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***Internalizing the landscape: Jane Urquhart's "A Map of Glass".***

**Abstract I:** This paper tries to show how the structure of the romance and the main themes, loss and search for identity, in *A Map of Glass,* Jane Urquhart's latest novel, are determined by the characters' disposition to internalize their Canadian landscape. In fact, this process of "emplacement" turns out to be the essential way to rediscover oneself and one's family. In particular, in a country like Canada, this is still more comprehensible as its inhabitants are so closely related to a landscape, which, more than history, haunts their imagination and shapes their desire for survival and a sense of personal and national belonging.

**Abstract II:** Il presente articolo si prefigge di dimostrare come la forma e il contenuto dell'ultimo romanzo *A Map of Glass* di Jane Urquhart siano determinati dalla tendenza dei personaggi a interiorizzare il paesaggio canadese. Il processo attraverso cui l'umanità dell'opera viene assorbita nel contesto naturale risulta essere la via privilegiata per recuperare la propria dimensione spirituale e per rinsaldare i legami familiari che sono alla base della riappropriazione dell'identità soggettiva. In particolare, in una realtà quale quella canadese, tale strategia è ancora più comprensibile dato che i suoi abitanti sono intimamente legati ad un paesaggio unico che, più ancora della storia, dà forma alla loro immaginazione e al desiderio di sopravvivenza e di consapevolezza personale e nazionale.

Jane Urquhart's latest novel, A *Map of Glass,* has received very little attention by literary criticism since its publication in 2005, even if this work reached the final selection for the Regional Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book. Apart from some interesting reviews on daily newspapers such as *The Independent*

and *The Guardian*, only very few scholars, among them Susan Moore, have devoted their attention to this book. In particular, Susan Moore has focused on the themes of loss and place in the text hoping that her examination could lead individuals to question the consequences of pollution and further damages against nature. It is interesting to notice that Moore is an expert of geographic location and that her article was published in *The Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* (Moore 2008), rather than in a literary journal. This testifies not only to the wide-ranging appreciation Urquhart enjoys beyond the field of literary criticism, but also to the central role the notion of place holds in her fiction.

As regards critical reception, Urquhart has often been praised for her complex narrative structures related to the theme of the supernatural and for her meticulous attention to time and space. This last coordinate in particular, space, dominates her whole narrative production, as is often the case in postcolonial literatures where the dimension of time is less relevant than that of place. In young countries like Canada this phenomenon is even more important, since the environment is the main source of identity for the inhabitants, although they still show an ambivalent attitude towards it. Space is seen, in fact, as both a fascinating and menacing element, towards which Canadians develop a complex love/hate relationship which leads to what Margaret Atwood aptly described as "paranoid schizophrenia". (Atwood 1972). Some reviewers have occasionally argued that Urquhart generally values setting more than characterization and plot in her narratives: Anne Compton, for instance, points out that it is really the landscape which creates stories in her fiction. Referring, in particular to *The Whirlpool, Changing Heaven* and *Away,* Compton asserts that "Her three fictions, constitute, to use Frye's title, 'a secular scripture', an interconnection of body of stories, containing an integrated vision of the human relation to landscape" (Compton 2005). This evaluation can be applied to *A Map of Glass* as well, since both the structure and the main themes in the novel

are determined by Urquhart's tendency to internalize the landscape, whose untamable nature is the real subject.

As regard the structure of the text, it is useful to refer to Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* to detect the model of invention used, that is, romance. This is, in fact, the most effective structure Urquhart could use to show the complex and ambiguous relationship that links the individual to his/her Canadian mother land (Frye 1976). Thanks to its greater flexibility in representing themes and creating the plot, romance is apt to expose the great capacity Canadian nature has to stir the imagination and its excessive claims upon the lives of those living in it. Since nature often absorbs their stories, the inhabitants' survival depends upon THE telling of their personal and collective narratives. For this reason, literary reviewers have defined Urquhart's work as characterized by remarkable ecological sensitivity. By releasing the characters' voice through a process of internalization of the landscape, the author also deconstructs the idea that her country's mythology depends upon an extensive report of official history, thereby celebrating national culture through minor stories.

As far as the structure of *A Map Of Glass* is concerned, the quest pattern of the romance, dominates and develops as the protagonists descend into the idealized and extraordinary world of nature. This journey into the darkest side of reality is perilous and calls for a crucial struggle which ultimately leads to an enlightening discovery about oneself and society. In this sense, Andrew's case is exemplary: his death opens the book and is the result of his desperate dive into nature. The protagonist, a man in an advanced stage of Alzheimer's disease, is presented as wandering across an uninhabited island in Southern Ontario, overwhelmed by a feeling of terror in the midst of an environment connoted by deep snow, shining sun and a wonderful forest. Despite the beauty of the surroundings, the man has no memory and no words for the familiar landscape and is driven unconsciously to the edge of a frozen river where, detaching a scrap of humanity from his past, he realizes that his whole life has been a total failure. Shortly before dying, he murmurs, in fact "I have lost everything"

(Urquhart 2005: 5). Andrew's death represents the destiny expected and reserved to some characters in romances: they must die after having accomplished their spiritual pilgrimage in order to experience in that a final act of self-knowledge.

The story of this character's and his family's existence is introduced and commented upon extensively only in the second section of the book entitled "The Bog Commissioners", where his past is closely related to the figures of his ancestors. In this central part of *A Map of Glass* the reader finds the description of the first pioneers, Andrew's relatives, who settled in Timber Island, the same place where Andrew dies in the present-day setting. Urquhart is fascinated by the Canadian landscape and the impact the first settlers had on the land, decimating forests and building towns. She, thus, inserts the ancestors' story within Andrew's story to justify his final awareness about himself (Zettel 1991). The man deprived himself and those interested in him of any true and satisfying relationship and thus sentenced himself to perpetual sorrow and loneliness. In particular, a metaphoric sign of his emotional aridity is his job: he is a historical geographer, accustomed to analyzing nature more than experiencing it. A clear sign of his participation in the land emerges only just before his death, at the end of his existential search for meaning: as he orientates himself through nature the whole unnamed world becomes so beautiful to him that he is aware he has left behind vast, unremembered territories. The dangerous voyage into nature and one's personal past emerges thus as a genuine appreciation of reality which is absorbed inside the land. After uttering a few words, Andrew, in fact, asserts that the "language and the knowledge of a cherished place re-enter his consciousness" (Urquhart 2005: 4-5).

The rite of passage marked by the descent towards a final resurrection can be also found in association with the character of Sylvia. She is the protagonist of the first and last sections of the novel ("The Revelations" and "A Map of Glass") and, indirectly, in the central part "The Bog-Commissioners", as she is the person who gives Jerome, the artist-photographer, Andrew's journals containing a

fictionalized account of his family, which goes back four generations to the genesis of his great-great-grandfather's timber empire on Timber Lake. Her constant presence in each section of *A Map of Glass* is due to the fact that her main objective at present is to re-create Andrew's past, with whom she had an adulterous relationship. After reading of her former lover's death in the newspaper, the woman leaves Prince Edward County for Toronto in search of Jerome, the young artist who found Andrew's body. Sylvia suffers from an Asperger's-like syndrome that forces her to feel more comfortable with known objects and places than with people. The trip from her native county to a huge city like Toronto is a very hard trial for a human being who is almost incapable of moving to new locations and talking to others. She knows, however, that she must battle against this autism in order to learn the language necessary to remember her dead lover Andrew. Daughter of a small-town doctor, Sylvia is married to Malcom, her father's successor, and the only male presence she has lived with, apart from her parents. The relationship to Andrew is so important to her because she had always been written off as disabled until she starts this secret intimate affair. It is precisely love that sets the protagonist free and encourages her to rebel against the suffocating daily experience of life with Malcom and to enter the idealized territory of risk. As in *Changing Heaven,* romantic love is the objective correlative for passion and vitality, the privileged way out of the orderly ordinariness of the world rejected by the character of Ann Frear and symbolized in her process of ascent to the heights. During their relationship, Andrew is always absent, "away" to use one of Urquhart's favorite adjectives, in that he has always refused to open up with Sylvia. Thus, he becomes permanently and eternally lovable, being the object of her unfulfilled desire. The only way for Sylvia to bridge this distance is to invent and convey the stories from her lover's past as narratives that enable her to re-create her longing for Andrew.

The third protagonist in *A Map of Glass* is Jerome; his dangerous journey is essentially a dive into his personal past in order to get rid of some spiritual ghosts

such as his father's. Again, as in Sylvia's case, the character needs to open up in order to communicate his fears and frailties which are the result of a very negative relationship with his father. This struggle for re-appropriation of one's own past results in the character's successful psychological effort to convey his subjective emotions and needs to other people. At the beginning of the story, in the section "The Revelations", the man is still reticent in that he refuses to discuss his own painful family heritage – an alcoholic father and a brutalized mother – with his lover Mira. Only in the very last pages, in the final section "A Map of Glass", he is able to reveal the miserable conditions in which he lived during his childhood. During that time, everything "was all eaten away" by his father's addiction, 'which was so huge a part' of his mother's life that any other aspect "paled in comparison" (Urquhart 2005: 362). The final *anagnorisis* consists in the protagonist's realization that existential survival only arises out of a genuine contact among human beings and is symbolized by Mira and Jerome's embrace in the text. When one is willing to show the deepest shortcomings and imperfections, even the animals surrounding the scene of reconciliation participate in this process of inward resurrection, as witnessed by Jerome's cat, Swimmer, in the following passage:

> Mira wrestled her way back into his embrace and held on to him with a force she wouldn't have thought possible in the past, held on to him while he cried like a broken child. When it was over, they both fell asleep sitting upright on the couch, their heads touching. Swimmer, who had been hidden behind the refrigerator when he saw that Jerome was angry, joined them once he was certain all was safe, walked around Jerome's lap three times in a circle, then settled in and went to sleep as well (Urquhart 2005: 363).

Jerome manages to reach this stage of spiritual awareness because of his link with nature, objectified both by his job and his contact with Sylvia. He is, first of

all, an artistic photographer, whose main attention focuses on the remote Timber Island and its changeable and inconstant elements and natural phenomena like the grandeur of the Canadian wilderness, the harshness of the winters, and the relief of the thaw. In addition to this, it is the bond with a historical geographer, Sylvia, his lover, which allows him to retrieve his past, which is so closely intertwined with Andrew's land and history.

Framed inside the structure of the romance, the reader can find the two main themes in *A Map of Glass*: the loss of and the search for identity, which are also intimately connected with the representation of the relationship between human beings and nature. The former motif is closely related to the latter, since it is a consequence of this journey into the characters' personal and collective past through the landscape. In the novel all three protagonists try to retrieve their self-consciousness through the re-appropriation of both their present and past dimensions. Andrew, whose death dominates the entire plot, has devoted all his life to studying the natural environment that characterized his family life. He has focused all his main activities and emotional efforts to map his country, detailing the abandoned house, the old fences, and the remains of previous settlers. Remarkably amazed by the beauty of the surrounding panorama, just before dying, the man lets himself go and accepts to be absorbed physically by nature. Commenting upon this stage in Andrew's personal progress, the narrator points out the undisputed superiority of the place over human beings, a supremacy that, despite its unquestioned pre-eminence, enables mankind to re-activate the working of memory leading to awareness. Intrigued, as usual, by her country's landscape, in her very lyrical style, Urquhart describes Andrew's last moments of life, immediately before the final statement about his loss of everything, with the following words:

> He begins once again to move forward. Often he bumps against trees, but this does not worry him because he knows they are meant to be there, and will remain after he has passed by them. Like an animal, he

> is stepping by instinct through the trees, branch by branch, the smell of the destination on the edge of his consciousness. While he is among pines, an image of an enormous raft made of the word *glass*, which in turn, connects again, for just an instant, with the word *ballroom*. In this daydream there are men with poles standing on the raft's surface. Sometimes they are dancing. Sometimes they are kneeling, praying (Urquhart 2005: 3).

Andrew's retrieved identity is then witnessed by the writing of his journal in which he tells the history of Ontario by introducing the narrative of his forebears. The central section, "The Bog Commissioners", represents the 19th-century settlers' life in Upper Canada, an existence dominated by the figure of the patriarch Joseph Woodman, Andrew's great-great-grandfather. This man, a ferocious shipbuilder who left England to move to Canada after his unsuccessful initial plan to drain the Irish bogs, is the most accomplished exemplary of the so-called "temper dominated by androcracy" to use Riane Eisler's definition, that is, by a destructive power linked to pseudovalues like war, command, exploitation and hierarchy (Eisler 1987).

The story of Andrew's ancestors focuses then on its real core, Joseph's two children: the lame, but bright-minded, Annabelle who seems interested only in painting shipwrecks, and Branwell, a fresco artist, who completely refuses his family life and business. The man's denial of his heritage is due to the fact that it is modeled upon greedy intentions, the repression of emotions and the abuse of people and the landscape. In fact, Branwell disapproved of his father because he tried to prevent him from marrying his love Marie and even sent him to Europe for a long time. In the present, all that is left of the Woodsman family are two geographical landmarks: Timber Island and a hotel buried under the sand, which had been run by Marie and Branwell and was the couple's dream of freedom and emancipation from the patriarch Joseph. The dynasty of this timber yard empire is sentenced to failure because of the frailty of material

success and the powerful changes the lust for money can wreak. The Woodsmans, both as 19th-century artists and businessmen have irremediably scarred the landscape. Consequently the loss of money and people is but the logical result of this wicked behavior.

With reference to Sylvia, the search for identity is triggered by her relationship with Andrew, the historical geographer. In order not to lose her dead lover completely, she passes down his journals to Jerome and in the process goes through her whole existence. The process of memory applied to Andrew's narrative intersects the woman's life and simultaneously reveals that she has always been obsessed with the idea of stability connected essentially to the knowledge of places and objects. She is described as someone who hates changes and has lived, for this reason in the same place, doing the usual daily activities without any kind of emotional participation in them. In fact she is used to cataloguing every item in her family home and shows more intense relationships with china horses than with her husband, the patriarch physician who agreed to take her off her weary parents' hands. Andrew and a blind friend, for whom Sylvia makes tactile maps, are the only individuals who have ever treated her like a real and complete person. The man, in particular, is an overwhelming presence in her life since he enabled her to re-discover the darkest and most genuine sides of her being, that is, feelings and physical sensations. The reunion between her mind and body is successful only through sex with Andrew who becomes the craftsman of her new satisfying human existence. The narrator introduces this mutual union as essential and very simple, by using these words:

> Andrew's voice, telling her such things, over and over, was inside her head almost all the time now. In the past she leaned toward his whisper, had once or twice heard him sing, and then, near the end, had heard the terrible noise of his weeping. A recording of the sounds he had made was always playing in her mind, but she was losing the

> shape of his face, the look of his legs and arms and hands, the way his body occupied a chair, or moved across a room toward the place where she stood, as she had always stood each time, waiting for him to touch her. She had never told Andrew how touch, until him, had been a catastrophe for her, how heaving leapt over the hurdle of touch, he would then become a part of her, – without him ever being aware of this – how the idea of him would be like something she was carrying with her, like an animal, or baby or a schoolbag, or maybe something as simple and essential as this purse that rested on the passenger seat of the moving car (Urquahrt 2005: 38).

In the first section of the novel, the images used by the narrator to introduce Sylvia's personality testify to the repression of her instincts and deepest feelings because of the stifling environment and family. For this reason the process of opening up to the lover was really the only strategy for survival she has. Digging into her memory, the woman associates a bleeding and half-dead robin to herself. This reference is the most accurate means to allude to Sylvia's entrapment and consequent sorrow and inward loss. Remembering her favorite fairy tales, the protagonist highlights the one related to the robin where cruelty and wanton abuse deface the surrounding beautiful landscape:

> She had begun to turn the pages of the book. Oh the berries and the feathers and the flowers – pure delight – and yet, and yet something was terribly wrong. The first decal portrayed a beautiful robin, his wings limp, falling back toward the earth because an arrow had pierced his side, producing one bright bead of blood (Urquhart 2005: 56-57).

Once settled in the hotel in Toronto, near Jerome's house, Sylvia begins the voyage into her consciousness and describes her predominating sense of fear through the images of the wind and the mirror. She has always been afraid of

the wind as this natural element produces change and transformations and she is terrified with any notion of the unexpected. Only manifestations of stability, even when artificial and an invention of human rationality, have the power to make her feel at ease in the world:

> When she was a child, there had been – apart from other people – two things that particularly separated her from calmness: wind in a room and outdoor mirrors. She could still call up the fear she had left when, one morning in June, she had walked into the dining room to discover the sheer curtains moving like sleeves toward her, and a bouquet of flowers that had been dead and still the previous day bending and shaking in the breeze that entered through the open window. She had become accustomed to the fact that the air moved when she was outside, but she believed the interior of the house was the realm of stillness, so that when she became aware of the wind in the room it seemed to her that something alien and disturbing had begun to animate all that she had relied on to be quiet and in place (Urquhart 2005: 89-90).

It is interesting to notice that in this passage the character's main feature is emphasized through the image of a basic natural element such as the wind and, that, at the very end of the quotation, the concept of quietness is associated to that of place, in order, again, to show the indissoluble bond between them.

The second troubling object in Sylvia's life is the presence of mirrors that encroach on her private territory, her soul, while she would like to shut everything else out. Refusing even to look at them, she reveals her complete inability to accept the reality around her and the inseparable link between humanity and society:

> But when she had passed by a row of mirrors and had seen herself reflected in them – herself drenched in sunshine with the hem of her dress moving, grass under her shoes, barn and trees, hills and clouds behind her – she had begun to cry and had not stopped crying until her father was forced to take her home. When questioned, all she could say was that nothing was where it should be. What she had meant, she realized much later, was that mirrors had shown her that there was no controlling what might enter the frame of experience, that the whole world might bully its way into a quiet interior, and that there would be no way of keeping it out (Urquhart 2005: 91).

Sylvia's tendency to detach herself from any inexplicable contingency also emerges in relation to the most important part of our body, our face, whose changeable expressions challenge her autistic need to entrap reality into rational and clear labels. The following extract immediately shows this absolute denial of any form of unpredictable life:

> "When I was small", she said, "I distrusted the human face and all the changes of expression that the human face invariably brought with it. Animals were somehow less threatening, though I suppose it is possible to read a change of mood or disposition in the face of an animal, particularly if one looks directly into its eyes" (Urquhart 2005: 109).

On the contrary, the most revealing image of the protagonist's effort to transfix the world outside to find a little sense of peace and permanence, and thus, of security, refers to the china horses. Their description signals that they are the most remarkable symbol of stability since they have the power to erase all the transient categories through which humanity shapes experience, that is, time and space. Any form of creation itself is refused and the following passage contains the most perfect triumph of death over life:

> There was no time at all in the brown pasture, just weather and changing light. The four horses were grouped together because there was a calm love that existed among them, with no variation in it: it neither gained nor faltered in intensity. That and the fact that as long as they were grouped together there could be no arrivals, no departures, no accidents. The horses could prevent things from happening by standing close to one another without ever touching. Touch, Sylvia knew, caused fracture, and horses should never, never fracture. Horses had to be shot if anything about them was broken. Her father had told her that. Her mother, in the story, had shot the one horse, and still, while Sylvia slept, the weather of the clock ticked on and the storms boomed out into the night, and then continued to mark the mornings when she was awake, and when she was at school while school was still a part of her life. These were the kind of things she liked to think about at the time that Malcom first came into her life: unnamed china horses (Urquhart 2005: 86-87).

Jerome's search for identity is possible thanks to his bond with Sylvia, the woman, whose very name unveils her link with nature. After having received and absorbed Andrew's heritage through his journals, the artist feels that something new has been happening inside his soul. The process of memory is now ready to work and to turn back to the most sorrowful part of Jerome's life, his childhood. In the midst of this time there is the disquieting figure of the patriarch father whose violent and destructive behavior irremediably ruined his whole family. From that time on, he has decided to devote himself exclusively to instability because this is the main cipher of his experience. Thus, he became a photographer interested only in documenting the transience in nature which he associated with the heavy sinking snow and the dripping icicles of the season. As the narrator highlights at the beginning of "The Revelations", Jerome

"*considered* himself instead a sort of chronicler. He wanted to document a series of natural environments changed by the moods of the long winter and wanted to mark the moment of metamorphosis, when something changed from what it had been in the past" (Urquhart 2005: 11). This refusal of the past corresponds to his personal denial of his family life leading him to search for continuous changes everywhere in order to survive. Jerome's journey from transience to stability is completely different from Sylvia's, which goes, instead, from permanence to risk because of her different family life. By listening to and absorbing Sylvia and Andrew's experiences, the photographer comes to reveal his own personal doleful past and therefore he frees himself of its darkest sides. In this way a childhood marked by fear and sense of guilt emerges, together with the memory of a mother, deprived of any kind of satisfaction and even of her own past:

> He had told Mira about the nights he had spent listening to his father roam the apartment like an angry nocturnal beast, the sounds of bottles breaking, his father collapsing on the cold tile of the bathroom floor, the smell of urine and vomit…. "There was never past for her (Jerome's mother)", he said (Urquhart 2005: 362).

These revelations on Jerome's life eventually lead to his final resurrection, witnessed in the very last pages of the novel when the artist is able to remember his father and feel pity for him, asserting that the cause of his existential failure may have been only his huge ambition:

> He leaned back to allow the memory to take shape and could hear the sound of his father's voice reading a story about a toy canoe launched at the head of Lake Superior, not far from where they had lived in the north….What had happened then? What had happened once this tiny object reached the desired destination? It could only have been

> overwhelmed, Jerome decide, swallowed up – destroyed, in fact – by the enormity of its own wishes (Urquhart 2005: 370-371).

As this paper has tried to demonstrate, the structure of the romance and the main themes, loss and search for identity, in *A Map of Glass* are determined by the characters' disposition to internalize their Canadian landscape. In the last section of the novel, Andrew himself clearly asserts this intrinsic inclination, recurrent in Urquhart's fiction, when he discovers people's identity in their place of origin. The process of "emplacement" thus turns out to be the essential way to come back to ourselves and our family. In a country like Canada, this is still more comprehensible since its inhabitants are so closely related to the landscape, which, more than history, haunts their imagination and shapes their desire for survival and their sense of personal and national belonging. For this reason, the best means to bring this analysis to completion is the narrator's comment upon the internalization of the landscape through Andrew and Sylvia's voice:

> "Andrew always said that there were people who were emplaced". Sylvia was standing now, speaking to Jerome's back….."It seems that those who are emplaced are made that way by generations of their people remaining in the same locations", she continued, "eating food grown from the same plot of earth, burying their dead nearby, passing useful objects down from father to son, mother to daughter. He (Andrew) said that I was like that to such a degree, I was almost an anthropological discovery. Or perhaps an archeological discovery; something more or less preserved, more or less intact. I was so emplaced, you see, that it was an adventure – almost an act of heroism – for me to leave the County….. He (Andrew) also told me that there was always a mark left on a landscape by anyone who entered

> it. Even if it is just a trace – all but invisible – it is there for those willing to look hard enough." (Urquhart 2005: 325-326)

Urquhart seems to say directly to each one of us that reality can be apprehended only through a re-appropriation of one's own landscape.

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