

A Languaged-Self: Translating Aritha van Herk's Novels

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If you're looking at writing in Canada at all,
you just can't footnote the women
(Atwood 1995: 90)

To translate Aritha van Herk's novels is not an easy task; it means to outline the complexity of words that are transported from one language into another, from one culture into another by an author who crosses geographical, literary and cultural boundaries and stands as an example of multicultural Canada, citizen of a country that, as she says, «provokes a multiple identity complex in everyone» (2001). The translation of van Herk's novels into Italian involves a wider notion of this practice of 'rewriting'¹: 1. the self-translation of the author from one language/culture to another, 2. the translation of the Canadian space and identity epitomised by the Canadian West, and specifically, Alberta. 3. the translation of a complex intertextual web made of allusions to the Canadian and the European contexts.

Aritha van Herk was born and bred in Alberta, in a family of Dutch immigrants. With her first novel, *Judith* (1978), the story of a young woman who takes up a pig farm, she won the Seal Books First Novel Award. In 1981 she published *The Tent Peg* set in the Canadian North, one of her recurrent themes in her work, and some years later, *No Fixed Address An Amorous Journey*, a parody of the picaresque tradition through the depiction of a Canadian 'picara'. Van Herk loves 'the North' and utilises it as a metaphorical space that can be explored and possessed by women. She opposes it to the 'West' that she conceives as «Male. Masculine. Manly. Virile» (van Herk 1992: 139). In her essay «Women Writers and the Prairie: Spies in an Indifferent Landscape» the author expresses her idea about Robert Kroetsch's claim about prairie fiction and the trapping of women in the house.² A Western Canadian of Alberta, van Herk wants to subvert the representations of women in Western literature and she decides to do so utilising the North, metaphor for a blank space that can be rewritten from a feminist point of view (Goldman 2001). In another essay «Ap-

¹ I am referring to the debate within Translation Studies and the 'Cultural Turn' carried on by scholars such as Lefevere and Bassnett (1992). See also Bassnett and Trivedi (1999) and Lefevere 1992.

² Van Herk and Kroetsch have discussed gender and genre in Canadian literature, see Sellery 2001.

propriations, The Salvation Army and a Wager» she shows how women writers can re/appropriate the prairie and affirms that «women need to be spies here, to be terrorists» (van Herk 1991: 85). Establishing the north as her place of discovery and rewriting, in *In Visible Ink* van Herk states that the Canadian arctic region is for her a place where she can survive beyond language:

And yet in this distant, eerie world of ice, unwriting and unwritten, merely a cipher of human bone and blood, I am inexplicably, immeasurably happy: because I am finally free of words [...] I am at last beyond language, at last literally invisible. Which is, reader, I confess, the state I ideally wish to attain. Finally, finally, a life dominated by language, I am to some degree free of it, of having to speak and read and write. [...] The landscape there, its delicious remoteness, calm uncommensurability, catalyzed my reading act into something beyond reality [...] turned and began to read back, to read me, to unread my very reading and my personal geography (1991: 2-4).

The northern landscape becomes a white great page where the author can reinvent herself. If van Herk utilises the North as metaphor of a feminine space, it is important to underline that it has always been a symbol for Canadian literature and a thematic element in writings about journeys and adventures in the frozen natural landscape. In *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*, Margaret Atwood presents 'the North' as a theme to a non-Canadian audience saying, «'The North' is thought of as a place, but it's a place with shifting boundaries. It's also a state of mind. It can mean 'wilderness' or 'frontier'» (1995: 8). Atwood's book begins with the Franklin expedition imagery that is a well known pattern of Canadian literature and culture, together with the idea of the North as «a sort of icy and savage *femme fatale* who will drive you crazy and claim you for her own» (88). Then she ends her volume with an analysis of women writers and their account of the north, proposing in this way a feminine perspective of the north, its imagery and metaphors. One of the writers she chooses is indeed Aritha van Herk, specifically her novel *The Tent Peg* where the protagonist disguises herself as a man in order to be a cook in a Yukon geological expedition. In its reversal of gender roles and representation of the female character in the Northern context the novel is certainly subversive and powerful. Talking about this novel, which openly alludes to and re-interprets a well-known Canadian text, Marian Engel's *Bear* (1976), van Herk says that it follows: «the tradition of a Canadian romance, but I needed a female ally for the landscape so that the polarities are not so distinctive. I wanted a woman character to penetrate that male world, succeed within it and act as an interpreter/interface» (1992: 280-281).

However, van Herk's novel that focuses completely on the North is her fourth novel, defined as a 'geografictione' by the author, published in 1990 and

entitled *Places Far from Ellesmere*. None of van Herk's works have been translated into Italian. In this essay I will refer to her fifth novel, *Restlessness* (1998). Van Herk also wrote two collections of essays, *In Visible Ink: Crypto-Frictions* (1991) and *A Frozen Tongue* (1992) which are quite helpful in analysing her work but also as 'maps' for a possible translation of the author. Van Herk is known as a feminist writer concerned with gender issues echoing discussions of French Feminism and *l'écriture féminine*, she herself states: «My feminism is never far from my pen. I am a feminist. I am a writer. I try to live and work as feminist and writer, writer and feminist. What I expect, yearn for, from my writing is an articulation of a secret and uninvented language. I want to dare to inscribe my body on the page» (1991: 131). But she is also a representative author of the Prairies interested in depicting the Canadian Western cultural heritage. In 2001 she published a book on Alberta, *Mavericks, an Incurable History of Alberta* (2001b),³ a final homage to the landscape that has inevitably shaped her and her writing because, as she affirms, «the impact of landscape on artist in unavoidable» (1992: 139). A Canadian of Dutch origins van Herk is a writer embedded in the multicultural recipient of languages which enrich the Canadian context after centuries of immigration. Her work highlights how the issue of multiple languages is strictly linked to those of nationalism, cross-cultural encounters and cultural heritage. As a piece of the Canadian mosaic, part of a minority that speaks Dutch, Van Herk is a good example for a discussion on translation. For the Dutch-Canadian writer, «the real miracle is language»:

That we humans want not only to touch each other but that we want to exchange words, like marbles from a fist, that we want to hear discernible sounds from each other's mouths, that we want to decipher them, that we utter our own sounds and others understand them. Even more miraculous, that we put these various marks on paper, written or printed or typed, and others understand the message, make some connection with these peculiar runes. This is a sweet and terrifying exchange, this intricate and shared knowledge of what is certainly a secret code (van Herk 1991: 53).

Van Herk insists on the notion of orality and literacy, refers to language as a code to transmit a message «with specific weight and connotative clouds» and emphasises that words are power encoded. Language is moulded and reshaped in our mouths and hands. Language is the means for a mutual exchange of written codes and sounds, it is also an intricate web, a 'structural prison' from which the author wants to escape because it binds her:

³ It was followed in 2007 by *Audacious and Adamant: the Story of Maverick Alberta*, an entertaining research on Alberta's past.

Bound by the limitations of my life/language. Bound by my first (and other) language (Dutch), an evil/beguiling genie that still ambushes me with its idiosyncratic voice and cultural nuance. Bound by the language of my desire: fiction, story, the unforgivable and unutterably attractive lie/truth. Bound by that most mysterious language of all: silence (129).

Language is an auto-biographical thread made of different sounds and its antithesis, silence. First of all, language embodies cultural difference; in van Herk's work the presence of two languages struggling with each other envision two worlds from which the writer goes back and forth to construct her own identity in an act of self-translation. Secondly, language expresses desire, it is a means to inscribe herself on the page utilising different tools/genres that the author skilfully shapes. Thirdly, silence is a language, the language of freedom, the mothertongue or, as the authors says, the «tonguemother», because «Body, place, land» make the «resident tongue, the vernacular endemic» (1992: 20). These three elements – body, place and land – are strictly interwoven in her writings. In *A Frozen Tongue* the author remembers:

I was born and learned to walk in Dutch, that obscure language practised by barely eighteen million people. I learned to eat and sleep in Dutch, to touch or not touch, to obey, to disobey. And all the while I carried that first language, it was eroded around me, my parents speaking English more and more, my siblings speaking it exclusively, my friends totally Canadian and English-Canadian at that, until Dutch buried itself in the pre-natal sack of silence and blurred sound and I lost my tongue. It remains my perfect muteness, a pre-immortal memory that by its silence promised another articulation, one that will perhaps teach my tongue its own treachery. I have tried to unearth my lost Dutch, and to some extent I have, re-remembered, re-learned, re-named the objects of the world in my not-quite forgotten language (19-20).

The private language, the language of the family, of the origins, is unlearned, forgotten, put aside. Dutch is a «gift and a curse», it is «irrevocably lost and eternally present»(20). 'Tongue-twisted' and 'tongue-tied' the author articulates her belonging to Canadian culture. If in *Restlessness* van Herk introduces words in Dutch, words connected to a family lexicon (like 'schattenbout') or that are easily understood from the context, in her essays she inserts entire unexplained pages in Dutch. If in the first case the reader and the translator can work out the meaning from the network of textual references, in the second case, s/he does not know how to discern them, words remain – also for the Canadian reader – the author's secret code.

In *Restlessness* van Herk inserts a few words in Dutch always explaining their meaning, she translates them directly for the reader. These italicized single words surface on the page and are effective in visualising the author's self-translation struggle, the recovery of a lost tongue. The intrasentential code-switching

carried out by the author in this novel makes clear both her obsession with language and her narrative 'world of translation'. In order to translate van Herk's 'world of translation' we need to work as cultural mediators. Since the Cultural Turn in Translation Studies in fact, a purely linguistic translation has been perceived as too strict a frame that needs to be supplemented by a culturally-oriented translating process which unveils the implicit meanings of the discourses of the source text/culture. Translation must be envisioned as a dialogue between languages and cultures where the implications of an intercultural awareness in the translating process leads to a different approach where the translator is an active reader of the ST and a dynamic re/writer of the TT. Translation introduces the concept of difference because it confronts cultural diversities, it relies on notions such as linguistic equivalence and correspondences implying at the same time a series of 'untranslatability' issues. If the text encapsulates the writer's voice, we need to retrace the complex web of references to her intertextual and extratextual worlds. The translator needs to understand the author's narrative world together with the historical, cultural and social context in which the text is set and has been published. The translating process involves the transfer of a whole culture and in this decoding/encoding from one language/culture to another many historical, social and ideological elements must be taken into account. The translator's attention thus should shift from the specific meaning of words to a larger linguistic/social world they convey.

In translating van Herk's text the illusion of transparency should be avoided and the cross-fertilised text should emerge in the translated version. If, as Lawrence Venuti acknowledges, translation is «an asymmetrical act of communication» (1995: 21) the translated text should counteract this problematic axis and communicate the hybridity in the target culture showing the ST linguistic and cultural specificities and demonstrating that the translating process is a route through cross-fertilization between different languages and cultures. Referring to the historical translation debate on faithfulness Maria Tymoczko affirms that: «in obscuring or muting the cultural disjunctions, the translator ceases to be 'faithful' to the source text» (1999: 23). The use of untranslated words in translations and the inclusion of unfamiliar cultural material are necessary elements that reveal the uniqueness of the text/culture. They are markers of the author's cultural 'difference' and, perhaps, in van Herk's case they stand for her own peculiar 'runes' conceived as a mysterious world to be discovered and re-written.

However, the difficulty in translating *Restlessness* does not stand uniquely in the introduction of Dutch language and culture but in the complex intertextual web the author has skilfully interwoven. The recognition of multiple layers of meaning is brought into play in the translating process. In fact the analysis of

intertextuality in literary texts is a very interesting example of the utilisation of literary and cultural archives and their transposition into another context. *Restlessness*, presents a red thread in van Herk's writings: the theme of death as a final journey, as the author says, as «an act of final immigration» (2001a: 18). In *Places Far From Ellesmere* the narrator visits the cemeteries of Calgary, its graveyards that become her 'grottos' where she can hide and feel safe. Death and graves are positive images also in *No Fixed Address*, where the protagonist again is fond of graveyards, «They are her ideal picnic grounds» (1998: 9). In an interview van Herk affirms that death is: «a time we cannot know [...] a time we must imagine [...] it's a sort of final journey. Death is an act of final immigration: you become a different citizen. And I'm convinced it's a happy ending» (2001a: 18). Death is linked to movement, travel and escape, it is a final silence. The protagonist, Dorcas, whose Biblical name recalls the woman whom Peter raised from the dead, decides to hire a killer for her own murder.⁴ It is an act of empowerment and agency; she wants to decide her death and its modality. Dorcas is also a traveller, for a living she works as a courier, a messenger inhabiting zones of passage, airports, roads and hotels. Her home is living crossing frontiers, she totally surrenders to spatial displacement. Like all other female travellers of her books, Dorcas embodies the «memory of leaving. Journey, imagination itself» (1991: 174) that van Herk captures in nomadic characters, the extreme representation of the immigrant. If Canadians are «innate travellers, immigrants, nomadic. Nomadism is something you inherit, that gets in your blood» (2001), so her characters possess the power of disappearing, of deleting themselves from the stories. Death becomes for Dorcas the last border to cross, the ultimate road she takes to disappear, to escape social and gender roles. Therefore, in Dorcas's story many are the echoes of the previous novels by van Herk, echoes that must be recognised by the translator and re-adapted for the target reader. The translator's competence on the author's work therefore, makes a change in the translation.

The plot is based on the protagonist's encounter with her assassin, their dialogues and their walks through the streets of Calgary. The novel ends with the protagonist, her assassin and her *doppelgänger* in an elevator, a small space that can be connected to a coffin but at the same time an object which is in move-

⁴ In her first novel *Judith* (1978), Biblical references abound together with allusions to classic myths and figures such as Circe, traceable in the plot. Also the protagonist of *The Tent Peg*, Jael, possesses a Biblical name. When I interviewed the author (July 2001), she told me that the rewriting of mythology for her transports mythical characters to the contemporary world. She affirms that we occupy a series of mythological moments that often repeat and repeat. The use on mythology in van Herk's novel has been considered by Lutz and Hindersmann 1991. In their essay they underline the intertextual references to Native American cultures and traditions.

ment. Already in *Places far from Ellesmere*, Calgary, where the author lives, was depicted as a «growing graveyard», Jericho, the biblical walled city, a labyrinth, a maze to abandon. I have outlined elsewhere the importance of mapping, cartography and the depiction of the Canadian landscape by van Herk (Federici 2003), but what is important here, in the discussion of a possible act of translation is how the Canadian space is recreated through continuous intertextual allusions to European literatures, arts, music and cultures. A literary translation must be replete with intertextual references and their survival depends on the ability to maintain the linguistic/cultural features of the ST in the TT. However, it is a great challenge to be able to keep the same web of connotations. Translating intertextual references is not an easy task, the translator should be able to decode the many and varied intertextual layers. Therefore, the translator/mediator, has to negotiate a «transcultural interaction» being well aware of the multiple codes which form a literary work. The writer's intertextual tapestry must be rewoven with the necessary adjustment for the target reader.

In a reminiscence of Mrs Dalloway's walks in London the protagonists of *Restlessness* fill their time with conversations that recall the suicidal desire of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. A new Scheherazade, Dorcas seduces her assassin – postponing in this way her death – with her stories which echo European master painters, scientists, movie directors and modernist writers who are remembered through many literary allusions like for example, T. S. Eliot: «Like Prufrock. Do I dare to eat a peach? Shall I wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled? Except that I am not afraid» (van Herk 1998: 8) or James Joyce: «How much do I dare to claim? [...] 'And Trieste, ah Trieste ate my liver'?» (108), or Marcel Proust: «the taste of a madeleine. It was just a cookie» (193) and even a Woolfian reference about «lemon-colored sailing boats»(142) that cannot sail in Tofino, a little village on the Western coast of Vancouver Island, a foreign place untouched by the European memory. Dorcas remembers Schubert's *Memento mori* and Orson Wells's *The Third Man*. The Metropole Hotel in Brussels which recalls a Bertolucci movie is not the ideal place to die. The many allusions to cinema are also enclosed in the cinematic technique van Herk utilizes, full of small spaces, windows, mirrors that recall the reflected gaze of the spectator.

Van Herk's choice of retelling and representing European cities, culture and arts through Dorcas's perceptions of her journeys visualises the importance of her Dutch origins in her cultural background and visualises the difficulty for the translator to decode and interpret this text. S/he can grasp some references and lose others; even when he recognises them, he may be aware that some are not easily translatable in the target language/culture. Culture-bound terms, idiomatic expressions and references to social, historical and geographical facts

need to be decoded and re-coded. The act of translation itself will increase the network of intertextuality. Probably an Italian reader will be able to recognise the translation of intertextual references to European cultures but not so much the Canadian ones. The first intertextual reference to Canadian literature is certainly Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and her protagonist's 'staged death':

I planned my death carefully; unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it. My life had a tendency to spread, to get flabby, to scroll and festoon like the frame of a baroque mirror, which came from following the line of least resistance. I wanted my death, by contrast, to be neat and simple, understated, even a little severe, like a Quaker church or the basic black dress with a single strand of pearls much praised by fashion magazines when I was fifteen. NO trumpets, no megaphones, no span-gles, no loose ends, this time. The trick was to disappear without a trace, leaving behind me the shadow of a corpse, a shadow everyone would mistake for solid reality. At first I thought I'd managed it (Atwood 1976: 7).

Van Herk's novel begins in a similar way: «I am alone in a room with the man who has agreed to kill me» (1998: 7), but her protagonist seems much more sure of herself, she is not pretending, she wants to die, and wants so because she wants to decide when and where this final journey will happen to her: «I am engaged in an act of hunger, a ravenous plan of escape that I have been working toward for more than a decade. I'm impatient now, more impatient than before, when I pretended to be ready» (8).

Many are the quotations in the novel to Canadian writers, from the well-known Robert Kroetsch, to a less famous Alberta writer, Monty Reid. «Death is a happy ending» is the first epigraph to the novel and the last sentence, a quotation from Kroetsch and Diane Bessai. Many are the references to Canadian culture, beginning with the choice of her death place, the Pallister Hotel, which stands as a symbol for the colonisation of the West. In the Canadian West in fact, some hotels with the structure of 'gothic castles' were built according to a specific Eastern notion of elegance, they were constructed to attract tourists from Europe and Eastern Canada. They were perceived as signs of colonization. However, in van Herk's novels cities and buildings are used as evocations and metaphors, they are inserted as *personae*, they have a character. Many are the words that recall specific elements of the Canadian West, the Chinook, the Stampede, the cartography of Calgary, its streets that recall a pre-colonial past, its buildings like, for example, Nellie McClung's house, the Memorial Park Library or the Eau Claire and Bow River Lumber Company which reveal that the city was built on oil. How can the target reader know that McClung was a Liberal political archivist, a feminist fighting for women's suffrage and part of the Movement for Social Reform? Van Herk presents Calgary as «a city nagged into exis-

tence by the Mounted Police and the railway, the joint of the Bow and the Elbow» (117), all elements that would need to be explained for the Italian reader that would not know they are two rivers and that here was the home of the Blackfoot Nation. In this novel van Herk achieves to demonstrate her 'knowledge contamination', she puts into the pages literary and cultural influences she experiences as a writer, because for her «contamination is a very positive thing», she says: «influence and contamination are what I desire as a writer» (2001).

Van Herk herself defines intertextuality as «stealing inside after dark, stealing the extant text, stealing inside it, stealing the dark colonization of text by writer» (1991: 152). It is clear that for the translator her use of intertextual references to the Canadian and the European context necessitates a recontextualisation in the TT. Intertextual and intercultural references visualise, borrowing Homi Bhabha's words, the «cutting edge of translation and negotiation» (1995: 206). They are the most difficult elements in the act of intercultural mediation, nonetheless they open a window on Alberta culture, they arouse the reader's interest in the author's cultural world.

Another intertextual element to take into consideration translating this novel is the melding of genres, so skillfully reshaped by the author. The structure recalls a travelogue, especially books by women travelers – a long Canadian tradition – and autobiography but here the character's life is given through flashbacks and scattered memories. Another genre in-between the lines is the utopian novel, especially in her search for an ideal place, an 'environmental ecstasy' (2001). She plays with the reader and his/her ability to discover genres and devices in the structure of the novel. Right at the beginning Dorcas states: «I am not a character in a cheap thriller where a detective will break down the door with a bold shoulder, where my body will assume an exotic and silent place at the center of a mystery eventually solved by a slick loner with a penchant for cigarettes and superlative powers of deduction» (van Herk 1991: 8). The overt parody of detective fiction together with American hard-boiled and the allusion to Sherlock Holmes is clearly put on the page. A further reference can be made to the fantastic genre with the introduction in the story of the *doppelgänger* and the theme of dreams. After all, can all this story be just a dream? But unlike in a fantasy tale, the reader is left without doubt. The boundary between the realistic world and the one we can only imagine is a permeable one. The many intertextual/intermedial allusions to photography reveal the negative attitude of the author towards it. Pictures do not reflect reality but present it in a specific way; like maps «photographs are lies. They wait for misperception and spring on it» (van Herk 1998: 96). Verbally described photographs become in this novel metaphors of a planned trip:

a setup, a tawdry gamble, like the columned ads in the Sunday paper placed by single white females looking for prospective mates. To lose expectation in both travel and its record is to live an unfinished cartography, following the street that never appears on the map, the name that vanishes once it has been spoken, the country that has never been visited (1998a: 100).

If the novel describes photographs her collection of essays, *A Frozen Tongue* contains photographs. Again this is a postmodern device to challenge the reader, to outline the «differences between what the pictures show and what the story tells» (2001). In this work the interrelation between images and words is a strong one, and it is summarised at the end in the final section 'A Frozen Tongue/Crevasse' where the author presents the cover of the book, a painting by the artist Jane Evans. The crevasse stands for the field where the Canadian writer walks, a field where «history is shaken»(1992: 291) and where new possibilities can be open, both the possibility «to disappear the self, to plunge joyously into the crevasse» and «to re-read all elements»(291) be they narrative or artistic. Verbal and visual elements, bound together, translate the meaning of the text. At the same time the author translates through images and words her own identity.

While acknowledging the European heritage part of the Canadian context, the author asserts the difference and specificity of Canadian identity. She recognizes the heritage taken to Canada by immigrants and their links with other cultures and heritage reshaped through the Canadian experience. But the Canadian one is a confused experience: «America dominated my references: all the books and magazines, the radio programs, were American. This, coupled with singing 'God Save the Queen' and saluting the Union Jack, made for a very confused sense of place» (1992: 118). All this is within *Restlessness*, as the final recognition of a place for the self: «I now live somewhere, in a place created by Robert Kroetsch, by Alice Munro and Audrey Thomas, by Marian Engel and Matt Cohen, by Margaret Atwood and George Bowering and Timothy Findley and Davis Adams Richards. I have a map» (van Herk 1992: 34).

The multi-layered world of the author, her languaged-self that symbolizes her 'Canadianness', her idea that language permeates reality, that «gives it existence»(25) must be translated and if we are able to do it, we find the key to open the door to the author's narrative world made of multiple secret codes and untaw frozen tongues.

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