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Confessions of a Dispassionate Witness – Jane Urquhart's *The Underpainter*

The present paper aims at analysing the significance of place and memory in Jane Urquhart's *The Underpainter* and their connections with the notions of the centre and the margin.

Jane Urquhart is an internationally recognized artist cherished by literary critics and readers alike. The author of six novels, numerous short stories, volumes of poetry, a winner of several prestigious literary prizes, including a Governor General's Award for her *The Underpainter* in 1997, has placed a special emphasis on place and the act of remembering, the themes which repeatedly surface in her fiction. Her works are set in the past, be it the 19th century or the early 20th century, but this shift backwards in time illuminates the present being an indirect commentary on it. The interest and excitement the past holds for Urquhart places her next to other Canadian writers whose past orientation symbolises, according to Staines (1981), cultural maturity: "Life is often [...] a repetition of patterns already established, and in order to understand the ebb and flow of life they turn to the past, for the past illuminates, offering some possible order that might explain the present and prepare for the future" (Staines 1996, 300). Looking back means for Canadian writers creating and exploring their roots as well as examining a history until now unnoted.

As a writer from Canada, a country struggling with its colonial heritage, its peculiar progress from colony to nation, to global village (Staines 1995, 24), and inferiority complexes coming from Canada's comparing itself to the former centres – Britain, France and the United States of America, Urquhart is emphasising the importance of the past and the place in her works participates in the nation building process and the literary discussion on "Canadianness". The Canadian nation building enterprise in a pursuit of a phantom – a single and unified identity – has resulted in several metanarratives such as the spirit of the land, the taming of wilderness, the need for social connection and the search for identity. Place has a particular

role to play in creating a national awareness (Osborne). Peoples' identification with distinctive places is indispensable for nurturing an "a-where-ness-of" national identity. A collective memory and social cohesion is cultivated through the representation of national narratives in symbolic places. Places themselves have no inherent identity, they are neutral. They are assigned an identity and constructed by human behaviour in a continuous mutual relationship between people and the places they dwell in. Becoming an element of an individual's self place enters his/her memory: "Place and its landscape become part of one's identity and one's memory. [...] [L]andscape is replete with markers of the past – graves and cemeteries, monuments, archeological sites, place names, religious and holy centers [...] that help us remember and give meaning to our lives" (Sack, 135).

Acknowledging the importance of a place, due to their colonial past, Canadians have often felt that their position is inferior to other, that it is marginal, dull and unimportant. They used to look up to the mother countries, France and England, and also to their powerful southern giant, the United States (Corse, 34-63). According to Hutcheon, it is the United States which due to their economic and cultural power colonised Canada in the twentieth century and politically threatened Canadians by constant reminders of American power and imperialist impulses (Hutcheon, 160). The political and geographic situation of the ex-centric country has influenced its literary representations in the United States and Canada. David Staines believes that in American literature Canada becomes North American colonial, the inhabitant of an anachronistic world which would probably soon awaken and reject its colonialism and welcome the independence the United States enjoy (Staines 1995, 33-66). In American imagination, due to illusory similarities, Canada is perceived as a part of the United States, not a distinct country, but an extension of its Southern neighbour¹. The undermining and more deep-rooted pattern that appears in American fiction, however, is that of the Canadian as the North American other which inhabits a unique world that provides a crucial viewpoint on as well as an option to its neighbour. A Canadian perceived as the North American "other" becomes a dispassionate witness who, from its safe world, carefully, caringly and objectively observes the aspirations and the crumbling of the United States.

¹ In one of her essays a Canadian writer Aritha Van Herk quotes the following joke: "Question: 'What's the difference between a Canadian and an American?' Answer: 'The difference is that the Canadian knows the difference between a Canadian and an American'" (Van Herk, 158-159).

In this way Canada becomes an alternative to and a peculiar kind of commentary on its southern neighbour. This vision of the Canadian onlooker created by American writers entered the Canadian imagination. The North American other, the privileged margin, detached from and superior to the American centre, assumes a position of a peculiar commentator on the American experience. For Marshal McLuhan Canada becomes *The Borderline Case*:

[...] the American way, without commitment to American goods or responsibilities, makes the Canadian intellectually detached and observant as an interpreter of the American destiny. [...] Knowing the United States like the back of his hand, the Canadian can be playful in discussing America. He is happy to invite the “ugly American” to enjoy the idyllic playgrounds of our largely unoccupied land of lakes and forests (McLuhan, 227-229).

In her novel *The Underpainter* Jane Urquhart manipulates and confidently transforms the traditional notions of the centre and the periphery as well as plays with David Staines's concept of Canadians as passive observers. Her *Künsterroman* is narrated by an elderly American artist, Austin Fraser. Through the visible acts of his memory – a series of paintings entitled *The Erasures*, which draw on the episodes from his life and the lives of the people he has met – the artist reconsiders his life spent between the centre and the fringe. The two different but equally alluring places : the New York City of the first half of the twentieth century full of cultural and intellectual stimulation, and Canadian wilderness, the shores of Lake Superior and Lake Ontario with their overwhelming landscapes and inhabitants living apparently unambitious and predictable lives, become parts of his identity as a man and as an artist. In the process of nostalgic recalling places and people Austin Fraser realises that unlike his Canadian friends from what he considers a ‘toy country’ who experienced deep passions and witnessed historically important events, he has led a marginal and an uneventful life as a peculiar ‘voyeur’ and a ‘visual bandit’ who turned every animate and inanimate object into art. As he rethinks the past of others and his own empty existence, the other merges with the self, the past with the present and reality with art.

In his seventies Austin Fraser struggles with his past which enters his mind and fills his paintings, being an attempt to atone for the sins of emotional negligence. With his memoirs and canvases he recreates the world from the beginning of the twentieth century and takes the reader into the realm of his

childhood, his youth and maturity spent between the civilisation of New York and the wilds of Canada. The narrative focusing on Austin's tidying up, assembling, cataloguing, and burying under layers of paint his past and his memories as a preparation for his death, alternates between the present and the past as Austin's, his family's and friends' lives are revealed slowly on the pages of the novel. Austin's past assumes a form of pictures, a series of paintings called *The Erasures* which record important moments of his life and which are based on "vivid fragments, ragged-edged episodes from [his] own life and the lives of others" (Urquhart, 107). Forced to rely on his memory but aiming at exactness Austin is doomed to inadequacy: "Slicing into the lives of others, I have walked away with only disparate pieces [...]; [I]t is simply not possible to fit everything together with any real accuracy, despite my overdeveloped powers of recollection" (Urquhart, 107). Thus, the painfully created pictures are about both "revelation and obscuration" (Urquhart, 180). Austin obscures the images that exist first in his own mind and his memory "I wanted to concretize the images, turn them into the kind of physical realities that occupy space and suggest depth – however illusory. Then I wanted the physical reality veiled" (Urquhart, 180-191). He does this with the use of underpainting and overpainting. First drawing a detailed scene, he later puts layers of lighter shades of colours on it and thus 'erases' the original picture. By telling his past he is simultaneously removing it. Various understood by critics, for Austin the canvases are about "the casting off of despair, about catharsis, anaesthetic" (Urquhart, 184). They are rectangles of sorrow embodying the grief of his secretly un-lived life. On the surface Austin Fraser, a successful painter may be mistaken for a happy man. His life spent between fame and admiration of New York with its artistic bohemia, his teachers such as Robert Henry as well as his friends, especially Rockwell Kent, and the luring shores of Lake Superior and Lake Ontario with his amateur painter friend George, and his model and mistress Sara, seems to be exciting and fascinating. In fact, Austin's life has been devoid of real feelings and commitment, characterised instead of aloofness and extreme detachment from anyone who surrounded him.

The painter's life is divided according to the seasons of the year: he spent winter in the city and the summer is reserved for the landscape and Canadian wilderness. When, after the death of his mother, due to the money which his father made on Canadian mining stocks, seventeen-year-old Austin is to spend a summer in Canada, a part of the colonial world still connected with its European ancestors, in a town of Davenport, the country, due to his prejudices, does not seem to offer any excitement for him:

The country across the lake never really takes shape in the collective imagination here. Cold, distant, separated by enough water that the curve of the earth makes it visible, the far shore disappears swiftly from the memory [...] The impression left behind is vague and fleeting as the various intensities of light over the lake (Urquhart, 37).

Although contrary to his expectations, Canada surprises Austin and chains him to itself with its captivating landscapes so impressionable on the artist's mind, he cannot help feeling that Davenport is far away from the intellectual stimulation New York can offer. This impression strengthens when he makes friends with another, in his eyes a minor artist, George, who is a China painter and the owner of China Hall. Looking at the Canadian landscapes painted on the porcelain exhibited in his friend's shop Austin perceives George's land as "a toy country; one to be played in, and played with, but one to be locked away with the dolls when you reached a certain age" (Urquhart, 75). For Austin, the country is strange and alien, tedious and unexciting, full of people like George, doomed to practise his pseudo-art and living ordinary lives:

How terrible, I thought suddenly, is the grinding dailiness of George's life. How pathetic that he should have to spend his days contemplating kitchen china. There was a kind of horror in it, a futility. I almost disliked him at the moment, for my own certainty was that nothing at all was ever going to happen to him (Urquhart, 77).

According to Austin, such a young country as Canada which has to look for recognition and engagement and which enters the First World War to "leap into the chorus and onto the world stage" (Urquhart, 91) admires the United States and Americans that, according to Austin, appear much superior to it. According to his expectations, George, an amateurish artist destined to the only form of art, he could practise in Davenport, to the low and despised by serious artists china painting, is intrigued by his American friend, a genuine practitioner, who scoffs at the designs of new shipments and lectures him confidently about real art.

Surrounded by an air of superiority Austin comes back for fifteen years to the funny, old-fashioned country on the north of the American border which, although seen as intellectually marginal, offers him landscapes he can colonise and exploit for his art: "Each summer I removed myself from cities and travelled north in search of landscapes. [...] I was a creature of

habit. Winter demanded that I remain in the city, but summer was for landscape” (Urquhart, 129-130, 266). The Canadian summers with their overpowering views are stored in his memory becoming part of his New York identity. Progressing as a painter, however, Austin regresses as a human being. Always aloof and reserved, he becomes a particular kind of voyeur, a detached observer who absorbs and transforms places and pieces into art, himself untouched/unmoved by them. In this respect Fraser follows closely the teachings of his master, Robert Henry who preached:

Each sensation is precious [he would lecture]. Protect it, cherish it, keep it. Never give it away. You must develop that balance which allows all of the world to come in to you and only that which you have expressed in your art to move back out again into the world. When you are alone, without the distraction of community and affection, this will be easier to achieve (Urquhart, 69).

Nothing is worth his time unless it can be developed into art:

What I wanted from life was just a good view. [...] A paintable view, a perfectly composed view, and now and then, a perfect figure in a perfect landscape. [...] The deeper currents of the world, when I was lucky enough to stumble upon them, existed, [...] to be examined by me, then used in my art for my own advancement (Urquhart, 141, 213-14).

Living according to this principle, Austin accumulates and hoards, trespasses everywhere and thieves constantly, retracing ever further within himself and treating other human beings only as a material of his art. This attitude determines the painter’s relationship with his model, Sara, a daughter of a transplanted Cornish miner, and a hotel waitress in Silver Islet Landing. Austin spends fifteen summers with the woman, observing her and converting her body into the canvases he exhibits during the winter months in New York. She fits perfectly into the summer Canadian landscape and Austin’s summer self but disappears from the artist’s life in winter:

When I was in New York, Sara became a series of forms on a flat surface, her body a composition adapting to a rectangle, her skin and hair gradients of tone. She became my work, and then, when the work was finished, I lost sight of her completely, turned towards ambition.

[...] She had no place, no relevance at all, in this part of my life. She belonged in a light-filled room in the north, a room with a view of landscapes I could frame and sell, her body frozen into poses I could also frame and sell. Her presence in my city life, my winter life, was unacceptable. [...] Between the artist and the model [...] there must always be a distance (Urquhart, 96, 98, 99).

What Austin does is to slip in and out of Sara's life. He becomes a specialist in quiet appearance and disappearance. Perfect at controlling his own emotions and aloofness Austin exerts control over Sara, too. He immobilises her body according to his wish in artistically impressive poses and orders her life according to the pattern of his coming and leaving. Although Sara is part of the Canadian landscape she can be more easily manipulated by Austin than the wild and evading dominance landscape which "refused to become intimate with us, to mirror our souls, to encourage our vanity" (Urquhart, 179). The model is entered and invaded, like the Canadian landscape and land, allowing in her passivity to be colonised by the artist while Austin seems untouched by her influence and able to leave her when he has painted her enough (Branach-Kallas 2003b, 45)². Following these rules of absolute detachment from his object, Austin desires to create great art but blindly pursuing this goal his experience of life is reduced to a virtual one. He is devoid of any passion and immersion in life, which, according to his teacher Henry, are indispensable elements of every masterpiece: "Those who have genuinely lived their lives will leave behind the stuff that is incontestably art" (Urquhart, 83). In this respect, contrary to his conviction, Austin fails as an artist.

It is in the winter of the year 1937 when Fraser takes his youth friend Vivian to visit George in Davenport that the artist realises how wrong his perception of his Canadian friends has been and recognises his own internal emptiness. Learning about George's secret marriage to Vivian and listening to Augusta's story about her and George's shattering war experiences Austin sees his

² Sara can be regarded as an incarnation of the Canadian landscape and wilderness. Howells notices that the wilderness myth since the 19th century has been undergoing a consistent feminization in Canada and its literary modifications have been sensitive to historical and social circumstances (Howells, 11-16). The vision of nature as fearful, alien and other, is, the male myth of wilderness, reflecting male experiences of colonization. Women, drawing on their colonization experiences, regard wilderness as a place of self-redefinition.

Canadian friends' lives in a new light³. George, a pitiable china painter turns out to have entered the real currents of life. Having taken part in the First World War he witnessed one of the greatest events in the history of mankind. Austin starts to see him as a man who can feel, love and suffer. Also other people such as George's partner, Augusta and his taken for granted lover Sara, appear to Austin as those who have lived their lives fuller than him, who "let passion break them" (Urquhart, 216). Austin becomes aware of the fact that concentrating on his fame and his "interior Arctic" (Urquhart, 216) he has led a life of a second-hand experience, that he has never filled anything with warmth, that he has been devoid of the ability to feel. He, a citizen of the apparent centre, coming from New York bustling with cultural and intellectual life, has led an existence of a dispassionate witness, an observer past whom a deep dimension of life passed by. It was this nice but humdrum place from George's china paintings, Canada, that was the arena of powerful human dramas while he was leading a sterile life, in the artistic circles of New York:

So it must have been that while George was wading up to his hips in blood and mud and rotting flesh, I was engaged in buffoonery, using the studio as my own private gym. The war [...] simply slipped my mind. [...] I was far too preoccupied with painting, or our classroom antics, carwheeling safely through rooms filled with marks on paper (Urquhart, 135).

On the winter morning of 1937, after Augusta and George's suicide, Austin gathers carefully the scattered collection of his friend's china to reassemble it as a tribute to George's formerly neglected artistry. Changed by the night revelations and the tragic events of the morning he decides to let feelings cross the threshold of his heart. Fraser wants to come back to Sara, not as an object of his art but as a woman he would like to love:

I could see that everything that had passed between Sara and me until this moment had been an approximation. Mere subsistence. I, who had previously been so restrained, would now engage in such blatant exposure that when I was finished she would have the entirety of my life in her possession [...]. She would look at all with the opalescent view of an innocent. She would forgive me and I would be exonerated (Urquhart, 331).

³ The question of history and memory in *The Underpainter* and other novels by Jane Urquhart are discussed in Branach-Kallas (2003a).

Alarmed at the approach of happiness just before a planned meeting Austin leaves Port Arthur as Sara is approaching it, too weak to expose himself emotionally after years of total camouflage, too afraid of rejection by a woman held at a distance for fifteen years and finally rejected: “How could I break into her innocence with my own corruption? In all fairness, ultimately, I could not bear to pollute her strength with my own damaging weaknesses. I panicked in the face of the possibility of happiness” (Urquhart, 333-334). The artist and his model never change the nature of their relationship in reality. However, their symbolic reunion takes place in Austin’s painting. In his old age Austin begins to collect the scraps of others’ lives and slices of his emotions in a desperate attempt to artistically compensate for the damage he has done to those who loved him. Unable to overcome his detachment he transfers his feelings to his canvases which become a collage made out of the slices of his life and those of others. The last of the series, *The Erasures* is to be his portrait entitled *The Underpainter*. The picture will contain, like his memories, the significant people and places that have entered him despite his reluctance to be invaded: “All these foreign fields, the battles, the china collection. Views of rocks and trees, hills and streams. I scarcely know which images are mine and which have been taken by me, fully developed, from others, or whether there is, in the final analysis, any difference” (Urquhart, 217). As a deep insight into his existence *The Underpainter* will show that a definite distinction between the self and the other is impossible, that the other, be it a person or a place, always merges with the self becoming its integral part, so that any boundary between them is illusory. This final picture will present Austin with the love he, “the implacable rock man, the miles and miles of ice” (Urquhart, 340) could not accept earlier in his life⁴.

Choosing for the narrator of her novel an American rather than a Canadian, Jane Urquhart looks at the Canada at the beginning of the twentieth century with the eyes of the other. Austin Fraser approaches his northern neighbour filled with the stereotypes about the remnants of the colonial world on the American continent and the insignificant individuals inhabiting it. He comes from the cultural, economic and political centre to the Canadian ex-centric convinced that it is his life and his native land that really matters. Rethinking

⁴ Austin is, to a certain extent, also identified with landscape but rather with its negative aspects. In an interview with Linda Richardson Jane Urquhart notices: “[I]f there was a redemption in that book it was that he at least was telling the story. It makes a difference” (Richardson).

his past he realises that Canada may be “a country of margins”, but “the margin [...] is where the action is” (Kroetsch, 356-357). Unlike in the traditional literary approaches to Canada described by Staines (1995), in the postmodern novel of Jane Urquhart it is the United States that provide a necessary perspective on Canadian existence and that help the American see a true picture of his self consisting of his American and Canadian identities. It is Austin then and not any of his Canadian friends who is a real dispassionate witness observing inertly human dramas. The only time he comes close to real life and the important historical events is when leaving the centre he comes to the Canadian periphery. Envisaging the United States and Canada from the first half of the twentieth century Jane Urquhart like other Canadian writers engaging in the past seems to comment on the present and reshapes the stereotypes from foreign and Canadian fiction, as if raising George Woodcock’s question from twenty eight years ago:

Why on earth did generations of Canadians pretend to believe this country dull? We knew perfectly well it wasn’t. Yet for so long we did not proclaim what we knew. [...] [F]or many years we valued ourselves insufficiently, living as we did under the huge shadows of those two dominating figures, Uncle Sam and Britannia (Woodcock).

Jane Urquhart only apparently assertively rejects these shadows. In fact, she acknowledges their existence, as she gathers Canadian legends and myths in her tale of a prosaic American in love with alluring Canadian nature and wild-hearted Canadians. *The Underpainter*, like Jane Urquhart’s other books, constructs Canadian myths and the Canadian identity in connection to the place and the past. Thus, the novel indicates that Canada still cares about its nationness and is not, as Staines claimed (Staines 1995, 24), a global village in which ‘here’ does not matter any more.

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