

The Act of Being Read

Fictional Process in *Places Far From Ellesmere*

Ellesmere as epiphany. As temporary home. As safe place to detonate “genre as product” (VI 38). To assault “the dictatorship of product [so that] [t]ext becomes process, reading and writing participants in text’s process” (VI 153). To reverse the reading process: “unreading, the act of dismantling a text past all its previous readings and writings” (VI 4). Refusal to be genred, to be canonized. Willingness to be un/read. A composition of fragments, “like pieces of a jigsaw, broken up into their separate shapes”: “this georafictione, this Ellesmere” (PE 113). A text—being dis/mantled by a fictioneer re/travelling through Edberg, Edmonton, Calgary on the way to Ellesmere and Russia—preceded by warning signs: *Places Far From Ellesmere* (the title), *a georafictione* (an invention/denial of genre), *Explorations On Site* (a subtitle), “For Ellesmere, that it will stay, eternally, mysteriously, its own georafictione” (a dedication), contents page, three quotations (Levi Strauss about memory as place, Foucault about discursive formation as space of multiple dissensions, Camus about the need for deserts and islands because there are big cities), a square bracketed authorial synthesis of the three quotations. Postscripted by an apology: “Writing is an act of appropriation.”

Georafictione: a neologism. An addition to the language, to the theory of literature. A re-signifying of place and fiction. Place as person. Memory as fiction. Any place you were but are not now is fiction. Anyone you were but are not now is fiction. Because it is memory. Only here and now are not fiction, but as soon as they are fixed they move into the past or into the future: into fiction. Place, person, memory, fiction—no longer nouns but participles, past and present: a re-signifying of language. Reading as writing as reading as process. As the activity of connection, the mutual creation and

murder of place, person, memory, fiction. And text. The illusion of text: “you are not reading me but writing, not me but yourself; you are not reading writing but being read, a live text in a languaging world” (VI 10).

Such eternal process, such absence of stasis is frightening/seductive, thus the desire for home: some place that does not move, that is safe/predictable. Place can only be home once you have left it, once you have released it into fiction. “An asylum for your origins, your launchings and departures, the derivations of your dream geographies” (PE 13). “Dream yourself a place: Edberg” (20). Read this sentence to mean dream about Edberg as a place; read this sentence to mean dream that you are a place called Edberg—“not quite so arid as Sinclair Ross’ *Horizon* or Robert Kroetsch’s *Big Indian*/not quite so far away from Ellesmere”(22). In other words closer to epiphany, closer to the next home. Closer to the realization that you were once a fictional inhabitant of a fictional Edberg. As fictions, both can be collapsed:

Who’s done it? Collapsed this careful edifice, this dreaming? The telephone? the car? the road? airplanes? weather? Can you permit it to remain upright (on its tired feet laced into farmer’s boots), or will it fall flat onto its high-fronted face? Edberg imagining itself a presence . . . (34)

Read this last sentence to mean Edberg imagines that it is a presence; read this last sentence to mean Edberg imagines that there is a presence somewhere in it. Texts read/dream/imagine and are read/dreamt/imagined by each other; texts unread/murder and are unread/murdered by each other—there are no natural births and no natural deaths.

And will it [Edberg] hang black crêpe over the same strings of Christmas lights before it dies: will it read past its own murder: un/read its eagerness to read the future: read its certain demise, its accidental blood and sweat. (35)

You have left your Edberg murders behind . . . (46) Read murder: Edberg (as past, present and/or future Edbergs) is murdered; read murder: Edberg murders itself. To read is to create or to murder; it is not simple observation of process—it is process.

From Edberg to Ellesmere via Edmonton and Calgary: a spiral movement, constantly/simultaneously receding from and moving toward home; re/inventing it, reading it from afar, being read by it as you pass through:

Edberg: this place, this village and its environs. A fiction of geography/geography of fiction: coming together in people and landscape and the harboured designations of fickle memory. Invented: textual: un/read: the hieroglyphic secrets of the past. Come home. (40)

This unrelenting focus on place and home is the stuff of autobiography, the act of un/reading a tangent of post-modern auto-reflexivity, the controlled movement from A through B through C to A1 and epiphany a perfectly acceptable novel form, the attempted rescue of Anna from the “peasant/writer/Tolstoy” a turning of the author’s reading into a natural act of “ficto-criticism.” A second person singular narrative. A singular narrative that strains its connection to autobiography (where first person singular is the canon and third person singular creates an amusing distance), that pushes “beyond the border of anywhere, in this generic of the post-partum, post-modern, post-colonial, post-patriarchal, post-mortem . . .” (VI 14), that disqualifies itself as a novel, and that finally creates another set of neologisms: ficto-criticism—a space inhabited by fictioneers.

What *Places Far From Ellesmere*/Aritha Van Herk/the reader does (is forced to do) is remove the restriction of text as product only, collapse the walls between writer, text and reader—which might seem to be the granting of unprecedented freedoms—only to re/institute a symbiotic relationship among writer, text and reader *and* place, memory and fiction. Since the act of reading is at the centre of these relationships, there would seem to be an obvious connection to (or comment on) reception theory. Any of us can be the implied reader of this book, but the reader most implied, indeed explicitly implied by the use of the second person singular, is the author/writer herself. Her statement on the illusion of text can (and should also) be read as follows: I am not writing me but reading, not you but myself; I am not writing reading but being read, a live text in a languaging world. For her the act of writing has become the act of her reading her writing; what is more, it has become the act of her writing reading her.

This act of reading is the most powerful force in the book, and goes beyond all traditional concepts of the process of reading. Here, reading is the act of creation and of murder; it has the power not only to fictionalize, but to real-ize. Just as Edberg and Edmonton and Calgary—and consequently those who inhabit those places, including the author—*become* fictions, in the sense that they are places and persons remembered, so Anna Karenin and Princess Myagky can be *released* from fiction—after all, they do inhabit a place in the past—to be real-ized on Ellesmere, to converse with Aritha Van Herk. There is always this double movement: reading and unreading at the same time, reading and being read at the same time. This symbiotic relationship between fiction and reality takes the two beyond the

mutual exclusivity of binary opposition, beyond even the fluctuating balance of a yin-yang relationship, into the relativity of time and space: depending where you are in time or in space will determine whether you inhabit fiction or reality. Although the obvious connection here would seem to be to Iser's theory of aesthetic response, Van Herk moves far beyond Iser's simple communication between fiction and reality.¹ Whether one agrees or not with Iser's assumption of the immanent structure and meaning of the text, his theory of repertoire and strategies is applicable, to a certain extent, to what Van Herk is doing: "The repertoire of the text is made up of material selected from social systems and literary traditions. . . . [T]he ultimate function of the strategies is to *defamiliarize* the familiar" (86-87). What is being defamiliarized in *Places Far From Ellesmere* is autobiography, the novel, post-modernism (inasmuch as it can be said to be familiar), and traditional criticism.

What is most applicable from Iser's theory of reception is his perspective on what happens in the reading process: "When we read a text, we are continuously evaluating and perceiving events with regard to our expectations for the future and against the background of the past" (Iser 90). For Van Herk, this process is at work in how she tries to read the Edberg of her past in comparison/collision with the Edberg she returns to:

You went to a dance in the Elks Hall in Edberg only a few years ago and you were surprised at how staid it decanted itself, how careful, how cautiously polite, when you had been led to expect such wild revelry/such drunken staggerings/such furtive gropings of instant hands and bodies in the long grass beside the building, all of your fiction etched to a never readable page. Saved from your own story. (PE 26)

Iser's "dialectic . . . between illusion-forming and illusion-breaking", and "continual oscillation between involvement and observation" (127-128) is Van Herk's "live text in a languaging world."

In the process of un/reading and being un/read, the author, the text, and the reader not only "create" and "murder" each other, not only affect the relativity of time and space which determines what Bakhtin would call "the simultaneous difference" of fiction and reality, but they all—especially the reader—engage in a journey into themselves so that the concept of division is shifted from that between text and author (or text and reader, reader and author) to that between who the reader is/was and who the reader is/was not: "there occurs a kind of artificial division as the reader brings into his

own foreground something which he is not” (Iser 155). Van Herk would argue that this division is not artificial but inescapable; it is what is at the heart of what the reading process does. She does not set out, as Iser believes is a necessary in any text, to correct or overcome the asymmetry between text and reader which derives from the reader’s desire to correctly understand the text or to determine its intent.

If there is any asymmetry to be found in *Places Far From Ellesmere*, it would be in the Bakhtinian sense of asymmetric dualism. For Bakhtin “self/other is a relation of simultaneity.” Self/other could be read here as reader/writer, reader/text, or writer/text; what is more, even “self” is dialogic. The differences that Iser would overcome are unresolvable for Bakhtin, but not in a negative sense: “Bakhtin insists on differences that cannot be overcome: separateness and simultaneity are basic conditions of existence” (Holquist 20). Dualism is simultaneous difference on a sliding scale, and therefore asymmetrical. Furthermore, “there is an intimate connection between the project of language and the project of selfhood: they both exist in order to mean” (Holquist 23). This is another way to understand Van Herk’s “living text.” Edmonton is the place between Edberg and Calgary: movement from and movement towards at the same time. It is also the introduction to the division/project of self: creating fictions, murdering fixity. Returning to Edmonton is a telescoped, intensified version of returning to Edberg; the time in Edmonton did not allow it to be anything more than a pretended place:

Swearing you will never return to your sites of seduction and rage, to the baffling problem of an eternal long division of the self, this Edmonton, still glazed with ice, pretends to be another place than it pretends to be. (53)

As Van Herk is seduced more and more by words, the inhabitants of her Edmonton are remembered/fictionalized as absent words; Edberg/home is re/read as an island, and though Edmonton is too brief a place to be re/read, it does launch Van Herk in the search for another island/home—the search for epiphany as logical consequence of conversion:

Dis/criminate these absent words: your brevities of Edmonton. Six years fore/shortened, refuse to be re/read. Conversion/metamorphosis/seduction. The criminal conversations of burial consigned to a potential desert woman, an island sublimation. (54)

What makes Calgary a growing graveyard is its murder of/by language. Language is no longer a process depending/dependent upon text and writer

and reader; in Calgary it is the handmaid of money. Money turns process into tautology—it goes nowhere, it does nothing but attempt to justify itself: “The declensions of Calgary insist on money, although money rejects declension (banking on itself, receivable)” (62). Naming is an exercise in euphemism—a sort of bastardized tautology: “Abattoirs have become Meatpackers” (62), “Dressmakers have altered themselves to designers, clothiers, tailors and fashion consultants” (63). In the end, money, unlike language, fails to communicate: “There are seasons of money, houses bought and sold and never lived in, land surveyed into inches, buildings flooring themselves into Babel” (65). The concept of home has no place, fictional or otherwise, in such a language: “(What does home mean?)” (66), “Where is home” (71)?

The focus on the process of reading as creation/murder continues into the last chapter, “Ellesmere, woman as island”, though this chapter could exist as a separate book. It is the place of epiphany, but it is also an island unto itself. Part of the reading process requires the reader, as new information is presented in the text, to constantly revise forwards and backwards, to change expectations and review perspective on what has gone by. To see the last chapter as an island unto itself is to understand that, although Ellesmere is a literal/literary island, Edberg, Calgary and Edmonton are also islands in what has now become a geografictional archipelago. Van Herk island hopping her way to discovery:

Discovery. What to call the first moment a place lodges in your memory, what to call the first moment place emplaces itself in naming. Edberg was always there, an initial seeing that you don't remember. . . . Edmonton, that city as initial. . . . And Calgary, the first time you saw Calgary you were ten? Twelve? You cannot remember its announcement, only prescient presence, and the mountains past it, the way you read it now, as a well-groomed cemetery.

Ellesmere will appear like a languid body below you, the island only waiting finally to float into a geografictione, like Anna waiting so long backstage on the yet-to-arrive, the interminably delayed train. (86-87)

Still, Ellesmere the chapter stands out not only because of its size but because it is the only island/chapter that is a ficto-critical one. Anna Karenin could not escape nineteenth century Russia or the shadow of Tolstoy or the confines of the novel unless there was an Ellesmere to go to, unless Van Herk decided to “[r]ead her again, give her a second chance, another life, a different fiction” (77), to not trick her as Tolstoy did: “Anna

can invent herself in an undocumented landscape, and undetermined fiction. That is the temptation Tolstoy holds out to her” (125).

You must free her from the constraints of the novel she has been imprisoned in, shake her loose from the pages of her own story so that she can float over the landscape her in this landscape of a woman, this northern body, waiting to fall in love. (131)

The interesting paradox/contradiction (or perhaps a spatio-temporal simultaneous difference) is that Ellesmere, being the here and now and the place to which Anna is escaping, this place where anything is possible, is not itself fiction: “In fiction anything is possible. But Ellesmere is no fiction” (105). A reception theorist such as Jauss would point out that the problem confronting Van Herk is that of reading *Anna Karenin* a hundred years later, the resolution of which is addressed in his fourth thesis:

The reconstruction of the horizon of expectations, in the face of which a work was created and received in the past, enables one on the other hand to pose questions that the text gave an answer to, and thereby to discover how the contemporary reader could have viewed and understood the work. (Jauss 28)

Given that Van Herk has written a *geografictione*, she sees the problem of reading Anna not as one concerning the text as novel, but as one of un/reading and re/reading Anna the person; neither is the problem one in terms only of time, but also, and more importantly, of place:

But whose invention is she? Tolstoy’s? The nineteenth century’s? Russia’s? The novel’s? Yours? She is the north’s invention, her figure only dreamable when the eye swings towards the polar star. But how then to read her? Is it possible to read her in the south, from the south? In that blindly south-faced reading, is it possible to read at all? You are closer to Moscow than you are to Edmonton, to Edberg, to Calgary. You are closer to Russia than to home: 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. . . . [T]he closest you can get to reading and still know story is this undiscovered place: the farthest possible reach of all reaches, this island paradise, this un/written northern novel, this desert un/kingdom. (113)

Anna becomes the pivot for the act of un/reading and of re/reading, for the criticism of “this male historiographical fiction” (84), and therefore for re/writing fiction/history: “she is source, text and the reading act itself” (136).

Anna, poor Anna, dead before she begins, the end already read. You know where she is going, have pre/read that destination. But re/reading her, in Ellesmere a/new, reading her whole, you can re/write her too. (83)

Read “reading her whole” to mean reading her whole story; read “reading her whole” to mean making her whole for the first time: “You are on Ellesmere Island. You are in Russia. You are free to un/read yourself, home, Anna, the rest of Canada, all possible text” (91).

Anna is the confluence of place, person, memory and fiction. And text: “Take her [Anna] with you to Ellesmere. You’re sure she’s never been there, no one else is likely to have carried a woman as difficult, as lengthy, as god-damned heavy as she is along” (85); “One thing about Anna: she is not . . . a slim, streamlined adolescent, but a woman on the verge of flesh, with a full figure, solid. . . . And Ellesmere is a fat island” (96).

Finally, Van Herk becomes Ellesmere’s text. The more she un/reads and re/reads Anna, the more she herself is read. In the end *Places Far From Ellesmere* is a reading of Aritha Van Herk: “You know you are a character in a larger novel, a novel of geography and passion, reading yourself as you are being read by a comprehensive reader” (118). This comprehensive reader takes on a more eerily powerful presence than Iser’s implied reader or Riffaterre’s super-reader. Van Herk’s process of un/reading Anna as text and as island is ultimately reversed: “Anna reading this book you are in, this book of the north, un/read because mysterious, this female desert island and its secret reasons and desires” (130).

In *Places Far From Ellesmere* Van Herk has reformulated the parameters of reception theory. The reference point is no longer the difference between the reader’s horizon of expectations and the appearance of the text, nor is it the asymmetry between text and reader; it is the asymmetric dualism, the simultaneous difference of fiction and reality: it is the power of the act of reading.

NOTES

- ¹ “If fiction and reality are to be linked, it must be in terms not of opposition but of communication, for the one is not the mere opposite of the other—fiction is a means of telling us something about reality” (Iser 53).

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