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Regionalism, Postmodernism, And Robert Kroetsch: An Introduction

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REGIONALISM, POSTMODERNISM, AND ROBERT KROETSCH AN INTRODUCTION

1

What is the discourse of region? How, in the complexity of our experience of the Great Plains, do we turn that experience, that place, that posture, into words?

The answers are many. And yet they cohere into something we call community. Discourse, in a way, is what enables us to tell each other that we recognize, that we care.

On the Great Plains, we garden. We garden against the odds. I recognized this one afternoon in Nebraska, standing in Frances W. Kaye's garden. We were watching a crow.

2

If we say the Great Plains are a garden, then we should add that they use our saying to consume us. Speech is dangerous as well as satisfying. The garden knows more than we can ever know. There is always the wind. The drift of light. The heat of a cloudless morning.

3

How do we write region? How do we turn region into text? Nowadays we find a connection between region and postmodern. Nowadays is a postmodern word. It tells us to live tentatively—tenderly—in the caress of a now that is wary of larger knowings. The forecasters have a way of missing by an inch, and an inch makes all the difference. Watch out for those fellows with the big designs. Weather has a way of being local.

4

There is a way of making history that makes history. We who call the Great Plains home avoid that cheap stratagem. Frances W. Kaye and Robert Thacker, in the eloquence of their essay, offer a discourse that tracks us over trackless ground. What could I possibly say to their readings but yes. Or wow. We move by guessing. We try to guess intelligently, but we carry more water than we think we'll need. More gasoline—to follow up on their reading of a red pickup in full gallop after a slow start. That Great Plains icon: the red pickup. And the road that leads toward while going away. That's how we get there. That's region and postmodern.

Moving around. That's home for us. Frances W. Kaye is on her way from Lincoln to Calgary. I was in Ottawa to attend a conference on the works of Margaret Laurence and while there I talked with Robert Thacker about the work of Willa Cather.

Discourse.

5

Carol L. Beran read my manuscripts and now reminds me of what I said I was going to say. The texts are never finished. That's one of the things we accepted when we started to think postmodern. That recognition excites us—and scares us. This introduction would read differently if I had finished it yesterday instead of today. The modernist dream of a complete and final and “authorized” text was a sham. And shambles. Let it unravel around the edges. That's what region is. A text that unravels around the edges.

6

As my students say: Like, I mean. I mean, like. You know what I mean?

The mediator is the message, Bruce A. Butterfield suggests, in an essay that acts out its own intention. One of the astonishing things—tropes?—on the Great Plains is the way in which the shores and sandbars of rivers become words. Or is it birds? I was with Frances W. Kaye and we were witness to the migration of cranes.

We became crane dancers.

7

Inter; intra. The Great Plains as middle. How do you speak a middle? Whatever happened to the good-old beginning and good-old end?

Mary K. Kirtz, in her essay, ventures into a middle and ventures a middle; she tells us how we manage to talk a middle ground, the beginning and end at loose ends.

One day one of my daughters on the phone asked me, “What are you doing today, dad, hanging out?”

Great Plains as a discourse site. I was in Manitoba at the time. But my daughter was calling from North Carolina.

Hanging out. The surface of region is more complex than any notion of containment. When I was a child we didn't hang out, we fooled around. What are you doing? Just fooling around. Is that a different matter?

It seems to me the subject is altered by the speaking that creates it. If you see what I mean. I go back to Bruce Butterfield's essay for another look. Region and postmodern, there on a sandbar in the middle of a river (in the middle of the garden?) in the middle of the Great Plains, dancing.

8

But we were talking about discourse. The site of the speaking, okay—the essays in this collection suggest more than a few possibilities. But what is the intention of the speaking? Now that's a tough one.

I'll leave that one in your hands, dear reader.

ROBERT KROETSCH

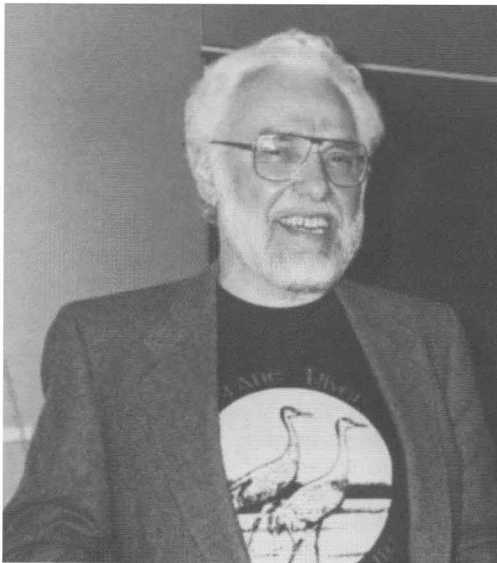


FIG. 1. Robert Kroetsch wearing a crane t-shirt during his visit to Nebraska in 1990. Photograph by Linda J. Ratcliffe.

Robert Kroetsch was born in Alberta, Canada, in 1927. After receiving his B.A. in Edmonton, Alberta, he worked for six years in the Canadian North, then went to the U.S. to attend graduate school. He taught at the State University of New York at Binghamton for 17 years, then joined the faculty of the University of Manitoba.

a)

B.A., University of Alberta, 1948
M.A., Middlebury College, Vermont, 1956
Ph.D., University of Iowa, 1961

b)

eight novels including:
The Studhorse Man
Badlands
The Puppeteer

c)

Governor General's Award for Fiction for 1969 (The Studhorse Man); The Robert Kroetsch Symposium, University of Strasbourg, France, May 1994.