sup> To Sadness, Bentham is the hero of the reasonable world. However, his own reactions to him are mixed. On the one hand, he rejects him as a plodding philosopher; on the other, he is driven to terror by the figure of Bentham stuffed and embalmed, his own icon. Intellectually, Sadness has reached an impasse. He can neither proceed with his doctoral thesis, nor abandon it. His personal life is also in a stalemate. His wife Carol declares herself dissatisfied with his attentions, and is unfaithful to him. At the same time, she continues to accuse him of being gross and bestial in his exhibitions of passion. Confused, Sadness begins to believe that his life has amounted to zero times zero. Nothing. He casts himself as a victim of the absurd. His internal conflicts are manifested in a physical manner: "Listen to me. It's a God's fact. My prick stands up. I can't study. I go lie down. MY PRICK LIES DOWN."<sup>6</sup>

If Sadness is to alleviate his frustrations, he must learn to cope with the demands made by the environment from which he springs. He must develop personal beliefs in which

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<sup>5</sup>Mary P. Mack, Jeremy Bentham: An Odyssey of Ideas, 1748 - 1792 (London, 1962); preface.

<sup>6</sup>Gone Indian, p. 35.

he has confidence. Of necessity, Sadness embarks on a journey of self-exploration. A romantic, he turns to the hope held out by the frontier. As a boy, he had ever dreamed of a far interior that the flesh might inhabit. Aware that he must now seek out this new Eden, Sadness accepts Grey Owl as his mentor. Indeed, Grey Owl's transformation from the Englishman Archie Belaney to the Indian Wa-sha-quon-asin is the one thing in his chaotic world which Sadness can take seriously. In his idealized version of Grey Owl's experience, the Indian is depicted as having been initiated into the secrets of living in harmony with a nature that is life-giving rather than death-dealing. Grey Owl, fighting for the preservation of the wilderness and the conservation of wildlife, is portrayed as the truest Indian of them all. Following Grey Owl's example, Sadness focusses his attention upon the timberlands and buffalo plains of the north. Unsure of what he will find upon arrival in this new landscape, Sadness sets out Columbus-like toward the last frontier. The purpose of the trip is for Sadness to become Grey Owl.

It appears as if Sadness succeeds in accomplishing his goal. Arrived in the land of his imagination, he enters a snowshoe race. He has never before worn snowshoes, but the example of a dogteam inspires him to run. These dogs, which have just been defeated in a dogsled race, exhibit a

magnificent indifference. For the first time, Sadness encounters the attitude that neither victory nor defeat matters; it is the running that counts. Filled with this new understanding, Sadness puts on snowshoes, knowing full well that he lacks the skills necessary to place first. Surprisingly, Sadness finds that he enjoys this method of travel. The mechanical action of his body frees his mind from self-consciousness. He is able to turn his thoughts to events outside himself: "My mind was as clear as the sky itself. I was seeing better, I recognized that . . . I saw a rabbit. The rabbit was sitting perfectly still, white in the white snow of the valley floor. I noticed the black tips of its ears."<sup>7</sup> Prior to this experience, Sadness' life had seemed empty of meaning. This void is now filled, as his mind becomes space itself. At the beginning of the race, Sadness is aware of his own thought processes. By the time he crosses the finishing line, he is no longer merely thinking. His entire being is involved in empathy with the landscape. It is this union with his surroundings, that allows Sadness to recognize their importance. Here, all around him, is the paradise which he has been seeking, the new Eden of his dreams: "The snow was a garden. Flowers of

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 83 - 84.

light and shadow bloomed out of the banks of the frozen river, out of the mouth of a cave, the curve of what must be stone, under the blue snow."<sup>8</sup>

This change in Sadness' understanding is acknowledged by the other runners, although they do not themselves realize what has happened to him: "You an Indian or something?"<sup>9</sup> He has run right out of himself and emerged a different man. It seems to Sadness that he has passed through some invisible gate, some wide and unseen gate, in the endless white snow. The barrier to becoming Grey Owl, to achieving acceptance by nature, has been overcome. When asked if he is an Indian, Sadness is unable to speak, for his tongue is possessed by the language of his new people. Rejected and violently beaten by the white men, Sadness is adopted by a Cree musher and his wife. During the race, Sadness stripped himself of his heavy jacket. Ritually, he was throwing away the keys to the civilization represented by his former life in the east. The Cree and his wife now dress him in their own cast-off clothing. The "new old jacket" and moccasins fit Sadness. He has put the chaotic past behind him and gone Indian. "Grey Owl would be proud."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 100.

Several parallels to this experience are interwoven throughout the novel. For example, Sadness is able to shed his human limitations and understand the life of a buffalo. Upon his arrival at Edmonton airport, Sadness meets a youth who claims to have been a buffalo in a former life. This concept had never before shown its possibilities to Sadness. He begins to consider the buffalo, and envisions a harmless animal which, like the Indian, was cruelly threatened with extinction by encroaching white civilization. In his mind's eye, Sadness sees in the buffalo a patient beast waiting out the winters of life, huddled against the elements in communal warmth. The animal appeals to Sadness as a symbol of the virtues to be found in the wilderness. It assumes the dimensions of a pastoral beast dwelling in, and representing, the imagined new Eden. When lonely and frightened, Sadness emits a grunt like that of a large heavy beast and feels comforted. He likes to think of his heart as twinned with that of Notikeewin's magnificent sculptured buffalo. In Sadness' dreams, the buffalo have returned to the great plains: "The buffalo calves have dropped into spring, gambolled and sucked. The lean cows fed in the sloughs while frogs croaked and muskrats dove to the doors of their lodges and nesting ducks tipped down to the mud. The barbed wire fences fell rusted into the greening earth, were gone. The squared fields were hardly a trace on the



burgeoning grass, on the young willows. The cowbirds fed on the backs of the shedding bulls."<sup>11</sup> While the buffalo prevails, the Indian can retain mastery of the landscape. The return of the buffalo spells the triumph of the Indian. In his dream, Sadness is no longer a mere warrior and hunter. Enveloped by a darkness reminiscent of the womb, Sadness imagines himself reborn as a buffalo. Amazingly, he knows what it is to be a buffalo, and can feel himself inside its body. The most valuable things in life are spear grass, prairie-onion and Buffalo Woman. His ideas of beauty are bounded by the yellow rays of the brown-eyed susans and Buffalo Woman. In Buffalo Woman he sees the most desirable buffalo cow imaginable, and he knows what it is to love her. As a buffalo, and with Buffalo Woman, Sadness "danced the highest measure of the flesh."<sup>12</sup>

The theme of death and rebirth continues to unfold. Estranged from his wife, Sadness is looking for a woman to help him complete his quest. He finds two, Jill and Bea Sunderman, whose home is significantly called World's End. They are aptly named, for they divide a man against himself. He must embrace each in the memory of the other, so that his

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 108.

desire remains desire. The Indians who inhabit Sadness' mind have called him Antelope-Standing-Still. But his fortunes change, and Sadness becomes Has-Two-Chances. He first chooses Jill, the daughter. She is intellectual and meditative. Sadness learns to think of her as the stark, amoral virgin come to ravish the frozen earth. He associates her with the north, with cold and ice and death. His relationship with her is less than satisfactory: "Together you were caught on that rail, lurching and locked in quick fury, lifted and hammered to the sky . . . while only inches beyond your aching and thrust bodies . . . beyond your hot joining, the empty and dread air held nothing for you but nothing . . . The frosted hairs of your lost privacy might have curled and clamped, might have fused iron-hard, snared, strangled . . ." <sup>13</sup> Life, observes Sadness, is a festival of desire; he chooses Jill to be queen of the winter carnival. In contrast to Jill, Bea is the healing mother. She is warmth itself, embracing Sadness within the garden of her home. Here, time has stood still, while Bea awaited her lover's arrival. Her only purpose is to restore this man to life. The results are complete. Sadness has come to the end of his journey, "The Columbus quest for the

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

oldest New World. The darkest gold. The last first. I was lifting my hidden face. To the gateway beyond. To the place of difficult entrance . . . I was lying down, stretched out flat, and that strange voyager who accompanies all my catastrophes was up like a mast . . .".<sup>14</sup> His paralysis has been overcome by this woman of the earth, this woman who gives to a room the smell of ferns and mosses, the grass and the crocus and the violet.

Sadness meets his doppelganger in the person of Roger Dorck. Dorck is the king of winter, the stern and final judge. The landscape of his realm is imprisoned in snow and lit by a cold sun. The curling rink is one of his palaces. He is the appropriate consort for Jill; together they rule the kingdom of winter. At one time, Dorck had been intimately involved with Bea. Before Bea met and married Robert Sunderman, she possessed the qualities characteristic of Jill. However, she has matured into a new role, and Dorck cannot recognize her. Obsessed with the desire to embrace death, Dorck drives his snowmobile off the cliff overhanging Wildfire Lake into empty space. Lying in a coma in Our Lady of Sorrows Hospital, death surrounds him. In the meanwhile, Sadness fulfills Dorck's duties at the winter carnival. He is becoming one with his wraith. True

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 147 - 148.

to the pattern of the novel, Sadness meets the undertaker and descends into the coffin. But, after a deep sleep, Sadness arises: "Carefully, slowly, I tilted my head off the satin. Carefully I opened my eyes . . . I was alive. I was alive, goddamnit, I was back in the game, rearing to go, lusting to paw the dirt and snort a little."<sup>15</sup> Free of the coffin, Sadness begins to take over the role of Robert Sunderman. Sunderman is Bea's husband, the lover with a perfect physique, who knocked a hole in the ice and faked his death. He is supposed to have telephoned Bea after he drowned. He stands as a figure of virility, of renewed life and freedom. Sadness fills his place in Bea's bed: "I believed then, I believe, she took me for her lost husband . . . All those years she had been waiting and now he had returned to the bed that was kept for him."<sup>16</sup>

The sense of optimism encouraged by an investigation of the overall design of Sadness' experience is, however, undercut by the unromantic details. At one point, Sadness is driven to declare that the world is a hospital; this is a suitable metaphor. Human life is everywhere dominated by the demands of an ugly practicality and the frailties of the flesh. For instance, the young man who introduces Sadness

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 148.

to the beauties of buffalo life is, in fact, a smuggler who is hopeful of withholding any definite information from the authorities. Sadness' ritual adoption into the Indian nation takes place in the washroom of an Esso station. While Sadness is in his mind consummating his beautiful relationship with Buffalo Woman, he is in fact "surrounded by the jaws and assholes of nine hungry sleigh dogs." Of course, the dogs give him fleas. These are the very animals which had earlier inspired Sadness to undertake the snowshoe race. By the time Sadness parts from them, his opinion of their magnificence has somewhat altered. The most fundamental disappointment overwhelms Sadness as he is forced to face up to the truth about Grey Owl. Grey Owl supported a worthy cause, but the man was not perfect. According to the Cree musher, ". . . once he killed a man. Another man. He was quick with a knife, Grey Owl. He liked to drink. He liked women."<sup>17</sup> This juxtaposition of the facts of actual life with his ideals cannot be avoided by Sadness. At times, he feels oppressed by reality: "Man, in seeking out the unknown, came only to the discovery that his feet are being sucked into the quicksand and quagmire of stinking death; while he lingers on in life his balls and his brain are caught in the virulence and vise of his fatal impulse

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 100.

to seek out the unknown."<sup>18</sup> When in such a mood, Sadness readily believes the quest, any quest, to be futile. Columbus begins to look less like a hero and more like the victim of a cosmic jest. After all, as legend has it, Columbus thought he had arrived in the Indies, but the poor deluded man was nowhere near them.

Doubts are raised about the true nature of Sadness' experience. The frontier about which he, along with many others, had been so hopeful is deceptive. A man might believe that the frontier presents him with a new freedom, but in effect it only confirms the fact of his bondage. The pattern of Sadness' journey indicates that he has overcome defeat and been reborn into a greater happiness. However, the design is flawed. Dorck, the companion of death, comes to life. Robert Sunderman's own rebirth is clouded by uncertainties. His father and his wife like to believe that he is alive, but nowhere does he appear. His death and life remain a mystery. Sadness, himself, with his newly-found lover, disappears into the night. Has he too faked their deaths? As with Robert Sunderman's disappearance, no bodies are found. The matter is open to speculation. Some of the characters in the novel firmly

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

believe Sadness and Bea to be dead; others are equally convinced of their survival. The authoritative interpretation of the success or failure of Sadness' quest depends upon this final chapter in his life. Does Sadness overcome the absurd, or does he fall another victim to the whims of an indifferent universe? As Sadness has been forced to admit, illusion is rife.

The particular choice of narrator allows the ironies their full significance. No character has less sympathy for Sadness' romantic dreams than (Professor) R. Mark Madham. Motivation for his deliberate coolness toward Sadness' venture is fully detailed. Madham is seeking to put to rest certain questions concerning himself and Sadness' wife Carol. All evidence available points to the idea that Madham purposely sent Sadness to his death in order to have Carol. Madham provided the means for Sadness' trip to Edmonton by arranging an interview between Sadness and the University of Alberta concerning a teaching position. Apparently this was done with good will, but it is possible that Madham, believing the north to be a wilderness of danger, encouraged Sadness to go there in the hopes that he would not survive. Sadness dictated his adventures and his thoughts about them into a tape recorder. These tapes came into Madham's hands. He ordered the fragments of tape and prepared them for the written page; then he destroyed them.

He justifies his selection from the tapes, explaining that, with the insight born of meditation and reflection, he is able to lend greater understanding to the adventure than Sadness himself. He asserts, moreover, that it is his professorial prerogative to edit the work of his student.

Madham is himself a western boy who ever dreamed east. He has been Indian enough; he wants to forget the experience. In his memory, the prairies are bleak, haunted and wind-torn. He recalls a sense of being trapped in a blank indifference of space and timelessness. He claims to have sent Sadness on a mission to revisit this wilderness, to discover in the interior something which is forever lost to the professor yet recoverable to the world. In Madham's opinion, Sadness fails miserably from the first moment. He warns the reader that Sadness' attempts to give significance to events are not to be taken seriously. Sadness, he says, went charging off in the wrong direction as soon as he arrived in Edmonton. He negates Sadness' final triumph, expressing the thought that Sadness and Bea fled World's End seeking nothing. In their move to flee everything, they did not know where they were going. Blinded by desire they lost themselves in a blizzard. All began as a pipedream; all finished in failure. The misspelling of the name of the Sunderman home, Worlds End, is finally the only statement possible to express the unbearable indifference Sadness and



Bea discover in the instant before death.

Madham presents this interpretation of Sadness' death in response to a demand that he explain everything. However, the reader knows that Madham is the mad Adam ("adam" being the Hebrew notation for earth or man), the grief spinner of the original garden in the east. Madham and his contemporaries are corrupt; they create nothing. Their only function is to criticize the work of others. They do not give birth to wisdom; they are the morticians of knowledge. Neither are they generous like the ring-givers of old. The gathering of the decadent Friday-Night Mead Sippers attracts their loyalty. They lounge in the false paradise of Ye Olde Valhalla Bar and Grill, in mockery of ancient heroic values. Madham has lost sight of life's essentials, and created for himself artificial goals. Recognizing these facts, the reader must be skeptical of Madham's vision. Madham's road leads to madness. The reader is free to view Sadness' experience as independent of Madham's commentary. It is up to him to decide whether or not Jeremy Sadness is the new Adam, redeemed and redeemer, who has found the keys to the true Eden.

## CONCLUSION

As Kroetsch points out in conversation with Margaret Laurence, Out West is not an old-fashioned chronological trilogy. The events do take place at various times: The Words of my Roaring occurs during the Great Depression of the 1930's; The Studhorse Man opens at the close of the second World War; Gone Indian is a novel of the immediate present, the 1970's. But the idiom of the novels is contemporary. Kroetsch expresses the belief that an author does not have to use the contemporary scene to write a contemporary novel. Instead, he tries to use the experience of the past in order to express the present. There is a sense of continuity in the fact that the past in a sense always is the present and the present is the future.<sup>1</sup> But the basis for calling this work a trilogy lies in the fact that each novel contains variations on a set of related themes. One of these themes is the failure of existing myth in contemporary society. All three novels are necessary to deal adequately with this particular theme; each work explores in depth one of three major myth-making forces in

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Kroetsch, ed., "A Conversation with Margaret Laurence", creation (Toronto, 1970), p. 60.

Western culture--the Christian religion, classical civilization, and the discovery of the New World.

The failure of the community to provide a satisfactory alternative to traditional myth is pointed to by Kroetsch's use of the picaresque. The individual is isolated. He must himself search for roots and ancestors, come to terms with his gods. The Out West trilogy does not, however, suggest a return to despair. There is a glimpse in the experiences of Backstrom with Helen, Hazard with Martha, and Sadness with Bea of a mysterious oneness, beyond all rational comprehension, which gives serenity of mind and the strength to face the human condition. The experience of Sadness in the snowshoe race, when his spiritual vacuum is gradually filled by a knowledge of things outside himself, points the way to the method of achieving this union. It seems that dignity is found in the ability of the individual to face existence in all its senselessness, and to laugh at it. The imposition of a false order upon the universe can lead only to madness. Balance seems to be the key word--balance between accepting the darkness without illusions and celebrating the miraculous gift of light.

VI

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