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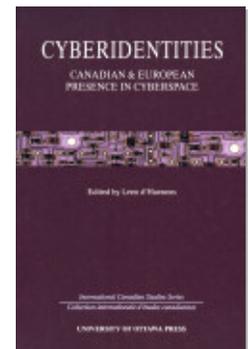
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ON THE (INFORMATION) HIGHWAY: SO IS THIS A JOURNEY OR WHAT?

by Robert KROETSCH

“... reading is a new act here, not introverted and possessive but exploratory, the text a new body of self, the self a new reading of place.” (Aritha van Herk, *Places Far From Ellesmere*)

①

Many years ago, one afternoon in Upstate New York while I was attempting to reprimand my very young daughter Megan for something – I forget what – she looked up at me and said, “Dad, don’t get hyper.” Unbeknownst to me I was at that moment commencing a paper, for delivery in Antwerp, to the Association of Canadian Studies in the Netherlands and Flanders. I was entering into the world of hypertext.

“Hyper” implies versions and visions of excess. The hyper-textual implies an excess of all the complexities that come together, or appear to come together, simply and reassuringly, in a traditional text. As we go from the bound and bounded book to the technologies that give us hypertext, we move from containment to expansion. The debate about what we call postmodernism focuses on that alteration. Those who criticize the postmodern fear the implications of excess. Those who favor postmodernism celebrate the potential of that alteration – even while admitting to anxiety. I number myself among those anxious celebrators. We are moving fast. Are we going somewhere?

①

Last month I delivered a manuscript of a novel to my publisher in Toronto. The novel is about a group of people who travel from Seattle, up the Northwest coast to Skagway, then over the Chilkoot Pass and down the Yukon River to the Klondike goldfields. It is, in a basic sense, a treasure hunt. And yet the story is a (rather strange) love story. Somehow for me those two master narratives of western culture – the treasure hunt and the love story – are intertwined. When I finished my novel, instead of going out and buying a bottle of scotch, I went out and bought a new computer. I am suggesting that contemporary technological change is of life-altering consequence.

①

In Canadian literature it is the work of Aritha van Herk that represents one of the most daring and insightful looks of the implications of hypertext for the writer of books. Aritha van Herk is a distinguished Canadian novelist and essayist whose parents emigrated from The Netherlands to Canada in 1949. Her three novels are *Judith*, *The Tent Peg*, and *No Fixed Address*. I will make mention of the third novel only. Aritha van Herk published *No Fixed Address* in 1986. That novel is full of kinds of restlessness, as

announced by the title, and as enacted by the story. In that story a man stays at home, in Calgary, minding the house, while his girlfriend travels in circles around the prairies, selling panties to general merchants in small towns. That is, she upsets the traditional narrative that goes back at least to Homer's *Odyssey*, the narrative that has the woman at home while the man roams the world. *No Fixed Address*, adding defiance to subversion, has as its subtitle: An Amorous Journey.

Aritha van Herk, after publishing that novel, began to write and publish a series of highly speculative, and some would say difficult, essays. She began more intently to examine the conventions of the novel and, metaphorically at least, the implications the hypertextual as they might influence a writer of books.



Her volume of essays, *Places Far From Ellesmere*, published in 1990, most clearly prophesies the effect of hypertext on traditional literary texts. I read that book as a kind of fable that tells us, obliquely, where we might be going.



The impulse of the hypertext, for all its ability to digress, and to summon up specters of the past, remains powerfully prophetic – it looks longingly, not to the past, but to the future. Perhaps the basic impulse operating at this conference is the impulse toward prophecy. Prophets tend to come in from the desert to the city, bearing word of change, of transformation, of condemnation, of repentance and penance. Of revitalization.

Aritha van Herk grew up in a kind of desert. She grew up on a wheat farm south of Edmonton, on the border where the treeless Canadian prairies become parkland – that is, the bald or short-grass prairies begin to be clumped over with groves of poplar. *Places Far From Ellesmere* is in many ways a bringing into the city of the prophetic demand for change and rejuvenation. It is a collection of four essays. Each essay takes its title from a geographical place in Canada.

The first is the Alberta prairie town called Edberg, the town (or technically, village) near which van Herk grew up. The second is Edmonton, the city in which she received her university education. While there she wrote her MA thesis, *Judith*, a prize-winning novel about a young woman growing up on a pig farm. The third is about Calgary, the city in which she works as a professor of literature.

Those three essays are full of what an older discourse might call sin. All three echo, obliquely and profanely, ideas of death and damnation. Graveyards abound. The fourth and culminating site is Ellesmere. Ellesmere Island is the most northerly island in the Arctic Archipelago, and also the most northerly point of land in Canada. It is on Ellesmere that the narrator – let us call her Aritha van Herk, to distinguish her from the

novelist, Aritha van Herk – encounters, along with a violent sense of death, a sense of hope.

Each of the four essays is a meditation on a place, even a description; yet each, while describing a particular place, becomes autobiographical narrative. The four pieces together constitute a single narrative. They might be read as the education of the artist – a *Kunsterroman*. The education of the artist toward hypertext. Or they might be read as departures from a narrative that has been too long in place. The book, after all, is resolutely not a novel. I am reminded of Wallace Stevens's poem, *Metaphors of a Magnifico*:

*Twenty men crossing a bridge,
Into a village,
Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,
Into twenty villages,
Or one man
Crossing a single bridge into a village*

*This is old song
That will not declare itself. . .*

Aritha van Herk's book teases us with an old narrative: we are assuredly crossing a bridge. Where to?



Let me begin again, this time by getting as far as the title page. In a certain way, hypertext is composed entirely of digressions. It raises the question: does the center exist at all? Places "far from Ellesmere" van Herk tells us. She says this to an audience that has always insisted that Ellesmere is far from us. Her title dislocates us. We are made to feel uneasy. But we also feel a kind of liberation. The field begins to open. Circumference and center threaten to trade places. Or they are encouraged to trade places. Or they lose the sense of difference, based on the assumption of center and circumference, that has traditionally given them identity.

The condition I'm describing bears a curious resemblance to the mysterious condition called falling in love. We enter into the erotics of hypertext. I'm thinking of the ways in which the intellect is so open to seduction by the technological invitation – but I'm getting ahead of myself. And even to say I am getting ahead of myself implies the existence of a vestigial narrative. A progression from "then" to "and then" to "and then."



Beneath van Herk's disturbing title we read a sub-title: "a geografictione." The mating of two words. Geography. Fiction. The making of a new word that contains in its middle

a reminder at a third word – graphy. That is: writing, description, representation. Geografictione: a writerly version of virtual reality.

Aritha van Herk's text begins:

Home: what you visit and abandon: too much forgotten/too much remembered. An asylum for your origins, your launchings and departures, the derivations of your dream geographies. Where you invented destinations. Always and unrelentingly (home) even after it is too late to be or to revert to (home), even after it pre/occupies the past tense.

Place and story, immediately, become lost in each other. We cannot begin to guess which was seduced by the other. This opening is the writer's instructions to the reader. Instead of orientation, we are offered the risk and the exhilaration of disorientation. Too much forgotten/too much remembered. An asylum for your origins, your launchings and departures. The derivations of your dream geographies. Where you invented destinations.

We are in the erotic world of travel – and surely travel is a socially acceptable version of the erotic. Reading that first paragraph, we experience the rub and touch, the distance and desire that, named variously, incline us always into the subterfuge of a four-letter word. Love.

That first essay has as its full title: "EDBERG, coppice of desire and return." That essay's second paragraph begins: "A welt in the parkland between Dried Meat Lake and Meeting Creek, just off the Donalda/Duhamel trail . . ."

The sheer erotics of places named. The lovers, naming and renaming. Repeating. As you can see, I have been seduced by van Herk's version of the hypertextual. It turns out that I too grew up on a wheat and cattle farm, only a few kilometers from the Battle River. From Dried Meat Lake. That lake's name, translated into English from Cree, denotes a place where the Blackfoot and Cree killed buffalo at various buffalo jumps, butchered the animals, and dried the meat in the hot summer sun. When I was a boy a trace and extension of the cart and wagon trail to which she refers – a trail that in an earlier manifestation was no doubt a buffalo and then a horse trail – was still to be found in a patch of prairie on my father's homestead. That is, looking for a goal, we came only to signs of journey.

Aritha van Herk's home town, Edberg, was already, before her birth, she tells us immediately, a marker on a trail. That is, it was a marker on a journey. She was born into a journey, this writer who sets out so willfully to deconstruct the traditional idea of journey. She authenticates this in the traditional manner by referring to the travels of the geologist and explorer J. B. Tyrrell and his own written text of 1887. Joseph Burr Tyrrell was one of the truly great explorers of the Canadian West. Working for Geological Survey of Canada (1881-98), he traveled into huge blank spots on the Canadian map. He

is credited with discovering the dinosaur beds that lure thousands of tourists into the badlands of Alberta. He had, unwittingly I suppose, a hand in my writing a novel called *Badlands*.

It is from Tyrrell's texts, we guess, that van Herk draws the unlikely term, coppice – a word in turn whose usage shows us now (it seems to me) that Tyrrell the geologist, the explorer, the historian, was as homeless in this terrain as van Herk is at home. She and I would call such a coppice a bluff. Again, there is a kind of misnaming in this, because the bluffs of poplars in the parklands of the Battle River country are not always located on hills or headlands. A bluff for us might well stand on perfectly flat land. Aritha van Herk's "geografictione" insists on the connectedness of landscape and story. It insists also that the relationship is always shifting direction, changing definition.



Traditional narrative is a means of dealing with the ingredients that constitute a text – or, more radically, I would argue, the elements that constitute a life. Narrative enables us to live our lives. Hypertext puts that narrative under revision. It questions our very perceptions of what a life – individual or collective – might be. I keep offering you what this paper is not about. Given another hypertextual shift, I might suggest that the hypertextual marks the end of the Romantic [capital R] self. Or self as hero. Or self as something independent, self-made, marked by clear boundaries. We too become geografictiones.

Aritha van Herk's title, *Places Far From Ellesmere*, calls our attention to a prior narrative, a narrative that has served as a master narrative from the beginning of European expansionist exploration into present times. I am referring to the quest for the Northwest Passage. The quest for a passage through ice and cold to the silks and tea and spices of the Indies. Why does the European imagination insist that to get to spices you must past through ice?

In this age of excess, be it an excess of information, or, more problematically, an excess of accessibility, it is especially the traditional journey that comes under question. The traditional journey was based on inaccessibility. The hero faced many trials, many tests. The journey, or quest, was based on an absence of information, whether being acted out by Christopher Columbus, setting sail westward for the Indies, or by John Franklin, sailing northward, but seeking the same goal – the Indies. Or Cathay.

The goal was absolutely clear, but sort of vague. Columbus believed all his life that he made it – that he got to the Indies. Sir John Franklin and his ships and crews disappeared into the ice. To this day they still occasion the annual launch of a search expedition.

The narrator in van Herk's book journeys North with an awareness that there is no cornucopia at the far end of the trip. There is, she says with a vengeance, no horn of plenty – at least not for the female traveler. Aritha van Herk, setting out, carries along

her own ambiguous treasure. She takes with her on her trip to Ellesmere one book and one book only – Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*.

The phallic confidence of traditional narrative, be it that of Franklin or Tolstoy, comes under debilitating scrutiny. Going up north – by brazen implication a question of “getting it up” – this time, explicitly, announces the feminine subtext that was disguised by earlier explorers as spices and silk. Aritha van Herk’s vision of the feminine is not so benign. And never so safely distant.

I would venture that, in hypertext, the traditional male journey is feminized. Geografictione and the hypertextual allow for no essentialism, no purity of intent, no assurances. In a geografictione, the supposed spatial certainty of geography and the willfulness of fiction (that is, our unpredictable movement through time) meet in erotic play. [And I am thinking of the high seriousness granted to play in the book *Homo Ludens*, written by the cultural historian who was Rector of Leiden University, Johan Huizinga]. To put it another way, love is a messy business. But it beats being frozen in the ice.



In *Places Far From Ellesmere*, Ellesmere Island itself is mysterious and largely unknown. Ellesmere, itself a geografictione, is for van Herk a representation of the presence and absence of woman. The full title of the fourth essay is: “ELLESMERE, woman as island.” Aritha van Herk, to elaborate her own geografictione, takes with her to the geographical and female island a novel – a patriarchal novel.



George P. Landow, that very helpful theorist of the hypertextual, tells us that “linking is the most important fact about hypertext (...)” (Landow, 1994: 6) The train (speaking of technologies) is one of the principal linking images in van Herk’s book. The train that killed Anna Karenina in Tolstoy’s novel is present in the opening essay, announced with the sentence, “The train went through.” Through Edberg, that is. But through Edberg to implications and stories of sex and violence and death. Aritha van Herk reminds us that in Tolstoy’s novel, Anna must confront that grandest and most romantic of endings in the western narrative tradition: she must die because of love.

Aritha van Herk cannot help but read and cannot help but disagree. As an ending – as one of the endings – in *Places Far From Ellesmere* – the narrator and her husband finally walk as far as the Abbe Glacier and the Seven Sisters. And as they turn away from their apparent goal we are in for a linguistic surprise. “I” turns to “you”:

The day you return from the glacier, you realize that Anna is condemned because she reads. ‘You are astonished to discover this in the novel, waiting there, your

own addiction so carefully prepared for on this trip where you have lost libraries and bookstores, where only the jaegers and the arctic hares bounce between lines. Your pages flutter in the wind that funnels from the glaciers above, from the glaciers to the north, from Russia just over the flat top of the world.' (van Herk, 1990: 130)

The reader in the last pages is addressed as you. But that you is also the writer addressing herself. In hypertext the distinction between writer and reader begins to slip. Returned from the mountain, having learned a new reading, you abandon the traditional linearity of the book. You enter into hypertext. More than that, you can now survive the death that is the necessary consequence of linearity.

In the word "Ellesmere" we hear mother and sea. The life-giving and life-taking mother of traditional mythology. The life-giving and life-taking sea. We also hear "she" in the plural. In Ellesmere as site/sight – in its immense whiteness – we see plurality. We see, and experience, not simply a desert of snow, but also what van Herk calls "white nights." In the Ellesmere summer, the sun does not set. We experience the color that contains all colors. We have gone beyond Ellesmere as an image of the blank page. We have recognized Ellesmere as an image of the computer screen. That change of perception allows a revision of the story. Ellesmere becomes for us as readers the image of cyberspace itself.

I am reminded of two lines from a W. B. Yeats poem:

*And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.*

We have indeed set sail. In the past we set sail for Byzantium. For Cathay. For the Indies. We set sail with a ruthless will to possess, to destroy, to colonize. You might begin to think I have come before you, after all, as the prophet out of the desert, to scourge you for your sins. But not so. Setting sail with van Herk, going down the information highway with her, into hypertext, we come to the harsh, blank, full, and beautiful island of Ellesmere. We come to an abundance that is disorienting. We are instructed to engage in linkage.

I am not quite persuaded that we have come to a new paradigm. We are travelers still, on a journey; we go on searching. But now we do not say we are searching for spices or silks or exquisite porcelain. Linkage is a barren word. And yet that word encodes our longing for a transformation into a fullness of the imagination. What is linkage, at its best, but love: a geografictione that acknowledges place, time, paradox, change, desire, imagination and the real.

Aritha van Herk has other and more explicit terminologies. She says of Anna Karenina:

Anna holds her red bag as talisman, she carries its ubiquity, daring to know her cunt, its lust for reading. Anna trusts her reading and her body: all other persuasions are traducer's inventions, excuses. She reads toward her own capitulation: her lover/her killer? her necrophiliac scribe. (van Herk, 1990: 142)

To enter into the hypertextual is to risk all. The journey toward the unpredictable discovery remains the paradigm. But, to make that journey now we must, like Aritha van Herk, reread the old texts, then re-imagine the journey even as we make it. The old map, existing as a trace, as a palimpsest, is unreliable, even deceptive. We must not only cross boundaries; we must proceed even while boundaries change, fade, disappear. We must re-imagine the linkage; we must, as van Herk shows us, make linkages that are not suggested by any map. Encountering myriad pathways, we still desire to connect.

And so I am suggesting that we, having traveled across oceans and through train stations, must now, exhausted as we might be, write a love story. It must be a new version – a very new version of that old story. And believe me, for your sake, for mine, for all our sakes – I wish us the best of luck. Because luck too is part of the journey. And part of love. And, while I hesitate nowadays to disagree with my grown daughter, I must suggest that we, contrary to her sage advice, “Get hyper.”