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SKETCHES OF A LEMON – HOW DO YOU GROW A LEMON IN THE POSTMODERN GARDEN?

Abstract

The paper focuses on the analysis of the postmodern poem *Sketches of a Lemon* written by one of the co-founders of *boundary 2* – the poet Robert Kroetsch. The poem is a signature poem of the postmodern school.

By applying the postmodern technique of negation, the author of the paper gives the analysis of the poem trying to explain how the poet achieves the affirmation of the lemon on the white pages of the book. In the spirit of his postmodern technique, Kroetsch describes the presence of a lemon in terms of its absence. The language of the poem goes beyond signification and contains its own possibilities for perception. Kroetsch's use of imagery moves the readers to question how to make sense of language itself.

The author of the paper concludes that the sketches are brought into new meaningful arrangements by absorbing the reader in an imaginative and intellectual engagement. In creating the meaning of the poem, the author of the paper refers to the postmodern techniques and ideas of Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard.

Keywords

postmodern techniques, negation, absence, presence, lemon.

In the autumn in 1972, the author of the two already published novels (*The Words of My Roaring* (1966), *The Studhorse Man* (1969), the latter one being awarded Governor General award), Robert Kroetsch with William Spanos

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co-founded the journal for postmodern literature *boundary 2*. The first issue of *boundary 2* consisted of essays and reviews and represented an attempt to define postmodernism in relation to modernism. One of the reviews published in the first issue of *boundary 2* is the review of Ihab Hasan's book *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (1971). Hasan's book and the literature of fragments certainly found its way in Kroetsch's prose and poetry. Kroetsch continued to work in the spirit of postmodernism throughout his lifetime. *Boundary 2* published major figures, critics, poets, artists: George Woodcock, Nathan A. Scott Jr., Marjorie Perloff, Hélène Cixous, Charles Simic, Nicholas Sperakis, Pablo Picasso, etc. Over years it has changed its subtitle from "a journal of postmodern literature" to "an international journal of literature and culture" and acquired a more political dimension. It is still being published and at the time of this conference there is a *boundary 2* conference going on at the University of Pittsburgh.

Kroetsch's dedication to postmodernism goes to the extent that he tries to define Canada, his native country, in terms of postmodernism. In his essay "Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy" (1985) he defines Canada as a postmodern country. He explains his statement that Canada should have a shared story and refers to Lyotard's definition of postmodern condition:

I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward meta-narratives. ... To the obsolescence of the meta-narrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements. (Lyotard 1984: xxiv)

Canada should have "the shared... [or] the assumed story" (Kroetsch 1989: 21), which Kroetsch calls a meta-narrative. Or to make a long story short, in his opinion Canadians couldn't agree on what their meta-narrative is. According to Kroetsch, the very lack of a meta-narrative is what holds their story together. In his vision of a postmodern Canada he concludes that the country is held together by "the disunity" which is the semblance of unity. In the postmodern spirit and his trickster imagination, he applies the negative definition and in terms of absence describes the very presence of story, the technique he would widely use in his poetry and prose.

One of the very important concepts of Kroetsch's poetry and writing is the concept of how to communicate meaning, how to represent presence in terms of linguistic signs on the white blank page; how words relate to the real world. In that sense Kroetsch relies on Derrida's concept of *différance* to a great extent. After his concern with the challenge of meta-narratives, Kroetsch's next concern is with language itself and its ability to communicate meaning. He questions

meta-narratives and while asking questions he tells new stories and spins tales from the pages of catalogues, or around ledgers and hammers, or even lemons. Playing with the difference, with the gap that exists between the sign and the thing in the real world, between the signifier and the signified, the word and its referent, Kroetsch conveys meaning to the reader, or better to say, creates meaning between the reader and himself. He plays on the arbitrariness of meaning. For him the lemon is almost round and it is not round. It is not an orange or a pear. The readers will define a lemon on what it is not. He sketches a lemon by explaining what it is not. He deconstructs the convention of naming and creates his own one. The readers should distrust and find joy in the freedom of the arbitrary play with words the author sets on his pages. That might be the reason why there are so many reflections on Kroetsch's "Sketches of a Lemon".¹ And Kroetsch himself presented twelve different ways of looking at a lemon trying to define it. Susane Holbrook suggests that "Sketches of a Lemon" write into a 20th-century tradition of literary still lifes which interrogate the very projects of representation they undertake" (Markotić 2017: 195). Those who know Kroetsch and his work know that he likes puns, he plays with titles mocking them. It is said that "Sketches of a Lemon" draws on Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (Markotić 2017: 182).

"Sketches of a Lemon" appeared in 1980 and was published as part of the collection of poems *Field Notes* (1981), *Completed Field Notes* (1989). It is a signature poem of the postmodern school. Kroetsch's famous question in the *Seed Catalogue* "How do you grow ...?" does not appear in this poem explicitly; still the question resounds throughout the poem. In the spirit of his postmodern technique, Kroetsch describes the presence of a lemon in terms of absence.

The poem, consisting of twelve sketches, is a story without narrative, with paradoxical constructions without ordering and methods such as anecdote, scientific observation, literary research, lyric expressions, joke, etc. through which lemon is approached. The lemon is compared to what it is not.

¹ In Nicole Markotić's book *Robert Kroetsch: Essays on his Works* there is the whole section on "Sketches of a Lemon" which contains essays: Dennis Cooley "Even Steven: Kroetsch Takes a Peek at the Blackbird", Nathan Dueck "Drafts of Kroetsch's 'Sketches of a Lemon'", Robert Archambeau "A Sketch of 'Sketches of a Lemon'", Jon R. Flieger "What do you give an injured lemon?", Aritha van Herk "Lines on biting into Kroetsch's lemon. Again", John Lent "You Don't Say: Voice in 'Sketches of a Lemon'", Gary Geddes "A Rum Analysis", John Moss "Sketch of a Plivalent Lemon", Pauline Butling "Sweet and sour", Roy Miki "Riffs on RK's Lemon Poem", Susan Holbrook, "The Unstill Life of Kroetsch's Lemon".

A lemon is almost round.
 Some lemons are almost round.
 A lemon is not round. (Kroetsch 2000: 76)

What Kroetsch applies in these three lines is his technique of naming, unnameing and renaming. Trying to capture a lemon in words, he says “A lemon is almost round”, then he unnameing it “some lemons are almost round”, which means that not all lemons are round, and then he defines a lemon through negation: “A lemon is not round”. The speaker continues to speak of a lemon in terms of negation in sketch 4:

Sketches, I reminded myself,
 not of a pear,
 nor of an apple,
 nor of a peach,
 nor of a banana
 (though the colour
 raises questions). (Kroetsch 2000: 77)

The attempt to determine what lemon is depends on absence. It is the absence of the lemon attempted to be created in words that invokes a lemon.

As the poet cannot represent the lemon on the page, he offers different possibilities of perception. While listing what lemon is not, he turns into an unexpected direction. Instead of giving a definition of a lemon, he uses auditory imagery:

Smaro, I called
 I'm hungry. (Kroetsch 2000: 77)

In a number of different observations, the poet asserts the image of his wife, Smaro, who cooks salmon garnished with lemon. Smaro rolls the lemon against the breadboard, “which stimulates, at the very least, one of the poet's erotic impulses (Markotić 2017: 187). Does the rolling of the lemon confirm the poet's premise that the lemon is almost round. Prior to being drawn on the page or put into words (if possible), the lemon is exposed to all our senses; in this case, the sense of touch.

In the poem, Kroetsch is a poet and a painter who actually paints down a lemon on the table leaving a puzzle for the reader: how to grasp the meaning of the absurd sketch of a lemon left behind him on the white pages of the book.

The poem gives off “sensual, visual, tactile, olfactory” (van Herk 1986) images, underlining the connection between the poet and the painter, the abstract and the concrete. The dominant image is the still-life of a lemon. Through the post-modern technique of negation, Kroetsch achieves an affirmation. The problem is if a lemon belongs to the abstract still-life world or if it is attempted to be created in words and turned into something concrete:

poem for a child who has just bit into
a halved lemon that has just been squeezed:
see, what did I tell you, see,
what did I tell you, see, what
did I tell you, see what did
I tell you, see, what did I
tell you, see, what did I tell
you, see, what did I tell you,
see, what did I tell you, see,
what did I tell you, see, what
did I tell you, see, what did
I tell you, see what did I
tell you, see, what did I tell
you, see, what did I tell you
One could, of course, go on. (Kroetsch 2000: 80)

The lemon is written over as a photographic representation of the thing. If the reader wants to grasp meaning, he should “see” and find the meaning on his own.

In sketch 3, the impossibility to create a material object in words is anticipated by the picture of blackberries, which replace lemons:

I went and looked at Frances Ponge’s poem
on blackberries. If blackberries can be
blackberries, I reasoned, by a kind of analogy,
lemons can, I would suppose, be lemons.
Such was not the case. (Kroetsch 2000: 77)

By speaking of blackberries to describe a lemon, the speaker stresses the arbitrary relation between the signifier and the signified and the fact that meaning lies beyond the level of signification. The reference is made to Ponge’s poem “Blackberries”, but Kroetsch’s poem echoes many other well-known thinkers and poets: Derrida, Barthes, Lyotard, de Saussure, Wittgenstein, Wallace Stevens.

In sketch 2, the arbitrary nature between the signifier and the signified is further depicted by inserting the memory of the speaker’s father:

As my father used to say,
well I’ll be cow-kicked
by a mule.

He was especially fond of
lemon meringue pie. (Koetsch 2000: 76)

The paradoxical construction of being “cow-kicked by a mule” also indicates the arbitrariness and is stressed by the association of his father’s fondness for “lemon meringue pie”.

A paradoxical comparison is made in sketches 8 and 12 where the speaker makes the comparison:

I'd say, a lemon is shaped
 exactly like an hour.

 The hour is shaped like
 a lemon. We taste its light
 on the baked salmon.
 The tree itself is elsewhere. (Kroetsch 2000: 79, 80)

By connecting the abstract with the concrete, the hour and the lemon, the speaker tries to define the lemon: "The hour is shaped like a lemon". The sketches is a portrait of a lemon and like an hour it contains 12 sections. However, the presence of a lemon exceeds the poets capacity with language. Like the tree, the lemon is elsewhere; it is not present on the page. Susan Rudy, who discusses incredulities about names and naming, suggests that the poem could be re-named "this is not a lemon" (Rudy 1991: 43).

In "Sketches of a Lemon", the tree, as a recurrent trope in Kroetsch's poems, from which the lemon originates, is absent and is elsewhere. Instead of a single origin, we have no origin at all, just multiple possibilities to (re)connect with the world. Similarly, Kroetsch asserts in the interview that: "Instead of the temptations of "origin" we have genealogies that multiply our connections into the past, into the world" (Kroetsch 1982: 117).

Though the poem consists of meaningless accidental occurrences of words, it offers a pleasurable opportunity for the reader to decrypt its significance. The reader is invited to play the role of the maker of meaning. Meaning resides in the reading of the text. Garrett-Petts and Lawrence explain that "the accidental thus becomes a postmodern aesthetic principle asserting the ascendancy of process over product, horizontal association over vertical dominance" (Garrett-Petts, Lawrence 2000: 80). The sketches are brought into new meaningful arrangements by absorbing the reader in an imaginative and intellectual engagement. The poet provokes readers to perceive the lemon while questioning the limitations of their own perceptions and the limitations of linguistic representation.

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