

## STRANGE LOOPS: NORTHROP FRYE AND CULTURAL FREUDIANISM

*Eli Mandel*

This paper does not attempt a history of recent Canadian literary criticism. Nor does it have anything important to say about Canadian writing in itself. Instead, it is concerned with how it is that literature and criticism, in this country, can be described as ways of seeing Canadian culture. This is a problem in perception. In order to address this question, I concern myself with two matters and I begin by describing or delineating these: one is the matter of cultural and critical theory; the other I call "strange loops."<sup>1</sup> The first is simply the question of whether (or by what means) literary and cultural history and theory are at all possible; the second, a puzzle about the language of literature and the paradoxes it involves. Strange loops are linguistic paradoxes that structure theories of poetry and literature and criticism. Theories of culture pose problems by means of somewhat different structures: themes, images, forms, for example.

I am reminded of two comments that might illustrate this distinction, one by Saul Bellow, the other by Groucho Marx. When Bellow won the Nobel Prize, he was asked whether he thought of himself as a Jewish writer like Malamud or Roth. "When anyone asks me about Jewish writers, they frequently mention Malamud and Roth along with Bellow" he replied. "I think at once of Hart, Shaffner and Marx, tailors not writers." This is a comment about cultural criticism. Groucho Marx once said he would refuse to join any club that would have him for a member. This is a strange loop. Both remarks should remind us of difficulties in the kind of question this paper addresses and in the problem proposed. I begin by listing, for convenience, three puzzles in the notion of cultural criticism or in the concept of "Canadian culture" and the means by which it might be *seen* through literature; the first has to do with the difficulty of generalizing to a class or social or public notion the particular perceptions of a poem or novel. You could put this as a difference between politics and fantasy, collectivist or particularist interests, objective or subjective approaches to writing. A second, as a kind of variation on this first, concerns the difference between an elitist approach to culture and mass culture or popular approaches. The literary and critical definitions of a literate audience, no doubt, stand in some sort of tension with the concerns of proletarian or at least mass or popular audiences. Third, a contradiction exists - profoundly, I think, - between the notion of writing as truth and writing as duplicity. Assuming that, as Roland Barthes remarks, the God of literature is the only god who lies, how would literary assertions relate to social reality or cultural identification?

Two theories of culture, to begin with, exist in opposition to one another. One, elitist, privileged (in language and metaphysical status), non-historical in relation to truth and society; the other, popular, particularist in language, and

## ELI MANDEL

experiential in form; one, more than likely, high literary criticism, formal in structure, continuous in form; the other, low or vulgar in approach, phenomenological in structure, discontinuous in form. We will have occasion to look at these differences in more detail as we go along. But this is obviously not the time or place in which to rehearse detailed puzzles of theory or even the history of attitudes about the purpose of literature as we have understood them in the country (though I will touch on some of these matters). I mention now, in passing, the problems the subject raises, the biases put before us (some now call this "habit").<sup>2</sup> What I propose to do is attempt to show how some questions I have put have been resolved or intensified in (first of all) our major literary critical approaches and then in the relevant work of some of our best writers. And in the process I want to put into opposition two kinds of critical and creative approaches: one, thematic, the other, structural; one about theory, the other, strange loops. I hope as well to deal with such intriguing questions that arise as those about history and structure, place and language, tradition and individual talent, and especially, beginnings and endings in writing: naming the world or bringing the house down.

## II

A remark in my preface to *Another Time* attracted considerable attention, as these things go. "Modern criticism in Canada," I said then, "has become a strikingly effective social instrument. It serves as a vehicle of political comment and social awareness. It seeks a central role in the development of national consciousness. It aspires to the attainment of cultural coherence."<sup>3</sup> There seemed to me then some reservations to be added; I was at the time thinking very largely of the thematic criticism of Northrop Frye as extended and developed by Margaret Atwood in *Survival* and D.G. Jones in *Butterfly on Rock*. By then, in fact, we had important work from Dennis Lee, Warren Tallman, and Robert Kroetsch. Miriam Waddington had published valuable essays critical of the metaphoric mode of Frygian thought, and Frank Davey's ground-breaking *From There to Here* had appeared. The alternative approaches were taking shape even as the main-stream of serious academic criticism from Desmond Pacey to Malcolm Ross continued to develop and a large series of critical monographs on Canadian writers appeared. Still, no one, I think, is likely to dispute the view that the most cogent and powerful means of describing Canadian culture through its literary expression has been, historically, the so-called thematic criticism of Frye. Indeed, despite some sustained objections, the method, if anything, was elaborated and extended through a series of major critical studies - I think especially of John Moss's work and (to a lesser degree) of Margot Northey's generic study with its revealing title, *The Haunted Wilderness* and, of course, a host of essays in important critical journals. Yet, despite the range and acuity of critical objections to and assessments of Frye's method (for example, Malcolm Ross's, George Woodcock's, Frank Davey's, Russell Brown's) two major peculiarities of it seem

## STRANGE LOOPS

to have eluded them.

It is surely no longer necessary to rehearse the central argument of thematic criticism though some of its implications take on special importance in this special context. Two in particular. First, the nature and character of its central metaphor, and second, its view of cultural Freudianism. Both, indeed, are vehicles of its social and cultural perceptions, its ways of seeing.

The central and familiar argument of thematic criticism is that the formative response in Canadian writing is to a dominant physical fact - the land as wilderness or north as symbol. Frye speaks of this as the riddle of the unconscious and believes that because of its concern with a symbolic mystery - unexplored, uncharted aspects of mind and universe, much of Canadian writing takes shape in images of terror and nightmare - a haunted, gothic mental space. The Canadian aspect of this encounter with the wilderness is the development of what Frye calls a "garrison mentality"<sup>4</sup>

The importance of this argument is that it connects with an historical interpretation of Canada as a northern nation or a Laurentian Empire. Unlike America, which develops by transformation at the frontier, Canada closes itself into the conservative town. America is revolutionary, active, dynamic. We are conservative, passive, religious. In another context, I put this in Charles Olson's terms in his essay on Melville, *Call Me Ishmael*. "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America. . . large and without mercy. . . Plus a harshness we still perpetuate. . . The fulcrum of America is the Plains, half sea, half land, a high sun as metal and obdurate as the iron horizon. . . Some men ride on such space, others have to fasten themselves like a stake to survive. As I see it Poe dug in and Melville mounted. They are the alternatives."<sup>5</sup>

This is one of the implications of Frye's criticism and from the gothic it seems to me, a version of ourselves, distinct, clear, individual and peculiar emerges. Of this more, later.

The central metaphor needs some account. It becomes clear in the opposition to Frye's position (which begins, by implication at least as early as in John Sutherland's *Other Canadians* (1947), designed as a reply to A.J.M. Smith's *Book of Canadian Poetry* (1946) that itself occasioned Frye's review in the *Canadian Forum*, "Canada and Its Poetry," the first major statement of thematic criticism of our literature.) Sutherland's is essentially the same in substance, if not politically, as Frank Davey's critique in 1974 (*From There to Here*). In Sutherland's view, Smith's anthology fails because, choosing to support British intellectuals, like P.K. Page, Patrick Anderson, Neufville Shaw, James Wreford, it perpetuates our British colonialism, as a version of what Sutherland called the Canadian "Butler mentality." Against Smith, he argued a Marxist position: genuine Canadian writing, he said, is not upper middle class, aristocratic, or genteel, but lower class, vulgar, proletarian. Inside every Canadian there's a Brooklyn Bum-self struggling to get out and let loose his barbaric yawp. Our *real* tradition is American and proletarian, not British and intellectual.<sup>6</sup>

This you recognize as familiar and important. It says we are not a garrison people but a frontier people. It points to a perennial tension in Canadian life between English and American influences on our life *and* culture, tensions

## ELI MANDEL

expressed as between those who believe the lines of influence run North and South and those who believe they run East and West, between those who hold the Laurentian thesis of Innis and Creighton or those who, like Underhill, are continentalists, those who say Canada exists *because* of its geography and those who say it exists *despite* its geography.

At this point a peculiar, potent metaphor enters the discussion from the literary point of view. Frye's position is uncompromisingly British, not American so far as writing is concerned. There are two fallacies about poetry, the imaginative process, to be got rid of, one he calls North American, the other American though they come to the same thing. One he calls "Tarzanism," the other "the Ferdinand the Bull theory of poetry." Both views are that poetry begins with experience, "first-hand contact with life:" smelling the flowers like Ferdinand or out of pure primitive machismo, like Tarzan or Irving Layton.

Both are wrong. Frye calls them aboriginal views of poetry, but poetry, he says is not aboriginal or primitive. Its origin consists of going back to origins. But the origins of poetry are poetry. Literature begins with literature. It imitates other poetry. It is traditional not aboriginal. It is literary not experiential.

This is the point at which Frank Daveky objects and the point at which the two opposing views of *culture* with which I began, now emerge. It provides a key metaphor in Frye's perception. I turn, to elucidate the point, to Paul Bove's *Destructive Poetics* and particularly to his essay on "Literary History and Literary Interpretation." There Bove argues that criticism such as Frye's (Harold Bloom's, for example) "nostalgically (reifies) an aesthetically ordered. . . humanistic *tradition* as an alternative to the radical flux, disorder, alienation and death which characterizes the Post-modern world."<sup>7</sup> His argument is clearest in his direct engagement with Bloom. I quote his summary of Bloom's startling and highly influential thesis about the birth of the poet, the meaning of tradition, the family romance and the meaning of "the anxiety of influence."

The argument of [Bloom's] *The Anxiety of Influence* is that all strong poets "try to overcome the priority of nature and time and necessarily fail." The independently existing "external" world claims priority over the poetic mind and restricts its freedom and comfort. "For every poet begins (however 'unconsciously') by rebelling more strongly against the consciousness of death's necessity than all other men and women do. Of course, according to Bloom, the acute anxiety of the poet emerges from the fear of two deaths: the physical death of the human being threatens the absolute freedom and priority of the 'cogito,' and the inhibiting temporal struggle with the poet's precursors promises 'poetic' death. Thus the poet's quest is for temporal priority over his fathers as well as for hierarchical priority or authority over nature. The poet's desire is to be not only his own father and to displace his 'real' father, *but to be the parent of those who gave birth to him in what Bloom, echoing Freud, calls the 'Primal scene of Instruction,'* the moment of 'Election-Love' when the poet is called and answers"<sup>8</sup> (I confess to a strong personal attraction to Bloom's theory of influence and to the marvellously paradoxical way it is put).

Now the cryptic and sometimes vexing meaning of Frye's comment "Poetry imitates poetry" becomes clear. That is a definition of *tradition* in poetry with all

## STRANGE LOOPS

the attendant and necessary metaphors implied. To use Bové's language again; two tropes (or figures of speech-metaphors) structure Bloom's thesis and reflect his concerns, and prejudices: "first, the genetic metaphor and its variants - the myth of the Fall, the idea of origins, the language of loss and nostalgia and the ultimate death of poetry; [beginning and end come together, we notice.] Second, the rhetoric of dualism and its transformations - the Cartesian isolation of the self, the quest to escape nature and time, the Gnostic desire for godhead, and the melancholy insistence on the priority of mind over matter."<sup>9</sup> The primal figure of Frye's thematic criticism is a metaphor about what has been called the burden of the past or the anxiety of influence. In Sartre's words it is heraldic and mythic, a naming or identifying metaphor. It is too a metaphor that denies time in its circular form of literary history which identifies beginning and end. The poet of Frye's scheme seeks the timeless, the world of structure not process, order not disorder, culture not phenomenal experience. These are the implications of his work that critics like Frank Davey view with distaste. Critics who see his work as bookish, about literature, not about experience, elitist not democratic, concerned with structure and art as opposed to process and experience. There is, however, a further aspect of the metaphor of art and genetics, or the romance of the family, to be noted.

One of the most attractive features of thematic criticism - at least to literary nationalists - is that it lends force to a wide-spread view that literature serves as a means of national identification and accordingly as a force for national unity. One form of this view implies an analogy between an individual or person and a body of literature (a metaphor we have just been looking at in Frye's trope of genetics or origins).<sup>10</sup> Literature then is to the nation what personality is to the person. It defines us by giving us further metaphors of "who we are." Another form of the same view sees literature as defining or arising out of place, therefore providing us with a picture, so to speak, of "where we are." A subtler elaboration of these first two views postulates a social and causal relationship: literature is a product of society and accordingly a portrait not of its external features but of its very nature and mode of operation and existence, its processes, so to speak. The first is a kind of cultural Freudianism, the second, a literary geography, the third, a literary sociology, more often than not Marxist. That no one has yet made sense of the so-called causal relations between literature and society seems not to have occurred as an objection, no more in the sociology than in cultural Freudianism. Taken together, the three views constitute, as many argue they do, a psychological, geographical, and sociological portrait of Canada and hence an image of its character and nature, invaluable for the intricately particularized sense of the felt life of the country, not only its general features but its very texture.

So it is with the Freudian form of thematic criticism. Its many implications provide it with a convincing metaphoric position. It develops, in Atwood's *Survival*, through feminist shamanistic visions of the wilderness; and throughout, with the notions of the mythic sense of tradition as the formative force in writing. To take some of the more striking examples, Robert Kroetsch uses punning distinctions of horse-house to play with erotic metaphors of space

## ELI MANDEL

in fiction of the Canadian west and Earle Birney uses the metaphor as a means of psychoanalyzing all of us as perennial adolescents. How much of the Freudian approach, if any, is to be found in John Moss's *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel*, I don't know but I've heard there is a study of Canadian writing modelled on Leslie Fiedler's wonderful *Love and Death in the American Novel*.

It is Frye himself who points to a number of objections which can be urged against the view that literature serves as a means of national identification and startlingly points to the development that, in literature and criticism, weighs most heavily against the structure his own work created: that development is regionalism. Now, though at a glance this sounds very like a plea for provincial interests by a local politician, it, in fact, means something quite different from political decentralism. In criticism, it refers to the so-called destructive poetics which seeks to demystify tradition, history, traditional forms and structures. It involves the substitution of process, discontinuity, the poetry of flux and phenomenon, and the substitution of self-reflexive forms of strange loops or paradoxes of self for the timeless structures of the work of art outside of time, the artifices of eternity, in Yeats' phrase. To show how this substitution occurs and its relation to modern thought is the purpose of the remainder of this paper.

### III

It is true, as one might expect in Canada, that the initial impetus toward a regional art and criticism looks very much as if it begins for political reasons. In his Preface to *The Bush Garden, Essays on the Canadian Imagination*, collected in 1971, it seems as if Frye has radically shifted from his nationalism of the forties and his internationalism of the mid-sixties when in *The Modern Century* he announced that Canada has come to nationhood just at the time when in a post-national world the significance of the nation had vanished. "Unity and identity," he remarked in his Preface, "are quite different things, and in Canada they are perhaps more different than anywhere else. Identity is local and regional, rooted in imagination and in works of culture; unity is national in reference, international in reference, and rooted in political feeling." "There are," Frye concedes, "of course, containing imaginative forms which are common to the whole country, even if not peculiar to Canada." The narrative, Frye argues; the documentary says Dorothy Livesay; the long poem, claims Michael Ondaatje. But the distinction Frye makes is of major import. Culture aligns itself with local and regional interests; "the rooted imaginative factors common to the country as a whole are negative influences," says Frye.<sup>12</sup>

Frye is addressing himself to the present lack of will [in Canada] to resist its own disintegration, in part by arguing for the authority of cultural disparity and the political danger of cultural nationalism or uniformity. Oddly, his argument co-incides with the modernist urge to articulate particularisms of various kinds and to deconstruct attempts at uniformity centralism, and orthodoxy, "... New Canadian writing of the sixties and seventies," Frank Davey announced in the

## STRANGE LOOPS

Introduction to his *From There to Here* "has taken process, discontinuity, and organic shape as its values rather than the humanistic ideal of the well-wrought urn. The writer's goal in such work has been no longer to retreat from the experiential world but to embody - and thus make intelligible to his reader - its rapidly increasing variety, fragmentation, non-linearity, and unpredictability."<sup>13</sup>

Both "regionalism" and "modernism" (or "post-modernism" as it is more often known), I well know are contentious terms, not fully understood nor clearly distinguished. So, for rather obvious reasons, I intend to be schematic and to draw my boundaries here crudely. I am going to argue first that regionalism is one aspect of modern culture in Canada and two, that it can be thought of primarily in linguistic terms, as language, and as a version of discontinuity or process in poetry. The sense in which we can distinguish various regions I leave to the examples I choose to illustrate my point. I refer to three writers in particular, and a fourth to reinforce my point. The writers are Robert Kroetsch, Rudy Wiebe, and Jack Hodgins, the fourth is Clark Blaise. They provide a spectrum of regionalist possibilities and modernist concerns in writing.

I begin with Robert Kroetsch for the simple reason that he is one of those writers specially valuable for critics uneasy about their terms who tends to define as fine a series of approaches to a definition of modernism as any critic could speak, is self-referring. He is also a cultural critic of the first order surveying the very material that is our subject. He introduced the notion in Canadian criticism of un-inventing structures or destructive criticism. He focussed the attention of cultural critics on the distinction between region *as place* and region *as voice* (or language). The local pride, he argued, locates itself in its stories about itself, the oral tradition. His essay on "The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem" provides as fine a series of approaches to a definition of modernism as any critic could wish for. In typical bawdy fashion that those familiar with his work have come to expect the essay on the long poem is entitled "For Play and Entrance." There are more than 24 sections and you'll be relieved to hear I choose only to list those which seem to me most resonant with values we need to discuss. Thus, toward a definition of modernism, or what makes a poem a long poem:

- 1) Not how to end, but how to begin
- 2) The poem of the failure of system is the long poem
- 3) Our interest in the discrete, the occasion
- 4) A skepticism about history, the temptations of the documentary  
—archeology, not history
- 5) The failure of language
- 6) "It implies a form of literature that feeds on its own impossibility"
- 7) Place as space or absence
- 8) *in search of* instead of *in vision*
- 9) the conflict of the poem with its own design  
the double or the strange loop  
the presence of absence
- 10) the gap between language and narrative<sup>14</sup>

## ELI MANDEL

What long poems? Phyllis Webb, *Naked Poems*; Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*; Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*; bp Nichol, *The Martyrology*; Don Mackay, *The Long Sault*; Fred Wah, *Pictograms from the Interior of B.C.*; Daphne Marlatt, *Steveston*; George Bowering, *Allophanes*; Roy Kiyooka, *The Fountain bleau Dream Machine*; Al Purdy, *In Search of Owen Roblin*; Eli Mandel, *Out of Place*; Robert Kroetsch, *Field Notes*. (For sheer interest, compare this list with Frye's comparable one of 1959 or 1956.)<sup>15</sup>

If modernist is, then, deconstruction, demystification, failure, beginning, a poem of language, in what way can we say this is regional? We note particularism, for one thing, but especially how the regional poem is a self-referring structure. Kroetsch's *Field Notes* is a continuing poem, one long poem linked to another in an endless sequence. Each is a book—a book of a book, image of itself, as in *The Ledger*: an account book of debits and credits, two columns balanced in the terror. The order of this poetry is what we now call structural: a binary system resolving the opposition or tension of a duality. Some odd results appear. A structural system is said to be ahistorical, that is, outside of time. But the self-referring strange loops appear to have unusual historical effects. A popular treatment of the subject, *Goedel, Escher, Bach* which deals with such loops in art, music, and mathematics, points out that Goedel's theorem in modern mathematics is called the dismal theorem because it proves the impossibility of mathematics. It, in fact, is a strange loop. Paradoxically, *nothing* then proved of enormous consequence. Part of Kroetsch's concern is then to discern structures (tradition, for example), part to destroy them, so that we may see what is *really* there. Nothing at all? What we made up? He may very well be the one Canadian writer who created a literary tradition by destroying it.

The most impressive tour de force in his work is that passage in *Seed Catalogue* which runs through the metaphor of growth on the prairies. How do you grow a prairie town, he asks. The answer: by discerning absence. Its presence is its absence. The emptiness of the prairie, of its past, of its history, of its culture. It grows of nothing. Nothing becomes something.<sup>16</sup> The world as language appears in *The Sad Phoenecian*, a structural love poem. The Phoenecian is a sailor, a trader, who brings alphabets to every port, and who as sailor has a girl in every port. The poem is an alphabet poem of Phoenecian runes run off in a binary opposition of the "and/but" that tells his story. It is this creation *ex nihilo* (so to speak) that gives us the antiphonal story: love and death, truth and lies.<sup>17</sup> Each story in other words (and there are always other words) tells another story—of the double place of self and other, body and spirit, man and woman. The word is the place: particular, local, occasional, in the poem of failure in search of, not in vision. Design in conflict with itself.

Rudy Wiebe is less paradoxical but no less committed to the notion of fiction as the means of defining the region, through the structures of language which it is, and no less committed to modernism as the vehicle of his fiction. His terms are those of the Christian anarchist, not the nihilist. In a statement about his writing, "Passage by Land," a powerful and quite extraordinary analogy (Kroetsch quotes from it in the *Seed Catalogue*) provides a poetics for

## STRANGE LOOPS

regionalism:

To touch this land with words requires an architectural structure; to break into the space of the reader's mind with the space of this western landscape and the people in it you must build a structure of fiction like an engineer builds a bridge or a skyscraper over and into space. A poem, a lyric will not do. You must lay great black steel lines of fiction, break up that space with huge design and, like the fiction of the Russian steppes, build giant artifact. No song can do that; it must be giant fiction.<sup>18</sup>

Wiebe's giant fictions, *The Temptations of Big Bear*, *Scorched Wood People*, rewrite the history of the west, driving new structures across it to alter it as inexorably as the railroad, in fact. And a short fiction, like *Where is the Voice Coming From*, presents a theory turning into fact, an idea becoming a form, a concept becoming an experience with the stunning conclusion: having heard the Voice of Almighty Voice, fugitive, defiant renegade, the Cree, the narrator tells us "I do not, of course, understand the Cree myself." The theory proves "itself inadequate to explain what . . . happened." "For," says the narrator, "if I ever could, I can no longer pretend to objective, omnipotent disinterestedness. I am no longer *spectator* of what *has* happened or what *may* happen: I am become an *element* in what is happening at this very moment."<sup>19</sup>

The stance is modernist and regional. Both Wiebe and Kroetsch are prairie writers, writers of the west, but their place is as much language as geography, the giant black steel lines of Wiebe, the strange loops of Kroetsch. A third writer, Jack Hodgins, gives us a third perspective on this question, both in place and language. He is from Vancouver Island and his stories and fictions create that strange world—or *his* strange world. In Hodgins' *The Invention of the World*—if its astounding proliferation of events and experience can be cast in the form of summary—there are two major stories, both pilgrimages, one the obverse of the other. A magical story of a god-man, Donal Keneally, who lures an Irish village to Vancouver Island to his colony, The House of Revelations. The other is the story of Maggie Kyle, now the owner of the colony after the magic man's death—he tunnels himself into the earth in a black fury—how she runs it as a trailer park and returns Keneally's ashes to Ireland where he was born. The story is framed not only by Keneally's life and death, but by two marriages, Maggie's son's and her own. There are three dreams or wishes operating in the book: Keneally's wish to be god which proves evil; Maggie's to be at home in the world—both contained in the narrator's wish to know all. More than anything, the novel is marked by exuberance and humour. As Goeff Hancock puts it in his essay on "Magic Realism or, the Future of Fiction:"

Language is telescoped and compressed. Literary works are Chinese—boxed inside the literary work. Characters split off into doubles. Various fictional layers are confused with reality, and the relationship of one reader with the main characters constantly shifts. Hyperbole and humour is given a fast spin and takes off. Unreliable narrators stalk the pages. And things *happen*.<sup>20</sup>

## ELI MANDEL

The book is constantly threatening to turn into a book, a self-referring form. Hancock rightly calls this "magic realism" a mode in which extraordinary feats and mysterious characters exist in ordinary places and the magic occurs from the sparks generated between the possibilities of language and the limitations of physical nature. "Changes are . . . happening to the language of fiction." It is not accidental that Hodgins says "Gabriel Garcia Marquez is closer to me than any Canadian writer because the same water washes on the shore of my home as on his." Regional cultures spring out of literary connections not geographical ones. The magic of *A Hundred Years of Solitude* changes Vancouver Island through Hodgins' stories.

Language writes us, the modernists say. If that is so, we are being articulated by a new dream of possibilities, voices we have only begun to hear. I close with Clark Blaise for two reasons: his career is the epitome of what to say about a pluralistic modernistic relativistic culture; his article on writing a summary of my theme.

Blaise is defined by more boundaries, borders, countries, and regions than virtually any other Canadian writer; perhaps in this he *is* typical. Born in Canada, he lived as a boy in Florida, studied in American universities, married a Bengali writer, taught in Montreal, travelled to India to live there twice, returned to Montreal, joined the faculty at York in Toronto, left for the States where he now teaches at Skidmore. His first book had the brilliantly appropriate title, *A North American Education*.

His article on fiction is entitled *To Begin, To Begin*. In it, he enunciates three rules or lessons for the writer and with these I conclude because they sum up what I have to say about modernism in art (not how to end, but how to begin) and its implied view of Canada and its culture: not the ending but the beginning. Not a pocalypse but genesis. Not bringing the house down but raising the curtain, starting. Bob Kroetsch says, "It is the paradox of Columbus' perceptual moment that it cannot end. The moment of the discovery of America continues. . . We demand . . . new geographies. And the search that was once the test of sailor and horse and canoe is now the test of the poet."<sup>21</sup>

Clark Blaise says:

Lesson one: as in poetry, a good first sentence of prose implies its opposite (a strange loop.)

Lesson two: art wishes to begin, even more than end.

Lesson three: art wishes to begin—again.<sup>22</sup>

Department of Humanities  
York University

## STRANGE LOOPS

### Notes

1. The term is taken from David Hofstadter, *Goedel, Escher, Bach* (Basic Books, 1979) and the implications that are further worked out in Patrick Hughes and George Brecht, *Vicious Circles and Infinity* (Penguin, 1978).
  2. Some of the above distinctions are developed in Paul Bové, *Destructive Criticism*, Columbia Press, 1980.
  3. Eli Mandel, *Another Time*, Press Porcépic, 1977.
  4. Northrop Frye, "Canada and Its Poetry," and "Conclusion to a *Literary History of Canada*," *The Bush Garden*, Anansi, 1971, pp. 129-143 and pp. 213-251.
  5. Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, Grove Press, Inc., 1947, pp. 11-12.
  6. John Sutherland, "Introduction to *Other Canadians*," *Controversies, Essays, and Poetry*, ed. Miriam Waddington, McLelland and Stewart, NCL, 1972, pp. 55-62.
  7. Bové.
  8. *Ibid*, p. 9.
  9. *Ibid*, p. 8.
  10. See "Introduction", *Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism*, Vol. I.
  11. Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Anansi, 1971); R. Kroetsch, "Fear of Women: an Erotics of Space", *Canadian Forum*, vol. 58, no. 685, pp. 22-27; Earle Birney, "Canada: Case History: 1973", *Collected Poems*, (McLelland and Stewart, 1975), p. 175.
  12. Frye, *The Bush Garden*, pp. i-x.
  13. Frank Davey, *From There to Here*, Press Porcépic, 1974.
  14. Robert Kroetsch, "For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem," *Dandelion*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, pp. 61-85.
  15. Compare Frye, *The Bush Garden*, p. 126 pp. 163-179.
  16. Robert Kroetsch, "Seed Catalogue", *Field Notes*, General Publishing, 1981, pp.53-55.
  17. *Ibid*, pp. 77-79.
  18. Rudy Wiebe, "Where is the Voice Coming From?", *the narrative voice*, ed. John Metcalf, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, Ltd., 1972, pp. 249-256.
  19. *Ibid*.
  20. Geoffrey Hancock, "Magic Realism, or, the Future of Fiction", *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, No. 24/25, Spring, Summer, 1977, pp. 4-6.
  21. Robert Kroetsch, "Preface", *Dreaming Backwards. The Selected Poetry of Eli Mandel, 1954-1981*, General Publishing, 1981.
  22. Clark Blaise, "To Begin, To Begin", *the narrative voice*, ed. John Metcalf, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, Ltd., 1972, pp. 22-26.
-