

## ARITHA VAN HERK'S NOVEL JUDITH IN ENGLISH AND IN ITS DUTCH TRANSLATION

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It is always fascinating to speculate on how readers react to a novel which was originally in a language other than their own. One wonders if they will grasp all the novel's nuances or whether they will misread the novel's purport.

Of course, it is often not possible to gauge these readers' reactions, but there is a way in which one can measure how the novel has been filtered by at least one very important group of readers: the translator and the publishing house, the latter with its attendant editors, illustrators, and publicists.

The manner in which this group represents a foreign novel to its new found audience: from the cover, the series in which it is included, the style adopted, all these elements serve to indicate how well the novel has been understood or to what degree it has been misinterpreted.

Aritha van Herk's award winning novel *Judith* has had a controversial enough reception in Canada that it seemed worth a study in itself, while at the same time, because of the authoress' Dutch background (her parents emigrated to Canada in 1949) it also appeared to be a novel about which Dutch readers would automatically show some curiosity.

In Canada Aritha van Herk's work has had a mixed reception. In the popular press, especially as exemplified by the *Globe and Mail* and *Saturday Night*, she is seen variously as a castrating bitch or as an author with a focus which is too narrow. The *Globe's* William French feels that van Herk's second novel *The Tent Peg* merely confirms what he had suspected all along, namely that the authoress has painful designs on men's genitalia. For her, it is a way of dominate the despised sex and to live out her obsession. In *Saturday Night* Urjo Kareda concludes as follows:

If she wants to, Aritha van Herk no doubt can continue to re-write her one plot indefinitely, shifting her Circe anecdote into a variety of settings. She is a formula novelist with a talent for something extra, and so remains the ideal Seal prize-winning novelist.

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This neatly phrased put-down also implies again that van Herk does not have the right to focus repeatedly on a specific problem, male-female relations, and that good novelists are not just able to change their locales but also their themes.

Of course, *The Tent Peg* is not a repeat of *Judith* either in technique or in theme. It has multiple narrators, and its theme is that of Marmoisan, which goes back at least as far as Perrault's fairy tales (see Marc Soriano, *Les Contes de Perrault*, Paris, NRF, 1968, p. 205). But that is beside the point because what becomes clear from the comment is that a lot of Canadian criticism is still very much content and author oriented.

The fact of the matter is that *Judith* is not pri-

marily about pigs or about the author's supposed castration complex, regardless of what Aritha van Herk's farming experiences and personal conflicts may be. Her novel *Judith* is first of all a deliberate attempt to emulate a continental tradition which starts with Flaubert and continues in the twentieth century with Sartre and which sees the novel as a *construct*, a verbal structure which captures most adequately the vision, the obsession, or the philosophy which the author wishes to convey to the reader. This makes *Judith* another perfect illustration of Sartre's dictum that "une technique romanesque renvoie toujours à une métaphysique" (*Situations I*, Paris, NRF, 1947, p. 66).

*Judith* is one of these novels which does not hide its seams. The references to Circe serve as a Gidian "*mise en abyme*" with of course the caveat that Judith realizes finally that she has even greater power over men: not only can they be turned into pigs, they can also be rendered impotent. The fusing of pigfarming with men's piggery towards women and Judith's attempt to come to grips with men as pigs, with love and sex and excrement, can either be seen as simplistic or alternately as amusing and ironic, but we must not forget that with these themes Aritha van Herk also harks a long way back. St. Augustin already stated that *inter faeces et urinam nascimur* and thereby he emphasized as does *Judith* the interrelationships of love, sex, birth, and excrement. More broadly speaking, Balzac in *Le Père Goriot* suggests two options for those who wish to live and flourish in the world. Together with Mme de Beauséant one can opt for the aristocratic solution: "le monde est un bourbier; tâchons de rester sur les hauteurs" (Toronto, MacMillan, 1968, p. 60). Or one can insist with Vautrin that in order to succeed in life one must get one's hands dirty:

Voilà la vie telle qu'elle est. Ça n'est pas plus beau que la cuisine, ça pue tout autant, et il faut se salir les mains si l'on veut fricoter, sachez seulement vous bien débarbouiller: là est toute la morale de notre époque. (p. 83)

In the twentieth century Sartre has carried this theme into the political arena in his play *Les Mains Sales*, which as the title indicates insists that it is naive to wish to remain simon pure and at the same time politically effective.

The heroine's name Judith carries, of course, biblical overtones. She is not only a young woman obsessed with her father and with men, she also harks back to the Judith who decapitated Holofernes and who, in the novel, castrates piglets. This is how both women set themselves free from the magical mystery of sex and men, but additionally, this Judith also manages to go beyond the Circe of myth who only succeeded in turning men into pigs.

In a literal sense, Judith has to learn what makes the world go around and she has to discover how to achieve her own mastery over sexuality.

In every other respect *Judith* is very much in the continental (French) tradition, and unlike Judith's friend Mina whose marriage interrupted her studies: ("...I finished high school, wanted to study French literature but Ed was there...") (p. 100) van Herk obviously did finish her literary education. First of all, the structure of the novel is based on the concept of polyphony, as it shows in the careful interweaving of several strands of the obsessions which dominate Judith's subconscious. The passages dealing with her father, with her ex-lover from the city, with her childhood and with her present preoccupations as a pigfarmer, flow into each other so that we become aware that Judith has stitched all obsessions into one magic cloth, which now has become woven around her and dominates all her conscious and unconscious states.

The language of *Judith* has also been chosen deliberately. Whenever the narrator is crude or very direct it is to shock the reader into realizing the nature of the obsession with which the heroine has to cope. The primary purpose is to create verbal equivalents of the affective and intellectual conflicts which Judith has to confront. As is often case, a mastery of the *language* of sex and excrement must therefore be equated with an emotional mastery of one's bodily functions, be they sexual or excremental.

Let us now turn our attention to the Dutch rendition of *Judith* in order to see whether it renders the original version in an adequate and appropriate manner or whether it misreads the text.

The Dutch translation was the work of Frédérique van der Velde. It was done for Amsterdam Book, a subsidiary of Uitgeverij Het Spectrum, which had the novel printed in Pössneck, East Germany by the Karl-Marx-Werk. *Judith* forms part of a series of "*streekromans*" (regional novels) which contains such revelatory titles as: *Hoeve Marloes* ("The Marloes Homestead") and *Op de grote stille heide* ("On the big, silent heath").

One wonders if this choice of publisher was made because of Spectrum's apparent connection with Eastern Europe and its doctrine of social realism, or was it felt that any Canadian novel must perforce deal with the countryside and man's (woman's) relationship to it and that hence Canadian novels must be devoid of other themes because of Canada's overwhelming size and the dominant role of the countryside in its mythology both here and abroad.

In any case, the publisher's inauspicious start puts one on the *qui vive* for potential blatant misreadings and distortions of the original. And, in fact, one is struck immediately by the modifications of two elements of the text which are essential if the reader is to capture the exact nature of the heroine's obsession. They deal with the language and with the structuring of the text. Van der Velde deliberately attenuates the direct and sometimes

crude vocabulary used by the author. The first paragraph of *Judith* begins intentionally with the word: "*Pig shit*"; it also contains the swearword "goddam" (See McClelland and Stewart-Bantam Limited, 1978, p. 9). Van der Velde renders these expressions as "*Varkensmest*" and "*verdomde*" rather than "*Varkensstront*" and "*godverdomde*". He also usually renders "angry" as "*boos*" rather than "*kwaad*" and the elliptical and a bit slangy: "Kinda hard to carry pigs in an MG" (p. 55) becomes in Dutch the somewhat more formal: "Het is wat moeilijk om varkens in een MG te vervoeren". (p. 68) In other words, van Herk's careful attempt to provide a linguistic equivalent of Judith's various states and reactions is subtly modified by van der Velde in order to lessen their impact.

The translator also ignores A. van Herk's choreography of the text. He should have treated it as if it were "a dancer's score" (p. 56) and allowed the parts to flow together as they do in the original text. Instead, van der Velde segregates the many voices that inhabit Judith's consciousness and thereby untangles the many strands that combine into one obsession. After all, the hints in the novel are patently clear as this example illustrates: "It all pivoted back to her father, guilt and desire; thick and bent as he was, it was really him she wanted." (p. 125)

There is one other element of *Judith* vis-a-vis which the translation of van der Velde falters. It may be called the geocultural aspect. It does not play an overwhelming role in the novel but greater accuracy would have helped the Dutch reader to grasp better the particular flavor of the Albertan landscape. The Dutch rendition is entirely too brief and even somewhat inaccurate when it comes to letting Mina describe her farm. In English this passage reads:

"...I live in a fourbedroom ranch style house on the south half of Section 31, Township X, Range 9, West of the fifth meridian. Hell, I can never get the land description right. Wife of owner. Dower rights on the home quarter."  
(p. 98)

This becomes in Dutch:

"...Ik woon in een hoeveachtig huis met vier slaapkamers op de zuidelijke helft van Sectie 31, Gemeente X, Terrein 9, ten westen van de vijfde meridiaan. Verdorie, ik kan nooit goed wijs uit die beschrijving van ons land. Vrouw van de eigenaar. Met weduwrecht op huis en grond."  
(p. 125)

A ranch-style house is not to be confused with a homestead and her rights are limited to the home quarter and not to all the land. No surveyor would be able to make much sense of the translator's description of the land just as the Dutch reader cannot conceive from it an impression of its enormous size which is necessary because it is an aspect of Judith's struggle.

In conclusion, our analysis of the original version of *Judith* and of its Dutch translation have clarified several matters because such analysis quickly becomes an act of contrastive criticism. While checking the Dutch version against the original for 1) the accuracy of its wording, 2) the adequateness of its structure and 3) the appropriateness of its

tone, we have become much more aware of the artful, deliberate, and purposeful nature of van Herk's fiction. As a pellucid construct *Judith* is the verbally choreographed equivalent of an obsession which its heroine learns to master and with which, in turn, the reader is asked to deal in an intelligent manner. Clearly, in Canada both William French and Urjo Kareda fall short in that regard. Unfortunately, van der Velde's Dutch rendition

attenuates the novel's aggressive assault on the reader and it distorts the novel's careful patterning, while it also renders the novel's setting inadequately. Aritha van Herk obviously believes that the artistic and critical functions should cohabit in a writer. We need more such novelists and we need fewer shortsighted critics or translators who cannot do justice to a text.