Exploring the Dark Tunnels of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting in Jane Urquhart’s *The Stone Carvers*

Memory is a central theme in Jane Urquhart’s writings. As she reveals herself in an interview, “other people’s memory stories” inspire her poetry and prose: “The past is a memory but it is a memory that is alive” (Hancock, 34). Yet, Urquhart approaches memory in a very ambivalent way. On the one hand, all her works emphasise the importance of the past for the formation of individual and collective identity. On the other hand, her writings, especially *The Underpainter* and *Away*, which are to a high degree novels of introspection, convey a crisis of memory typical of postmodernism. They highlight the textuality of memory, its vagueness and the subjective aspect of any remembrance of things past. All of Urquhart’s novels depict the complexities of individual remembering through which identity is constructed. The author sees identity as a process and her works undermine the traditional view of self as stable and coherent. Urquhart explores many facets of the ambiguous term “memory”, which does not merely refer to the ability of the human mind to retain information about the past. In *The Whirlpool* and *Changing Heaven*, memory represents a haunting obsession which produces chaos because the “truth” about what “really” happened can never be recaptured. Moreover, Urquhart opposes the notion of memory as an archive: it is elusive, ever-changing and involves constant reinterpretation and obliteration of past events. *Away* and *The Underpainter* in particular show that imagination shapes and re-shapes our sense of the past. Furthermore, in Urquhart’s writings, voluntary memory is an ethical concept that connotes individual freedom; we are responsible for what we choose to remember and to forget. Finally, a conflict appears in Urquhart’s later novels between individual remembrances and official memory, i.e. ideology and history.

---

1 Anna Branach-Kallas was awarded the scholarship of The Foundation for Polish Science (Fundacja na Rzecz Nauki Polskiej).
All these aspects are present in Urquhart’s latest novel, *The Stone Carvers*, in which, however, the author seems to explore the concept of memory in the most profound and thought-provoking way. The novel focuses on Klara, a Canadian of German origins, who lives in the village of Shoneval, Ontario, at the beginning of the twentieth-century. The analysis that follows will highlight the multifaceted exploration of remembering and forgetting in the heroine’s identity-shaping process.

The tendency to cling obsessively to the memories of the past, while ignoring the complexities of the present, appears a characteristic of Klara’s parents, her mother in particular. After the disappearance of Klara’s brother Tilman, who runs away from the farm as a teenage boy choosing the existence of a vagrant, the heroine’s mother plunges into the memories of her beloved son, trying to retain his presence by constantly recollecting him. She becomes embittered and depressed and resents Klara’s presence by her side instead of Tilman’s. Klara’s childhood is thus defined by her brother’s looming absence. The girl, “who was practically forgotten in the panic” (Urquhart, 95), comes to the conclusion that Tilman will never be forgotten but forever present in the family’s life. Her grandfather, a woodcarver impressed by his grandson’s outstanding artistic skills, keeps hoping that Tilman will return one day. He wishes to leave his tools to the boy as a family legacy and, lost in the recollections of the gifted grandson, remains blind for a long time to his granddaughter’s equally impressive carving abilities.

The general indifference to Klara’s presence, resulting from the painful memories of somebody else’s absence as a paradoxical attempt to keep the absent one present and alive, shapes the heroine’s identity. Furthermore, this lack of appreciation seems also to be caused by gender discrimination. Klara notices early that her grandfather’s enthusiastic lessons are addressed to Tilman only, as, following Dürer’s advice, the old man hopes to train the youth into an artist. Although her skills remain unnoticed, Klara does not forget her grandfather’s lessons while her brother grows restless and bored. She is the one to stay at the farm and to carve numerous altarpieces, yet, when her grandfather speaks of art, she cannot see how the term “applied to her – a wood sculptor, and a woman” (Urquhart, 91). Overwhelmed by the memory of her brother’s absence and her mother’s subsequent death, Klara’s early youth is thus marked by emotional rejection, painful recollections and erasure of self.

Consequently, Klara’s love affair with Eamon, “the silent Irish”, is the more
Exploring the Dark Tunnels of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting in Jane Urquhart’s The Stone Carvers

passionate as it draws her away from the painful past into the intensity of the present. Her senses awakened, her restraint gone, the young woman learns to relish every moment spent with her lover. Therefore, when Eamon, obsessed by the romantic dream to fly an aeroplane, joins the army to fight in the First World War, she cannot forgive him this immature decision, which she considers a betrayal of their love: “This dark removal, this adventure in absence, chosen by him” (Urquhart, 140). She becomes suddenly aware of the insurmountable differences between them, which result from their very different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Resenting the pain caused by passion, the heroine refuses to marry Eamon before his departure for Europe. Furthermore, she denies her love for him by coldly breaking the amber necklace he has offered to her to remind her of their happiest days together and to promise her infinite bliss. Klara’s initial reaction is therefore a refusal to remember, the destruction of the string of beads being a symbolic gesture by which she erases their happy past together and refuses the prospect of a common future. However, despite her declared intention not to remember, her memory will retain the scene forever, turning it into an excessive preoccupation that her imagination will try to alter in vain. Moreover, like Tilman’s escape, Eamon’s departure also ties the heroine to place, to the farm where, faithful to her stereotypical gender-role, she will be awaiting the absent (male) beloved.

When, after two years, Eamon is reported missing in action and Klara is forced to accept his death, the protagonist becomes obsessed with remembering. With dismay, she notices the irrevocable transience of things:

Even the chestnut tree outside Klara’s window would die a slow, rotting death until it would fall one night in a summer storm when everything in Klara wanted it to remain standing, blossoming in spring, leafy in summer, the only access, she secretly believed, to the window of her former self (Urquhart, 159).

Tormented by the constant flux and changeability of the world, the protagonist is terrified by the possibility of the permanent loss of Eamon that would result from her forgetting about him: “She knew that all that remained of the texture of his skin was what she could remember with her own senses” (Urquhart, 168). It is as if, by remembering about Eamon and the happy moments they spent together, she could keep him somehow alive, not allowing him to disintegrate into the void. Forgetting appears to her a drift towards non-existence. Her desire is “to remember everything, to totalise
memory to the point of forgetting about forgetfulness, so as to achieve some imaginary simultaneity of remembrances which hinges on the necessity of transcending human limitations, thus also instigating a transcendence of the ‘I’ ([Memory], 8). In Klara’s case, the wish to transcend the ‘I’ is connected with a desire to gain a transcendence for the beloved by the power of memory.

Urquhart pushes further her exploration of the concepts of remembering and forgetting when Klara gradually realises that, as everything else, memory is dependent on the progression of time. Thus, memory appears a source of identity only in so far as it produces temporal selves, our present selves constantly altering and re-interpreting the memories of our past selves:

When one embraces a moment of rapture from the past, either by trying to reclaim it or by refusing to let it go, how can its brightness not tarnish, turn grey with longing and sorrow, until the wild spell of the remembered interlude is lost altogether and the memory of sadness claims its rightful place in the mind? And what is it we expect from the sun-drenched past? There is no formula for re-entry, nothing we can do to enable reconstruction. The features of an absent loved one’s face are erased one by one, the timbre of the voice drowned by the noise of the world (Urquhart, 158-9).

Perfect memory proves an illusion, it would imply a disintegration of self. Eventually, Klara feels as if “the past was shutting her out” (Urquhart, 168). Eamon’s presence becomes less and less tangible and she visualises his scattered remains as all that is left of him. For, as Kalaga and Rachwal point out, “the predicament of living in the present with the past also necessitates forgetfulness, either selective or not, of some fragments of the past so as to introduce a liminality to the otherwise infinite experience of worldliness” ([Memory], 7).

Consequently, Klara rebels against the trap of memory. Exhausted by the pain of remembering, during the following fifteen years the protagonist tries to eradicate Eamon from her mind altogether: “She had rationed the time she would allow herself to think about him, and by a fierce act of will had almost succeeded in turning him into a faceless ghost, until all that was left was the vaguely human, dark shape of absence. A shadow thrown against an unforgiving wall” (Urquhart, 332). Nevertheless, despite her efforts to forget him, Eamon’s presence continues to haunt Klara, while guilt and regret
torment her. The memories of the past render her absent from the present, a ghost hovering on the margins of the community for whom she sews daily their clothes. Pain lulls her senses to sleep and she rejects all the men that approach her. Soon, the protagonist becomes defined by her status of spinster, slightly frightening and ridiculous. She remains in a liminal space, beyond the reality of the present: “Her own connections continually slipped downstream, against the current, toward the swiftly disappearing past” (Urquhart, 169).

Therefore, when Tilman reappears in her life, Klara regards his return as a unique chance to reshape her existence. Initially, having noticed the figure of a soldier limping towards the house, she takes him for Eamon. Both men have damaged her by their absence; thus, Tilman’s miraculous return can help her heal the wounds of the past and liberate herself from her stagnant existence. For Klara realises that her lonely life, subordinated to a strict routine, is so empty of emotions that her passion for Eamon can also drift into the realm of the unreal, “a fantasy concocted by her old maid’s mind” (Urquhart, 262). Her departure from the place that has so far defined her will therefore offer her a chance to alter radically her self and to liberate herself from the memories connected with that place. She manages to persuade her brother to take her to France, to the site of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, where Tilman lost his leg, Eamon his life, and Walter Seymour Allward is now constructing an enormous War Memorial. Klara seems to believe that by working on the monument, she will somehow compensate for Eamon’s death.

*The Stone Carvers* presents an interesting portrait of Walter Seymour Allward, the Canadian engineer of the monument. Obsessed with his design, he desires the structure to celebrate the memory of the dead soldiers in a pure, monumental and anonymous way. Absorbed by his vision of a memorial to grief and peace, he resents any personal conception of his stone carvers. Allward’s impersonal vision of the monument comes into conflict with Klara’s desire to leave a personal touch on it. When he encounters Klara,

---

2 The Vimy Memorial, erected at the site of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, is a monument to all Canadians who died in the First World War. It was designed by Canadian architect Walter Seymour Allward and took eleven years to complete. The numerous allegorical figures were carved from limestone brought from a Roman quarry on the Adriatic Sea. The walls of the memorial are covered with the names of 11,285 Canadian who were killed in France and whose final resting place is unknown.
disguised as a man, carving the face of Eamon on one of his torchbearers, initially he considers the sculpture damaged because of its personal expression. Only when the heroine confides her personal tragedy to him does he realise that the personal can also convey the universal as Eamon’s face expression renders the innocence of pre-war youth. As to Klara, by giving a visual expression to the secret love hidden in her heart, she takes the first step to disentangle herself from the past.

However, total liberation from the memory of the past and her former self proves much more difficult for the female protagonist. Her love for Giorgio, a Canadian of Italian origins whom she meets in France, makes the present suddenly tangible and submerges the traumatic past. Having discarded her male clothes, Klara rediscovers her forgotten femininity and sensual pleasure. Interestingly, her sexual unions with Giorgio take place in the dark tunnels surrounding Vimy Ridge. Love in this “chosen underworld” (Urquhart, 357), a grave to so many soldiers, Eamon’s remains being also scattered somewhere there, illustrates how Eros and Thanatos are closely connected. Klara’s sexual reawakening in the tunnels also shows the conflicting pull on her loyalties: present love trying to replace past love. In this sense, the descent into the tunnels can be seen as a voyage into the depths of the unconscious, into the depths of memory. Eventually, she is faced with a dilemma, as Giorgio asks her to tell him about her first lover. She believes that to utter Eamon’s name in Giorgio’s presence would be disloyal. Simultaneously, the protagonist refuses to release her former self connected with the memory of her youth:

[S]he insisted on the ownership of her past. Since the day of his departure, Klara had never once said aloud the name of her young lover. She felt that to release the syllables into the air all these years later would be a kind of amputation, a violent removal of a part of the self. To present them to the man she had so recently embraced would betray, she believed, Eamon’s bright, eager passion, would for the second time annul it (Urquhart, 360-361).

Hurt, Giorgio walks away with the light, leaving Klara alone in the dark. Urquhart alludes here clearly to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Giorgio being ready to lead Klara away from the world of the dead into the light. Giorgio-Orpheus does not turn back; it is Klara who keeps looking over her shoulder, lost among shadows and recollections, thus making Eamon eternally present in her memory. Deeply frustrated, she seems to prefer Eamon’s image in memory to Giorgio’s presence in real life.
Exploring the Dark Tunnels of Memory: 
Remembering and Forgetting in Jane Urquhart's The Stone Carvers

Klara must prove that reality is more powerful to her than the imagined world of memories: “She had only two choices: to stay alone in the dripping shadows of the underground labyrinth or to follow Giorgio, follow his light” (Urquhart, 361). Eventually, the power of love wins over the protagonist’s attachment to the past. She realises that she has never fully accepted Eamon’s feelings for her and that, in fact, she hardly knew the young man who died two decades before but who still inhabits her mind. The protagonist realises that, as Wojciech Kalaga suggests, “the realm of individual memory […] cannot be the realm of perspectiveless mimesis: of impressions of wax, of icons in the archive. Individual memory does not conserve people, events or things as such. Individual memory involves being as interpretation” (Kalaga, 39). By uttering Eamon’s name in Giorgio’s presence, she disposes of the painful memory of the past and opens up to the present. As in Plato, oblivion is the “exit of memory” (Borkowska, 38). Depicting Klara carving Eamon’s name on the wall of the monument with Giorgio’s help, Urquhart uses a vocabulary that emphasises their mutual love, tenderness, the ascent into light, heaven, from the darkness of Hades and non-existence.

Klara’s act of confession, the avowal of her love to the world, seems an ultimate effort to recollect in order to forget and thus gain absolution from the past. Therefore, as Richard Terdiman puts it, “confession is an act of memory that seeks to neutralize memory”\(^3\). Analysing the etymological sources of the word “memory”, the critic discovers an interesting relation between memoria – the faculty of memory and the act of confession. Originally, the word confession “referred to a monument, a memorial, the site of the remains of the martyr and hence the Latin equivalent for such a monument: a memoria” (Borkowska, 40). The site of Klara’s confession, the memorial to the martyrs of World War I, has therefore a symbolic meaning, connected furthermore with the Christian definition of confession as an avowal of sins and sorrows. As Borkowska points out, it seems “that in the very act of contrition and confession there is inscribed the idea of erasure, obliteration, a relief from an emotional tension as when one gets rid of the ‘maleficence of the past’” (Borkowska, 40).

Urquhart explores yet another facet of the concept of memory as she undermines the traditional equation of memory with the past. After Klara’s marriage to Giorgio, when they settle together at her farm in Shoneval, the heroine admires her husband standing in various rooms, absorbing his

---

\(^3\) Quoted in Borkowska (40).
physical presence in the house. Many years later, she still makes him repeat
the same ritual when she realises suddenly that she cannot remember what
he looks like in a given room: “She would pull him by the sleeve to the
place in question and make him stand in its light or its shadow until she had
taken the sight of him there permanently into her memory” (Urquhart, 382). The dichotomy between the present and the past is thus rejected, as
memory is an essential part of the self that is performed at a given moment.
As Wojciech Kalaga explains, it is “erroneous to think of the past that it
becomes past only after being present, that it is in a sense the old present
which has changed into past. The present and the past are not linked by the
order of succession; they are not two moments that follow one another; they
are simultaneous and coexistent” (Kalaga, 32).

Just as the memorial is strictly connected in The Stone Carvers with the act
of confession, an attempt to remember in order to forget, the role of art
appears essential in “neutralising memory”. Urquhart does not, however,
approach art as eternal. The narrator notices that it is not permanent depicting
the completion of the Vimy Memorial in 1936, a triumph of remembrance,
bringing back the loved ones dead for almost two decades. Yet, just as all
things change and perish, art is not resilient to the passage of time and the
memories epitomised in the monument are soon forgotten. Allward’s belief
that “he was making memory solid, indestructible” (Urquhart, 381) proves
a delusion:

The larger, the more impressive the monument, the more miraculous
its construction, the more it seems to predict its own fall from grace.
Exposed and shining on elevated ground, insisting on prodigious feats
of memory from all who come to gaze at it, it appears to be as vulnerable
as a flower, and its season seems to be as brief. And who among us does
not imagine the stone crushed, the altars taken away to museums, the
receding past vandalized […] Names carved in stone become soft and
unrecognizable under the assault of acid rain. No one knows any more
what the allegorical figures represent. No one cares (Urquhart, 378).

Nevertheless, apparently, Urquhart supports the romantic idea of imagination
as a powerful force that creates its reality far more reliably than any other
mode of apprehension. The hope for peace that the monument was supposed

---

4 Emphasis A. B-K.
Exploring the Dark Tunnels of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting in Jane Urquhart’s The Stone Carvers

to convey is annihilated by the horrors of World War II. The memorial survives the catastrophe, but Allward gradually loses his sanity and his genius is forgotten by the Canadians. Yet, although the artists vanish from the earth, the works of their imagination remain; if not eternal,

[…]

the windows and statues and towers are maintained longer than you might think, in the face of autumn’s bitter winds and winter’s frantic storms.[…] They disperse light and strength and consolation long after the noise of the battle has ended, and all of the warriors have gone home (Urquhart, 390).

Confronted with the changeability and transitoriness of all things, art seems to give the most powerful and lasting expression to human obsession.

In The Stone Carvers, memory does not imply an opposition between the present and the past, being and non-being, presence and absence. On the contrary, exploring the ontological aspect of remembering, the novel seems to suggest that the past as memory is as much part of our being in the present. The novel implies the simultaneous coexistence of the past and present in the human mind and highlights the dynamic nature of memory, our present selves being involved in a constant dialogue with our past selves. Memory is therefore (re)interpretation and (re)construction. Furthermore, Urquhart insists on the liminality of memory, the impossibility of achieving total memory and thus transcending human limitations. In this respect, forgetting should not be seen as disintegration and dispersal into the void. The novel highlights the healing aspect of oblivion. Moreover, the connection between confession and memory seems crucial in the novel; the effort to remember that is made in order to forget. Finally, the relation between memory and art is also of central significance in The Stone Carvers. Although neither can oppose the transitoriness of being, art gives the present and the past their human forms, and, if not eternal, at least carries the memory of individual passions over the present into the future.

Works Cited


