

## “A Field Guide to Field Notes”

Dennis Cooley. *The Home Place: Essays on Robert Kroetsch's Poetry*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2016. xi + 362 pp.

For those of us who came to the study of Canadian literature in the 1980s, our introduction to Robert Kroetsch was likely through his fiction, particularly *The Studhorse Man* and *Badlands*. Kroetsch's narratives offered a daunting and exhilarating immersion in a Canadian brand of postmodernism, a textual experience later supplemented by the exuberant essays in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*. For me, it was much later that I came seriously to engage Kroetsch's long poems, as gathered in *Completed Field Notes*. While postmodern narrative poses problems for the undergraduate reader, these are manageable in comparison with those felt in the postmodern long poem. Happily, with the writing of *The Home Place*, Dennis Cooley has developed something of a field guide to *Field Notes*. In this engaging study, Cooley brings to bear on these long poems both his scholarly insight and his poet's eye so as to illuminate the main thrusts within Kroetsch's work and the poetic methods by which he approaches those concerns.

As the subtitle to *The Home Place* suggests, Cooley's study is a collection of essays, not an exhaustive or comprehensive study of Kroetsch's whole body of long poems. And as the title indicates, the essays are intended to have a thematic focus. The first chapter, “Getting There: The Long Road Home,” functions as an introductory biocritical essay. Partly narrative in nature, this chapter tells the story of Kroetsch's homecoming to the prairies in the mid-1970s after his time at the State University of New York in Binghamton and in the wake of his marriage's dissolution. For Cooley, this homecoming is the catalyst for Kroetsch's writing between 1975 and 1979 of *Stone Hammer Poem*, *The Ledger*, *Seed Catalogue*, and *The Sad Phoenician*. It is also the story that leads Cooley to his major themes for the study: the significance of home for Kroetsch, whom Cooley characterizes as a postmodern realist (35). “He writes his way home in his poetry,” Cooley argues. “If Kroetsch's claims that writing brings us into existence ever were true, if ever they could be true, it would have to be said of himself that in his highly personal, even autobiographical poems, he returned—rambunctious, indignant, elated, madly inventive. He was also conflicted, worn, yearning” (31). At the end of this first chapter, Cooley summarizes his reading of Kroetsch's long poems and points into subsequent chapters:

The poems that *The Home Place* addresses—polyphonic, linguistically alive, formally venturesome, idiomatic, and highly oral—revolve around conspicuously ‘un-poetic’ sources from Kroetsch’s prairie. They are folksy, endearing, entertaining, profane, charged—the language of his home in a way. In acts of culture making, he blows open possibilities for prairie writing with language that bursts into Kroetsch’s criticism too. (47)

Here, in a tumble of adjectives, is Cooley’s characterization of Kroetsch’s long poems and his claim for their importance.

The middle chapters follow up this biocritical opening with explorations of specific poems, analyses that draw upon not only Cooley’s close reading of the poems but also insights from Kroetsch’s critical writings and extensive materials from the University of Calgary archives—all of it nicely interspersed with the ideas of key thinkers such as Mikhail Bakhtin. Chapter 2, “Or So It Has Been Alleged: *The Ledger*,” examines Kroetsch’s poem on his family’s pioneering heritage first in Ontario and then in Alberta. Cooley examines here Kroetsch’s extensive and inventive use of found texts. Chapters 3 and 4 comprise a pair of essays on *Seed Catalogue*, a poem that is clearly central to Cooley’s larger project because of the poem’s focus on house and horse, mother and father, the garden. The first in this pair of chapters, “Hearing Voices: *Seed Catalogue*,” offers a critical experiment defending the poem against the judgement that it’s “[n]ot normally the stuff of poetry” (88). After the chapter’s introduction, Cooley launches into thirty titled sections that explore how the poem is a polyphonic, formally inventive reply to the authorized history of the prairies, to the canonical, to the Western metanarrative. The second chapter in this pair, “What It Was: *Seed Catalogue*,” follows this expansive reading of the poem by digging deeply into the poem’s presentation and evasion of a singularly important event in Kroetsch’s life, the sudden death of his mother when he was a teenager. Zeroing in on the lines in which the boy falls off a standing horse and the mother whispers to him to bring her the radish seeds, Cooley here explores pressing questions about the boy’s mother and father, about the horse and the house, the garden and the graveyard, pulling into view larger questions of masculinity and femininity in Kroetsch’s work. As Cooley concludes, “*Seed Catalogue* is an enigmatic text, a version of playing dead. Inside of it is a shrouded pain—above all the story of a lost mother and an incomplete grieving” (197).

The two remaining chapters seem to take something of a turn away from the homecoming theme announced in the first chapter and pursued in Chapters 2-4. In Chapter 5, “It’s a Lover’s Question: Staging Romance in

*The Sad Phoenician*,” Cooley plumbs Kroetsch’s foray into the conventions of love poetry, his following of them only to upset them. Exploring the four females who hold their own with the speaker, the structural devices Kroetsch uses, and Absurdist elements in the poem, Cooley reads *The Sad Phoenician* as Kroetsch’s answer to the question, “How do you write a postmodern love poem in a new land?” (211). The result, according to Cooley, is “one wild joyride” that is “conducted on the whirlwind of words” to, in the end, “touch the loneliness and the terror” (246). After this chapter, Cooley concludes his study with “Noted & Quoted: Kroetsch in Conversation and at the Podium,” an essay on Kroetsch’s interviews and lectures that in some ways complements the opening biocritical essay and extends the poem readings by characterizing the rhetoric of Kroetsch’s critical sayings and writings.

As this description of the final two chapters suggests, *The Home Place* does have some minor weaknesses. While the final two chapters are engaging and consonant with the larger study’s focus on the formal and rhetorical inventiveness of Kroetsch’s long poems, the story of homecoming largely disappears; to put it positively, it is as though the final chapters escape the frame established by the earlier chapters. Cooley seeks to bring the final chapters into that frame with statements like these: “Reading the ‘secondary’ material for its artfulness will show how entertaining and effective it is, demonstrate how much it collapses distinctions between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ texts, and perhaps say something about why those statements have carried so much weight” (256). Later in the final chapter, Cooley is then able to describe Kroetsch’s criticism as “wonderful, stunning poetry” (276) and as having “the tightness and force of poetry” (277). Nevertheless, the connection feels a bit forced, certainly disconnected from the earlier chapters’ emphasis on “the home place.”

It would be oxymoronic also to suggest that the book is at the same time too long and not long enough. On the one hand, at more than 350 pages, the study is a long look at some of Kroetsch’s long poems, and in some places it circles back on itself, returning to the same passages. To a large degree, the technique is effective, but some tightening could have happened to make room for more attention to poems beyond the ones covered by Cooley. For example, in Chapter 4, Cooley does a masterful job of pulling into his discussion of *Seed Catalogue* small portions of *Sounding the Name* and *The Poet’s Mother*. Even more attention to these poems, given the significance of “the home place” for Cooley, seems warranted, as does the reappearance of the mother figure near the end of *After Paradise*. In a few other places, I was left—again oxymoronic—wanting more from

Cooley. When Cooley states that “Kroetsch wanted to write the long poem, and he meant it to be postmodern. He also wanted to write ‘prairie’” (35), I want to know more about the why. When in his discussion of *The Ledger*, Cooley defends Kroetsch’s decision to vary from the historical text, I want to know more about that defense and its implications (61). When Cooley explains that in *Seed Catalogue* “[t]he unpretentious stories, the rude events of rural Alberta butt in, and in their own way answer the Old World exemplars” (102), I want to hear more from him about the character of that answer. And when Cooley characterizes Kroetsch’s postmodernism as “press[ing] close to postcolonialism” (247), I want to know more about the character and thrust of that postcolonialism, especially in light of Indigenous issues that have become pressingly important in understanding Canada as “home place.”

The strengths of *The Home Place* far outweigh these minor concerns. First of all, Cooley brings to this study not only scholarly chops but also a poetic sensibility cultivated particularly through his writing of long poems himself. He has clearly sat with these poems for a long time; he has gotten inside them, and they have gotten inside him. He has sat with the poems, but he has also sat, quite literally, with Kroetsch himself, through a long-standing relationship, and that intimacy shows. It also shows through the extensive and careful work that Cooley has done in Kroetsch’s archival materials: these enrich and buttress Cooley’s readings of the poems in valuable ways—showing Kroetsch’s mind at work and tracing the evolution of his verse. In this way, Cooley is able to make links across Kroetsch’s works and to address gaps in critical readings, such as the inattention to tenderness within his poems as opposed to the ribald, ram-bunctious, and larger than life (169-72). As a poet, Cooley is particularly sensitive to form and prosody in Kroetsch’s work and supplies insightful close readings at the level of the line. Cooley argues that Kroetsch’s long poems are not lyrical, not image- and figure-oriented, but attuned to voice, document, fragment, irony, anaphora, even typography and space. “Kroetsch’s long poem,” explains Cooley, “seeks ways to disrupt what stands in the way of the New-World writing he wants to do. The choices are ideological as well as aesthetic” (103). He effectively characterizes the Kroetsch long poem as “a supple form that stretches the resources of poetry by wringing possibilities out of a larger patchwork of material” (55), as an amalgam of “mixed entries brought by contiguity and by an interrogating voice into persistent and intensifying ironies” (58), as an act of assembly that “leads the narrator to familial relations and to New-World concerns” (59).

Moreover, Cooley's study is engagingly and creatively written. His prose is probing and speculative. It seeks to both compliment and complement Kroetsch's work with a pithy energy, sentence fragments, the segmentation of analysis, and a double-voicing, particularly at the ends of chapters. Here is one example from the end of the third chapter: "Not bad. Not bad for starters. There among the catalogues and kings, the squash and the cabbage, the horses and the bullshitters. Around talk of Pete Knight, of family and friends, poets and pretenders. The gardens and the pubs. All that. All that unfinished writing" (150). And here is a second, longer example from early in the book:

Secret, hushed, private, sparse—the pattern will come close to mocking Kroetsch's professed love for chaos and jeopardize his reputation as clamorous postmodernist who throws himself into disorder. The habitations seem a vast undoing of the world, a radical shedding of it somehow. Inside those shut-off rooms he seems buffered from the loud complications of living.

And yet, though he flees the house, he also searches endlessly for it. . . He will spend much of his life seduced to thrift, tempted to drift. He wants to sit and visit at the kitchen table, and he can hardly wait to get on the road again. (22)

This passage effectively conveys not only Cooley's style but also his essential theme, and in doing so also moderates or fine-tunes the conventional understanding of Kroetsch as a postmodernist.

This moderating is another effective thread laced through Cooley's study. Repeatedly, he comes back to and elaborates his identification of Kroetsch as a postmodern regionalist, "a fierce regionalist . . . immersed in formal innovation, increasingly in a postmodern way" (33). That regionalism, Cooley suggests, focuses Kroetsch's postmodern understanding of language and form so that it becomes part of his engagement with reality. This thinking leads Cooley to align Kroetsch's postmodern practices with speech act theory and with Bakhtinian understandings of discourse: "For [Kroetsch], overwhelmingly, language is something whose significance gets realized in a diachronic, social, and interactive world—among speakers and listeners, as it swings among them, and as it reverberates within a social give-and-take, amplifying the dreams of those who join the conversation" (110). In this way, Cooley gets at the serious play, the vitality of Kroetsch's long poems.

Toward the end of his study, Cooley exclaims, perhaps with some poetic-tall-tale hyperbole, that "Kroetsch has spread his electrifying words across the nation, and much of the rest of the world" (300), and that this

discourse “sparks creative responses” (302). In a way, *The Home Place* is Cooley’s creative, critical response to Kroetsch’s long poems—rich in its close reading of these texts, its attention to biographical and critical resources, the frameworks through which it approaches readings, and its poetic-provocative style. Part homage and part elegy, Cooley’s study offers an insightful, engaging guide to Robert Kroetsch’s complex homecoming.

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