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J. L. AND THE TEMPLE OF THE GENDERED GOD  
A STUDY OF *THE TENT PEG* BY ARITHA VAN HERK

Aritha van Herk, a Canadian woman writer of Dutch origin, has written three books that focus on Canadian north, the region stereotypically connected with male explorers and their narratives. For many years this northern wilderness used to be the temple where only male worshippers prospected for gold and meaning or indulged in hero worship. Margaret Atwood's study about the myth of malevolent north<sup>1</sup> shows how these masculine narratives have spawned the gendered story of northern wilderness, created the role of a femme fatale and the male heroes who got lost or froze amidst Canadian landscape.

Van Herk's book *The Tent Peg* is a novel about men looking for uranium in the Yukon territory. The author places herself at the centre of exploration narrative canon by providing most of the masculine characters with the names that are immediately recognizable in the context of Canadian tradition. Mackenzie, head of the team, a geologist working for Yukon Company, immediately brings to mind Alexander Mackenzie, the author of an exploration journal *Voyages . . . Through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Ocean*. The name Thompson alludes to Thompson who wrote *Travels in Western North America*; the name Hearne echoes the earlier Hearne, author of *Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson Bay to the Northern Ocean*.<sup>2</sup> There is also Franklin, a synonym of disaster in Canadian tradition because of John Franklin's failed quest for the Northwest passage.<sup>3</sup> There is Hudson, a name that is only too obvious in the context of Hudson Bay company. By emphasizing those

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things. The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (Oxford: 1995), Clarendon Press.

<sup>2</sup> W. H. New, *A History of Canadian Literature* (London: 1989), Macmillan, p. 25, 38-46.

<sup>3</sup> See M. Atwood, *op. cit.*, p. 11-34.

names as chapter titles in the book the author acknowledges and subverts the male influence in the territory appropriated by patriarchal heroic myth.

Among the men with meaningful and meaningless names there is a woman defined only by her initials "J. L.", which she uses to disguise her sexual identity.

I thought that my initials would get me past the first scrutiny, but I didn't even count on their unassailable arrogance, that even if I left the sex box empty, no "F" or "M" . . . it didn't matter. They must have noticed, but assumed it was masculine carelessness on my part.<sup>4</sup>

In order to join the all-male team of scientists, J. L. plays a trick on the leader and pretends she is a man. This time she uses unisex clothes and seemingly boyish appearance. Unwittingly, Mackenzie hires her as a camp cook.

Van Herk's book is very different from the feminist scenarios of the seventies. The female protagonist is sexually liberated but no longer entertains illusions that her availability brings her closer to self-fulfillment. Escaping into the empty north, she brings her own emptiness resulting from the fact that she was reduced to an object in the relations with successive men. Rather than perpetuate the ultimately patriarchal scenario à la Erica Jong, J. L. ventures into the masculine preserve and tries to stand her ground there. When her true identity is revealed, a scandal seems imminent. J. L. violates unwritten rules which exclude women from the explorers' escapades into the north. A potential object of fantasizing in the male camp, J. L. refuses to be fixed in her passive role from the past. Unlike Isadora from *The Fear of Flying*, J. L. does not use men to act out her sexual fantasies and discover her own self in the process.<sup>5</sup> But the men from the camp assail her with gender stereotypes. One calls her a bitch, the other a witch. Still another tries to use her as a muse, but J. L. constructs her gender on her own terms, a major act of defiance to the most aggressive invasive men in the team.

J. L. is a trespasser on the segregated gender space, which is symbolically emphasized at the beginning of the novel when she goes with Mackenzie to men's washroom, because going to the ladies would be an oblique confession of sexual difference. The violation of territorial taboo is her conscious choice. So is her journey into the north. "Women just don't belong out there" – says her main antagonist, Jerome. In van Herk's survey of masculinities, Jerome is the worst mixture of aggression and stereotypical

<sup>4</sup> Aritha van Herk, *The Tent Peg* (Toronto: 1988), McLelland & Stewart, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> My reading of Jong is indebted to Helena Ericksson *Husbands Dreamers, and Dreamlovers. Masculinity and Female Desire in Women's Novels of the 1970s*.

reactions. He does not tolerate J. L.'s presence, let alone her independent status. Jerome is an intelligent geologist obsessed with the idea of control. From the very beginning he competes with Mackenzie for the leadership in the project. He controls and humiliates his assistant; he hates J. L. for defying him, and wants to subdue her by attempting a rape. His fear and inferiority complex are masked by provocative behaviour. He sports his magnum all over the camp in the way that is nauseating for other men. He would fit in with Nadine Gordimer's description of South African violence whose perpetrators use penis as a gun. For Jerome both are the instruments of male domination over women and nature. His geological activity is an invasive "lay of the land."

While Jerome is a serious threat to J. L., others are mostly a nuisance. All the time she has to shake off the images they project on her. "I am here to cook and not pose for you" – she says to Hearne who treats her as an exciting exhibit for the photographer keeping track of the camp life. She cools Franklin's romantic attachment and refuses his offer to teach her meditation. When Cap pesters her with sexual advances and says: "I'm horny and it's your fault," she loses her temper. "Go find yourself a grizzly bear," she replies. For Milton, an adolescent from strict Mennonite family, she is a fallen woman and taboo object. Mackenzie, the best geologist in North West Company, perceives J. L. as somebody who can help in understanding his personal dilemma. In spite of his huge record of scientific success, Mackenzie does not feel happy. His wife left him some time earlier for the reason that he cannot fathom. He has not been able to develop another relationship. What brings him closer to J. L. is the fact that both of them confronted inner emptiness and came to the north in search of redeeming knowledge, prospectors for hidden resources.

Van Herk's book is basically a constellation of masculine voices. J. L. stands out from the rest through the difference that resists marginalization. The voices comment on her in the way that makes her central to the whole story. She is the recipient of negative and positive emotions. She is also the nourisher, not only in the literal sense. When she has gone through the process of dismantling men's preconceptions, she becomes their confessor. They approach her for emotional nourishment or just a different point of view.

The story of biblical Jael is superimposed on the exploration narrative. Initially, the biblical code is the only clue for Mackenzie in his conversation with the newly hired cook:

I was really named after a person in the Bible. J, A, dash, E. L. People used to string it together so it sounded like „Jail". I didn't like that, so I decided I would go by my initials, J. L.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A. van Herk, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

For J. L. the exodus into the wilderness means "retreating from the precast world." It is an escape from the constructed jail of gender stereotypes. From now on she will be enclosed in the cooktent, the segregated space of her culinary ministrations. Like biblical Jael she will welcome strangers and serve them exquisite nourishment. Like Jael she will face unwelcome intrusions.

Nine men. They are finishing now, shoving away their plates and scraping back their folding chairs and lighting cigarettes. I should have made a rule, no smoking in the cooktent. But it's too late now, and even though this is going to be my kitchen, it is already invaded.<sup>7</sup>

The cooktent becomes a metaphor of her body, its vulnerability. Like biblical Jael she refuses to be a victim, and is determined to keep men on their knees like Sisera, reduced to the petitioner's posture at the moment of his fall. The cooktent is turned into a fortress. Pots, wooden spoons, merciless soups constitute a defensive code which J. L. adopts to discourage familiarity. Cooking is her message in cipher, "hieroglyphics in flour," creativity. She nourishes the men with a feminine message, which transforms them.

J. L.'s story is echoed by Deborah's story. Like biblical prophetess J. L.'s friend, Deborah, is a singer. Her visceral singing attracts admirers who do not hear the song but covet the body. Deborah is always claimed by heterosexual desires, which J. L. now hopes to evade by trespassing on gender boundaries, cross-dressing, masquerading as a man.

Van Herk's text makes use of the stereotypical association of northern wilderness with *femme fatale*. J. L. seems to embody the attractions and threats offered by the north. Besides, there is a mystical connection between her and the wilderness. She is the only one who hears the earth rumble before the landslide that could have obliterated the whole camp. All men are asleep at that moment, "men with no ears, men with no connection to the earth" – this is how she comments on it. The wilderness, like Deborah, inspires wonder with its visceral song, but it also dislodges geological certitudes. The tent woman J. L. armed with scalding water and merciless soup, restores her inner strength through her identification with northern landscape, and its extremes. One of the creatures belonging to this scenery is a huge grizzly mother with two cubs. Haunting the nearby valley, the she-bear is often seen by the explorers, awe-inspiring embodiment of unpredictable perils. She confronts J. L. in the camp but leaves her unharmed, much to the astonishment of the two male observers of the strange encounter. The incident is fraught with gender context. In J. L.'s imagination grizzly mother comes to offer a message:

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

I knew her. She came to me in the she-bear. She came to me and she reared herself up big and beautiful and wild and strong and she said: "Wait. Don't let them drive you away."<sup>8</sup>

The grizzly mother is femaleness empowered and empowering. It is interesting to see how Canadian texts are haunted by human animal encounters. It is instructive to compare the gender context. The classic text with a Canadian setting, *Forest Path to the Spring* by Malcolm Lowry shows the protagonist's encounter with a cougar in the enclave of wilderness near Vancouver. But in Lowry everything is interpreted through the European intertextual grid. It is obvious that the meeting echoes Dante's encounter with a lion in *bosca oscura*. Lowry's protagonist identifies the animal with unpredictable danger or some destructive emotion that can potentially destroy his Paradiso. Lowry's story shows opposite reactions to the animal, which causes fear in a man but does not terrify his wife, who identifies with nature outside literary paradigms. Van Herk's description of animal human encounter seems to be inspired by a Canadian classic entitled *Bear*, written by Marian Engel. In this text the female protagonist is enamoured of a bear, which illustrates the intimate erotic connection with nature. Vera Lang from Robert Kroetsch's novel is described in a similar way. Seduced and caressed by a swarm of bees, she will never be satisfied by any man. The boundary between the human and animal world collapses just as in Indian myths where the trickster hero can be either animal or human, or can be both at the same time. In the way that is radically different from Angela Carter's, Van Herk transmits a message of metamorphosis. The grizzly she-bear becomes J. L.'s totemic guardian, a manifestation of her own strength and nurturing capacity. Like J. L. the she-bear elicits different responses, the most aggressive comes, quite predictably, from Jerome. His reaction is:

... we'll see how she feels about my Magnum. I hope I run into her out on the slopes, I'll finish her off quick.<sup>9</sup>

The threat anticipates Jerome's assault on J. L., his invasion on the space of her cooktent and the space of her body. But he is not the only Sisera in the story, although his intrusion and his defeat offer the most obvious parallel to the biblical scene. J. L. from Van Herk's story is always surrounded by the attributes of her biblical predecessor. The intertextual clues are evident even in the description of the camp:

... the crew is already re-erecting the tents farther away, cursing and laughing as if the summer has been announced, J. L. is talking to them, her voice carries down between the *tap tap tap* of a hammer on an iron tent peg.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

Her voice is here juxtaposed against the sound signifying the process of structuring the masculine space. Mieke Bal mentions the fact that pitching the tent was a feminine responsibility in cases of nomadic tribes.<sup>11</sup> Here, in the north, pitching tents is one of masculine activities connected with mapping the land, assessing deposits, segregating the space into wild and tamed. J. L. becomes a destabilizing factor questioning the boundaries of the masculine world. Her voice mediates the message that deconstructs the masculine order. One by one the men come up to J. L. with their stories, which she comments on. Thompson, who has confessed to communication gap between himself and his girlfriend, reacts to J. L.'s perspective in the following way:

There is something hammering inside my skull as if she has struck at the one answer I never wanted. . .<sup>12</sup>

J. L. offers a different point of view that is often hard to face. In this way she attempts to deconstruct the masculine temple of gender stereotypes. Van Herk strings together the anatomical temple and the temple of intellectual worship. J. L.'s letter to Deborah ends with the words:

It's time we laid our hands on the workman's mallet and put the tent pegs to the sleeping temples, if ever we are going to get any rest.<sup>13</sup>

While reading Mieke Bal's *Murder and Difference* I became aware of interpretative possibilities that can also be applied to Van Herk's novel. First I would like to focus on the hint of maternity inherent in Van Herk's description of J. L. It struck me as particularly important in the context of J. L.'s response to masculine intrusions upon her privacy. Cap, a man who keeps pestering her with his sexual offers, suddenly finds himself drawn into an emotional, non-phallic contact with J. L., when he tried to peep at her in the shower:

For a moment only the silken feel of her body hammers in my temple and then I lay my head on hers and cry . . . She holds me and comforts me like I'm some big goddamn baby.<sup>14</sup>

Cap is baffled by the sudden evaporation of his sexual urge. Instead of sexual encounter there is a scene suggesting maternal embrace and purification.

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<sup>11</sup> Mieke Bal, *Murder and Difference, Gender, Genre and Scholarship, on Sisera's Death*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: 1992), Indiana University Press, p. 129.

<sup>12</sup> A. van Herk, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

There is no doubt about who plays the priest to the temple of the body. J. L. lays her hand on Cap's head and walks away leaving him with the disturbing memory of the unusual bodily communion and its aftermath: the blessing. The other instance of closeness is observed by the Mennonite boy who sees J. L. walk into Mackenzie's tent. For the first time he witnesses the intimacy between a man and a woman:

What unfolds for me leaves me rooted to the ground, I could be hammered into the moss.<sup>15</sup>

Instead of becoming an object of possession, J. L.'s body becomes an object of worship. Mackenzie turns it between his hands "like a forming vase." The boy Milton brought up in fear of the body expects Mackenzie to do something else. "He doesn't, he only goes on turning her this way and that as if he's discovering in her shape something new for himself." The scene returns in J. L.'s version who describes it as a "song of praise." Was it her attempt to regain the temple she has described previously, the temple of her body, desecrated and appropriated by patriarchal code? These two scenes initiated by J. L. form a stark contrast with Jerome's assault on her. Her tent and body are invaded. Jerome puts his gun to J. L.'s head and threatens to kill her unless she yields. She takes advantage of his momentary lapse of attention and kicks him in the groin. He lets go the gun, which she instantly takes, symbolically emasculating him. The extract brings to mind Susan Niditch's analysis of sex and violence undertone implicit in the biblical scene.<sup>16</sup>

J. L. is standing over Jerome, holding his Magnum in her hand as fierce and steady as an old warrior. But after my first relief that she's all right, the sight chills me. In her long flannel shirt, her bare legs gleaming through the twilight of the tent, she seems vulnerable until I hear her voice . . . She's holding that deadly pistol at a point directly between Jerome's legs where he lies writhing on the floor of the tent.<sup>17</sup>

The scene is followed by the quotation from the Bible. Quite predictably, this is also Deborah's song.

Van Herk's J. L. is a catalyst of different kinds of metamorphosis. "He asked for water, and she gave him milk" says the biblical song. Mackenzie tried to find uranium in the north, but discovered gold instead. Nicknamed Midas by J. L., he found himself an explorer of the most precious resources

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>16</sup> See: Susan Niditch, *Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael in: Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> A. van Herk, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

not only mineral, but also emotional. On Mackenzie's explicit suggestion J. L. takes part in staking the territory. She hammers the posts into the ground and inscribes her name on them. Symbolically, she claims a part of the territory. At that moment Hearne manages to take a picture of her

... leaning herself and the hammer into the ground until she becomes a movement of striking, driving that post deep into the temple of the earth ... For a moment it is as if she is hammering that stake into everything I have ever known or photographed, hammering the very pulse of life.<sup>18</sup>

In van Herk's story biblical Jael is fused with another warrior woman, Joan of Arc. In the last scene J. L. celebrates herself by dancing on the table that was previously used by her in the culinary ministrations. She barely escapes the flames of the bonfire when the table collapses, but she is not punished for listening to male voices. In this final scene J. L., a witch is metamorphosed into J. L. a saint. Mackenzie, who witnesses this dance with the rest of the crew, compares himself to Sisera and visualises himself as the recipient of the "loving wrath" It is he who has the final word in J. L.'s story.

... as I touch her, lay my arm across her shoulder, I know the peg still lodges in my skull. I will never forget.<sup>19</sup>

Van Herk also hammers her tent peg into the temple of male discourse connected with Canadian exploration narrative. Through J. L. she is reclaiming the symbolic territory that used to be staked by men only. She is aware of the violence of male discourse that invades the feminine literary space the way Jerome invaded J. L.

*The Tent Peg* is a therapeutic celebration of feminine endeavour to stake the mine of reclaimed resources in literary, scientific and religious discourse. What is at stake is the anamnesis, the recognition of feminine way to commune with and mediate the divine element. By hammering her tent peg into sleeping temples J. L. disrupts the Temple of the Lord where male priests worship the gendered god of patriarchy.

Women ... have no temples, they have been razed, the figures of our goddesses defaced, mutilated to resemble men, even Athena destroyed. Where do you worship when your temples are stolen, when your images are broken and erased ...<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

J. L. speaks from razed temple and erasure, but her ministrations are a trace, an inscription on the body of the gendered god. J. L. communicates meanings through the taste of her dishes. She disseminates herself symbolically by hiding sachets with tundra moss in men's belongings. Her dance ruins the provisional kitchen table made by men in the camp. Her tent peg ignites illumination.

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