

THE CREATIVE TREATMENT OF ABSENCES AND VOIDS IN A.D. HOPE AND ROBERT KROETSCH

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The plight of the White settler colonies may be slightly different from that of the Black colonies, but we can say that in Australian and the Canadian contexts, the landscape poses a lot of riddles to creative writers. This paper aims mainly at the explication of problems of the Australian and Canadian literary artists, by looking at the poems of A.D. Hope and Robert Kroetsch. The expostulation of the dilemmas, ambivalences, absences, voids and interstices of their respective countries will be focused. Snow and desert, bush and prairie garden, traditional and postmodern poetry- all seem paradoxical, but there are similar key issues in their poetry which are important to both. The tensions, tribulations, the treatment of their respective genres, imagery, tone, rhythm and artistic achievement – are all food for thought for a discerning reader.

Nations, as Homi Bhabha posits are actualized in the realm of “the mind’s eye” (01). The inherent ambivalence between the ideological constructions of a nation and the quotidian experiences of its subjects is important to him. Absences or interstices in a given culture or society of a nation are more powerful than what is present. The difficulty in narrating the nation becomes more important as it is directly linked with the questions of identity, cultural representation and the artist’s place in articulating his/her experience as a national subject. The plight of an artist in such a context is uniquely articulated by A.D. Hope and Robert Kroetsch in their writing. What results from this tension is a febrile reaction in Hope’s case and on the other hand, a reconciliatory but quintessentially postmodern response from Kroetsch.

The Australian writing evokes the images of “roughness and toughness” due to its history of being a convict colony and due to its rough terrains whereas, the Canadian literature is:

a product of the confrontation between two white colonisers, the British and the French . . . While the two stick to their cultural and national pride, they concentrate on the confrontation of the cold, icy, frigid and frustrating landscape provides to their identities in a desired intimacy and possession of land. (Bhatnagar 28)

O.P. Bhatnagar further feels that, “The Canadian struggle seems to resolve itself in identification, the Australian in transcendence” (28).

With all these differences, one major similarity, that of the treatment of absence, void or nothingness in both literatures can be enumerated by analyzing A.D. Hope’s ‘Australia’ and Robert Kroetsch’s *Seed Catalogue*. The constant effort to narrate their nations through their art can also be discerned from these poems. As Homi Bhabha feels, absences or interstices in a

given culture or society of a nation are more powerful than what is present. This as he feels is much evident in postcolonial societies which struggle with the problem of identity at various levels (*Location* 1-9).

A.D.Hope's concern towards the Australian landscape and his attempt to bridge the immense gaps and absences of the land are best depicted in his much anthologized poem 'Australia'. The poem traces the tensions and frustrations of the poet with regards to the harsh landscape and creative sterility. He describes the topographical details of the land in negative terms thus:

They call her a young country, but they lie:
She is the last of lands, the emptiest,
A woman beyond her change of life, a breast
Still tender but within the womb is dry;

(Narasimhaiah 74)

The physical vacuity is pointed out by the image of a woman who is sterile. The corruption of the feminine symbol of fertility creates a greater effect here as Australia is "the emptiest" of all lands and is past any creativity, for, "the womb" is "dry" within. Such ascription of anthropomorphic stature to ones land is quintessential in literature.

The next stanza is important because, it points out to the voids in Australian cultural, geographical and historical spheres in a single line- "Without songs, architecture, history" (74). As a poet and intellectual, Hope tries first to accept the lacunae of his country and then reconcile with these facts through his vision. With self-reflectivity, honesty, wit and irony, he records all these haunting issues and hints at his aspirations of resuscitation. In the concluding stanzas of the poem, he achieves a greater maturity, for; he looks towards future with hope. He feels that:

Yet there are some like me turn gladly home
From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find
The Arabian desert of the human mind,
Hoping, if still from the deserts the prophets come. (74)

The poet here definitely tries to transcend the situation and hark back to the "Judo-Christian tradition" (Narasimhaiah *Essays* 204) of prophets and miracles as the panacea for the sterility around him, thus reminding us of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, wherein, he believes in the regenerative powers of the mythology of both Christianity and Hinduism. Hope's sensibility is essentially Yeatsian as he yearns for the glory of distant lands of the East. As an inhabitant of a settler colonial society like Australia, Hope has to look for the cultural models elsewhere. This is one of the commonest ironies of societies impugned by the colonial discourse. The barrenness of culture as A. D. Hope realizes is mainly due to the intrusion of the colonizer's culture which over rides the native culture. The ambivalence of Hope might as well be the gift of his colonial education which again exerts a negative influence on the subjects.

Robert Kroetsch, the "Mr Canadian Postmodern", will be an interesting contrast to a traditional poet like Hope. As a postmodern poet he is constantly preoccupied with ambivalence, absence, and "notions of creativity and commentary" (Hutcheon 160). His long poem, *Seed Catalogue* is "a poetic form of historiographic metafiction" which "is intensely, self-reflexively art, but is also grounded in historical, social and political realities" (23). The poem tries to come to terms with past/present, history/narrative, presence/absence, and city/prairie landscape dualities in the Canadian context. The harsh landscape and horrid living

conditions in Canada give rise to a creative temperament which tries to face the challenges through art, whether be it novels or long poems.

The poem traces the development of poet's artistic sensibility from his childhood at Heisler to his growth as a postmodern prairie novelist and poet of Canada. He constantly juxtaposes the seed catalogue and his story, rendering it in the form of anecdotes in an antilogical structure. The dominant image of the poem is that of the seed, which connotes the possibility of growth, germination and creativity. This Canadian seed of creativity is literally and metaphorically refrigerated by the cold, icy atmosphere surrounding it. Once properly sown and nurtured, the seed can grow both vertically upwards and rhizomically downwards- thus accepting and transcending the limitations of Canadian soil. That is why Robert Kroetsch constantly poses questions as to how to grow a gardener, a lover, a prairie town, a past and a poet. The answers to these questions are given with the help of the bits and pieces from his own life, which are also a hint at how he gradually gains creative powers through experiences.

The first section tells about his father and mother, who are typical farmers. They sow imported seeds of various countries in their farm which is a hint at the usurpation of native farming habits by the multinational companies. One dominant image used here is the 'home place' which is a "terrible symmetry" because of the harsh wind and cold atmosphere (Kroetsch *Field Notes*). The following section narrates how the poet is initiated into love. His sense of irony is presented in the instance of his confession and his love making with a girl. The third section uses the image of the erect gopher to point towards the building spree in his town. Vast lands are cleared, tall modern buildings are built, and telephone poles are laid, which create asymmetry in the eco system and the actual geography of Heisler.

The fourth section of the poem, which raises the question about how to grow a 'past', records many absences and voids in Canadian life, as Hope does in his poem. The absence of past and its grandeur is very important to the poet because, it is the dominant factor that inhibits Canadian imagination. He says at the beginning of this section, "Everything: an absence" (*Field Notes*). Then, in a fine syntactic parallelism, he states the absences in Canadian culture, religion and philosophy, geography, architecture, flora and fauna etcetera. Unlike the British and the French cultures, which have a well defined history and grandeur of their own, Canada lacks "kings and queens", "sailing ships", great historical monuments like "pyramids" and the "Parthenon"; and great wild beasts like "lions" (*Field Notes*). Artists and commoners have to grapple with these limitations and can be happy only with dinosaur fossils, little gophers, magpies and beavers. Adding to this misery is the lack of great philosophers and thinkers like Heidegger, Sartre, and Heraclitus. Douglas Lapan calls Canada, "A land without mythology". So, how to grow a poet then?

Kroetsch deals with all these questions in his own way by using native colloquial language and kitsch phrases throughout the poem, adding humor to spice up. His way of compensation is through the depiction of these 'aporias' with an acute sense of ambivalence that is the result of his being in Canada. This predicament is solved in the sixth section of the poem, wherein he maturely appraises and celebrates his prairie landscape, and tries to become a "postman" delivering "real words to real people" (*Field Notes*). For instance, he says;

This is a prairie road.
This road is the shortest distance
between nowhere to nowhere.
This road is a poem. (*Field Notes*)

He actually likens the poem to a dead “porcupine” and words to “rabbit turds”, which is unique because of his postmodern orientation. He tells ‘how’ he actually grew into a poet due to his association with Al Purdy and Rudy Weibe, two of the great artists of Canada. And in the last section he says profoundly “We silence words/ by writing them down” (*Field Notes*). Louis Mackendrick says:

As a careful amalgam of times, tales and reflections, *Seed Catalogue* has a provocative and exciting arrangement, with double- takes and bursts of associations that dramatically impinge on the chronicling persona. The poem is its own process and its grounding and fore groundings are far from studied. (55)

Thus, we see how two poets from two different countries address the problems inhibiting their creative output and achieve artistic qualities. Modern literature has been a compendium of voices from desolate lands and a “heap of broken images” as Eliot would say. But the creative minds can never be inhibited by adversities.

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