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Article abstract

No Canadian writer has been as insistent in the belief that life and story -- that living the story and storying the life -- are two sides of the same experience as has Robert Kroetsch. In his para-autobiography, A Likely Story: The Writing Life, Kroetsch spends much time talking around this very idea, dealing extensively with issues of performative self-/historical construction. In fact, it is extremely fruitful to examine a particular strand in Canadian fiction, what Alistair Fowler calls poioumenon (that is, novels in which the main plot is itself about the writing of a novel), using Kroetsch's theory as a lens. Such analysis can be extended both backwards and forwards to provide illuminating readings of texts as varied as Laurence's The Diviners, Callaghan's A Fine and Private Place, Davies's Deptford Trilogy, and Vassanji's The Book of Secrets. Each of these works, along with numerous others, neatly fits Kroetsch's theory that by telling, we create.

POIOUMENON AND PERFORMATIVE STORYTELLING IN CANADIAN FICTION

Sheldon Fischer

> And the word became flesh . . .
> — The Bible
>
> "Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man.
> — Martin Heidegger
>
> . . . but already I digress.
> — Robert Kroetsch

"How do you write in a new country?" Robert Kroetsch's question epitomizes many of the issues that have preoccupied Canadian literary critics during the last several decades (*Lovely* 2). But the question might just as well have been stated, "How do you *live* in a new country?" For no Canadian writer has repeated as insistently as Kroetsch that life and story — living the story and "storying" the life — are two sides of the same experience:

> The visit is the great prairie cultural event. People go visiting, or they go to other events in order to visit. This accounts for the predominance of the beer parlour and the church in prairie fiction. . . . We see fictional characters going to stampedes and country dances . . . — those places where *we talk ourselves into existence.* (*Lovely* 6; emphasis added)

Kroetsch answers (or, more accurately, talks around) his permanently posed question in his recent para-autobiography *A Likely Story: The Writing Life* (1995), which hits us with the pointed irony of a main title that both asserts and questions (in its colloquial usage) the truth value of what is being told — not to mention a

subtitle which evinces the same double-sided reality adumbrated in the quotation just above: the book is about a lifetime spent in writing as well as about the life that, so to speak, writes itself. Discussions of Kroetsch in the past have focused on the negative side of our existential dilemma: on the need to grapple with our nothingness before asserting our being, on Kroetsch's elusiveness motif, on the urge to make ourselves "invisible" as the tactic for survival, and on "the deconstructive need to *un*name before naming anew" (Reimer 121). This view would have Canadians become permanent Houdinis, distinguishing ourselves by forever tying ourselves in knots and disappearing, emerging at the last possible minute only to do it all over again.

In this essay I will focus instead on what comes *after* the unnaming, on when and how the "hidden" comes into view, on how we "settle" into a new tradition. Using a number of different strategies throughout his latest collection of essays and poems, Kroetsch asserts over and over that what we do "tells" who we are and, reciprocally, that what we tell (of ourselves) determines who we are. His questions resonate at many levels: personal/psychological, communal/ethnic, regional/geographic, and national/political. In what follows I begin by elaborating Kroetsch's paradoxical view and uncovering its philosophical roots in Martin Heidegger's writing. The next sections then document the claim that Kroetsch's postulate sheds light on an important strand in the Canadian literary tradition by examining several standards from the Canadian canon; I start with one of Kroetsch's contemporaries, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, and from there work back to the early modern period, and forward to a contemporary exemplar.

I

Kroetsch's thesis that life and story-of-the-life form an indissoluble unity is most graphically demonstrated in an incident from the opening chapter of *A Likely Story*. Kroetsch, a recent university graduate, has gone north to work on riverboats on the dangerous Mackenzie River. On one trip downriver they approach the most treacherous set of rapids just at dusk, when the interplay of light and shadow makes the currents, the rocks, the safe channels, more difficult to read than at any other time of day. The old Métis pilot, a veteran of twenty years on the river, softly asks the

young Kroetsch, who happens to be sitting in the pilothouse, several questions, as if testing him — "Is that the big rock? . . . What's that shadow?" But Kroetsch suddenly realizes that the pilot is not teasing; he is slowly going blind and desperately needs Kroetsch's assistance. *He* will have to be the pilot's eyes if they are to survive this Charybdal passage:

> I told him what I thought I was seeing; . . . I was reading the landscape as if my life depended on it. And possibly it did. We entered into a small conspiracy, Vital [the Métis pilot] and I. . . . Vital and I, in the dark wheelhouse, *became the language of ourselves*. To put it most outrageously: we became our version of lovers. . .
>
> The river, I learned, was a shifting narrative of itself. Vital and I were swept into that narrative, and yet, once there, . . . we had to write the narrative too, . . . and we had to write it together. (39; emphasis added)

The story captures several aspects of the being/becoming/telling triad which is the subject of this essay. The river — with its sandbars that shift from season to season, its banks that erode over centuries — and the larger tundra landscape that evolves with the millennia, constitutes one "master narrative" itself, the being and becoming of geography that Kroetsch wishes to note and celebrate. But the narrative that constitutes the lives of the men that float upon and dredge and sometimes sink in the river intersects that other narrative, creating a larger, more variegated but still unified whole. And, to isolate the human perspective, the unity of word and action is also solidified: that almost Delphic phrase — we "became the language of ourselves" — suggests that their actions on both the small, situational scale — the peering and pointing, the sharp monosyllables and quick nods — and those on the larger scale as well are a language that must be "spoken" if it is be "lived." The novice Kroetsch's words were metamorphosed into actions as Vital's "hands climbed in beautiful precision up and down the handles of the wheel," and, reciprocally, those actions became words as, years later, Kroetsch recounts the incident, which helped shape his life, in the story in his book. The lived life becomes the life-long "song of myself."

Kroetsch's view of the interchange between life and art is not always quite so tidy. He wishes to question both the history (the

official story of events) and, more particularly, the meaning (the personal recollection of events) from which we construct our living selves. Kroetsch recalls the admonitory tale his parents told about the cow that drowned in quicksand, which was used as a threat to keep the children away from the sandy riverbanks near his childhood home: "Part of me is persuaded that I actually saw the cow in the quicksand. . . . There is another part of me that suggests I never actually saw the cow." Instead the putative memory is constructed out of other people's recollections — or pure fancies (*Likely* 79). Thus, the self-creating urge is itself put up for scrutiny. Another of Kroetsch's strategies is to intentionally disorient his readers by the bald assertion of paradoxes: "What I have to say from here on is impossible to say; therefore I must say it" (14), and "the North was a silence that desired . . . to be spoken" (16). Such riddles force the reader to confront the heterodoxy of everyday life, the "unimaginable" which is nonetheless experienced and unified in self-consciousness and which forms the core of so much that is told, whether around primitive campfires or in the latest postmodern novels. He delights as well in exploiting the puns and playful ambiguities that language provides him in order to show both the linguistic and perhaps the logical impossibility of separating being/living from becoming/(re)telling.[1] One can only write what is (as yet) unwritten; yet, in another sense, one can only write what is already "there." As Morag will also discover in Laurence's *The Diviners*, even when prompted by the strongest love, one can't "write a story that [isn't] there to be written" (207). Like Kroetsch, the schoolboy, pasting together his scrapbook during the Second World War, one must first become an author — in other words, have a thematic plan for the book — before one can become a reader. "Or perhaps we must become readers" — deciphering the plan in our own minds for all those blank pages? Or at least reading other magazines to collect the clippings — "before we can become authors" (*Likely* 129). It is difficult to say which comes first.

But the most effective of Kroetsch's strategies is to underline in myriad ways the inherent duality/duplicity of language — the priest who intones well-water into holiness with his blessing but cannot prevent it from freezing in the font (58), the farm hands who do not "hear" him when he tells them he has peed in their drink-

ing water because a mere boy's words cannot penetrate their "paradigm" of how farm boys should behave (46), the words that "force" him to say what he did not intend to say when he writes his first poem (54), the lad who had to "make up sins so the priest wouldn't think I was lying" (60) — a language that we nevertheless cannot avoid using if we want to be human. To revert to the image that runs as a motif throughout the book, one can fill up the centre of the blank pages (of one's life?) only by writing right to the margins:

> To write is to step or stumble over the edge of the known into that category of desire that defines itself, always, just a hair's breadth short of fulfillment. To write is, in some metaphoric sense, to go North. To go North is, in some metaphoric sense, to write. One goes North at that very point on the page where the word is in the process of extending itself onto the blankness of the page. (14)

Kroetsch reasserts the essential Canadian-geographic experience (going North, working in the bush, etc.) as metaphor for the psychological experience of writing/living one's life. One *is* by virtue of what one does. One *does* by virtue of what one speaks or writes.

More than any other critic, then, Kroetsch has toyed in his critical writings with the philosophical paradox involving the notions of being and becoming: that it is the essence of human *being* to change or evolve, that is, to be in a process of becoming; but if we are forever *becoming* (something other than what we now are), then what *are* we, how or what will we finally *be*? *Being* implies stasis, *becoming*, movement; *being* gives priority to essence, *becoming* to experience. How do we reconcile these apparent contradictions? Kroetsch's insight is based on his appropriation, or translation, of Martin Heidegger's analysis of Being into literary terms or, if I may hazard a figure, his ability to give the philosophical skeleton some firm literary flesh. In transposing ontology into literary criticism, Kroetsch renders the abstract more concrete by making narrativity — the telling/"performing" of stories — the bridge across the gulf between being and becoming.

In his essay "Language," Martin Heidegger treats language as the very medium — the metaphorical atmosphere — in which we live and breathe:

> Man speaks. We speak when we are awake and we speak in our dreams. We are always speaking, even when we do not

> utter a single word aloud, but merely listen or read, . . . we are continually speaking in one way or another. (*Poetry* 189)

He means not simply that human beings continually "use" language, or that we are par excellence the species to whom using language "comes naturally"; speech is not just one faculty among others. Rather, it is speech that "enables man to be the living being he is — man." Or, as he phrases it enigmatically, it is not man who speaks language, but rather man who is "bespoken by language" (192). Heidegger thus makes of language an ontological, unanalyzable foundation for all other human existence. We cannot "ground language in something else that is not language itself, nor do we wish to explain other things by means of language," for these groundings, these explanations, would all themselves be language (191). Language, he says, embracing the tautology, is only — language.

Language realizes itself wherever people gather, and this speaking, he writes in language that is itself poetical, is what creates "an abode for the being of mortals." Language is what makes it possible for people to "dwell," to feel at home in this world. It is, in some ways, analogous to the Kantian *a priori* categories such as time and space, that which makes subjective experience of the world conceivable. For Heidegger, language makes possible one of the primordial modes or manifestations of Being (*Dasein*), namely Being-with (*Mitdasein*). Co-existence with one's fellow human beings "depends upon how far one's own Dasein [self-consciousness] has understood itself, . . . this means it depends only upon how far one's essential Being-with-Others has made itself transparent" (*Being* 162), or, as he later explains, how far one has made oneself empathetically sociable with one's fellows, something that can happen only via the medium of language. By the same token, the great importance Heidegger attaches to possibility or potentiality (*Seinkönnen*) as a mode of Being that is "real" before it is actualized relies upon its revealing itself through communion with others (182-87).

Heidegger rejects the received linguist's view that language is an "expression" of something else, for example, feelings. He substitutes his notion of "calling": language calls that which it names into the (phenomenological) presence of the speaker; it images or presents ("presences") the things it names and thus brings man

into conjunction with them. In this way language always and everywhere "conditions" the being of mortal man by continuously "translating" him to (or into) the world. According to this view it is talk (*die Rede*), rather than language (*die Sprache*) in the formal linguistic sense, that carries the situational meanings that a linguist or logician only secondarily abstracts and analyzes. The locus of important "truth [and meaning] is shifted from the proposition to the existential basis of such propositions" (Gelven 103) as they are expressed in everyday, colloquial talk. It becomes clearer, now, how Kroetsch's fascination with those prairie gathering-places, and his employment of word-play and paradox — "the North was a silence waiting to be spoken" — are thoroughly Heideggerian in inspiration, an influence he has elsewhere acknowledged. "Language speaks as the peal of stillness" (Heidegger, *Poetry* 207) or "Mortals speak insofar as they listen" (209) encapsulate Kroetsch's similar position that we are human insofar as we hear and respond to the "calling" that language does, or is.

Heidegger's speculations give philosophical substance to ancient and universal beliefs — or perhaps one should say, "intuition," — that the spoken word — language — is one crucial emanation, one particular form, in which ultimate Being shows itself, and to the corresponding belief in the magical power of words to effect certain results: God said — and it was *done*. Magnus Eisengrim (in Robertson Davies's *Fifth Business*) tells Boy Staunton to put the stone in his mouth and drive off the end of the pier — and he *does* it. Johnny Backstrom (in Kroetsch's *The Words of My Roaring*) promises rain in his election speeches — and it *rains*. Al Delaney, in Morley Callaghan's *A Fine and Private Place*, conceives of the novelist Eugene Shore as a temple and then, with his monograph on Shore, will *turn* him into just that, a literary icon, an institution. Kroetsch recalls how farmers used to come into the small Chinese diner in his prairie hometown and invite the proprietor to flip a coin, and to pay him, accordingly, double or nothing for the meal: "What I remember is the terror and elation that I, a listening boy, felt at the speaking of that wager. . . . Double or nothing somehow became the wager by which I might live a prairie life" (*Likely* 65-66). Terror and elation — the almost unnamable efficacy of words to shape and control events in the external world. Language has this power, in Vance Crummett's words, by virtue of the

fact that it is the boundary between, or the medium by which, *Being* becomes *beings* (1995).

The wager is, of course, one of the central examples of what J. L. Austin, in *his* analysis of the magical power of words, calls "performative" verbs (1962). These verbs do not state a proposition, nor do they describe a state of affairs, or attribute qualities to things. Rather, they perform the act they name *in* the very act of making the utterance. Thus, for example, when A says to B, "I promise to meet you tomorrow at the secret drop point," A is not describing a mental state or merely voicing a plan or "thinking out loud," but is performing a particular act, the act of promising, by or through the utterance of those precise words. Making a wager ("I bet you twenty bucks that . . .") and making marriage vows ("I do take . . .") are other acts that can be in fact performed in no other way than through the speaking of these (or the equivalent) conventionally prescribed words.

The culmination of much of Kroetsch's writing, both criticism and fiction, is to attribute an analogous "performative" power at a higher, narrative level to the stories people tell to achieve certain ends, most specifically the construction of both self and community. How does one write/live in a new country? By telling stories by which we construct the history of self and place, by which we *perform* an act of self-generation or manifest our being in the world. Kroetsch's literary-critical achievement is to give us a powerful hermeneutic with which to interpret a large number of Canadian narratives.

II

The clearest examples of such performative self-/historical construction are in novels that Alistair Fowler call *poioumenon*: novels in which the main plot is itself about the writing of a novel (1989).[2] In Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, Morag Gunn, the protagonist, is a writer who, like Laurence, grew up in á small prairie town, who, like Laurence, goes to England early in her career, returns to the West Coast, eventually settles in rural Ontario, and so on — the parallels are obvious. In writing her novels, Morag is re-membering her life; that is, she is both recalling it and also reconstructing it as she would like to remember it. It is not the clichéd fragility of memory but rather its plasticity, its availa-

bility as the raw material from which to create the whole fabric of one's life, that is highlighted: *"I keep the snapshots,"* says Morag, *"not for what they show, but for what is* hidden *in them"* (14; italics in original, emphasis added) — one is tempted to add, for what I can *read into* them. The process of writing/telling will, in Kroetsch's terms, "unhide the hidden" (*Lovely* 58) and will enable Morag to use words which will incarnate her lived experience. And, as with Kroetsch's story of the cow stuck in quicksand, so Morag at the same time both affirms and questions the "factual" truth-value of her memories: *"All this is crazy, of course, and quite untrue. Or maybe true and maybe not. I am remembering myself composing this interpretation"* (16; emphasis in original). As if it were a literal memorybank, the memories seem to accrue interest, to acquire nuances and become more elaborate, the longer they remain there: *"I recall looking at the pictures, . . . over and over again, each time imagining I remembered a little more"* (17; emphasis in original). Much later in adulthood she acknowledges that "the myths are my reality" (145) — a fruitful use of ambiguity in the word "myth" in both its classical and modern senses — but admits as well that those myths, and hence reality, will change with every retelling (362).

Indeed, it is not only the past but present reality even as it is unfolding that is subject to the formative pressure of words. Morag too lives right on that moving line between being and becoming, shaping her experiences through the performative power of the words/thoughts in which she conceptualizes events as they occur: "The river was the colour of liquid bronze this morning, the sun catching it. Could that be right? No. Who had ever seen liquid bronze? Not Morag" (33). Wine-dark sea, or liquid-bronze river, it is what we say it is. The on-going narrativity of life is conveyed aptly when Morag attends a party at the home of her literary agent. She is only observing, recording, as the passage begins, but then there is a perceptible change from still frame to moving film as the dividing line between external and internal, between passively recording and actively experiencing, dissolves:

> He is surrounded by a breathless group, all women, who possibly think it would be nifty to be able to say you'd slept with a well-known poet. . . . The woods are perceptibly not full of an equal number of breathless men who have designs upon women writers.

> But hist! What have we here?
> "Hi. My name's Harold. . . ." (342)

And whether Harold is of Homeric stature, or merely a stud, or delicately aesthetic, will depend upon the words through which she "sees" him, just as her own self-image depends crucially on the words through which she "interprets" herself (317).

Furthermore, based on likenesses already suggested as obvious, we may understand Morag to be a refiguring of Laurence's life. In addition to minor parallels between Morag and Margaret such as their touchiness about having their writing recognized as respectable "work," or the fact that the actual well on Laurence's Lakefield property was, like Morag's, found by divining (*Dance* 197), probably the most significant similarity is in how precisely Morag's publishing history matches Laurence's. To show how the two "lives" coincide is not to fall into a simplistic identification of the character on the page with the author who is writing, as if the former were a mere duplication of the latter. Rather, this is to suggest that the created character is a reconfiguring of elements performed in order to create a persona that more accurately represents certain aspects of the writer's life than a "reading" of the superficial outward events of her life would. Laurence legitimizes such an interpretation when she refers to *The Diviners* as a "spiritual autobiography" (*Dance* 6). In an earlier interview she had said, "Nothing I have written is directly autobiographical at all. The thing that *is* autobiographical is not the events, not characters, but some of the *underlying responses toward life* " (Cameron 106; second emphasis added). The novel is not a simple rehearsing of the author's life but a reinterpretation of certain pivotal events in a way that focuses on and gives meaning to the spiritual — the essential — inner life.

The Diviners is a particularly interesting example of *poioumenon* to examine through the lens provided by Kroetsch because there is yet a third layer in its structure. Morag, as noted, is a reconfigured or "mythologized" image of Margaret Laurence. But in addition, Morag's first novel, *Spear of Innocence*, and its protagonist, Lilac Stonehouse, are also images of Morag, and thus of Margaret: *she* sets out from a small backwoods town for life in a large city, she is like them very inward-looking and naive, and so on (244). To cement the identities of Lilac and Morag, Laurence has

Morag move into a rooming house whose landlady appears to be a figure straight out of her (Morag's) novel (332). This tripling of characters lends itself, I admit, to a different overarching symbolism for the novel, that of the hall of mirrors in which images reflect images to infinity, rather than a picture of cohesive self-generation through words, one of infinite fragmentation. If Laurence's novel (or Morag's writing career) ended there, the tension between these two competing models would remain. However, the fact that Morag goes on to write further novels, the second of which recalls other Laurencian themes (for example, the proud Hagar of *The Stone Angel*), and the fact that the cryptic ending of Morag's fifth novel coincides precisely with that of *The Diviners*, suggest a final pulling together which is not exactly univocal but which has the intentional (or, one might say, "virtual") narrative unity of Kroetsch's remembered scrapbook.

The dominant imagery of the novel points this way as well. Morag the novelist is, like Royland, divining, not for literal water but for "living" water, the wellspring of action and motivation in human character (115). Her attempts to divine (see into, intuit) the causes of behaviour are analogous to Christie's "reading" of the garbage:

> "Did I ever tell you," Christie says, "how to tell garbage, Morag, like telling fortunes? . . . You know how some have the gift of the second sight? . . . Well, it's the gift of garbage-telling which I have myself." (85)

By reading the detritus of these metaphorical discarded tea leaves, he reconstructs the life of the town: the various households' relative wealth, even their emotional crises as well as their hidden sins, as when he finds the aborted fetus clumsily wrapped in newspaper. Now, consider divining/fortune-telling as performatives: they are not actions that can be done through description or prescription. In fact, Royland warns A-Okay that he will never learn to divine unless "he can just get over wanting to explain it" (476). One prophesies *in* the act of speaking the words; the reading of the omens — the chicken bones, paint cans and cancelled receipts — is not about the reading but *is* the reading itself, the reading of what is, in a different sense, already "written." Morag "tells" her future (and her past) through Lilac and her other characters; Laurence, in "telling" Morag, may, like Dunstan Ramsay

writing Magnus Eisengrim's autobiography, be rewriting her life in a way that is truer to experience than mere facts would be. In the same vein, Jules and later Pique reconstruct the lives of their respective fathers, and more distant ancestors, through the songs they write. And ultimately we, the readers, have our experience clarified through reading Lilac/Morag/Margaret. Laurence's novel, then, illustrates the two-way traffic between generation of the self and narrativity that Kroetsch theorizes: "One recognizes in texts the doubles that allow the writing self into the recognitions that become words" (*Likely* 69).

III

The analysis of the poioumenonic novel as a powerful lens through which to view an important strand in Canadian literature can be extended both backwards and forwards to cover earlier "standards" in the Canadian tradition as well as some very recent voices. Morley Callaghan's *A Fine and Private Place* embodies, like Laurence's novel, several layers which make it at once both a finely nuanced and a densely packed narrative.

There is something atypically assertive about a Canadian novelist writing another novel which is recognizably, even insistently, a commentary on his own previous novels to that date, as if he had grown impatient with critics' inability to properly understand his work. Eugene Shore, one of the two main characters, is a Canadian novelist, obviously representative of Callaghan himself, who is almost unknown at home but greatly admired abroad. By sheer happenstance, Al Delaney, a graduate student in English, becomes interested in Shore's unconventional novels and begins writing the first book-length study undertaken on Shore's *oeuvre*. Much of the actual novel consists of debates that Delaney has with his equally literate girlfriend, with Shore himself, and with a handful of reviewers and academics, on the meaning of Shore's — that is, Callaghan's — novels. Shore, at the same time, is at work on a feature-length newspaper article which will deal with other events that occur in the novel and with his and Delaney's roles in them. Interestingly, when Shore first meets Delaney and Lisa Tolen, his girlfriend, Shore appears for a moment to know them from somewhere else. When it becomes clear that this cannot be the case, he smiles wisely to himself and comments that

they need not bother reading his books because they are already "in them" (26). Like an omniscient and omnipotent god, Shore implies that he constructs and describes in his novels characters who then appear, like Al and Lisa, before him in real life. And — to complete the roster of writers — Lisa, meanwhile, rewrites parts of Delaney's manuscript about Shore.

Thus Callaghan has written a novel about a novelist, unmistakably his own alter ego, who expounds the meaning of his earlier novels by way of another character (Delaney) who is also writing about Shore/Callaghan. Furthermore, Shore is writing (for the newspaper) about himself and Delaney, and the Delaney/Tolen team (in their book) are writing about Shore. It is hard to miss the fact, if one can catch one's breath, that there is a very peculiar reconstructive circle here: Callaghan writing Shore writing Delaney who is writing Shore/Callaghan.

And what, after all, are Shore's novels about? When we sketch the answer — or at least, Delaney's answer — to this question we see a reconstructive project on an even grander scale. Shore's contemporaries have always found his work puzzling, or even subversive, because he writes about prostitutes and bank robbers and other of society's "losers" but invariably takes their side. He somehow evokes sympathy for them, gives them an aura they are generally thought not to deserve, turns criminals, in fact, into saints. The references are primarily to the hookers Ronnie and Midge and the naïve but self-sacrificing Father Dowling of *Such Is My Beloved*, and to Kip Caley of *More Joy in Heaven*. Delaney's first major insight into Shore's "method" is to conceptualize Shore as a refuge, a temple,

> where he offered them [society's outcasts] warmth and respect for being just what they were. . . . [I]n his haven, in some mysterious way, they unexpectedly became bigger, more human, higher up than they were, knowing they could make it in his world. (164-65)

By the power of Shore's imagination these misfits are able to show what was only latent in them; they are seen, as it were, under the roseate light of stained-glass windows so that their essential humanity becomes visible rather through the shadowed existence caused by impoverishment and society's rejection. This metaphor, of Shore as his own cathedral, becomes the fundamental organiz-

ing principle for Delaney's book: "Yeah. Shore's temple — where his outlaws are all in his light, . . . all free to become aware of the adventurous possibilities of their mysterious personalities" (200-01). Delaney explains that in meeting some of Shore's underworld associates he too has "felt the warmth of [those] strange outlaws" and that he is a "little bigger" because of it. Indeed, early in the novel Delaney is made to describe himself in the very way that much later will be used for Shore: "That's where I want to be — take it all into me, make something out of it, something bigger for myself" (19).

As with Kroetsch, it is the imagination that is the key to structuring life. "If there's any magic it's in the way the imagination holds a life together" (97), Shore tells Delaney. Delaney, we learn, keeps a journal which he frequently reviews, "trying to discover whether his experiences had any pattern that would give a meaning to his life" (9), without success. This "disciplined analysis" which nonetheless fails to yield significance stands in contrast to Shore's imagined and impassioned understanding, which does succeed in creating lives with almost transcendental meaning. Yet this imaginative construction of "something from nothing" can yield ambivalent results too. During the inquiry into the policeman's shooting of an unarmed teenager, Delaney suddenly fears that Shore could take even this much-put-upon cop — who had in fact vengefully humiliated Shore some weeks earlier — and "make even him into one of [his] big human beings" (165), whereas in reality the policeman was just a thug in uniform. The difference between those that are valid material for Shore to work on and those that aren't is that Shore's *misfit* heroes could be reshaped into *unqualified* heroes because "they were like lovers, knowing only the law of their own love" (65), while Jason Dunsford, though he also follows his own private "law," does it to control or hurt others. Shore's heroes, Delaney speculates, break the law to establish their own freedom, love, or independence, whereas Dunsford does it to deny others their freedom, as when he forces his weak-willed and alcoholic wife into a sanitarium.

There is another limit to what can be done with the words of imaginative creation. At one point in the story Lisa responds to yet another of Al's wild expostulations with a very tentative, "well, I don't know what to make of it" (203). Much depends on the awful

ambiguity of that "make" — does it mean to understand, or to construct, something? Delaney's overly dramatic view is that the artist can make whatever he or she wants out of the tiniest detail — a whole social history from the details of woman's shoes, for instance (199). But Lisa replies that she does not want to be "made" over into anything, she wants to be accepted just as she is. Her objection to being reshaped by Shore's forceful personality is a factor in her inadvertently helping the rogue police officer kill Shore. Other people, wrote Immanuel Kant, are ends, not means. The obligation not to abuse other people in the process of imaginatively reconstructing our own lives sets one important boundary to the performance which is the storying of our lives.

IV

The brooding intensity of Callaghan's protagonists, and Delaney's attempt to unearth the deeper background to Shore's unconventional perspective on life recall another venue where contemporary men and women tell and, in the retelling, (re)create their life history: the psychoanalyst's couch. The recitation of events to the analyst embodies the same paradox seen earlier: the story (that is, consciousness or understanding of one's past experiences) does not "exist" until it is told (if it did, there would be little need for the consultant), and yet on the other hand, it could not be told if it did not in another sense already exist (for then the analysand would be merely "making it up"). Like the soldiers who fought to get hold of newspaper accounts of the very battles they were in the midst of, we crave "someone to make an informing narrative of the confusion" — someone to put the scraps and fragments of our lives into order (*Likely* 134).

Robertson Davies's Deptford Trilogy is preoccupied with the magical constructive power of words. In *Fifth Business*, the entire novel consists of Dunstan Ramsay's writing not a novel but in this case an extended epistle in which he attempts to set straight, "for the record," what actually transpired during the previous sixty years of his life. But it is the second novel in the linked sequence, *The Manticore* (1972), that brings the constitutive nature of speech to the foreground. From the outset we see a protagonist uncannily aware of two levels at which events occur: the speaking, and the self-consciousness of that speaking. "'When did you decide

you should come to Zürich, Mr. Staunton?' / 'When I heard myself shouting in the theatre'" (3). In the theatre, the drama occurs only when the words written on the page are spoken by the actors. Similarly for David Staunton, the drama of his life will unfold its deepest meaning only when he speaks out to Dr. von Haller (holler?). Furthermore, we learn that Staunton has the unusual habit of putting himself through an interrogation in the manner of an attorney's cross-examination any time he must make an important decision (63). Only by such ritualized self-questioning and response can he feel confident that his subsequent action will be the right one.

The incident that has sent him to Zürich and analysis, however, is one where he questioned not himself but The Brazen Head of Magnus Eisengrim's magic show. Although Staunton claims to disdain that kind of "grandiose, impudent, silly stuff" as titillating gossip and charlatanism, he nevertheless blurts out to The Head the single most important question plaguing his mind, the question of who killed his father. Contradictions abound: the large head, which floats somehow in the middle of the stage, looks like brass yet is almost transparent; it is a huge empty balloon yet speaks to people's inmost desires.[3] And we know from the previous novel that of course it can do so only because it does have access (through the pick-pockets who work in cahoots with Eisengrim) to the "real-life" events of people's lives. This is not a vicious circle, however, but yet another way of showing the union of life on the one hand with story and art on the other. People come to such a show, as Eisengrim and Liesl recognize, willingly offering themselves on the magician's "couch" so that he can draw out their story and tell it back to them. In the same way, though Staunton dismisses at first what the psychiatrist can offer and is embarrassed to be in this supplicant's role, he is, like the unenlightened audience, driven to the couch to tell his story as the only way of finding peace of mind: "Yet was it not urgent need for confession that brought me to Zürich?" (172).

Both the analyst's couch (the term is used metaphorically here: as von Haller points out, Jungians forego the Freudian couch in favour of a normal easy chair) and the confessional (David's long conversations with Father Knopwood) play important roles in Staunton's life. The crucial point again is that the client being

analyzed does not recount his or her life as if reading off to the consultant an already finished script lying somewhere in his or her head. Rather, the discoveries are made in or through the conversation, which may often recount incidents which would on the surface appear to be about unimportant events, but which gradually peels back the layers of the psyche. Similarly, the "sins" that require absolution often come to light only there in the booth, in the telling, under the gentle prodding of a sympathetic confessor. Nor, on the other hand, can healing occur if the analyst simply tells the client "what is wrong." As von Haller, the analyst explains, first

> "we look at your history, and meet some people there whom you may know or perhaps you don't but who are portions of yourself. We look at what you remember, and at some things you thought you had forgotten. . . . And when that is satisfactorily explained, we [go] to that part of you which is beyond the unique, to the common heritage of mankind." (71)

The analyst thus goes to that place, in Heidegger's terms, where language simply *is*, before it "speaks" itself through any particular person. Always, von Haller reminds Staunton, the answer which he is seeking already "lies in you, not in me," though it will come to light only in the speaking of it (261). The conversations serve not for the purpose of exchanging information but as the process by which Staunton will "*become* himself" (69; emphasis added) — perfomativity in an extended, psychological sense.

There are of course inauthentic ways of "telling," too, as when Denyse Staunton fabricates a family genealogy and coat-of-arms, or when Morag, in *The Diviners*, tries to turn the stories she writes for her small-town newspaper into "big-city stories." On the other hand, one must not confuse mere facticity with truth. The description of Eisengrim's autobiography is a very Kroetschian moment in *The Manticore;* sheer facts of the police-court type could never explain what he — Paul Dempster, a prematurely born weakling from a tiny Ontario village — had become, the world's "greatest illusionist since Moses" (287). Only Ramsay's highly imaginative fantasy (son of secret agents in the service of Russia, childhood in the Arctic where he had learned shamanistic arts, etc., etc.) could represent the *essence* of what he was, a thoroughly phantasmagoric figure and, precisely for that reason, one

who could satisfy people's deep-seated hunger for the marvel of self-generativity.

V

Life is a web, a tangle of secrets that may require great effort in untangling, perhaps with a counselor's help as in David Staunton's case, or a sympathetic critic as in Eugene Shore's case, or simply by a deeply searching self-analysis, as with Morag Gunn. But such unraveling and reweaving together of the threads of one's life is not a merely academic — or literary — exercise; it is, according to Kroetsch, one of the prime motivations for "ordinary" people as much as it is for writers. One might expect this recreative urge to be even more urgent the more recently a writer his entered an alien culture or the longer a people has been dominated by a foreign power. Although the work of Canadian M. G. Vassanji might at first glance be included in the category of immigrant literature, his latest novel is set in his homelands (Tanzania and Kenya), and though the setting does involve migrations and displacement, the ultimate meaning of the novel derives its force from personal meanings and rediscoveries.

Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* shows several aspects of the self-revealing process as the strands of story from one life are woven, untangled, and rewoven through the threads of other person's lives. Alfred Corbin, a colonial administrator in British East Africa, both encrypts and reveals personal and imperial history via the keeping of a journal; much later, the schoolteacher Pius Fernandes must unravel and reconfigure the events recorded in that journal in order to create a "truer" picture of those times by writing his own book. Fernandes's book, in other words, is a book about the history of a book, for Corbin's journal — a magic book of secrets to the African natives that captures their souls and stores them as in a bottle (1) — continues to exert a mysterious force over those who come in contact with it long after its writer has lost it and given it up for good. Like Aladdin's lamp, the journal has a great power inside it, and the "djinn" is just the words themselves that, in a sort of reversal, mesmerize and capture Pipa, who has himself "captured" them (he received the journal as stolen goods). But there is another twist, for the journal wields its force over him specifically because of what he hopes someday to find in

it, but which it ultimately fails to reveal: namely, whether Corbin rather than Pipa is the father of the child that Pipa's wife gives birth to.

Vassanji, like the novelists examined earlier, has created a multi-layered narrative rich in intertextual implications and delicate ironies, suggesting that the "telling" — which is the creating — is also hard work which results from long investigation, much like Morag Gunn's "divining" of the sources of human motivation and action. Pipa must wait many years, until his son is finally old enough to teach him how to read rudimentary English, before he is able even to read the journal. Only then does he realize that — of course — such a personal indiscretion on the part of an Assistant District Commissioner as impregnating his native house servant would in any case never have been recorded in an official journal. Indeed, several decades later when Corbin publishes his memoirs, he passes over his years in Pipa's village almost as if he had never been there. It thus falls to Pius, the retired schoolteacher, who had taught Pipa's son as well as many other boys of the colonial capital, to trace out the intertwined lives of Corbin, Pipa and his wife, Pipa's son and *his* wife.

With Fernandes's history, we as readers feel that now at last we have the full story. Yet, in his very last interview with Rita, Pipa's daughter-in-law and also a former student, she names as her price for having revealed so many family secrets a solemn promise not to publish the story: "This is the price I'm going to ask. . . . Let it lie, this past. The diary and the stories that surround it are now mine, to bury" (298). Pius accedes to the request, acknowledging that "what I can never disclose, give to the world, is mine only in trust" (301) — except that we *do* have the whole story, in Pius's extended account of his investigations, which is nothing else but Vassanji's novel itself. As with the heroines of Richardson's epistolary novels who are continually writing that "no one must ever know that . . . " and then proceed to tell us what no one must ever know, so Pius cannot take back what he has told us in getting to this point in the novel. The djinn of the story cannot be contained.

But not all the ironies work against Pius. When he begins his historical investigations into the tangled web of the colonizer and the colonized people, he insists that many paths lead to and from

any one incident, and a path is chosen perhaps by chance, or by personal predisposition; the story "becomes the teller's, it's mine" (92), he says. This turns out to be true, not in the way he had meant it, but in a way that is nonetheless beneficial to him. As he continues to unearth and study the events surrounding the lives of his students and fellow teachers, he comes to several sudden realizations about his own life — his latent love for Gregory who he only now discovers was a homosexual — and about his relationships with his former students. His interviewee seems to doubt the validity of his historian's impulse:

> If you cannot know these things about yourself, . . . what arrogance, Fernandes, to presume to peep into other people's lives — to lay them out bare and join them like so many dots to form a picture . . . we can never know the innermost secrets of any heart. (297)

But by spending his years unlocking the secrets of others' lives he has at last discovered some of the innermost secrets of his own heart. We are reminded of Kroetsch's injunction that only by pushing into uncharted territory does it finally become charted.

I have argued that novels in the generic category of the *poioumenon*, such as Laurence's *The Diviners*, Davies's *The Manticore*, and Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*, neatly fit Robert Kroetsch's theory that by telling, we create. That concept can be usefully extended to illuminate our understanding of a number of canonical standards — Ross's *As For Me and My House*, Hodgins's *The Invention of the World*, several of Ondaatje's works, Findley's *The Wars*, and Kroetsch's own *The Studhorse Man* — as well as less-known fictions such as Diane Schoemperlen's short stories, George Bowering's *Burning Water*, John Steffler's *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* or Clarke Blaise's *I Had a Father*, all of which feature protagonists who are themselves writing novels, plays, diaries, or in one way or another creating otherwise unfinished characters. These writers thereby extend themselves out, as it were, into the world through their characters, but at the same time they use those other character as a means of distilling or clarifying their own experience. Such "creative" writing, such narrativizing, may be figured, as in the novels alluded to, by literal historical research, by psychologi-

cal archeology, even by the names and graffiti scratched indelibly into old brick walls as in Guy Vanderhaeghe's *Homesick*, or by "this fictive enterprise," as Kroetsch calls it, of writing novels itself. It may be that we only know who we are when we write, and *in* that very process establish our being. The answer to the questions posed at the outset lies over there, on the edge of the page; we will know it when the pen reaches that far margin.

NOTES

[1] I am not distinguishing oral from written storytelling in this paper, although the differences are, in other contexts, significant. The terms "writing," "telling," "storying," are all treated as equivalent.

[2] A terminological note: this category can be sub-divided into several subcategories. What Steven Kellman calls "self-generating" novels are based on the conceit that it is the main character who is writing the very novel the reader is reading. Second, the *poioumenon* may be about a character writing other novels. I also refer more broadly to works in which the putative protagonist is writing not merely *about* the life of someone but is writing a biography so as to establish or reconstruct his protagonist's essential identity.

[3] A description, incidentally, very reminiscent of the fakery of the Wizard of Oz (Baum); [*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Annotated Edition, Michael Patrick Hearn, ed. (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1973)], though it also owes something to Thomas Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*.

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