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Restoring the Temples: the Fiction of Aritha van Herk

Abstract
And women, we 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, when there is only a pressure at the back of your brain to remind you that we once had a place to worship. Now lost, leaderless, no mothers, no sisters, we wander and search for something we can have no memory of.
And women, we 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, when there is only a pressure at the back of your brain to remind you that we once had a place to worship. Now lost, leaderless, no mothers, no sisters, we wander and search for something we can have no memory of.1

‘Where do you worship when your temples are stolen?’ Scourging usurers and usurpers may transform a den of thieves into a house of prayer, but what if the place of worship and the divinity enshrined there have been swallowed in oblivion? These are questions Aritha van Herk addresses in each of her novels, Judith (1978), The Tent Peg (1981), No Fixed Address (1986), where a young woman’s efforts to establish her autonomy are portrayed in terms of a spiritual quest. Luce Irigaray writes in her essay ‘Divine Women’:

To have a will, it is inescapable to have a goal. The most valuable of which is to become. Infinitely.2

She goes on to say, ‘Becoming means to accomplish the plenitude of what we can be’, and continues:

This is what we need to become: free, autonomous and sovereign. There has never been any construction of subjectivity, or of any human society, which has been worked through without the help of the divine.3

But such help is not readily available for women in a culture where God has been constructed in man’s image, and J.L., heroine of The Tent Peg, castigates that arrogance which has compelled women to worship in temples of male intellect: ‘The forehead of a man is the seat of wisdom, the place of being, the centre of thought’ (p. 172). Irigaray points out that the unique masculine God through whom man seeks to establish his relationship to the infinite, is quite unsuited to figure the perfection of women’s subjectivity.4
Only a God in the feminine can look after and hold for us this margin of liberty and power which would allow us to grow more, to affirm ourselves and to come to self-realisation for each of us and in community. This is our other still to be realised, our beyond and above of life, power, imagination, creation, our possibility of a present and a future. 

Aritha van Herk seeks to restore to women a sense of the numinous through reshaping traditional myths of female divinity. Drawing on both classical and biblical sources, she deploys the stories of Circe and Arachne together with legends of such heroic figures as Judith and Jael. An equally important myth underlying her fiction, however, is that of Demeter and Persephone which celebrates the relationship between two women, the desolation of its disruption and the joy of reunion. It figures most prominently in Judith but has a significant bearing on the other novels as well. Each heroine, Judith, J.L., Arachne, has a close friend, Mina, Deborah, Thena, who is vitally important to her development – although she contributes little to the narrative action – and an account of their initial meeting, or the moment when they first acknowledge their closeness, occurs mid-point in each novel. The friend, associated in some way with the maternal, becomes a mirror where the heroine discovers her essential self reflected, and their association strikes a divine spark necessary to the accomplishment of the heroic quest.

Without the possibility, and indeed, the necessity, of a God incarnated in the feminine, through the mother and daughter and in their relation with one another, no substantial help can be given to a woman.

In Judith, the quest is circular, as the heroine, striving to become her own woman, abandons life as a farm girl under her father’s loving domination for secretarial work in the city, where she becomes the boss’s mistress, returning again to the country after her parents’ death to establish her own pig farm. In the Greek myth, Persephone, enticed by their beauty, plucks a clump of narcissus, opening up a pathway for Pluto’s chariot. Judith, driven from home by dissatisfaction with a life where ‘all the women are housewives and all the men are country louts’ is lured to the city through hopes of greater independence. But her love-affair, and all it represents, traps her within the routines of office life, forcing her into a standard mould of femininity where she commits ‘acts of barbarity’ on herself, ‘plucking her sleek eyebrows, rolling her straight hair into curls, thrusting golden posts through the holes of her ears’, and restricts her bodily freedom by wearing fashionable shoes and dresses. The red M.G. Judith’s lover forces upon her is a version of Pluto’s chariot, and he himself is a wintry figure who takes her walking into ‘the snow-driven wind’ as a prelude to seduction. He remains anonymous, yet all-pervasive:
Even so, she saw him everywhere, in shaving-cream ads, in the dark-haired man three seats down, in someone waiting at a corner for the light to change, briefcase in hand and trench coat buttoned and precise. So common, she could not rid herself of his recurring image. (p. 36)

City work offers only a poorly paid, subordinate position where Judith must depend on her employer both for life’s necessities and any available luxuries, because Pluto, God of the underworld, is also the God of wealth. One festival honouring Demeter in ancient Greece, the Thesmophoria, was celebrated solely by women to ensure the fertility of crops and their own fecundity.

The casting of pigs sacred to Demeter into subterranean chasms during the course of the rites, probably represented the descent of Kore into the nether regions of Pluto, and the bringing up of the putrefied remains of those thrown in the previous year, placing them on an altar and mixing them with seed-corn to secure a good crop, was said to commemorate the swallowing up of the swineherd Eubuleus by the earth when Kore was abducted, and the engulfing of his herd in the chasm. The festival, therefore, was regarded as an annual commemoration of the Corn-maiden's descent into the underworld.6

Judith takes up her farming enterprise around the beginning of November, the time of year the Thesmophoria was held. The practical knowledge of pig-farming gained in her youth, submerged and largely forgotten during her city years, now revitalizes her life, a fertilizing agent like the pig-flesh ritually dug out of the earth. Pigs in the ancient world were images both of female sexuality and of the mother goddess: 'the goddesses are all great, white, round maternal sows (Ishtar, Isis, Demeter, etc.)',7 and in Judith the pig-barn resembles a temple of female divinity:

...Judith entered the barn’s loomy redolence eagerly. She was whole here, a part of their tumescent sanctuary of female warmth. It was that, their femaleness, the subtle scent that lifted from beneath their alert tails, surrounding her like a soothing conspiracy. Expectant, they pressed forward against their fences, eyes glowing under the naked light bulbs. Transformed and spellbinding they surrounded her like priestesses of her creed. They had been waiting for her. (p. 48)

The pigs exercise a magical transformation on Judith who herself becomes an enchantress figure able to transform her own world. In attempts to understand her metamorphosis, she scrutinizes herself from time to time in the mirror, a symbol of that obsession with appearances society induces in women and which Irigaray regards as yet another barrier separating them from their own divinity.

...their duty to deck themselves out, to mask themselves, make-up etc. instead of letting their physical, corporal beauty appear, their skin, her/their form(s), all this is symptomatic of an absence, for them, of a feminine god who opens up for them the perspective of a transfiguration of their flesh.8
Judith is alarmed to see her mother’s face reflected in her own:

Now her face was pale and colorless, hair short and ragged. More familiar than any image of herself, her mother’s motion of passing her hand over her face, erasing something there. And it was her mother’s face, smooth and younger, looking back at her from the mirror.

‘Can I go outside now?’ Her mother turned from the mirror on the wall, fingers pursing her lips, hand moving from brow to chin, wearily molding it back, back into place. She touched her hair nervously then sighed. ‘Sweep the floor first, Judy.’ And after she swept the floor she ran outside and held her face into the wind, knowing it would never be like her mother’s, she would never try to smooth it clear like that, so desperate and exposed. (pp. 35-6)

Unlike Persephone, who is released from Pluto’s clutches through Demeter’s efforts, Judith must discover in herself the determination to escape her captivity, for her mother can reflect only the conventional role model of female subservience.

We look at ourselves in the mirror in order to please someone. Rarely to interrogate the state of our body or ‘soul’, rarely for us, and with an eye to our becoming. 12

One of the novel’s epigrams comes from Through the Looking Glass, and Judith must learn to move through the mirror to discover on the other side a world where even ‘pigs have wings’.

She finds her true reflection in Mina Stanby, wife of a neighbouring farmer. Their first meeting occurs the same night as the birth of the first piglets which promises the success of Judith’s venture. Although Mina sometimes resembles Judith’s now dead mother ‘Just so her mother had stood’ (p. 56) – she does not in her heart submit to the traditional female role: ‘She moved as if she were the only woman in the house yet free from it’ (p. 52). The bonds of friendship deepen so that Judith represents the daughter whom Mina, with three grown sons, never succeeded in having. On the afternoon Mina comes to the barn, watching as Judith helps another sow to farrow, the two acknowledge they are kindred spirits, each with an emotional stake in the farming enterprise which symbolises the assertion of female space, independence and autonomy.

...Judith slid over the fence again, bent to scrub her bloody hands with straw. She hesitated, then blindly thrust her right hand toward Mina. Eyes following relentlessly, the pigs saw Mina get to her feet, take Judith’s hand in both her own and hold it there, the two of them caught together in the incantation of their joining. (pp. 93-4)

The handclasp, representing the embrace of Demeter and Persephone, is followed by a succession of butterfly images. Judith is in flight from the netherworld where the girls she worked with had resembled ‘pretty grubs, white and dead’ and her own body lying beneath her lover had seemed
'pale and grub-like'. Her emergence from the chrysalis is suggested by the paper on her bedroom wall, with its design of oriental butterflies, resembling a dress she had worn in childhood on which butterflies floated 'like exotic orchids that would surround her in undiscovered mysteries'. A richly sensual image, the butterflies also symbolise aspiration and transcendence. To achieve fulfilment, Judith must re-establish contact with her childhood self. As a child she ran downstairs with a 'movement so practised it was almost like flying', and the adult Judith lies down in the newly fallen snow, moving her arms and legs to make the pattern of a winged angel, just as when she was a little girl. The paradox by which she achieves her wings through pig-farming is alluded to in van Herk's choice of epigraphs.

'The time has come,' the Walrus said,
'To talk of many things:
Of shoes - and ships - and sealing-wax -
Of cabbages - and kings -
And why the sea is boiling hot -
And whether pigs have wings.'

_Through the Looking Glass_
_Lewis Carroll_

There is a herb in father's garden,
Some calls it maidens' rue:
When pigs they do fly like swallows in the sky,
Then the young men they'll prove true.

_An old English folk song_

Although flying pigs traditionally signify impossibility, a determined and aspiring young woman might well become airborne. Butterflies are summer creatures, and the novel ends in spring with Judith and Mina watching Judith's newly acquired boar mount one of the sows as the cycle of regeneration begins yet again.

And together they laughed, those insane women, laughed at everything they could and as hard as they could as they danced about in the melting snow. (p. 178)

The story of Demeter and Persephone has accumulated a great wealth of literary association over the centuries, but until very recently, it has been mediated almost entirely through male culture. Some writers have focused on the image of female vulnerability. For Milton, Persephone is analogous to Eve in all her frailty:

...that fair field,
Of Enna, where Proserpin gathering flowers,
Herself a fairer flower, by gloomy Dis
Was gathered, which cost Ceres all that pain
To seek her through the world...\textsuperscript{13}

But Persephone, in her role as Queen of Death, also serves as an image of the \textit{femme fatale} gathering helpless men within her dangerous embrace.

\begin{verbatim}
Pale beyond porch and portal,
Crowned with calm leaves she stands
Who gathers all things mortal
With cold immortal hands
Her languid lips are sweeter
Than love's who fears to greet her
To men that mix and meet her
From many times and lands.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{verbatim}

Sarah Pomeroy complains that in classical myth even goddesses are 'archetypal images of human females, as envisaged by males' - Athena, the asexual career woman, Aphrodite, the frivolous sex object, Hera, the respectable wife and mother. Not even a female divinity was considered sufficiently complex to combine all these capacities: 'A fully realized female tends to engender anxiety in the insecure male.'\textsuperscript{15} Roland Barthes argues that myth has a depoliticizing function, 'purifying' representations of human relations so that artfully contrived social structures appear natural and eternal.\textsuperscript{16} Although the Homeric Hymn to Demeter of the seventh century B.C. stresses the bond between mother and daughter, even suggesting that natural growth and fertility depend on its maintenance (since Demeter curses the earth with barrenness until Persephone is restored), it also implies that, just as all human beings inevitably die, so a young woman will naturally be caught up in a male embrace severing her from the world of women. It is perhaps significant that, even from a male point of view, wifehood should be equated with death! Mary Lefkowitz laments the very limited scope classical mythology allows to female experience. Once female figures in myth accomplish the \textit{rite de passage} into adulthood, very few options are allowed them:

If they choose to marry, they may either die themselves or kill their husbands and/or children. If they choose to remain celibate, they must do men's work or become frozen in some aspect of their maiden state; for example they turn into trees. There are no other possibilities!\textsuperscript{17}

Lefkowitz concedes, however, that Persephone is something of an exception. She can survive marriage as an individual because she is, 'in a sense, recycled', spending only part of each year with her husband and living the rest of the time in Olympus with Demeter, becoming a maiden daughter again.\textsuperscript{18} It is not surprising, therefore, that a number of modern feminist theorists and writers have sought to repoliticize this particular myth. Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich frequently focus on it in ways which
suggest it could be a continuing symbol for women in contemporary society: ‘...every mother must have longed for the power of Demeter, the efficacy of her anger, the reconciliation with her lost self’. The myth is valuable, not only because of its celebratory aspect, but because it also offers an opportunity to explore situations where women are divided from one another, their vital energies suppressed.

Aritha van Herk engages in such exploration in *The Tent Peg*, while at the same time exalting female strength and creativity. In *Judith* the Greek myth reflects a process of initiation. The action, both past and present, occurs almost entirely in the winter months and only at the end of the novel, when Judith's personal triumph is complete, do we emerge into spring. *The Tent Peg* is a summer narrative, even if it is a cold summer spent in 'The middle of the Wernecke mountains in an alpine valley that never feels summer, just varying shades of winter' (p. 42). Like Judith, the heroine, J.L., moves from city to country to work as cook in a geological survey camp in the Yukon, the only woman in a group of nine men. J.L. is more seasoned, more of an initiate, than Judith when she leaves her student existence in Edmonton, cynically dismissing a whole array of lovers. But she has also established a deep and sustaining friendship there with Deborah, a singer, to whom she confides in letters her sense of loss and alienation as she seeks to function within an entirely male world.

For the greater part of the novel J.L. resembles Demeter, the corn goddess, rather than Persephone. As cook, she assumes a traditional female role: 'we know the smoothest, most efficient way of making food and giving food and clearing up the remains of food, nourishers always' (p. 59). But cooking, like alchemy, involves transformation, and in the novel J.L. is endowed with transforming power. Her presence is the catalyst enabling Mackenzie, the team leader, to discover rich gold deposits in a survey area which proves deficient in the uranium the geologists were directed to search for. She effects her greatest transformation, however, among those she works with, evoking admiration, affection and even reverence from men who initially regard her with resentment, suspicion or amusement. The cook tent, a place of abundance filled with the 'rich, yeasty smell' of bread-making, becomes a sanctuary – comparable to the pig-barn in *Judith* – where J.L. presides as priestess, the meals she serves coming to resemble a eucharist. Like her biblical namesake Jael, who killed the Canaanite captain, Sisera, by driving a tent peg through his temple, nailing him to the ground as he slept, she also breaks open the sleeping temples, penetrating the complacency of her male companions to create new awareness and self-knowledge. What in the old testament is a deed of savage cruelty becomes a redemptive act, essential to restoring those temples of female divinity whose destruction J.L. laments.

In both cookery and alchemy, fire is the agent of transformation, and just as the lighted torch was one of Demeter's traditional attributes, so
flame is a principal metaphor associated with J.L.: 'She holds enough anger inside her to burn a person right through'. Franklin, one of the geologists, regards her as 'A candle clear to fix my thoughts upon' (p. 80), while Milton, the young Menonite farm boy, illuminated by a glimpse of J.L.'s naked body, compares her to a lamp: 'And her body is alight, it reflects a heat and radiance that I never thought bodies could possess. Luminous glass, perfectly turned' (p. 211). Mackenzie perceives her similarly: 'She turned herself inside my hands, with each movement the porcelain quality of her skin, more luminous, as if my hands could ignite a light within her' (p. 213). Fire is also a cleansing agent, and at J.L.'s instigation the men light a campfire each night where they burn the day's garbage. It draws them into a circle, helping fend off the outer darkness.

Now, around the fire, we are one voice rising and falling, a group of men in unison with the bony shadow of a woman weaving a spell. (p. 152)

As Demeter, taking the role of nurse at Eleusis during her separation from Persephone, tries to render the princely child Demophoon immortal by thrusting him into the heart of the fire each night, so J.L. attempts to purge her companions of their arrogance, fear and insensitivity.

But she also knows how readily an assertive, visionary woman may herself be consigned to the flames like another Joan of Arc, and along with all women she carries on her back a bundle of faggots which could fuel her own immolation.

I've tried to throw it off, fling it to the ground and abandon it, but although I sometimes lose a stick or two, the weight is still there, old myths and old lovers, old duties, my mother's warning voice, my infallible conscience. (p. 37)

Fending off the remorseless encroachments of the male world, J.L. struggles continually to preserve her sense of self intact. In the novel's central episode, a grizzly bear visits the camp with her cubs in tow and two of the crew watch in terror as J.L. stands only a few feet away apparently conversing with her. The sight of the creature, like a furious demonic power rising from the earth, fuses with memories of her friend Deborah, constantly under pressure because her beauty makes her so vulnerable to male predators. The encounter is an epiphany, comparable to the handclasp between Mina and Judith in the barn, for as J.L. faces the bear she recognizes that her love for Deborah is the primary source of strength in her own life, enabling her to endure her present situation. Once again, women friends re-enact the union of Demeter and Persephone. Deborah is identified with the maternal figure of the bear accompanied by her two cubs, which is, in turn, associated with Mackenzie's wife, Janice, who ten years earlier had taken their two
children and left him without any explanation in an act of desperate self-assertion.

She left for herself. You were a good man but you couldn't give that to her, it had nothing to do with you. It was herself she was after and the only way she could find that was by leaving. (p. 202) Jancie's departure is also associated with the rockslide which occurs one night as a substantial portion of the mountain above the camp collapses: 'it must have been like a rockslide to her, the suddenness, the enormity of it. One small trickle of pebbles taking half a lifetime with it' (p. 130). J.L. describes the earth as giving birth to herself (p. 137), and like the bear, with which it is associated, the dangerous, shifting Yukon landscape embodies a ferocious female energy, so that it becomes the dominant maternal figure in the novel with which the various women characters are identified as they discover sources of power within themselves.

In van Herk's use of the Greek myth, Demeter and Persephone are interchangeable. Although J.L. is associated with Demeter, especially in her yearning to see Deborah again, she has, like Persephone, emerged from an underworld captivity where she had been fettered by 'the growing chain of men who rattle and clink behind me' (p. 113). Hope of release comes to her deep in the stacks of the University Library, although the messenger of liberation is not Hermes, but Jamesie, a former lover who complains in disgust: 'Why don't you go live in the Arctic? Who would miss you?' (p. 24). J.L. recognizes that she and Deborah share a common identity: 'Perhaps that's why they call us Siamese friends. The one is wearing the other's costume, we are forever and irrevocably intertwined' (p. 190). Because both confront the same problem of male dominance, each must in turn provide strength and nurture for the other. But Deborah is not just a friend in whom J.L. sees herself reflected, she is also an artist: 'That voice could make shape of chaos, give tongue to every unarticulated secret and intuition' (p. 11), and it is she who, in the words of the biblical prophetess celebrating Jael's victory over Sisera, hymns J.L.'s triumph over the camp bully, Jerome. Through her vision, the woman artist creates the image of what women might be, holding up to female recipients of her art a mirror reflecting their own potential. In this respect the woman artist is Demeter, delivering the daughter she has created out of the bondage of obscurity.

But the act of creation is never complete. J.L.'s triumph is substantial, yet temporary, for as summer ends, she must move on still enclosed by the framework of a patriarchal society designed to thwart every impulse to self-determination. Nevertheless, she transforms the final bonfire on which the survey team burn the remains of their camp into a celebratory ritual, dancing on the kitchen table before it subsides into the flames. She rejects the role of Joan of Arc, saint and martyr, to assume that of pagan
For a moment I can pretend I am Deborah celebrating myself, victory, peace regained. And in their faces I see my transfiguration, themselves transformed, each one with the tent peg through the temple cherishing the knowledge garnered in sleep, in unwitting trust. (p. 226)

Demeter and Persephone, the artist and her creation, are identified in the moment of triumph. Just as Judith’s victorious emergence from the underworld is associated with images of butterflies in flight, so J.L. dancing among the flames resembles the immortal phoenix arising from the funeral pyre she has ignited through the force of her own wings. The immolating flames are now the refiner’s fire in which a new spirit is forged.

Judith and The Tent Peg transform a traditional myth into a container for women’s perception of who they are and what they might become. But both heroines must continue to struggle in a hostile society to preserve their victories and their vision of female friendship. Because the story of Demeter and Persephone is a metaphor of seasonal change, joy in the reunion of the two goddesses is tempered by knowledge that they must part again. In No Fixed Address, however, Aritha van Herk, while still asserting the image of female divinity, breaks the myth wide open to release her heroine from a situation where achievement and loss alternate so remorselessly. Arachne who ‘has always hammered against the impossible: fate, birth, life’, battles not only the male world, but pushes against the constraints of human existence itself. The picaresque narrative moves with an intricate, spiderwebbing motion through the heroine’s past, present and future, tracing the process by which she has emerged from life as a tough, streetwise kid growing up in East Vancouver into the prosperous new existence she enjoys in Calgary when she is first introduced to the reader. She lives happily with Thomas, her ‘Apocryphal lover’, so perceptive and accommodating he is almost too good to be true, and she delights in her job as sales representative selling women’s panties to stores in the country towns of Alberta and Saskatchewan for a firm called Ladies Comfort. But, despite this, Arachne remains restless, seeking scope for greater self-development than even her present existence permits.

This tension is reflected in the opening pages by images of imprisonment and mortality which also point to the motif of Persephone in the underworld. The novel is prefaced by a meditation on female underwear throughout the centuries: ‘It was for a long time taken for granted that woman’s body should be prisoner, taped and measured and controlled’ (p. 10). Now that underwear has been relegated ‘to the casual and unimportant’ some measure of liberation has been attained, and the
narrative next focuses on Arachne, seller of underwear who wears none herself. Even though she purveys comfort to ladies – cool easy to care for cotton – together with imaginative stimulus and sensual enticement – bikinis in galvanic, fruit, peppermint and ice-cream colours – her work is linked with time and death. She must always carry the black ‘midnight line’, along with that other very popular item, the boxed set of coloured panties each embroidered with a different day of the week, and to do her job efficiently she must appear ‘dead ordinary’. Early in the novel Arachne visits a cemetery where she meets Josef, an old Yugoslav immigrant. Persephone was swept down into the underworld through plucking a handful of flowers, and Arachne yearns to lie among flowers and merge with the earth: ‘There is a field of rape down the road. Let the yellow close over her...’ (p. 17). Because of his great age (he is almost ninety) and the persistence with which he tracks down Arachne, it seems that Josef might be death’s emissary, especially when, after their first meeting he seeks out her hotel room:

He bends, slides one arm between her bare legs, the other around her shoulders, and picks her up, holding her above... in an iron embrace. (p. 29)

But, in reaching out to Arachne, Josef is holding fast to life, and through their passionate sexual encounters, the two establish an alliance against death. Instead of Pluto abducting Persephone, it is Arachne, defying propriety, law and reason, who eventually kidnaps Josef from the nursing home to which his relatives consign him. This bid for freedom inevitably fails; with the police on her tail, she flees westward, her flourishing Calgary life in ruins, and the novel gives no clear indication of Josef’s ultimate fate.

Judith’s spiritual journey moves in a circle from country childhood, to the city and back, and The Tent Peg implies J.L. will complete her circle by returning to Edmonton, although the novel suggests she may travel further. Arachne’s return to the rain-filled streets of her Vancouver childhood, while concluding one cycle of existence, precipitates a further journey with no foreseen ending. Throughout the book, images of stasis and stickiness carry negative connotations. Escaping from Calgary’s comfortable middle-class world which has her ‘tied and tagged’, Arachne finds herself temporarily trapped in Banff National Park: ‘she has one of the famous yellow stickers with the miniature beaver looking at its tail stuck inside her wind shield distracting her vision; she has to stay, she has the sticker’ (p. 241). The temptation to cease moving, which regularly assails her, is expressed in terms of subsiding underground into the male embrace of death, of taking her place within the traditional male-oriented myth. Leaving Banff, she falls in with a mildly satanic ex-coalminer, Dougal McKay, who tries to sell her a disused mine, entry into the netherworld: ‘The foul reticent portal mouthing earth’ (p. 267). Pluto-like,
he helps her attain wealth, only to cheat her again, so she must later ambush him to repossess it. When, after an all night drinking session with McKay and his friend Frank, Arachne wakes in foetid darkness, locked between two drunken male bodies, it requires a mighty effort of resurrection to break out of this lightless burrow.

Constant movement is the keynote of Arachne’s character and driving is her regular escape-route; the fat black 1959 Mercedes Type 300 she inherits in adolescence is a ‘four-speed ticket to flight’ (p. 161), symbolising control over her own life: ‘She loves that car more than herself’ (p. 315). Significantly, the description of receiving her inheritance, interwoven with an account of how she met her best friend Thena, comes mid-point in the novel. The two women come across each other in the garage which services the Mercedes, for female friendship is a driving force in women’s search for autonomy. Although the Demeter and Persephone motif remains highly significant, mother/daughter relationships in No Fixed Address are presented as problematic. Thena’s two teenage daughters reject her feminist values: ‘They mince to school, they experiment with makeup, they are themselves’ (p. 143), while Arachne maintains an armed truce with her own mother, Lanie, accepting her hostility and indifference because ‘She and Lanie wanted the same thing’ (p. 41). But although a patriarchal world divides women so that a daughter’s mere existence may impede the mother’s freedom, the identification between women characters is even more important than in van Herk’s previous novels. Thena, ‘a mirror for others’ and the candle which illumines (p. 59), is the heroine’s alter-ego, and Arachne’s more outrageous exploits are sometimes tempered by recollections of her shrewd commonsense. Other women characters also reflect or project the female energy and aspiration embodied in the heroine. She hears a famous feminist, priestess and ‘golden Amazon’ (p. 251) address a women’s conference, and meets a woman artist with eyes of different colours and hair half blonde, half brunette, who proves a figure of heroic confidence: ‘I’m going to take up sculpture and chisel a statue of Isis out of Mount Lougheed’ (p. 247). Arachne, hair now dyed blonde in an attempt at disguise, also meets her dopplegänger, a hitch-hiking sales representative who peddles snuff and claims to be a failed poet. Despite their different hair colour, each exactly mirrors the other, and together they correspond to the figure of the halved artist. Society may often drive women apart and subdue their inner being, but they can still hope to be made whole through discovering other women whose lives reflect what theirs might become.

This pattern of women’s lives echoing, reflecting or paralleling one another is important to the image of female divinity van Herk constructs within her novel. Despite their individual limitations, Lanie, Thena and Arachne together, three generations of women, represent the Great Goddess, venerated long before the establishment of the Greek pantheon,
in her triple aspect of crone, child-bearing woman and virgin.\textsuperscript{24} Thena's name links her to the goddess Athena, irreverently challenged in legend to a contest of skill by the cunning weaver, Arachne, whom she transformed into a spider for her presumption.\textsuperscript{25} But van Herk's Arachne is also a manifestation of Athena, just as Persephone and Demeter are reflections one of the other, and her career also incorporates allusions to Christian myth. Lanie, exhausted after her daughter's birth, exclaims to her husband: 'Christ, Toto' (p. 84). Arachne's paternity is doubtful, and the mysterious visitor who effectively names her and bequeaths the car so necessary to fulfil her potential, is called Gabriel. She performs her ministry by selling panties for ladies' comfort and delight, and after leaving Calgary she undergoes more than one symbolic death and resurrection. In a Vancouver sushi bar she is served a eucharistic meal, a kind of last supper of sliced fish arranged on the plate to resemble a spider, and as she eats Arachne is released from all the worlds she has ever known, dying both to her blighted childhood and to the love and joy of her limited and limiting Calgary existence.

After three months of oblivion, she finds herself on a ferry crossing the Strait of Georgia. If Judith represents Kore, the maiden abducted by Pluto, and J.L. signifies Demeter, goddess of growth and fruition, then Arachne is Persephone, queen of the dead, for the dyad of mother and daughter forms part of the more ancient triad of the Great Goddess.\textsuperscript{26} Arachne challenges mortality itself, piercing to the heart a man who tries to molest her on the ferry, representative of Charon transporting souls into the realm of death, and she continues her harrowing of Hell by summoning from the waters off Long Beach a drowned airman with whom she vigorously makes love. Female energy cannot yet find its full expression within the boundaries of existing society, and Arachne, her movement west halted by the sea, returns to the mainland and begins driving north into a frontier world where past, present and future merge — a visionary realm symbolised by the 'four-dimensional nothingness' of Canada's frozen north. What women may become is still unexplored and potentially dangerous territory. Arachne's narrative ends with her Ascension as a group of geologists she has met on the road bundle her into a helicopter, piloted by a woman. (Perhaps she is J.L. back in the Yukon fulfilling her ambition, hinted at in \textit{The Tent Peg}, to become a professional flier?) When the road gives out, only flight is possible: 'She watches the roadless world below her, knowing she has arrived'.

Once again flight is a metaphor of female triumph, but it involves Arachne's departure from the everyday world, leaving the other women characters, like the feminist conference speaker who can 'lift worlds' with her eloquence, and the woman artist who portrays 'Revolution. Kitchens', to perpetuate her story and celebrate what she represents. The woman artist is a divided figure because she must reflect both Arachne and her \textit{doppelgänger} — the possibility of brilliant achievement on the one hand, and
on the other, the plodding endurance necessary to maintain independence and autonomy. Lanie and Thena are also artist figures. As a fortune-teller, Lanie employs literary skills of intuition and imagination, and Thena, the only person to whom Arachne speaks truly about herself, reads her friend so she can eventually tell her story: 'Every adventuress requires a teller of her tale, an armchair companion to complete the eventualities' (p. 146). The shadowy narrator figure whom we encounter throughout the novel is also dependent on Thena (to whom in some respects she corresponds) as a principal source of information about Arachne. Her research into the history and social implications of female underwear prompts her to seek the legendary seller of panties, and her reflections on the situation are expressed in italicized passages interpolated throughout the novel. She is yet another representative of the woman artist pursuing an ideal of female transcendence with which she cannot quite make contact, for she and Arachne never actually meet, and the novel concludes with her driving north following a never-ending trail of Ladies Comfort panties. For women confined within a restrictive society, Arachne represents inspiration and hope. She is the Comforter who sustains their endeavours, and whose possible second coming may inaugurate a new heaven and a new earth.

Just as in The Tent Peg Deborah the artist and J.L. the heroine she celebrates are twinned characters, each reflecting the other, so in No Fixed Address the fictional narrator, travelling the routes first traced by Arachne, is strongly identified with the complex directions of her life. The figure of Arachne, the picara, whose story inevitably assumes the form of a journey, has much in common with Luce Irigaray's view of the divine: 'A mode of self-completion without finality'.

Can we forego will without dying? It seems impossible. One has to want something. It is vitally, not morally, necessary to want something. It is the condition of our becoming. To have a will it is indispensable to have a goal. The most valuable of which is to become. Infinitely.

Demeter's search for Persephone and their seasonal reunions are echoed by various incidents in No Fixed Address, but the search for the goddess, represented by the narrator's endless pursuit of Arachne, is also a framing device which serves as a metaphor of the novelist's activity. Through the power of imagination, the woman artist draws on myth and legend to recreate the image of female divinity which has been so long lost or suppressed. In doing so, she identifies with her creation, releasing the divinity within herself, a continuing process with no foreseeable conclusion: 'There is no end to the panties; there will be no end to this road' (p. 319).
Becoming means to accomplish the plenitude of what we can be. This trajectory is, of course, never achieved. Are we more perfect than we were in the past? It’s not certain.29

In her novels, van Herk suggests women must continually struggle to free themselves from ‘the norms, ideals and fantasies imposed on them by phallocentrism’, 30 turning away from the mirror which sends back flat, superficial images: ‘The mirror freezes our becoming through breath, our becoming through space’.31 Only at those moments when a woman’s life touches the lives of other women who share her aspirations will she discover a true reflection of what she herself can become, and it is at such moments the nature of female divinity is most potently revealed.

Notes

2. Luce Irigaray, Divine Women, tr. Stephen Muecke, Local Consumption, Occasional Paper 8 (Sydney: Local Consumption Press, 1986), p. 4. I am indebted to my colleague Dr Anne Cranny Francis for drawing my attention to this paper.
3. Ibid., p. 4.
4. Ibid., p. 6.
6. Ibid., p. 12.
12. Ibid., p. 7.
18. Ibid., p. 43.
20. The story is found in Judges, chapters 4 and 5.

23. Arachne’s second meeting with Josef is also preceded by a visit to another cemetery where she picks a yellow buffalo bean to add to the pile of flowers on a new grave. (See NFA, p. 150).


29. Ibid., p. 4.
