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PASTORAL ELEGY, MEMORIAL, WRITING: ROBERT KROETSCH'S "STONE HAMMER POEM"

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I want to begin with endings – closures, and even enclosures. These are endings that are in some cases beginnings, as in the ending of Robert Kroetsch's "Stone Hammer Poem," prologue to his *Completed Field Notes*. To begin I need to reach back to John Milton and his monumental pastoral elegy "Lycidas,"¹ and to look to the ending of that poem, the ending of a song of mourning by Milton's speaker, the swain, for his drowned friend, Lycidas. The swain articulates his content consolation, "weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more," (165) as he sings his story of Lycidas's ascension to heaven – a happy apotheosis, to spend his days with singing saints in sweet and glorious societies, to paraphrase the poem. As the swain's song comes to an end, Milton employs another speaker-narrator to close out the poem. This speaker tells us that the swain's song is done and that he has accomplished his goal of mourning his dead friend, for when he awakens on the next day he will look ahead and not back: "At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue:/Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures anew" (192–93). Successful mourning is achieved in the space

of a day-long song, and within the space of the poem, and now it is time to move on. Within the bounds of the poem, from beginning to end, a movement of mourning is enacted and contained. The structures of text become the enclosures within which grief can be worked through and serve to enable but also to retain the emotions of loss, even to restrain them from superseding the bound of the grieving moment. Thus, grief is given its proper space but it is also made clear that grief is to remain within that space, enclosed and closed.

Similarly, for Robert Kroetsch in “Stone Hammer Poem,” the text itself serves also as a space within which loss can be engaged in a grief-movement. However, for Kroetsch the poem is space where mourning occurs but loss is not closed off at poem’s end, as it is in “Lycidas.” For Milton, the end of the poem of mourning marks a beginning, a move forward and onwards (outwards even from the song of grief’s boundaries), but for Kroetsch’s speaker the end of his contemplation of past, place, and family is a circular move, a returning, to the material that has occupied his mind over the course of the poem. There is no closing off of his rumination but rather an articulation of the ongoing nature of his engagement with fundamental elements that inform his life, such as the home place, and the loss of that place, the loss of his father and grandfather and the complexity of the emotional relationship with them, and the role of writing and creativity in his life. Thus, in the last section of the poem the speaker-poet is still contemplating the stone of the title, which he relates overtly to his writing:

I keep it
on my desk
(the stone)

Sometimes I use it
in the (hot) wind
(to hold down paper)

smelling a little of cut
grass or maybe even of
ripening wheat or of
buffalo blood hot

in the dying sun.

Sometimes I write
my poems for that
stone hammer. (8)

The stone of the poem's title is the central object of the text, clearly, but is also the subject of poems outside the scope of the specific text; thus, the stone refers to a larger signifying structure that is returned to repeatedly by the speaker and that supersedes the bounds – the enclosure – of the text of “Stone Hammer Poem.” This pattern of repeated return to the subject of loss is concomitant with a late twentieth-century understanding of patterns of grief and of the textual response to loss.²

The elegiac currents of Milton's poem and Kroetsch's practice of dealing with loss in “Stone Hammer Poem” employ the idea of a momentary articulation as an exploration of loss. In “Lycidas,” the swain sings a song of mourning over the course of a day, beginning at sun up and ending with nightfall. In “Stone Hammer Poem,” the movement of the poem is encompassed by the speaker's contemplation of the stone on his desk, which begins the poem as well as ends it. The lyric – and thus song – mode of Kroetsch's poem is clear enough. Further, Milton's poem is decidedly pastoral, set in the countryside within a Greek and mythological world. Kroetsch, in exploring his feelings of loss looks to a pastoral world that has its own mythical associations. But even more significant, both speakers in these poems are deeply interested in the relationship between work and mourning, how indeed a necessary work of mourning can be carried out, and what the relationship of song, of poem, is to the work that is required of a grieving individual. Furthermore, the notion of monument and memorial, of a poem as a physical object that can be a site of memory and mourning, is important to how both poems function. For Milton, the success of the poem and its mourning is indicated by the fact that the poem gives textual presence to the lost friend, echoing the Orpheus myth in asserting the power of art over death. Kroetsch, by contrast, finds that poetry has no such power: it can invoke memory of the dead but it can do nothing to contain that death by paradoxically giving it life within the structures of the poem. For Kroetsch, “Stone Hammer Poem” is but one of many poems of mourning, and art is ultimately shown to be nothing more than the vehicle for the attempt to repair loss.

I will begin to address these issues by looking to some recent commentary on mourning and work before returning to Kroetsch. Jacques Derrida has written significantly about loss and about the role that work has in mourning in the essays that comprise his book *The Work of Mourning*.³ Derrida takes his cue from Sigmund Freud, particularly from his seminal essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” published in 1917, where Freud argues

that mourning is a form of mental labour or work that the grieving subject needs to slowly and determinedly work through in order to be freed from the loss. In German, the word for mourning is *Trauerarbeit*, which literally is mourning-work. For my purposes, it is useful to note that in the German the word operates as a noun and as a verb; thus the work of mourning is both an object – such as a poem that deals with grief – and the process that is carried out in response to loss. For Freud, there is a rather strong emphasis on the idea of working through and past grief, but for Derrida, the work of mourning is a multi-dimensional process that deeply involves and affects all aspects of the mourning subject's life and it is not particularly something that ever ends – and this is what will become important for my discussion of Kroetsch in a moment. Derrida writes:

Work: that which makes for a work, for an *oeuvre*, indeed that which works – and works to open: *opus* and *opening*, *oeuvre*, and *ouverture*: the work or labor of the *oeuvre* insofar as it engenders, produces, and brings to light, but also labor or travail as suffering, as the engendering of force, as the pain of one who gives. Of the one who gives birth, who brings to the light of day and gives something to be seen, who enables or empowers, who gives the force to know and to be able to see – and all these are powers of the image, the pain of what is given and of the one who takes pains to help us see, read, and think. (142)

To sing a song as Milton's swain does, or to sit and contemplate a stone, and then to write as Kroetsch's speaker does, is a form of work, and in the context of these two poems this form of labour is mourning. The role of the poet of mourning, as Derrida cues us, is to communicate a feeling of grief, and to do so with the overt idea of an audience. The poet gives something, enables and empowers, gives a force, as Derrida notes. For Milton's swain, the context of his song is clearly stated: he sings to his fellow shepherds who then also share in his moment of consolation. For Kroetsch, the idea of audience is more elusive, but implied audience can be read in the range of loss that is engaged as he contemplates all the things that have come and gone that the stone has come into contact with. In this way, Kroetsch's force of mourning is to articulate loss and to engage self-consciously the emotions of loss, to create his *oeuvre* and to fashion a sense of *ouverture*.

Freud's idealization of mourning, that a work can be completed, that such labouring produces tangible results is shifted by Derrida. As R. Clifton

Spargo notes about Derrida: “From the standpoint of cultural utility, since all of mourning’s language-acts fail to produce anything measurably effectual in the way of action, mourning must seem aberrant, characterized by nothing so much as its resistance to the cognitive and recuperative structures of identity that might gather the other into the self as a resource for symbolic meaning” (27). The act of mourning, of labouring – and more importantly for my purposes – of writing grief, is to be aware of the impossibility of mourning whilst still persisting in acting. As Spargo remarks, “For Derrida, as mourning fails even in the midst of its continued attachment, it seems.... the sign of a longing to preserve what is obviously impossible” (27). At the core of elegiac writing is the realization that the very thing that is wished for – the resurrection of the dead, the making concrete of the departed – is bound to failure: text can be no more than symbolic. It is in the gesture, in the action of writing, that a ghost of the lost one will be given a fraught presence.

The work of mourning of Kroetsch’s speaker in “Stone Hammer Poem” is catalyzed by his contemplation of the stone as object on his desk. The object is no more than a mere thing, a piece of matter, until the speaker infuses the object with meaning generated by memory, and that memory is infused with loss. The opening line of the poem reinforces this idea, for “This stone” (3) is transformed in the next line as it “become[s] a hammer” (3) by knowledge of the stone’s history that only the speaker can supply. The reader soon learns that the stone has multiplicitous associations, for in the second section of the poem it becomes “This paperweight on my desk” to the speaker. Each of the next sections, until the last one, features different associations that the stone has. It is “stone maul” (3), and then “a stone/old as the last/ Ice Age” (5) and it is the stone that his grandfather found in the field: “This stone maul/stopped the plough/ long enough for one/*Gott im Himmel*” (5). In this repetition of the event of the stone’s finding by his grandfather, the speaker indicates the range of the human life cycle, from the earth of the field that signals life itself to the notion of a heavenly afterlife in the German phrase. Though overtly religious as the reference to God asserts, the word “*Himmel*” also means sky and thus takes on a double meaning. The grandfather is situated between the earth and the sky, and therefore the greater cosmos that the speaker finds attaches to the stone: stone as symbol of history, family, place, and the relation of the self to these elements. At the end of Milton’s elegy, the speaker imagines his dear lost friend ascending to heaven in a moment of apotheosis; resurrected in

heaven, the friend will now be happier than he was on earth and thus the speaker can derive consolation from this fact. For Kroetsch's speaker, however, the German phrase appears in the text ultimately only to signal the impossibility of easy consolation. The grandfather is given presence in the poem through the passages that feature him, and his language is used to reinforce that sense of presence. However, the phrase "*Gott im Himmel*" appears archaic, from as different a time as the spoken German of an immigrant farmer. The grandfather is remembered only as having been in this particular place, handling the stone, and not as having ascended after death to the positive space of a Godly heaven.

Over the course of the poem, the stone is returned to repeatedly in new enactments of the stone's significance. For the speaker, this returning is a means through which to attempt to give presence to the memories of things lost. The returning by inscription – the very acts of writing that make up the whole of "Stone Hammer Poem" – is also a mode of attempting to make solid what is absent. But the repeated returnings fail ultimately, as they must, for the speaker can do no more than assert the presence he desires: he cannot make present the impossible, and hence the labour of mourning is a paradoxical work. A work can do nothing to bring back the dead; it can do no more than assert its own existence as the writing of a poem, the active working of grief, and text becomes memorial, even monument, but it does not and cannot become that which has been lost.

Another element of work that is carried out is one of ancestral history, the tracing of associations that detail the speaker's feelings of loss in relation to his family history. This is a history of settlement, farming, and ultimately of the speaker's conflicted abandonment of the family farm. And so we have the story of the stone's finding:

This stone maul
was found.

In the field
my grandfather
thought
was his

my father
thought was his. (4)

And we have the stone's association with a million years of history in this place, from the Ice Age to Native existence to the unsettling effects of European settlement. And we have the speaker's engagement with all of these elements as he feels compelled to work to understand and process the feelings of loss he has that are generated by contemplation of the stone on his desk, the paperweight that holds things down in a hot wind:

 ?what happened
 I have to/ I want
 to know (not know)
 ?WHAT HAPPENED (5)

The paradoxical movement of wanting to know and not to know simultaneously is indicative of the active labour of grief that is occurring, of an active process of engagement with loss and with working at mourning, for grief is a process attempting to make real that which has been lost. To carry out, in fact, the impossible, and such is then inherently a paradoxical process.

The speaker's awareness of his working at mourning through the composition of his poem becomes evident in the seventh section when he relates the stone to the poem that he is writing. For the poem, like the stone, has been worked at, has been part of a process of complex struggle rooted in history and time:

 The poem
 is the stone
 chipped and hammered
 until it is shaped
 like the stone
 hammer, the maul. (6)

Thus, the poem is an implement of struggle, of active work, and it is overtly a concrete tool to carry out a necessary psychic work. Similarly, Milton's swain begins his song to Lycidas by self-consciously reflecting upon the necessity of singing, of using language, as an implement to perform a work of mourning. As the swain notes: "[Lycidas] must not float upon his watery bier/Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,/Without the meed of some melodious tear" (12–14). The swain feels compelled to employ some "lucky words" (20) to "bid fair peace" (22) to his beloved Lycidas.

Kroetsch alludes to several key elements of pastoral elegy to provide context for the work he has his speaker carry out over the course of the

poem. In the fifth section, for example, he uses the convention of comparing vegetative cycles to the finite human cycle to figure the passing of traditional Native life. The speaker notes “the retreating Indians” and links them to the vibrant growth of berries:

(the saskatoons bloom
 white (infrequently
 the chokecherries the
 highbush cranberries the
 pinchberries bloom
 white along the barbed
 wire fence (the
 pemmican winter (5)

The growth is contrasted with the fence, a construct of the settlement that has caused the loss to the Indians. The berries here are also loosely allusive, elusively allusive I am tempted to say, to the “berries harsh and crude” that Milton’s swain plucks for poetic inspiration when he begins his song of mourning.

Close to the end of the poem, the idea of vegetative cycles returns when Kroetsch notes that his father kept the stone “on the railing/ of the back porch in/ a raspberry basket” (7). And while the stone is decidedly unlike anything that grows, it metonymically takes on the status of a naturally growing, and cyclical, object that transcends the human life span. The stone in the basket has further figurative qualities, for the basket is the container for the stone just as the speaker’s poem is the container, or enclosure, for the memories and stories associated with the stone. And so, a key element of work that occurs in the poem is a work of memory, a work of remembering and extrapolating the associations of the stone that originates the contemplation that is the poem. Another element here is that in the stone’s multiplicitous symbolism, the work of memory broadens the spectre of loss. The stone is not a singular object that has a direct referent, and it becomes unclear ultimately what exactly is being made present. Kroetsch signals his own awareness of the paradoxes of loss and of writing loss: why try to fix meaning when the lost object can never be made present?

Kroetsch employs other elements from the tradition of pastoral elegy as well. The seasons and nature are used frequently in pastoral elegy to “reflect the changes in the dead person (autumn or winter, then spring) and in the mourner’s grief” (99) as Jahan Ramazani states. The cycles of growth and harvest are noted by Kroetsch’s speaker in reference to the growing activities

of the father and grandfather and to the abundant growth that occurs on the farm. His grandfather first finds the stone in the spring while he is ploughing – “This stone maul/stopped a plough” (5) – a clear reference to a springtime activity. The blooming berry bushes are indicative of the vibrant growth of spring, countered by the ironic reference to “pemmican winter” (5) that contrasts the loss of the parent and grandparent with the cyclical and ongoing growth of the bushes. When the speaker remembers his ancestors, he remembers them as being active during the growing season of summer, noting that his father “was lonesome for the/ hot wind on his face” (7); the speaker then connects this notion of growth to his own practice of writing, for the stone serves as paperweight “in the (hot) wind” (8) in section ten. Further, for the speaker the stone is associated strongly with growth as he imagines it “smelling a little of cut/grass or maybe of ripening wheat.” (8). But this process of ripening also ironically refers to the notion of death, for things that are ripe are harvested (as the grass has been), and thus are no longer alive. The speaker acknowledges this connection when he references the dead buffalo blood and the death of the sun in the next lines: “buffalo blood hot/ in the dying sun” (8). The father is remembered in part by the association of the raspberry basket and the stone. The raspberry basket is used at harvest time, and thus in the autumn, to contain the growth – the raspberries – that has been plucked. Thus, the basket paradoxically indicates both life and death. Kroetsch’s use of the seasons along with vegetative growth is a gesture to traditional pastoral elegy where, as Ramazani notes, the “seasonal tropes are anthropomorphic” (99). The raspberry basket takes on associations with death and thus is related to the dead father. That the stone contained in the basket later becomes an integral part of the speaker’s writing desk, as is made apparent in the section that follows, reinforces the elegiac function of “Stone Hammer Poem,” but also reflects the memorial status of the stone and of Kroetsch’s poetry.

The stone, then, gains symbolic significance through its associations with memorial stones or grave markers. “Stone Hammer Poem” becomes a textual site of memory and memorial, where inscription can allow grief to be enacted and for the force of mourning to be borne. The significance of the notion of memorial is interesting as it applies to “Stone Hammer Poem,” for Kroetsch’s speaker associates the stone closely with the function of memory, and then links that memory with mourning. The stone thus is linked with grave markers and monuments and other signifiers of memory and death. James E. Young argues that monuments are the “material objects, sculptures, and installations used to

memorialize a person or thing” (4). For Kroetsch’s speaker, the stone becomes an object of memorial in the multiple, taking on what Young describes as the funereal function of a monument: “The traditional monument (the tombstone) can.... be used as a mourning site for a lost loved one” (3). For Kroetsch, the poem as a whole can be thought of as a *monumental text* for it stands as a memorial to the various elements of loss presented in the poem, and especially for the lost father and grandfather. A monument’s meaning operates only, as Young notes, within the framework of what is brought to it: “As an inert piece of stone, the monument keeps its own past a tightly held secret, gesturing away from its own history to the events and meanings we bring to it in our visits” (14). Likewise, Kroetsch’s stone takes on variable meaning, from a mere piece of rock to a historical artefact, to the focalizing object of the speaker’s grief.

For Kroetsch the work of mourning is an open-ended process, where the poem is an enclosure that contains elements of his labour; it does not close out his grief-work as Milton’s poem does for the swain. Kroetsch’s work of mourning is akin to the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century understanding of grief as an all-encompassing experience without closure. That is, loss cannot be compartmentalized, worked through and past in the Miltonic and Freudian sense; rather, loss becomes an intrinsic part of the experience of living, and for a writer it becomes an intrinsic part of his oeuvre and his opus, to echo Derrida. For Jacques Lacan, as Alessia Ricciardi remarks, loss takes on an “interminable, monotonous tempo.... a rhythm that flattens the singularity of the object and renders its historical circumstances irrelevant” (Ricciardi 43). Derrida effectively describes this idea in another passage from *The Work of Mourning*:

This being at a loss says something, of course, about mourning and about its truth, the impossible mourning that nonetheless remains at work, endlessly hollowing out the depths of our memories, beneath their great beaches and beneath each grain of sand, beneath the phenomenal or public scope of our destiny and behind the fleeting, inapparent moments, those without archive and without words. (94–95)

And so, for Kroetsch we see in “Stone Hammer Poem” a sign of that hollowing out of the depths of memory, of the impossible work of mourning that remains, that labours on. And, we are reminded in this contemplation that “Stone Hammer Poem” is mere prologue to the collected poems he has published as *Completed Field Notes*.

NOTES

1. Milton's poem is generally acknowledged as foundational in the English tradition of elegy, as critics like Peter Sacks and Melissa F. Zeigler note. Zeigler remarks that "Lycidas" is "resonantly influential for most later English elegy" (7), and though allusions to Milton are not direct in "Stone Hammer Poem," it is clear that Kroetsch's poem employs elements from the English tradition begun by Milton, as well as from the Greek, Roman, and later pastoral elegy traditions that Milton also borrows from.
2. See especially John Bowlby's *Loss: Sadness and Depression*, where he writes about the cyclical nature of grief over the course of a lifetime, and Ronald Schleifer in *Rhetoric and Death: The Language of Modernism and Postmodern Discourse Theory* on the limits of language in articulating loss.
3. I discuss the notion of the work of mourning further in *Writing Grief: Margaret Laurence and the Work of Mourning*, and in my introduction to *Response to Death: The Literary Work of Mourning*.

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