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Back to the Past?  
Place and Memory in Robert Kroetsch’s Badlands

In his essay “The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues”, Robert Kroetsch stresses the importance of the oral tradition, archaeology and memory in relation to the past. Starting out from the traces of the past that haunt him, he describes a situation from his own home in Alberta. His father allowed dam-builders to take away stones that had belonged to a historical and magical site, an Indian tipi ring. He remembers that day as the day when he embraced the model of archaeology against that of history. He concludes: “If history betrayed us, we too betrayed it. [...] Where I had learned the idea of absence, I was beginning to learn the idea of trace. There is always something left behind. That is the essential paradox. Even abandonment gives us memory” (Kroetsch 1989, 2).

Traces are closely connected to memory and the digging of the past. Kroetsch’s response “to those discoveries of absence, to that invisibility” (Kroetsch 1989, 2) has been to tell a story. A story is always about a particular place and time based on memory. A story is based on what we remember from the past. Kroetsch says: “Like the homesteaders before us, we are compelled to adjust and invent, to remember and forget. We feel a profound ambiguity about the past – about both its contained stories and its modes of perception” (Kroetsch 1989, 5). Stories and oral tradition based on archaeology and the dream of origins are of immense importance for Robert Kroetsch. “The oral tradition, becomes a literary tradition, points us back to our own landscape, our recent ancestors, and the characteristic expressions and modes of our own speech” (Kroetsch 1989, 7).

Since literature’s beginnings, Canadian writers and critics have also been preoccupied with place; one of the definitions of which is that it is “a complex interaction of language, history and environment” (The Post-Colonial, 391). Critics have also argued that Canadian writing constructs “a sense of place” which usually explains, in terms of the human relationship to a distinctly Canadian natural environment, the essential characters and identities in texts. In Badlands, the dominant image in connection with land
is that of archaeology. In the novel, the land involves the land of dead dinosaurs, which is related to the past and the search for history and origins. On the other hand, the land also involves the land of the high source of the river, the land of the mountains, “the Badlands upside down” (Kroetsch 1999, 226), which is the place of rebirth and renewal for the heroines of the novel.

The narrative of Badlands provides its own commentary on the forms of memory and place. The story has been focused on William Dawe’s life’s quest for dinosaur bones, particularly the events surrounding his expedition by flatboat down the Red Deer River of Alberta, during the summer and fall of 1916. The events are narrated by his daughter Anna Dawe fifty six years later. Anna Dawe is engaged upon a personal quest for her father whom she knows only through the fieldnotes of his expedition. The urge to know the father arises from the fact that William Dawe abandoned his wife and child in order to discover the “source” of origins. William Dawe’s obsession with the dinosaur bones hidden deep in the Alberta badlands is his attempt to return to the origin of things, to dominate time and achieve immortality. But in order to achieve that he has to sacrifice certain values: love, humanity, the other “dark” side of his personality, the feminine aspect of his psyche.

William Dawe is unable to create relationships. This is the problem that Anna Dawe also has, but by the end of the novel we can see her overcoming it. William Dawe leaves his wife and child and, led by the urge for glory and immortality, sets out on a journey to the Alberta badlands. While with his crew, he is also unable to communicate properly. There is no love and humanity left in him which could make his life and his quest more meaningful. William Dawe assumes the role of authority over his crew members as well as the role of surrogate father, for example, with Tune, one of his crew members. In the expedition story he is presented as always needing to play the patriarch; he converts his crew into sons, his progeny, his products; they exist to supplement his self-pride:

He would have sons, perhaps he would have three sons, one of them a young man like Tune, almost morose at times, dreamy, given to singing in the midst of disaster; young Tune who had learned to worship – yes, that was hardly too strong a word – Tune worshipping the old master, Tune already dreaming of his conquests in the field; but Dawe would be at home, at home with his wife and family (Kroetsch 1999, 148).
When Tune is buried under rubble in the search for bones without an
opportunity for regeneration, William Dawe puts down in his fieldnotes
only: “Dead. Tune. Dead” (Kroetsch 1999, 192). William Dawe cannot
admit either love for a human being or the language of loss. His short and
precise scientific statements end in silence. It is silence, isolation and
loneliness that remain after the tragedy and dominate William Dawe’s life.
His daughter Anna Dawe, reading his fieldnotes, attempts to identify the
point at which her father undergoes the transformation into a man isolated
from feeling, love and friendship. In the “mystery of his first season” in the
badlands, she notes the changes in his 1916 fieldnotes, changes that point to
a transformation in the man whose “ventures into deserts and jungles, into
Africa and Texas and Patagonia, into the Arctic Islands”, she and her mother
have followed so closely:

His field notes, after that summer, were less and less concerned with
his crew, his dangers, his days of futile prospecting, his moments of
discovery, his weariness, his ambitions, his frustrations. They became
scientific descriptions of the size and location of bones, of the
composition of the matrix, of the methods of extraction and preservation
[...] And I had to visit those badlands where his success began. Because,
there, in that beautiful and nightmare season – he ceased to dare to
love (Kroetsch 1999, 121).

It is by means of memory that he recollects the rare moments of his bliss
and happiness with his wife and family: “and all the fury his body needed,
spent, to swim him back, down, to the world’s surface, to the memory of the
civilized east, his home and his wife” (Kroetsch 1999, 168).

Searching for the bones, William Dawe is in search for immortality and his
historical self. He returns to the valley of dead dinosaurs and seeks “the
dead creatures, immortalizing the mortal man. The bones as crazy and
obscene as [his] own” (Kroetsch 1999, 32). William Dawe abandons the
present and returns to the past in order to achieve immortality. The fieldnotes
that he has kept are the symbol of his male courage, solitude and memory
by means of which he wants to achieve immortality and assert his historical
self. “Those cryptic notations made by men who held the words themselves
in contempt but who needed them nevertheless in order to carry home, or
back if not home, the only memories they would ever cherish; the recollection
of their male courage and their male solitude” (Kroetsch 1999, 2).
However, his search for the past and immortality ended in failure. While William Dawe proves the futility of turning to the past, Anna Dawe turns to the past for a short period of time to discover who she is and who her father was, and then turns back to the present moment. While referring to the past, she uses her father’s fieldnotes, the confession and the story of another woman, Anna Yellowbird, an Indian woman who accompanied William Dawe on his expedition. William Dawe’s zeal for bones is at odds with his daughter’s method of discovering the past. Anna, who saw little of her father until near his end, tries to recover him by means of the fieldnotes he kept of his expeditions. Her aim is explicit: “She imagined to [herself] a past, an ancestor, a legend, a vision, a fate” (Kroetsch 1999, 3). Anna Dawe’s personal completion is set against the impersonal and illusory “immortality” her father seeks. Later on, Anna Dawe builds up a story based on somebody’s memory: William Dawe’s fieldnotes and Anna Yellowbird’s recollection of the events. Thus, their recollection and memories are in function of discovering the past. Anna Dawe’s memory is based on the notion of absence: “I don’t know that I ever received a letter from my absent father. He sent us instead, left us, deposited for me to find, his fieldnotes; God help us we are people raised not on love letters or lyric poems or even cries of rebellion or ecstasy or pain or regret, but rather old hounds of fieldnotes” (Kroetsch 1999, 2). This confirms Kroetsch’s statement that the idea of absence leaves the idea of trace. The trace of Anna Dawe’s absent father are his fieldnotes. By using the memory of her father’s experience based on his fieldnotes, Anna Dawe makes an imaginative recreation of her father’s story and comes to understand and accept her father and her past.

Apart from the fieldnotes, another source of memory and story in the novel is Anna Yellowbird. Anna Yellowbird’s relationship to the past is opposite to William Dawe’s. She is not concerned with her historical self, but with her original source self where one can be uncreated and reborn into the many possibilities of existence. Unlike Dawe’s search for origins in the dead layers of history, the Annas’ quest for origins takes them to the brand new waters of the lake, untouched by history. Anna Yellowbird makes William Dawe lose the urge for the past and immortality by making love to him in her tipi of bones. She “made him lose the past. He began to hate her for that” (Kroetsch 1999, 168). Thus Anna Yellowbird proves that it is love and sex that transcend time, not the search for dry bones. Anna Yellowbird represents the other aspect, the one different from William Dawe’s, the transformative spiritual nature in the novel. As such she would influence
Anna Dawe’s life and make her change her view of life and free herself from the grip that her father still had on her.

Searching for William Dawe’s past, two Annas, search for their own past. Anna Dawe experiences transformation from the set of values her father represents to a set of values Anna Yellowbird advocates. Unlike William Dawe, Anna Dawe is aware of the present moment and the time we live in. “We have only time to survive in, time, without either lies or mystery or suspense; we live and then die in time” (Kroetsch 1999, 23). She doesn’t want to “exit from time”, but to live in time. At the end of the novel, realizing that one doesn’t live in the past but in the present moment, celebrating the present moment, two Annas, at the source of the Red Deer River throw away all they have of Dawe: fieldnotes, documents of the past and photographs. They walk away from the past and all it represents: men, history, immortality, the historical self, fame, order and discipline. And Anna Dawe concludes: “We did not once look back, not once, ever” (Kroetsch 1999, 230). Rather than fleeing the past, they have reconciled it into their present vision.

In Kroetsch’s novels, memory plays an important role in telling the story. In Badlands, memory used for self-transformation has a healing effect for Anna Dawe and Anna Yellowbird. On the other side, William Dawe uses memory to achieve fame and immortality; he wants to perpetuate the memory of his expedition by keeping his fieldnotes and by naming one of the dinosaurs Daweosaurus. In the novel, the story told by Anna Dawe is based on her father’s fieldnotes, the conversations before his death, and the memories of Anna Yellowbird. It is memory that Anna Dawe is relying on when trying to form her own picture of the expedition and reconstruct her father’s history. While remembering and conserving the past of her father, Anna Dawe creates a new story, a work of art. Thus reminiscence turns out to be important for telling a story and making literature.

Apart from memory, another important question for a writer is how to lift an environment to expression. Robert Kroetsch’s response to these questions is to acquire a local pride that enables us to create our own culture. The feeling of a local pride comes from an awareness of the authenticity of our own lives. It leads us to a concern with myths and dreams of origins. There has always been an enormous interest in ethnic roots because “on the prairies the small town and the farm are not merely places, they are remembered places” (Kroetsch 1989, 8-9). The places and landscape are turned into myths when remembered as stories talked about or written into existence.
Works Cited


