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CHAPTER TWO

**TELLING THE PRAIRIE:
THE OUTWARD TOPOGRAPHY**

**2.1.— GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION OF
THE PRAIRIE**

The terms 'Canadian west', 'interior Canadian plains' and 'Canadian prairies' refer to a vast and sparsely populated area that is Canada's hinterland, the core of what today is, probably, the world's biggest nation after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. From east to west, the Canadian prairies stretch from the

Manitoba lowlands (the most eastern of the prairie provinces) until the foothills of the Rockies in western Alberta. To the north, the prairies merge with the Mackenzie Basin that contains the only commercially worthwhile forest in the North, and with the Keewatin region above Manitoba which, for centuries, has been known to non-natives as the Barren Grounds, the Barren Lands or simply the Barrens. This subpolar area is characterised by miles of rolling, lake-dotted plains, old worn-down hills and soils that in many areas lie over permanently frozen ground and rock known as permafrost. To the south, the prairies extend into the great plains of the United States and sprawl down until the Gulf of Mexico.

Three types of landscape can be found in this vast area that occupies 18 percent of the Canadian soil: the grassland, the parkland and the boreal forest. The grassland landscape is a flat and treeless one that reaches to the horizon on all sides with an illusion of interminable monotony. The grassland covers a

triangle-like area that has its eastern angle around Winnipeg in southern Manitoba, its apex reaches Edmonton in eastern Alberta and the western tip is located around Cardston in the south west of this same province.

Further north, there is the parkland with rolling gentle hills and tree-clad valleys, a scenery that constitutes an oasis-like area between the monotonous grassland and the impenetrable forest of the Subarctic region. Finally, the landscape of the boreal forest is impressive with its rock outcroppings, cold lakes and miles and miles of spruce and pine beyond which lies the Arctic tundra characterized, as I have already remarked, by bare frozen grounds and rock and also by such vegetation as mosses, lichens, small herbs and low shrubs.

Of these three types of landscape it is that of the grassland that has become the stereotyped image of the Canadian plains. The immediate association that non-Canadians make

between the grassland landscape and the term prairie is mainly due to the emphasis that Canadian writers have laid upon this particular area. The vastness, flatness and emptiness of the grassland have always had such an impact on the mind of the artist, that prairie poetry generally sends us into this kind of landscape which is precisely the central theme in the first part of this thesis. Sometimes, references to the grassland are clear and direct as in the following lines:

*Empty prairie slides away
on all sides, rushes towards a wide
expresionless horizon, joined
to a vast blank sky. (*1)*

Sometimes, the geographical features of the plains are reflected in the human as in Robert Currie's "Another Time" where the monotony and solitude of prairiescapes seem to have invaded human consciousness:

*Dazed with boredom
my son slams around the house
I know his frustration
but cannot tell
how to make a different world. (*2)*

These two extracts, especially the first one, introduce us to a landscape that immediately contradicts western standards of natural beauty and physical amenity. On the other hand, the laconic simplicity of the lines in both excerpts is a warning to those readers who have been trained to decipher poetic complexities and expect to find them in prairie poetry. For these reasons, the traveller who is going to set off on an imaginative journey through the prairie needs to adjust his mind to the kind of landscape he is going to encounter and to the language and style that most prairie poets have chosen to articulate their land.

The first kind of adjustment consists in trying to brush off the concepts of verticality and delimitation from our mental landscape since from north to south, from east to west, as far as the eye can see, the prairie is, for the most part, an unbroken empty flatness. Indeed, when travelling across this immense plain, one realizes that were it not for the road and the signs on it, there would be no

direction on the prairie; left or right, forward or back are all the same. Of course there are houses, trees, people and animals on the prairies but one can drive for miles and miles without finding any of these presences and when they finally appear they are so dwarfed by the immensity of the landscape that they are perceived as man's or nature's brave but failed attempts to fill the emptiness of the place. The poet John Newlove has expressed this idea with Imagist poignancy and precision. In the poem "The Green Plain", this contemporary artist says that a tree on the prairie is 'remarked on' for it stands 'lonely and famous as a saint'.(*3)

2.2.- THE PRAIRIE MUSE

In the middle of this vacuum the traveller wonders how a featureless landscape that resists the closure of form can be effectively

translated into language. How can prairie artists articulate concepts such as nothingness and emptiness whose very essence rejects articulation?. A little browsing through anthologies of Canadian prairie poetry is enough to realise that prairie poets have managed to do this by adopting an extremely simple idiom that fits the prairie like a glove.

This idea leads to the other type of mental adjustment we have to make before entering the prairie through poetry. The majority of prairie poets use a language which, like the landscape it reproduces, has been stripped of all its superfluous elements and reduced to a simplicity that often makes explanation seem unnecessary. As Laurence Ricou remarks, the poetry inspired by the Canadian west:

*(...) can be readily understood, it communicates its basic insight after one reading. It is a poetry to be comfortable with, a poetry which sounds familiar and friendly. (*4)*

Dennis Cooley enlarges upon this idea saying:

*It must be difficult, even for the curious, not to perceive vernacular poetry as a failure of imagination or intelligence. It hardly offers, it seems, the shock of metaphor or the challenge of interpretation many of us have come to expect in "good poetry". (*5)*

However, as has already been pointed out, the reasons for the simplicity and directness that distinguish prairie poetry are to be found in the characteristics of the landscape itself rather than in the poet's inability to produce erudite or sophisticated pieces. No other region of Canada conditions the voice of its poets more than the prairie. The land seems to refuse excess of words and ornament just as it eschews natural exuberance. Consequently, prairie artists have adopted an extremely spare and simple idiom that is sometimes but one short step from total silence. Some of them even prefer to draw rather than describe the landscape. In other words, they turn to non verbal factors such as the physical form of the

poem to convey a reality they find difficult to render through words alone.

This tendency to dispense with linguistic sophistication and to rely on visual elements for the articulation of the prairie experience is especially noticeable in descriptive pieces where the spatial arrangement of words and lines produces a visual impact that places the reader in the middle of the prairie. Indeed, descriptive prairie poetry is strikingly visual. Here and there you see margins that resist justification in order to portray the openness of the land, you notice wide spaces between words and lines which prairie poets use to draw silence and emptiness, and you become aware of the almost total absence of capital letters in many poems, a device which suggests simplicity and uniformity. Sometimes, as in some poems by Douglas Barbour, the lines are unusually long to convey the idea that the prairie has no limits that the eye can reach. This contemporary prairie artist explains that,

in his poems, landscape and page become one. He writes:

*& my lines stretch out to say so to spread the word across some paper landscape to that horizon.....(*6)*

Other poets such as Robert Kroetsch and, especially, Eli Mandel, generally prefer to scorch both lines and syntax till they become mere skeletons. In these cases, the prairie is less visible in the lines themselves than in the amount of space the poet chooses to leave vacant. This technique is a way of saying that the prairie is beyond us, that we can't comprehend it and, therefore, cannot describe it. In both cases, however, the physical form of the poem reproduces the landscape. Thus, through lines that lengthen and flatten out defying closure or through white and empty spaces that refuse to be filled in with words, the land unfolds itself in front of us before we begin to read the poem. Then, after the first visual impact, the reader continues to perceive the prairie through the simplicity of

language and content which always belies the poet's learning and the amount of work that has gone into his writings.

2.3.— OVER PRAIRIE TRAILS:

ROBERT KROETSCH

In the poetry of Robert Kroetsch we find all the elements that characterize descriptive prairie poetry. The spatial arrangement of words and lines reproduce the vast and limitless nature of the land while the clipped syntax and simple language he uses recreate its ascetic atmosphere. Kroetsch's poetry also exemplifies the prairie artist's quest for a voice able to render the Canadian western experience clearly. It is a search that involves the paring down of language to a bareness that may mirror the nakedness of the prairie landscape and also the feeling of living in the middle of this vacuum.

This contemporary poet and novelist born in Heisler, Alberta, in 1927 is one of the Canadian writers who has most intensely conveyed the intimate connexions existing between prairie literature and geography. His poems are so deeply rooted in the prairie, and more precisely in Alberta, his homeland, that we cannot refer to them as being 'about' the prairie but as actually 'being' the prairie. Every word Kroetsch writes, every space he chooses to leave vacant as well as the imagery and style he uses, invariably take us to the prairie landscape for even when the poet deals with themes other than the description of place, the imminence of the natural world is strongly felt. Let us analyse, for example, the following extract from the long poem Seed Catalogue:

the home place: N.E. 17-42-16-W4th Meridian.

*the home place: 1¹/₂ miles west of Heisler, Alberta,
on the correction line road
and 3 miles south.*

*No trees
around the house.
Only the wind.
Only the January snow.
Only the summer sun.*

*The home place:
a terrible symmetry.*

How do you grow a gardener?

*Telephone Peas
Garden Gem Carrots
Early Snowcap Cauliflower
Perfection Globe Onions
Hubbard Squash
Early Ohaio Potatoes (*7)*

The first thing we notice is the physical layout of the excerpt. Robert Kroetsch makes no concessions to conventional ways of arranging lines. They may be printed as independent units or they may huddle together on the left of the page, on the right or somewhere in between. This lack of form inevitably brings to mind the featureless and shapeless nature of the prairie landscape and, at the same time, draws our attention to the spaces which have not been filled in. Robert Kroetsch has a good reason for leaving them vacant because through them he wants to convey prairie silence as he explained to Robert Enright and Dennis Cooley during an interview. On that occasion, the poet said: "I wanted space all over the place because silence

is one of the chief sounds of the prairie".(*8)
And in a poem entitled "The Frankfurt
Hauptbahnhof" Kroetsch insists on the need to
allow blank space to gnaw at language as the
only effective way of articulating silence. He
writes:

*the margin
is a frame of
(where the man
spoke) silence. (*9)*

However, the poetry of Robert Kroetsch is
much more than an attempt to draw the silence
and emptiness of the Canadian plains. As soon
as we delve into his poems, we realize that
this writer also makes us feel the sense of
disorientation that an apparently limitless
landscape devoid of physical points of
reference is likely to elicit from the
visitor. The poet also uses this lack of
directionality as a metaphor for the feeling
of cultural orphanage that besets most prairie
artists. Paradoxically, Robert Kroetsch does
not try to alleviate this feeling by looking

for cultural or historical connections between the prairie and the rest of Canada, Europe or the United States. On the contrary, this artist puts forth the idea that the disintegration of inherited literary forms and patterns is essential to the emergence of a distinctive prairie idiom and tradition.

As I have already remarked at the beginning of this section, the traveller who drives across the prairie is likely to experience the feeling of being stranded in the middle of nowhere. The almost total absence of topographical features in a land that seems to have no limit other than the sky generates a considerable degree of tension because one has the impression of remaining in the same place in spite of moving continuously.

The poetry of Robert Kroetsch reproduces this feeling of anxiety because most of his compositions are long, never-ending pieces made up of discontinuous sections which are discontinuously presented. The poem Seed

Catalogue, for example, is a series of unconnected memories the poet puts together in order to create a sense of identity. Kroetsch does this by abandoning himself to the whims and vagaries of memory and imagination that reminds us of the stream of consciousness technique used by writers such as James Joyce. Hence the irregularity of form and the fragmentation of meaning that characterize Kroetsch's poem and puzzle the reader.

The pattern of Seed Catalogue is partly controlled by a number of questions such as 'How do you grow a garden?', 'But how do you grow a lover?', 'How do you grow a prairie town?', 'How do you grow a past?' and 'But how do you grow a poet?'. The answers to these questions only increase the reader's confusion because Kroetsch does not provide any explanation but simply allows the land to recite itself into existence. Thus, to the question "How do you grow a garden?" Kroetsch lets vegetables emerge spontaneously in front of us without further commentaries. Similarly,

the answer to the question 'How do you grow a prairie town?' is the sudden appearance of 'telephone poles', 'grain elevators' and 'church steeples' in the next stanza which, incidentally, are the only distinctive features of prairie villages whose only grace seems to be their unpretentious nature. The same laconic tone and haiku-like impact and precision are present in Kroetsch's definitions of a past as a long list of absences such as:

the absence of Lord Nelson
the absence of kings and queens
the absence of a bottle opener, and me with a vicious
attack of the 26-ounce flu

(...)

the absence of pyramids
(...)
the absence of a condom dispenser in the Lethbridge Hotel,
and me about to screw an old Blood whore.
I was in love.

the absence of the Parthenon, not to mention the
Cathédrale de Chartres

(*10)

The irony implicit in the combination of high-sounding names of people and places with the poet's personal memories that sound trivial and coarse by comparison, hardly needs any

explanation. Through this ironic tone Kroetsch seems to suggest that although prairie artists often miss the existence of a sustaining tradition, they enjoy, in compensation for this drawback, the freedom of moving without the crutches and burden of history. However, the first image that comes to mind when reading these lines is that of the empty and repetitious landscape of the prairie from which the whole composition has sprung.

Through this recurrent pattern of questions and answers that seem to grow spontaneously out of the prairie, Robert Kroetsch reproduces the slow seasonal rhythms of an essentially agrarian environment using them as metaphors for the planting, growing and harvesting of local writing thereby suggesting that if a literary tradition of the prairies is to be created it can never be done through the knowledge or influence of other writers but through the impact of place itself.

This narrative strategy, although useful to recreate the prairie, is a source of bewilderment and tension to the reader who approaches Kroetsch's poetry for the first time. The enumeration of vegetables, place names, or other prairie items stuns him and makes him wonder what the poet's aims might be. It is not until one becomes familiar with the artist's world and technique that his compositions release their full significance. However, this initial sense of bewilderment is extremely important because through it we experience a feeling which is quite similar to the impact that the prairie produces on the visitor.

The idea that the reading of Robert Kroetsch's poetry is a source of uneasiness that may be likened to the anxiety caused by prairiescapes, will be better understood if we look at another extract from a different poem entitled The Ledger. The excerpt reads as follows:

TELLING THE PRAIRIE

the green poem

*my grandfather, Henry (dead)
in his watermill (gone)
on the Teeswater River,
on the road between Formosa
and Belmore,
needing a new ledger:*

*the ledger itself (surviving)
purchased in the Bruce County
Drug and Book Store (Price:
\$1.00 PAID), the leather cover
brown. In gold:
THE LEDGER*

*EVERYTHING I WRITE
I SAID, IS A SEARCH
(is debit, is credit)*

is a search

for some pages

remaining

(by accident)

*the poet: finding
in the torn ledger*

*the column straight
the column broken*

FINDING

*everything you write
my wife, my daughters, said
is a search for the dead*

*the book of final entry
in which a record is kept. (*11)*

Once again, The physical form of the poem is significant. In this case, it reproduces the double entry of the original ledger which was in the possession of Kroetsch's father and contained family accounts from the time of their settlement in Bruce County, Ontario. Kroetsch uses this family document as a metaphor for the book of his life and, by

extension, the life of the prairie community. He senses the need to hear voices from the past as if only these voices could propel him forward. However, what is really relevant here is not so much Kroetsch's interest in history, which is an interest shared by most Canadian artists, but the visual tension created by the double column printing the poet uses. The unusual arrangement of the lines forces the reader to move from left to right and from right to left trying to find his way through the poem. One may even become impatient and irritated because you are never sure of moving in the right direction. As I have already remarked, this wandering immediately brings to mind the lack of directionality that characterises prairiescapes and the resulting feeling of disorientation the visitor experiences in the middle of this landscape. It also reminds us that, in pioneering times, the risk of getting lost in a summer fire or a winter blizzard was a major source of tension to prairie settlers. Today, this fear has of course diminished if not disappeared completely

but the uneasy feeling of being lost in the middle of an emptiness still haunts the traveller who drives across the Canadian prairies.

In The Ledger, the impression of being stranded in a poem that, like the prairie, seems to lead nowhere is intensified by the absence of a coherent and meaningful line of discourse. As if he was writing a real ledger, Robert Kroetsch only supplies the entries, the text is missing. The poem consists of a long list of notes which, like most notes, only make sense to the author. As in the case of Seed Catalogue, the reader does not find anything especially significant, interesting or exciting in the objects and situations described or in the way the poet presents them. The reproduction of the debit and credit columns of a ledger is not inherently appealing or poetic except insofar as it suggests the poet's journey to the record of his past symbolized through the credit column and his desire to contribute to the making of the future

represented by the debit side. In the same way, the simple and laconic idiom the poet adopts does not encourage the reader to reach the end of the composition. For all these reasons, some of the questions that may come to mind when reading these compositions are: why does Kroetsch use this material to write a poem? and why is he economical with language to the point of sacrificing meaning? The answers to these questions have already been suggested. Robert Kroetsch becomes a spokesman of the idea that prairie writing must be shaped by the physical and sociological aspects of this milieu. Hence his use of a seed catalogue and a ledger which have, for him, such a strong local flavour. With regard to Kroetsch's simple and unadorned idiom, it is to the austerity of the prairie that we must turn to for an explanation. Just as nature seems to have wiped out all signs from the landscape, so the poet avoids being talkative in order to reproduce the physical environment which constitutes the inspirational ground for his poetry.

Kroetsch has, however, another important reason to spare words when writing about the prairie. This writer is aware that terms come to us loaded with other people's experiences and, for this reason, he only uses words which are so pregnant with personal significance that there is little or no room left in them for alien meanings. In other words, Kroetsch purifies language of all received influences until he recognizes himself and his land through it. The critic Robert Lecker refers to this process of purification as the removal of "the trappings of culturization" (*12) and Kroetsch himself betrays his anti-colonial stance, or to put it mildly, his desire to fulfill the dream of cultural autonomy when he writes:

*The Canadian writer's particular predicament is that he works with a language, within a literature, that appears to be authentically his own, and not a borrowing. But just as there was in the Latin word concealed Greek experience, so there is in the Canadian word a concealed other experience, sometimes British, sometimes American. (*13)*

It is almost impossible not to interpret this attitude as the result of the almost obsessive concern for identity which is a trademark in Canadian literature. It is a concern that makes Canadian artists especially reluctant to borrow cultural patterns. Everything that sounds British, American or foreign must be eliminated in the hope that what remains will be Canadian. In the case of prairie artists, the desire to assert their independence is even stronger because they have not only resented the cultural yoke imposed from Europe but also from Montreal, Toronto or Vancouver which from the west have always been viewed as centres of political and cultural dominance.

In the poetry of Robert Kroetsch, the advantages of this desire to assert his literary independence are that his poetry sounds really personal and original and has a strong local flavour. The drawback is that, in his attempt to rid his work of cultural influences and to achieve a simplicity that may

evoke the prairie, Kroetsch withholds language to the extreme of sacrificing meaning. The poet himself recognises this when he says that in his quest for a distinctive prairie idiom he has gone 'too far too far past everything' (*14). Indeed, the reader who has already been baffled by the form of the poem is further bewildered by Kroetsch's style and by the considerable length of the poem which, as we shall see now, constitutes an added source of tension that, once again, brings the prairie landscape into focus.

The Ledger is a long poem and a section of a three-part poetic composition which also includes Seed Catalogue and other pieces. This long series of poems is, in its turn, contained within a much longer piece of work entitled Field Notes. About Field Notes Robert Kroetsch writes:

My own continuing poem is called somewhat to my dismay Field Notes (...) I think of the field notes kept by the archaeologist, by the finding man, the finding man who is essentially lost. I can only guess the other; there might, that is be a hidden text. Yes, it is as if we spend our lives

finding clues, fragments, shards, leading or misleading details, chipped tablets written over in a forgotten language. Perhaps they are a praising of gods, a naming of the dead. We can't know. Perhaps we tell a blurred story because the story is blurred.
(*15)

Here, the emphasis is on the fragmentary nature of self that Kroetsch sees as a mixture of imagined or lived experiences pasted together in memory. The poet also puts forth the idea that a text is a compendium of borrowed and created materials and this proves that the interest of Robert Kroetsch's poetry also lies in the analysis he makes of the elements involved in the process of creative writing. The reader who is interested in themes of intertextuality, construction, deconstruction and in all the discussion generated around reader response criticism will find the poetry of Robert Kroetsch fascinating because it lends itself easily to interpretation and analysis from these perspectives. In other words, the poetry of this contemporary Canadian writer is also



the story of writing a story and of the complexities inherent in this task.

However, I do not want to close this section on Robert Kroetsch by removing him from the land that has such a strong grip on his imagination. The prairie is both a reality and a dominant metaphor in his work and, for this reason, the reading of Robert Kroetsch's poetry is essential to anyone who is interested in gaining an insight into the face and soul of the Canadian west.

2.4.- THE SPEAKING EARTH:

ELI MANDEL

Like Robert Kroetsch, Eli Mandel is a native of the prairie. He was born and grew up in Estevan, Saskatchewan, and his work also reflects his early experience of the Canadian plains.

In Mandel's poetry the influence of the prairie environment is especially noticeable in his books Stony Plain published in 1973, and Out of Place which appeared in 1977. Stony Plain marks the beginning of a conscious drift on the part of the poet towards the exploration of his prairie origins. It is a shift of emphasis that may be seen as part of a larger movement which also includes other contemporary prairie artists such as Robert Kroetsch, Dale Zieroth, Andrew Suknaski and Miriam Waddington who, like Mandel, have chosen to give their work a sense of place without renouncing themes that transcend the local.

Eli Mandel's drift towards the regional comes after a period of personal conflict with his Jewish upbringing which he remembers as an oppressive rather than a formative or enriching time. The following comments made by Mandel to Margery Fee during an interview in 1974, one year after the publication of Stony Plain, suggest that the poet feels comfortable with this new direction in his poetry. Mandel said:

*I think of myself now as a prairie poet, a writer whose being was formed by the experience of living on the prairies. (*16)*

and added:

*Stony Plain is right because this is a book that's going back to roots, towards the prairies. (*17)*

As in the case of Robert Kroetsch, the first thing one notices when approaching Eli Mandel's prairie poems is the use he makes of the dimensional reality of the page to reproduce the Canadian plains. This visual quality comes to the fore immediately in poems such as "Wabamun" contained in the volume Stony Plain. Mandel writes:

*lake
holds
sun moon stars*

*trees
hold*

stars moon sun

2

thunder
 and sky
towel
 wet sand
in yellow light

yesterday (*18)

The scarcity of words, their monosyllabic simplicity and the amount of space between them reproduce the still and almost featureless landscape of the prairie, its imposing silence and also man's awe in front of magnitude. Besides, the disintegration of conventional poetic forms, visible in the artist's refusal to submit his poem to the constraint of margins, mirrors the vastness and openness of the region.

If we look at another piece entitled " Narrative Poem", we observe similar visual characteristics. The composition reads as follows:

*the point is
the story
that
one no-one
told*

*and yet
cattle
on lean flanked
land leaning
toward plain*

*and yet
shacks
coal fire
despair
the
barbed wire
wolf willow
river ice*

*but never
a third act
plotting*

*end or
even*

beginning

*land
and long
land
and
land*

(*19)

As in "Wabamun", through the emptying out of language that allows space to flood the page, Eli Mandel draws the bare and apparently limitless nature of the prairie, he records its

silence and even gives a picture of the baffled spectator who stands embarrassed by his own verticality. This last effect is achieved through the repetition of the initial vertical consonant in the last lines and through the form of the poem as a long skinny ribbon of print on the whiteness of the page.

Eli Mandel's capacity to give his poetry the force and immediacy of a painting may be related to the artist's fascination with visual arts as he himself explained during an interview. On that occasion and in answer to a question regarding the kind of impulse that famous painters such as Rembrandt or Velazquez had had on his sensitivity, Mandel answered:

*Well the question could also be put this way: why not music? Why the visual? I wrote an academic piece on voices in the 18th century writing in which the visual, the kinaesthetic and the musical/ auditory get mixed up. I see rhythms, I don't hear rhythms, oddly enough I see them. I see a painting and get excited by what I see in the painting. (*20)*

These words reveal that, to a great extent, Mandel's interest in painting explains the importance of the visual component in his poems through which the artist places the reader in the middle of the prairie and achieves his aim of "putting on the page what is really out there".(*21)

However, it is not only the physical presence of the land that we must look for as the key to Mandel's poetry. The artist's aim goes far beyond mere topographical description for it is the soul rather than the face of the prairie that concerns the poet leading him to adopt the role of a medium. In other words, Mandel believes that the land has its own voice and that the poet should only be a vehicle for the transmission of this voice. Consequently, when reading Eli Mandel's prairie poems one has the impression that the artist does not describe the prairie but that he lets the land speak through him thereby exhibiting a degree of empathy with the natural world that gives

unusual intensity and directness to his work as well as a mysterious and disturbing tone.

This communion between Eli Mandel and the prairie may be better understood if we relate it to his poetic credo and personal philosophy since, very often, the way a poet chooses to depict a landscape results from and is revelatory of his broadest metaphysical concerns. As the critic John Ower remarks, Eli Mandel shares the Romantic assumption that man is linked to the One which underlies the universe through his unconscious mind.(*22) To a great extent, this belief in the oneness of creation explains the poet's conviction that, to quote John Ower once again, "man can descend spiritually as far as the inanimate",(*23) a belief that would no doubt raise the scorn of those philosophers who, following Locke's ideas, believe that the essence of the object of knowledge remains unknowable. But Mandel believes, and in this he is also indebted to Imagism, that he can enter the object, in this case the prairie, and tell us about it from

within which is precisely the reader's feeling when dealing with pieces such as "Wabamun" and "Narrative Poem". On reading these compositions, we have the impression that we hear a voice that comes directly from the land. The beginning of "Narrative Poem", for example, is an attempt on the part of the poet to describe his prairie experience. He says:

*The point is
the story
 that
one no-one
 told*

However, as the poem proceeds we feel that the land imposes its own voice and that the poet is simply allowed to be its echo. At the end of the piece we only hear:

*land
and long
land
 and
land (*24)*

It barely requires knowledge of Eli Mandel's aims and technique to realize that, like Robert Kroetsch, Mandel tries to release and objectify the tensions that inevitably accompany the process of creative writing, especially when the artist tries to avoid resonances from outside. Both Kroetsch and Mandel exhibit an almost obsessive concern for self-exploration and this explains their desire to rid their work of interfering levels of culture in order to be receptive to their own rhythms which, very often, they cannot disentangle from those of the land. Sometimes, the prairie self engulfs that of the poet as perceived in the last lines of "Narrative Poem". The long, laconic sound of the vowels, together with the gentle flowing of the liquids and the resonance of the nasals produce a kind of incantation that takes us right to the heart of the prairie, to its vastness and emptiness, its austerity and solitude.

"Wabamun" also produces the same impression. We feel that the poet steps aside

and stands in awe hearing how the prairie
recites itself into existence with such
chilling plainness and ritual solemnity that
the artist cannot help but exclaim:

to have come to this

simplicity

to know

only

the absolute

calm

lake

before

*night (*25)*

Through the brief and quiet rhythms of the
lines and, above all, through the poet's lapse
into silence he implies that the prairie is
beyond description. It is, as Mandel tells us
here, 'the absolute', the ultimate, the thing-
in-itself. Mandel's poem also suggests that
simplicity is one of the most difficult
concepts to be put into words. The idea of
extreme simplicity like the ideas of emptiness

and nothingness are difficult to convey. Whenever you try to express them your plans are likely to turn awry because the very nature of these concepts is inimical to that of language, to its artificiality and the limitations it inevitably imposes. For these reasons, it is understandable that artists like Eli Mandel, whose aim is to express the essence of the land, should throw into question the value of language and embrace the eloquence of silence.

However, this technique may weary and unnerve the unprepared reader who is used to more loquacious artists. Like the majority of prairie poets, Mandel is not a talkative writer. "Narrative Poem", for instance, is made up of twenty nine lines with only two finite verbs in simple forms and no more than three words per line. Of the two verbs that appear at the beginning of the poem, one is the simple present of the verb to be, the most elemental of all verbs and one that helps the poet reduce narrative to a bewildering series of monosyllabic words. The title itself is

deceptive for what follows is far from being a narration since it lacks semantic and syntactic coherence. As in the case of Robert Kroetsch, it is not until one becomes immersed in the poet's world that the composition releases its full significance. Then, we realize that by reducing narrative to a mere skeleton, the poet reproduces the prairie starkness and the bare essentials of earth and sky that characterize this kind of landscape.

We also realize that Mandel's imaginative journey into the land is a dangerous one. As I have already pointed out, the prairie suggests nothingness, an idea the individual cannot sustain for too long without feeling chilled to the bone. Consequently, when attempting to describe the prairie it is safer to look for other techniques which allow the artist to observe the land from some distance instead of trying to reach the degree of empathy with the prairie achieved by Mandel. Peter Stevens, for example, chooses to say what the prairie is not instead of attempting to express what it is. In

his poem "Prairie: Time and Place", this poet recognizes that 'we can't comprehend the prairie' which amounts to saying that we can't describe it.(*26) Perhaps this is why in another poem entitled "Prairie", Stevens uses negation to describe the landscape. 'There is nothing' he says, 'nothing to stand in/ the way of the eye'.(*27) And in "Prairie Negative", he enumerates a series of presences that are not likely to be found on the prairie, a technique which eliminates the problem of being stuck for lack of words. Indeed, there are lots of things to name which do not exist on the prairie: there is 'no shore', there are 'no gulls', 'no pines' and 'no slopes' in "Prairie Negative".(*28) Besides, by filling the poem with concrete images, the poet distracts our mind from the idea of emptiness he wants to convey. Therefore, although repeated negation is effective to reproduce the nakedness of the land, the final effect is not as perturbing as the one achieved by Eli Mandel.

In the same way, Lorna Crozier's "Poem About Nothing" sounds more reassuring than Eli Mandel's descriptive pieces in spite of its title. Crozier's poem is an attempt to describe the land by means of a series of interesting and amusing definitions of the word zero until she finally identifies it with the prairie because neither of them has a beginning or an end.

While the effectiveness of Peter Stevens's poem lies in the force of the negative statement, the success of Crozier's composition stems from the expectation it arouses right from the beginning. Lorna Crozier plays with the reader delaying until the end the revelation of the source from which the theme of nothingness has sprung. She writes:

*Zero is the one we didn't understand
at school. Multiplied by anything
it remains nothing.*

*When I ask my friend
the mathematician who studies rhetoric
if zero is a number, he says yes
and I feel great relief.*

*If it were a landscape
it would be a desert.*

*If it had anything to do
with anatomy, it would be
a mouth, a missing limb,
a lost organ.*

Finally, she turns to landscape, which is the main theme of her poem:

*Zero starts and ends
at the same place. Some compare it
to driving across the Prairies all day
and feeling you've gone nowhere. (*29)*

The idea of nothingness that comes across directly in Robert Kroetsch's, Eli Mandel's and Peter Stevens' poems is also implicit in Lorna Crozier's final lines. However, by endowing the previous stanzas with fine humour, the poet creates a relaxing mood that allows her to describe the prairie sparing the reader the anxiety caused by the descriptions of the other poets. Humour also proves to be an effective way of reproducing the prairie landscape in Don Kerr's poem "Editing Prairie". This composition is the editor's answer to someone who has sent

a piece of writing in the hope of seeing it published. The letter-poem reads as follows:

*Well, it's too long for one thing
and very repetitive.
remove half the fields.
Then there are far too many fences
interrupting the narrative flow
Get some cattlemen to cut down those fences.
There is not enough incident either,
this story is very flat.
Can't you write in a mountain
or at least a decent sized-hill?
And why set it in winter
as if the prairie can grow nothing
but snow. I like the public bush
but there is too much even of that,
and the empty sky filling all the silences
between paragraphs is really boring.
I think on due consideration
we'll have to return your prairie.
Try us again in a year
with a mountain or a sea or a city. (*30)*

Although the poets selected to illustrate the theme of this section are Robert Kroetsch and Eli Mandel, I have opened an angle on other contemporary prairie artists in order to prove that, in spite of the differences in tone existing among descriptive prairie poems, one gets a clear unity of impression from all of them, an impression that prairiescapes can only be conveyed through poems which, in one way or

another, tell us about the impossibility of describing them. Wanting to write about the prairie is not enough. There must be something to be described but the nakedness of the place is a formidable obstruction to description. Consequently, descriptive prairie poetry can only be a poetry of absence, a poetry which does not move from words to meaning but from words to silence, a process that, although effective, startles the reader who expects to be given some concrete points of reference in order to orchestrate his particular vision of the land. It is not until one turns to poems which:

*chronicle the meaning of these vast plains
in a geography of blood
and failure
making them live (*31)*

that the Canadian plains acquire a more concrete significance. This kind of poems show that the prairie, like the rest of the Canadian landscape, is not only a set of geographical characteristics but a tangle of contradictory

feelings, a mixture of love and hate, of acceptance and rejection that prairie people have projected onto the land endowing it with life. More than any other Canadian landscape, the prairie exists in the mind of its artists and, for this reason, the analysis of their emotional responses, of the way geography has shaped their poetic personality, is essential to understand the complex reality that is the Canadian prairie.

As has already been suggested, the variety of stances that prairie artists adopt towards the land surprises the reader who has been tempted to think that a dull and uniform landscape must elicit a dull and uniform response. The prairie seems to enhance rather than hinder the poet's imagination and to breed diversity rather than uniformity. As Laurence Ricou suggests:

*(...) the physical emptiness is an imaginative vacuum which must be filled and which offers new freedom to the artist to choose what he may to fill it. (*32)*

The two chapters which follow are a study of the wide range of responses that the prairie has elicited from its poets. The first one includes poems that fit the hostile wilderness paradigm and the fear of nature postulated by Margaret Atwood and Northrop Frye whereas the second deals with compositions which, in one way or another, retrieve both the landscape and its people from their much-emphasized gloomy nature.

Finally, the analysis of these responses is a way of enlivening a stark naked landscape and a means of imposing some kind of discourse on a place which is, otherwise and in spite of the title of this final section, stubbornly mute.

8. Robert Kroetsch in "Uncovering Our Dream World: An Interview with Robert Kroetsch" conducted by Robert Enright and Dennis Cooley, Essays on Canadian Writing, Prairie Poetry Issue, ns.18/19, Summer/Fall 1980, p.27.
9. Robert Kroetsch, "The Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof" in Completed Field Notes. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1989, p.200
10. Robert Kroetsch, Seed Catalogue, op. cit., p.12.
11. Robert Kroetsch, "The Ledger" in Completed Field Notes, op. cit., pp.12-13.
12. Robert Lecker, Robert Kroetsch. Boston: Twayne, 1986, p.140.
13. Robert Kroetsch, "Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction" in An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English, vol.II, op. cit., p.246.
14. Robert Kroetsch, "How I Joined the Seal Herd" in Completed Field Notes, op. cit., p.56.
15. Robert Kroetsch, The Lovely Treachery of Words. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989, p.129.
16. Eli Mandel in "An Interview with Eli Mandel" conducted by Margery Fee, Essays on Canadian Writing, n.1, Winter 1974, p.8.

17. Ibid., p.8
18. Eli Mandel, "Wabamun" in Dreaming Backwards. Don Mills, Ontario: General Publishing, 1981, p.57.
19. Eli Mandel, "Narrative Poem" in Twelve Prairie Poets, op. cit., p.105.
20. Eli Mandel in "Interview with Eli Mandel March 16/78" conducted by David Anderson, Dennis Cooley and Robert Enright, Essays on Canadian Writing, Prairie Poetry Issue, op. cit., p.85.
21. Eli Mandel in "An Interview with Eli Mandel" conducted by Margery Fee, op. cit., p.9.
22. John Ower, "Black and Secret Poet" in Canadian Literature, n.42, Autumn 1969, p.21.
23. Ibid., p.20.
24. Eli Mandel, "Narrative Poem" in Twelve Prairie Poets, op. cit., p.105.
25. Eli Mandel, "Wabamun" in Dreaming Backwards, op. cit., p.57.
26. Peter Stevens, "Prairie: Time and Place" in Twelve Prairie Poets, op. cit., p.139.
27. Peter Stevens, "Prairie", ibid., p.140.

28. Peter Stevens, "Prairie Negative", *ibid.*, p.151.
29. Lorna Crozier, "Poem About Nothing" in A Sudden Radiance, *op. cit.*, pp.45-48.
30. Don Kerr, "Editing Prairie", *ibid.*, p.94.
31. Andrew Suknaski, "Indian Site on the Edge of Tonita Pasture", *ibid.*, pp.210-212.
32. Laurence Ricou, Vertical Man / Horizontal World. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1973, p.8.

CHAPTER THREE

THE WILDERNESS WITHIN.

In the introduction to this thesis I summarized Margaret Atwood's and Northrop Frye's theories about the effects of the Canadian wilderness on the artist's imagination. Both authors share the belief that Canadian literature is mainly a dialogue with nature and with the self and that the relationship between man and the natural world is tense and destructive rather than relaxed and uplifting.

This confrontation between the individual and his physical environment manifests itself in different ways and to varying degrees of intensity in Canadian literature. In the case of prairie poetry, this conflict is often conveyed through themes of cruelty, violence and restless movement. It goes without saying that these subjects are by no means limited to the poetry that deals with the Canadian west. Violence and anxiety are central issues to contemporary life and art. Thus, it would be foolish to affirm that these themes are any less Russian, Spanish or Peruvian than they are Canadian. However, the analysis of the poems included in this section are an attempt to prove that the climate and geography of the prairies, as well as the constrictive puritanism that seems to have conditioned the life of its inhabitants, have a direct bearing on the eruptions of violence that shake the body of prairie poetry disrupting the steady beat of its pulse.

The Canadian novelist and critic Henry Kreisel confirms the idea that the frequent bouts of cruelty in prairie literature are provoked by the physical and emotional limitations that the land imposes on its people. With regard to physical restrictions, Kreisel remarks that, paradoxically, the wide and open spaces of the Canadian plains often produce feelings of enclosure and sequestration rather than a sense of freedom and well-being:

*The prairie, like the sea, often produces an extraordinary sensation of confinement within a vast and seemingly unlimited space. (*1)*

Like Northrop Frye, Henry Kreisel suggests that when the individual is placed in the middle of a wilderness that cannot be tamed or controlled, he tends to shrink back in fear thereby generating feelings of oppression and seclusion. It is interesting to mention here that prairie villages seem to reflect this fear of nature. Nothing in them suggests that the physical and emotional mastering of the

land has been achieved. On the contrary, prairie settlements spread awkwardly and timidly and are almost unseen until you are very near them because no tall building dares defy the intimidating horizontality of the place. Besides, the simplicity and uniformity of their architecture make them appear like temporary shelters that prairie people have built to protect themselves against the onslaught of the climate and the engulfing void that surrounds them.

In the old pioneering days, the feeling of confinement to which Henry Kreisel refers was even more intense due to the disperse pattern of settlement and the fear of getting lost in a landscape without points of reference and natural protection against winter blizzards or summer fires. Today, modern means of communication and a sophisticated technology have, of course, diminished if not eliminated this fear. However, the sense of isolation is still as congenial to the prairie experience as the wind or the horizon because the Canadian

west continues to be a huge and thinly populated area and the cold season is as forbidding as it used to be in the old pioneering days. Besides, the snuggling comfort of prairie cities that insulate man against the wilderness, which in Canada presses close to the suburban edge of almost every town, makes it more alien and fearsome than ever as Bruce LittleJohn and Jon Pearce remark in their book Marked by the Wild:

*(...) recently, fear and antipathy towards the wilderness have found fertile soil in the conditions of modern, urban technological life. Many Canadians have grown up in large cities where they have been almost totally insulated against the non-human world. They know little of it and consequently find it alien and fearful. (*2)*

To the sense of physical confinement produced by a vast and sparsely populated environment we have to add the emotional constraint imposed by the rigid moral code that, as we have already seen, has always governed prairie life. Malcolm Ross, a

contemporary Canadian writer, reminds us of the origins of this puritan austerity:

*The loyalists had brought with them their books and their craft and a deep-down instinct for forest, river and sea. But they had also brought a Puritan distrust of the senses. (*3)*

Today, Canadian society, like the American, is still ruled by a puritan philosophy and its emphasis on discipline, endurance and moral uprightness, an insistence that may sometimes be hypocritical, but an insistence nonetheless. This explains why prairie writers continue to exploit the theme of the imprisoned spirit and the tensions that inevitably arise when man's passions and emotions have long been in fetters.

The combination of the emotional constraints imposed by puritanism and the physical limitations derived from the climate and geography of the prairie has proved to be an explosive one to judge by the numerous fits of cruelty that crop up in prairie poetry.