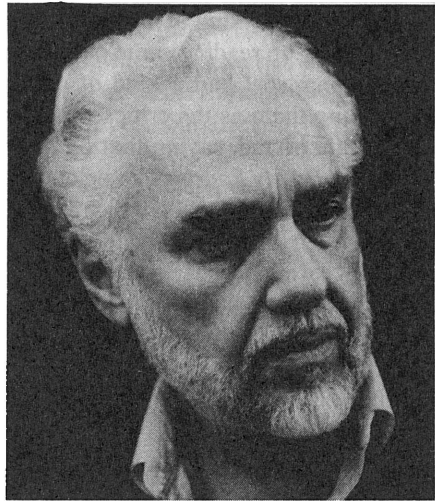


ROBERT KROETSCH: OF CANADA, NOVELS, WRITING AND OTHER FRAGMENTS

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— **Would you say there is any connection between the rhetoric of the prairie taverns and the tall-tale tradition in the South of the United States, and is that the case in works like *The Words of my Roaring*?**

— I think so, and I was very much influenced by the reading of American literature and the kind of tall tale that would lead to say... *Huckleberry Finn*, where you have both the sense of an oral tradition and of the tall tale. When I was a kid I lived on the frontier in a certain sense; the tall tale was the literary form, especially for men; for women it was more likely to be gossip, which also influenced me...

— **Charles Olson mentions Americans as being the “last first people”, and maybe the last of those people were the Canadians as having that sense of the frontier and an emerging nation, maybe getting away from the American influence, etc.**

— I liked that phrase when I first read it in Olson, and I think in Western Canada especially we had a sense of that because there was a pretty radical break with the past, we entertained the fiction of “beginning again”. You could have the sense of being the “last first people” and also the sense of putting yourself on the map. It’s an exhilarating moment, when you realize you have a blank in front of you and you can inscribe it as you will.

— **Would you put that in a particular historical context? In a particular moment in Canadian history when that break takes place?**

— Yes, sure, a couple of things happened on the prairies... One was that the Depression was so violent on the prairies in the 1930’s; the drought came along with the economic Depression... there was the sense of being reduced to zero for

the people who stayed, an erasure almost, and it is interesting that some of the early writers of the time were still playing with not just realism, but with more violent versions of realism, a naturalistic world.

— **You are talking about the thirties, so you were in your teens...**

— I grew up reading some of that fiction and saying no, it wasn't like that, they were wrong, so I had a kind of double thing of correcting my predecessors, or misreading them as the critics would say nowadays —Sinclair Ross, F. P. Grove; on the other hand, saying that by their misreading they left everything blank. In *The Words of My Roaring* I came up with the notion of a highly comic vision of that world, using the tall tale, which I read as having a pretty strong sense of what I would now call the "carnavalesque". In *The Words of my Roaring* there are many literally "carnavalesque" scenes, like the rodeo for instance. The rodeo was a kind of folk art that was upsetting traditional notions of art and so on. History was a lie so you had to start over.

— **What do you think it was that made people realize that the history which had been constructed up to then was a lie?**

— We were still part of the westward thrust of the New World experience, which was "Go West", and we had gone into the last "West", because it was the last area that was blank. My father, in his own time, took up free land, he was a homesteader. Then, along with the Depression, there was the sense that the narrative of western movement had not fulfilled itself because part of the assumption of that narrative of "going West" was that the road got better as you went. It suddenly got worse... it couldn't get any worse!

— **Do you think that the humour which you included in those novels was a means of survival?**

— Yes, very much so. Now that I look back on it, and even as a kid I remember that sense of... it was a time of critical suffering, there was laughter, and it was the laughter of survival. It was also surviving by dismissing history in a sense.

— **Would you also call it subversive, in that sense?**

— I would indeed. That's what I play on in *The Words of my Roaring...*, the hero, who runs on this new ticket is really an undertaker, there is a doctor who represents the Establishment, but he is no longer effective, it is the undertaker who now saves us, if you will.

— **Spaniards will understand that pretty well!... Something common to many of the commentaries which have been made on your fiction, and you have used the same term, is that reaction "against"...**

— Yes, you are right, and I do think of writing as subversive in a strange way, because I think one of the other failures that was taking place in that experience of mine, was the failure of inherited forms, the novel was not letting us explore our experience, so I had to become subversive. I still wanted to write novels, that's the old problem, but...

— **"Making it new"?**

— That's right, and to "make it new", I used comedy and I became a... —whatever you mean by it— a postmodernist, but in my sense of postmodern, no

longer looking for unity in the story or in the philosophy of the world. The great stories are lies, you must tell a story “against” the story.

— **I share with you that perception, not post-socratic (in which everything is linear, having a cause and an effect), going back all the way to Heraclitus, only of moments grasped, and the impossibility of putting them together in a clear way. A perception close to the comment you made in your lecture about “fragments”, which brought to my mind Barthelme’s comment, in his *Snow White*, “Fragments are all I believe in”.**

— I once met and talked to Barthelme, and it was quite a discovery. We ended up talking about the loneliness of the writer, because to go into fragments is to “go into fragments”, of many kinds, including the kinds of unity that console, and you have to take the rap when it comes.

— **There is also a mention by Barbour on *Gone Indian*, in which he says you call the conventions of realistic fiction hilariously into question...**

— In *Gone Indian* I was using a..., it’s about a graduate student who goes out West, with an expectation of what the West is like, but, beyond that I am using the whole notion of the “trickster” figure from native Indian mythology, the force that is totally pre-socratic, if you will, this force which is unpredictable, very sexual. You win one time you lose the next, this is not a perfect god, this is not a coherent god, it’s a god that’s as good and bad as the rest of us..., stupid sometimes, arrogant sometimes, just horny sometimes, all of the things that this trickster is. In a sense I’m using parody, parodying that whole notion we had in the westward movement of going to some kind of ideal state, even that kind of wonderful misreading of the native people as ideal human beings. We had the European or Eastern Canadian models of the natives, on the one hand as beneath civilization, and on the other as above civilization.

— **The “noble savage”...**

— That’s right, and both those notions turning into nonsense when you came to real natives trying to make a real living.

— **You mentioned before the problems you had in finding a way of developing your fiction along different channels, and yet one of the elements which has cropped up in our conversation has been using established genres or approaches to fiction and going against them or parodying them, as you’ve just mentioned, as a vehicle for your writing.**

— Well, I think the conventions of story-telling are incredibly powerful and have a great hold on us from the time we’re six months old or whenever we start hearing stories; so I think you’d be foolish to pretend there isn’t an operative set of conventions. The novel is an elaborate set of story-telling conventions and, unfortunately, in the nineteenth century it became a rather rigid set, so, in the twentieth century we’ve been trying to get loose again from a rigidity which set in too early. You have to go back to a mixing of genres, and the original novel—I hate the word original there— was very much a mix, using letters, or even stories set within stories; it had a great sense of its being a mixed genre, and then

somewhere in the nineteenth century there developed a notion of pure genre in the novel, which was a mistake.

— **I'm thinking of Sterne at the moment, obviously...**

— Yes, when I was a graduate student he was one of the great discoveries of my life, he had done it all before we got here.

— **There seems to be an area in which a lot of the postmodern writers come together in their approach to the novel, as do South-American writers with their "magic realism", an admiration for Sterne as the great father of the modern novel. Would you agree in that approach?**

— Very much so. Sterne, in his not trying to make it all cohere, with comic strip notion of middle, without worrying about beginnings or endings, and his sense of shifting proportion... if he likes writing about a particular character he just goes on and on, not worrying about a larger tradition of proportion. And now, in South-American writers, Canadians recognize a great lesson, because they also have a sense of distorted history instead of a continuum. They take away the boundary between imagination and so-called reality. Because that's really the condition of the mind, where we mix them all up.

— **Is that picked up in *What the Crow Said*?**

— Yes, in *What the Crow Said* I was playing —almost started to do a parody of Márquez especially.

— **Do you think before hand about the elements which you are going to include in the novel, drafting a general outline and then letting yourself go?**

— As I work in a novel I begin to recognize what it is I'm talking, dialoguing with. I don't know at first, I don't begin from that recognition. When I was writing *What the Crow Said*, because we do have the tall-tale tradition that says a crow can be taught to speak, I said, what if I found a crow that could *really* talk! And then I realized, as I wrote, that I was beginning, in my mind, to deal with people like Márquez, the Mexican writers... In my last published novel *Alibi* I was trying to look at some of the conventions of the detective story and mystery story. It was interesting to try and work with those rules, they are so strong... the reader has some very specific expectations, you discover, when you try to play with that set of conventions, and I like that idea of "play".

— **Is that what attracted you to that genre? Detective stories are normally considered second-rate...**

— Sure. I am sort of tempted by that point when the sub-literary starts to translate into literary... That's what I was doing there, saying what if you take the detective story and treat it as a literary possibility.

— **Your mention of how you start to write without any preconceived pattern and then suddenly you come to the realization that there is a line which you are going to follow, takes me back again to Olson and his comment that you can only go by the way the poem "underhand" takes you... Did you know the work of Olson and the "Black Mountain" poets, since you were their contemporary and also a poet?**

— I came, as Olson has it, "to all things slowly", but I was teaching in Upstate

New York for a while, when Olson was at Buffalo, he was a presence...; Creeley would come to our campus and read, I never did meet Olson, and I recognized in that Black Mountain group..., actually before that in Williams, William Carlos Williams was really the person who gave me the first insights, I think, but then I looked at the elaboration of those ideas by people like Creeley and Olson, that wrestling with the question of history, of process, with and against the tradition (Olson's big book on Moby Dick, *Call Me Ishmael*); I liked very much in Olson that ongoing poem, *The Maximus Poems*, the sense of the impossibility of finishing a poem, the ultimate resistance to... to form, in a certain way.

— **Your title *Field Notes* reminds me of Olson's concept of "open field", and also "notes" as something temporary that jot down your... biography?**

— That's right, what is it that you're jotting down? that's true. In fact if I go on with the poem, which I hope I will, I'll continue to ask what is it that I'm jotting down? Even the notion of an autobiography, a biography, is a pretty shaky notion, living your whole life and trying to put in down on paper.

— **Creeley defines autobiography with the three words "auto", "bio", and "graph", as "life tracking itself". Could that be the way you are developing your poetry, just putting markers along the way?**

— I like the tension between "auto" and "bio" that he sets up, because even when you write about yourself you become other from yourself and any notion of a coherent self. It's almost as if by writing about yourself you're losing yourself instead of capturing yourself, it becomes bio...

— **Do you think you can get outside yourself and look objectively at yourself? It seems an impossibility...**

— I would say you do get outside of yourself, and again Creeley's notion of "the figure of outward" is, I think, very important. As I read twentieth century writing there's a kind of inward turning which I think is based on an illusion of the complete, isolate self, and I just don't think there's any such thing. We are self, loosely, in the world, a kind of infinite pattern of connections and breakages, and so on. Creeley's notion of autobiography —and he puts the emphasis on the "graphing", on the writing— has freed us from the notion of unity... Even in our reading or misreading of Freud we still had a notion that there was some kind of complete self one could find. In the very process of writing it down it changes on you, or you change it by writing it down.

— **Do you use your poetry also as a means of survival? Your mention of the "isolated self", which is so strong in the contemporary perception of life, seems to point to your acceptance of isolation and loneliness as being the essential condition of man.**

— Yes, and I notice in my writing that the word "sadness" often comes up. Sadness says the margin is pretty small and the notion of sadness would go along with that notion of loneliness. Again, one of the prices we have to pay for this sense of "fragments" is being fragment.

— **I am thinking of the importance of a writer like Samuel Beckett who underlines that essential loneliness of man, particularly as a significant element of**

the twentieth century, and how that perception has been taken up by so many postmodern writers.

— Enormous importance... Strangely enough it was Beckett's novels rather than his plays that were influential for me... *Malone Dies*, *Watt*, announcements about a perception of the world... Again, one of the things about Beckett is the utter sense of the beauty of language that he recognizes, and for me, I found that consolation of language in poetry rather than in prose because in fiction I'm still very much the story teller.

— **Do you rewrite much?**

— Yes, I do rewrite. I guess as you work on a story you hear the other reverberations that are going on, and you want to let them all play in the story. It's not that I think I can write towards a conclusion... this notion of a finished text is a pretty shaky notion; but you want to write a text that is willing to hear itself.

— **And what about in your poetry, do you rewrite your poems?**

— I do rewrite, yes, but there is also the feeling that you can re-write, do another whole "take"... A novel is a five-year commitment, or something. You can write a poem in six months and then say I'll just write another poem instead of rewriting again.

— **Doesn't rewriting a poem make it into another poem, a different one?**

— We don't necessarily make a poem better when we rewrite... It would be wonderful if that were true... You are changing a text and you are saying, well, here's a text that I'm willing to share with others. The other I'm going to keep in my drawer. I don't really subscribe to the notion that we are writing toward an ideal text.

— **So what is it that you want to achieve with your poetry? Is it an act of communication, or, as Creeley says "writing it down so I can think about it myself", and "I always write what I don't know" and thus discover in the process of telling you?**

— I want to go beyond what I know, that's where the fun is, but I also want to enter into Bahktin's dialogue with other people and I don't know that the word "communication" is the right word because it implies that I'm telling that person something. It's more that we are in a dialogue together and that's why I take —maybe more than Creeley, although that might be unfair to him nowadays...- I'm sort of obsessed with the notion of what the reader does. It seems to me the reader has a very active role in the experience of the poet.

— **But the reader is absolutely outside your area of influence... I mean, once you write the ship sails off reaching ports unknown.**

— Sure, but if I want to take my stand as a poet I've got to pay the price... I no longer have that... I think of that as being manipulative of a reader and I don't want to manipulate the reader.

— **So what is it that attracts you about the reader and the possibilities that the reader can develop with your text?**

— Well, first of all I think readers are remarkably perceptive and responsive... I don't think readers are simply receivers in any sense, they are very active and I'm

willing to... Well, it's almost like... again in notions of play, you are going to let the reader play as much as you play.

— **You mentioned two things about your actual writing: One moment you spoke about Williams, who stressed the idea of using the writer's own speech in the writing which we could connect with the Canadian consciousness apart from your own, and also that idea of play which seems to be so prevalent in the fiction being written today, connecting with people like Wittgenstein and how he stresses precisely that quality of play in language. How do those two elements, play and own speech, fit in with your writing?**

— *Paterson* announces a local pride and I think that in *Paterson* you've got a sense of hearing yourself using your own speech, talk, voice—I used to use the word "voice" a lot—and Williams insisted on that in a way that opened up the field for me. It's not only your own voice because one has voices... part of me is trained in literature, another part is trained at sitting at a beer table..., so you want to let all those voices have their say, polyphonic, I guess, and that's the lesson of Williams, how polyphonic he is, he hears many voices... He breaks down genre walls. I remember when I first read his poems with all that prose in there, very exciting stuff; it was Williams who articulated my sense of how you use your own voice. Even though you use the same vocabulary as another, you hear those words in a slightly different way. And I think that goes hand in hand with the notion of play that has irked some twentieth-century readers, the notion that writers are at play which makes me think of... was it Ben Jonson who said he wrote works instead of plays, I think we write plays instead of works... And I was influenced by people like William Gass, John Barth, in my generation people who took very seriously that idea of play, and then we have notions of "game" and "play". I don't know whether we want to make distinctions between the two but...

— **Games would follow some rules, whereas play would have none, making it more attractive and fun, even though more ambiguous?**

— Yes, that's right. And I think that it's when you take away at least the visibility of rules that you lose some readers, because a lot of readers play by the rules, they go to the game side of writing; whereas for a lot of us, we are saying the rules are so unknowable that we might as well proceed as if we are playing.

— **You mentioned Gass, Barthelme, and Barth... Is there any influence or personal connection or was it that that type of writer was influencing Canadian literature at the time?**

— I was living in the States for a long time and so I did meet these people—they weren't friends of mine, but I did meet them on different occasions—and we were... In fact now it seems to me a young writer would want to look to some quite different models... They were very powerful forces in the sixties and early seventies... there was quite a range because, as we were saying earlier, Charles Olson was big news for us, a great liberating presence.

— **In 1963 a Poetry Conference was held at Vancouver, where Olson, Duncan, Creeley, Ginsberg got together with local poets, people like Bowering, or bp Nichols...**

— You see, by 1960 I was already in the Eastern United States so I wasn't at this gathering, but Bowering and bp Nichols are very close friends of mine, and when I first read them —it must have been in the early sixties— I recognized fellow sufferers or fellow travellers —whatever they were— and to this day we're very much in tune... and George's sense of parody and his use of other texts underneath his own texts... Bowering is one of the most challenging. And bp... that ongoing poem of his, *The Martyrology*, is quite a staggering accomplishment. Then there's Michael Ondaatje, very important also, always a very persuasive writer.

— **One gets the feeling that Canadians or at least the “establishment” is trying to get away from the influence of the United States, though I think it's obvious that culturally you don't grow up in a void...**

— Of course not... It is curious to me sometimes how little has been said about it... I mean, there they are side by side and the border doesn't go away. Borders attach you as well as separating, and there are good poets like Bowering and Fred Wah who never cease to examine the implications of that presence.

— **It's just that I was thinking, when you mentioned bp Nichols and his continuing work, your own *Field Notes*, that a link must exist between them and works like *The Maximus Poems*, *Paterson*, *Zukofsky's A*, *Pound's The Cantos*.**

— For a long time we were reading *The Cantos*, and then it became *Paterson*..., seems like a lot of people are reading *A* right now... nobody says *should* we, but *how* do we read, *how* do we hear these people. I also think bp Nichol's really pulled it off, he just reads and reads and reads. Amazing.

— **Maybe it's the new form... the old forms have been substituted by a new tradition, of the long poem. It seems to me a peculiarly American form...**

— It does seem to be and I think it has a couple of advantages for us. One is that it is such a mixed genre, the way Pound saw it, an utter ragbag in a certain way, and that is useful to us, purity of genre was getting in our way. The second thing is that the long poem, as Williams and Pound practiced it, allowed for a kind of plurality of voices; one didn't have to get that monolithic, monologic voice established. I think that's true of Olson, although a little later in his poem he gets a little anxious about the whole thing..., and then it also freed us from that notion of the end-orientation of a work of art. You could just follow the process instead of saying “but where are you going...?” The long poem really lends itself to that. The novel still hankers to come to a neat conclusion.

— **Do you have a neat conclusion in mind when you write your fiction?**

— No, I never have in mind one of those Beethoven endings where you really bang the cymbals or whatever. But I'm very much interested in the notion of an ending.

— **When *do* your novels stop?**

— It's funny, because I thought I had my novel finished last December, and then I put it away for three months and then I took a look at it again and realized it wasn't finished, it had to go on. Now, why did I think it had to go on, that's what you are asking me and what I'm asking myself... I thought that in a certain way I hadn't met the terms of the contract I'd made with the reader and that doesn't

mean that you come to a resolution, it means you let certain strands play themselves out in a way that will satisfy the reader.

— **Is it a rational analysis? Or is it subconscious?**

— That's a tough question...

— **Did you carry on working on this novel? Did you go back to it?**

— I thought hard about it; I'm actually not going to start writing it again until..., I'll just get on with various things in my life.

— **So what you are really thinking is that you need to *continue* the novel, not to find an alternative ending but to continue.**

— To continue, literally.. Yes, that's right. Literally, to continue. There have to be more chapters from where I stopped... yes, I hadn't thought about it in that way, it's quite true, yes, that's great, that's great... In a certain way I haven't released myself from the material as a writer. I haven't let the story tell itself. There's a way of giving the characters and the story a certain kind of room of their own, a space of their own.

— **Do you think, as some writers do, that the characters take over once you've created them taking *you* along instead of you moving them?**

— I used to disagree with that but I think it is true in a way that you... you know, "letting be"... who was it, Heidegger? You do have to let the characters *be* in a certain way... you do let them be in a way that says.. that it's beyond you, and maybe if we are willing to say that readers are beyond us, we also have to say that story and character are at times beyond us. The writers role *is* diminished, in a certain sense it's diminished... I'm not into death-of-the-author arguments as far as some people will go! The romantic notion of the writer as creator is a questionable notion... Once you get it going *they* are creating the writer too and that's an interesting point, and I think maybe that's one of the things I was wrestling with in trying to finish my novel... that's what I hadn't let happen enough... That's it!

— **You mentioned the idea of process, and that reminded me of a comment by Jackson Pollock that one was "in" the painting and the painting finished when the energy exhausted itself, when there was nothing else left to do.**

— O.K., in a certain way I would agree that I had tried to finish the novel when there was something left to do...

— **With both Abstract Expressionist painters and projectivist poets, it was also a gut feeling, a feeling that the energy had finished, you knew instinctively —not rationally— that the activity underhand was finished. With fiction it's probably more difficult to do this since it is not a continuous process, going back to it repeatedly instead of writing in just one burst. How do you write?**

— I work on a novel for a long time..., and even within that long period of time I might work very intensively for a while and then go away from it, and in that sense I guess your energy theory would hold, that you might work with the kind of energy that exhausts itself and then come back to the story two months later with something that has given you a new store of energy, some other recognition in the material sets you off again. I tend to have an idea with me over a long period of

time, that doesn't mean I work at it every week or every month... Actually, when I try to rush it...

— **Why do you write poetry sometimes instead of fiction?**

— When I write fiction I'm still a story-teller whereas with poetry I get into a closer relationship with the physicality of language. The language doesn't have to kowtow to a story. It becomes material in a material world. Maybe that's why my poetry sounds more like prose than my prose does.

— **Do you also let the words take you wherever, following whatever they suggest?**

— Yes, I think that's part of the pleasure of writing poetry; you are freer to go wherever...

— **It's not that you feel you can express in poetry feelings which are closer or more intimate?**

— No, not really... I don't know, I don't honestly feel that. I couldn't honestly think of a feeling that I couldn't use in either poetry or prose. When I write fiction I'm in a narrative state of some sort, that's a very basic way of thinking for all of us.

— **Is it that you can be more objective in your fiction than in poetry?**

— That's true. People have noticed that about my work... One of the critic's criticisms of my fiction is that my objectivity becomes too pure in a sense; I think you have to muddle it a bit...

— **Become more subjective?**

— Yes, whatever subjective means. But I can be really more subjective in my poetry, the *persona* can be some version of me speaking; whereas when I write fiction I tend to set up characters who are... I don't think of my fiction as being terribly autobiographical.

— **Do you identify with any of your characters?**

— I can't honestly say that in a book I would have a mouthpiece, I am just as much the rascal as I am the good guy, I tend to be very close to... I never can really say this is... when I'm in that character I'm in that character. The multiple voices are that, multiple voices.

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Robert Kroetsch, Canadian author of fiction, poetry and essays, teaches at the University of Manitoba, where he is Distinguished Professor of English. His latest publications include his collected essays, *The Lovely Treachery of Words* (Oxford University Press of Canada), and his collected long poems, *Field Notes*.