

## The Artist and the Witness: Jane Urquhart's *The Underpainter* and *The Stone Carvers*

Neta Gordon

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Résumé de l'article

Jane Urquhart's *The Underpainter* takes a different approach than most Great War novels: it does not presume the implied authority of combatant's accounts, like *Generals Die in Bed*, but nor does it interrogate the war novel as a postmodern pastiche, as in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*. She presents a realistically conceived persona, while nevertheless questioning the authority of the unengaged artist to represent an historical event. Her extensive use of historical data is not applied in a postmodern method, but is rather inspiration for a fiction that refuses to grant itself full authority. Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers* is similarly concerned with the paradoxical combination of control and detachment in the relationship between the artist and her work.

# The Artist and the Witness: Jane Urquhart's *The Underpainter* and *The Stone Carvers*

NETA GORDON

IN *DUBIOUS GLORY*, Dagmar Novak enumerates three classes of Canadian fiction about the Great War. The first class includes the idealistic and heartening works written during the war years, such as Ralph Connor's *The Sky Pilot in No Man's Land* (1919) and Basil King's *The City of Comrades* (1919). These are greatly indebted to the romance tradition and have a tendency for uncritical patriotism towards Canada and, to an often-greater degree, England. Such work has prompted almost no critical response except regarding its reflection of Canada's political naïveté and literary crudeness. The class of "realistic" Canadian war fiction, written in the late 1920s and 1930s by actual Great War combatants, has received slightly more attention. In his article about Peregrine Acland's *All Else is Folly* (1929), Charles Harrison's *Generals Die in Bed* (1930), and Philip Child's *God's Sparrows* (1937), Eric Thompson asserts that, in each, the literary protagonist is identified with the combatant author, especially as the protagonist's status as a hero is based primarily on having simply endured the horrors of war. Harrison's novel has also been included in Evelyn Cobley's *Representing War: Form and Ideology in First World War Narratives*, an extended analysis of combatant fiction the central argument of which denies this simple correspondence between historical referent and literary text, as well as the objectivity of reproduction by the war insider. The third class that Novak indicates is made up of only one work: Timothy Findley's *The Wars*, published in 1977. For Novak and Thompson, writing in the 1980s, and Cobley, writing in 1993, Findley's novel appears to represent a culminating stage of Canadian Great War writing and not just because it was one of the only contemporary novels to take up the subject. In it, the traditions of romance and realism are combined (Novak 132), the "drama of *personal* heroism" is more explicitly articulated (Thompson 92), and the self-consciously con-

structured documentary format serves to undermine the potentially misleading truth claims of combatant fiction (Cobley 109).

In the last several years, however, authors like Jack Hodgins, Frances Itani, and Jane Urquhart (and, to a less sustained degree, Ann-Marie MacDonald and Dionne Brand) have begun contributing to a new stage of Canadian Great War fiction writing, one which often revisits and revises both Findley's novel and the ensuing critical response. Urquhart's last two novels, *The Underpainter* (1997) and *The Stone Carvers* (2001), are, like *The Wars*, concerned with the problem of representing war. Urquhart's novels, however, operate as reformulations of Cobley's thesis that since "all narrative renderings produce rather than reproduce war experience" (15), the "renderings" of the war insider may "be seen as the source of a certain ideological complicity with the war" (17). Cobley reads *The Wars* as a more trustworthy antiwar tract than those written by war insiders because, as an outsider, Findley's experiential distance from the war itself keeps him from unwittingly diluting the novel's ideological position in an attempt to exonerate the combatant. Urquhart, however, is unconvinced that experiential distance, especially as it is signalled by the self-conscious literariness in postmodern fiction, necessarily gives rise to a more stable ideological position or a more disinterested depiction of the horrors of war. Both novels examine the grounds and function of outsider renderings, questioning the authority often granted to artistic reconstructions of experience over experience itself, as well as the ambivalent role of the artist as both a commemorator and exploiter of war. Further, the novels interrogate what the operation of commemoration through art does to the witness, especially the witness who may want to forget what he or she has seen.

Herb Wyile has argued that, for her novel *Away*, Urquhart blends the features of the historical novel and those of magic realism. He admits, though, that "[*Away*] raises questions about history without sharing ... [the] discursive and generic self-consciousness" (23) of novels like *The Wars* or Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*, novels that Linda Hutcheon would define as historiographic metafiction (13). In *The Underpainter*, Urquhart has moved even further away from self-conscious fictionality, as the tension between myth and history that Wyile observes is replaced by a narrative that is focalized through a single, realistically conceived persona. Urquhart does not create a postmodern pastiche out of the documents she makes reference to in her acknowledgements, which include both historical studies and such primary source material as letters from Canadian soldiers, Rockwell Kent's autobiography, and the writings of

Robert Henri.<sup>1</sup> Rather, she has used her research for “inspirational purposes” and has changed “recognizable places and events ... to fit the shape of the narrative” (343). Likewise, in *The Stone Carvers*, the historical figure of Walter Allward “is used in the text in a purely fictitious manner” (391). The narrator of *The Underpainter*, Austin Fraser, both focalizes the stories of others and uses these stories in his paintings; Urquhart’s version of Allward is similarly concerned with how to deploy art so as to transcend historical specificity. Fraser and Allward thus replicate the artistic liberty that Urquhart admits to in her acknowledgements — her procedure of controlling history through fiction, fact through art.

The crucial difference between the use of historical data in postmodern pastiche and Urquhart’s use of history as “inspiration” for two fundamentally realistic novels is in the site of ambivalence. The transparent and often playful juxtaposition of fact and fiction in postmodern pastiche both signals authorial hesitancy and invites readerly skepticism regarding the stability of the historical record. Rather than presuming that facts can speak for themselves, postmodern writers call attention to their ambivalence about them via instances of self-conscious fictionality. In highlighting the control he or she has over historical material, however, the postmodern writer will simultaneously announce that such an exercise of control is essentially meaningless because of the pains taken to make the procedure highly visible and therefore unfixed. That is to say, by emphasizing the recreation process and, more importantly, the fact that this process is always subject to further playful modification, postmodern fiction absolves itself from the potentially damaging effects of deploying historical data to any particular purpose. In contrast, Urquhart is ambivalent about the very recreation process that postmodern pastiche depends on and, in both *The Underpainter* and *The Stone Carvers*, she turns her attention to the artist whose work derives from the experiences of others. Urquhart is able to confront the pitfalls of such an artistic approach without transforming historical data into mere fodder for endless undertakings in skepticism by employing a realistic mode that eschews the playful use of the historical document in favour of a more generalized historical setting.

The use of the historical document has been a central concern of the criticism about *The Wars*. As many critics, including Lorraine York, Martin Kuester, Diana Brydon, Simone Vauthier, and Copley herself have pointed out, the complex form of Findley’s novel, its juxtaposition of archival fragments collected by a researcher and scenes that an anonymous narrator constructs about Robert Ross’s life, serves to undermine

the distinction between fact and fiction and disclose how meaning is ideologically assembled. On the one hand, the form of *The Wars* disrupts narrative coherence; the emphasis in the non-archival scenes is on psychology as opposed to fact, while the selective memory and perspective of the informant is shown to influence such archival material as the taped transcripts. On the other hand, the novel's form reveals the continuities among various sorts of narration that are often concealed. As York points out, Findley also explores the issue of normalized distinctions between military and non-military events thematically by showing the relationship between violence in ostensibly distinct spheres: "wars are not simply separate phenomena, but rather partakers in a larger network of aggression — sexual, familial, intellectual" (xvii). Thus, even as Canada's culminating Great War fiction, *The Wars*, as the title's use of the plural form makes clear, is not only or even primarily about the Great War. Findley's interest in the general context of what Brydon refers to as "the violent conditions of everyday life that readers have learned to accept as normal" (59) unhinges Ross's battlefield experience from its historical moment. The degree to which Findley, a non-combatant, has employed the memoirs and poetry of the great British soldier-poets shows his interest in the literary construction of war and its potential to function as a metaphor that transcends the historical referent.

For Cobley, it is this "temporal and emotional distance from events" (107) that allows Findley to avoid the prospect of complicity with the war agenda that marks the novels of Great War combatants. By "complicity," what Cobley means is that, in their narratives, combatant authors like Charles Harrison, Ralph Hale Mottram, and Siegfried Sassoon unconsciously reveal their desire to somehow preserve the ideals they believed they were defending. For example, Harrison's recourse to such features of autobiographical-documentary as the impersonal focalizer and excessive description of the quotidian aspects of life at the front reveals his conviction that facts may be counted on to speak objectively and that liberal human agency was not accountable for or subject to war (137, 138). Harrison's framing of *Generals Die in Bed* as a memoir/memorial counteracts the thematic that war is absurd with one that doggedly stresses the purpose of fighting and dying for *something* (7). Thus, for Cobley, narratives that may have been intended to be and are commonly viewed as antiwar tracts ultimately function as a defence of war or, at least, a defence of preserving continuity with a past tradition; she is suspicious of their embedded search for wholeness. She argues that because *The Wars* is not invested in the sorts of historically determined defensive postures

that might try to conceal political or literary ambivalence, its antiwar stance is more genuine (109). Happily for Findley, he is not writing from the perspective of a war insider whose “ideological complicity was influenced by an emotional reaction to the war which would have made it difficult ... to analyse the rhetorical effects of ... narrative technique” (107). Copley values Findley’s foregrounding of narrative reconstruction (107), his suspicion of truth-claims (108), and his effort to de- and recontextualize violence. Urquhart seeks to challenge the superiority granted by Copley and others to the reconstruction that is fundamental to artistic rendering, especially renderings alluding to circumstances of which the artist has no first-hand knowledge. Her use of historical figures and events to “inspire” fiction functions to emphasize the distinction between the witness and the artist, and to reveal the danger of privileging art that has been created out of, and thus recreated, the truth of horror.

In *The Underpainter*, it is Austin, the artist, who recontextualizes the stories of war insiders. As an American, Austin has no link to the war except through two Canadians: George Kearns, a china painter he befriends during his visits to Davenport, Ontario in the summers of 1913 and 1914, and George’s lover, Augusta Moffatt, who comes to live with George in the China Hall after having served as a nurse in France. Austin’s first sojourns in Davenport are the result of his father’s monetary interests in a Canadian mine; his returns to this and other towns on the north shore of Lake Superior are motivated by his interest in painting. Via the words of his painting teacher Robert Henri that “art is a kind of mining” (84), Austin makes the connection between his father’s type of invasion and his own: “How right Robert H. was. About art. About success, ambition. The greed. The exploitation at the expense of nature and humanity. And, in the end, sometimes the beauty” (84). In particular, part two of Urquhart’s novel dwells on the process whereby Augusta’s experiences in Étapes, as well as her experience of recounting what she has witnessed, are mined by Austin for his painting *Night in the China Hall*, which he admits is “one of my least satisfactory canvases” (276). Austin’s disappointment in the painting stems from the fact that he cannot comprehensively depict all the details of Augusta’s story in an aesthetically pleasing manner because of art’s inability to be exhaustive in representation. The artist’s disappointment, however, is set in tension with what the witness undergoes during the portrayal of experience; during her own recounting, Augusta exhausts herself so utterly that she cannot survive the process. Art, here, does not simply supplement the witness’s account but manages, in the operation, to annihilate the witness.

At the beginning of this part of *The Underpainter*, which is entitled “Night in the China Hall,” Austin explains that, for his most famous series of paintings, known as *The Erasures*, the artist’s act of disassembling is crucial. These are works where fragmented images of a particular scene or story are painted with detailed realism and then painted over with several layers until the images are obscured. Austin initially claims that he has not “recomposed” Augusta (108), that it is her full story, ostensibly related to Austin on a single winter night in 1937, which has been treated in painting and will be narrated again. However, the formal features of this section and its revelations about Austin’s character and behaviour undermine this avowal. First, Augusta’s story is focalized for the reader by Austin, so that her description of experience is shown at once to be shaped by him and to give his own story shape. For the first part of Augusta’s tale, an extended section that concerns her childhood, Austin functions almost like an external narrator who has access to all of Augusta’s thoughts and desires, and yet, even here, Urquhart continually indicates that the story has already been “said” to Austin. Our attention is diverted from the story itself to how it functions as a new context for our understanding of the painter. The first major interruption of Augusta’s story directly follows her first mention of the war; after this, the episodes of “Night in the China Hall” become truncated, their interest is quite various, and chronology is forsaken. More and more, Augusta’s story is juxtaposed either with descriptions of how Austin has proceeded with a particular painting or with the aged Austin’s reflections on his past behaviour.

The memory of the war insider, the witness, is thus made to struggle for attention against a narrative focus on the work of the commemorator to the point where the witness herself is almost entirely “erased” under the layers of the artist’s memory and output. The most distressing aspects of Augusta’s term at the hospital — her attempts to alleviate the pain of badly hurt soldiers; the exhaustion that leads to her use of morphine; the overdose of the drug she mercifully gives her best friend Maggie who has been horribly injured in a bombing of the hospital — are unhinged from their original site of meaning. These experiences become metaphors for Austin about the relationship between representation and anaesthetic that he tries to reveal in his *Erasure* paintings (184).

The literal and metaphorical use Urquhart makes of morphine signals her interest in distinguishing between the function of memory for the witness and for the artist, a difference that the process of recontextualizing threatens to obscure. The novel’s first mention of morphine occurs during a description of Augusta’s recovery from a tonsillectomy in a hospi-



tal in Davenport, the same hospital she had spent time in years before as a shell-shock patient. Morphine is referred to as "Maggie's remembered gift" (154), and the narrative later discloses that in France, occasionally, when very tired "the girls shared a needle" (235). The tonsillectomy scenes make it clear that, for Augusta, the addiction to morphine is also an addiction to forgetting; the drug benumbs its user to violent dreams and disturbing memories that are here associated with the war. When Augusta tells her story to Austin, it is an act of remembering that becomes too much for her. After telling Austin that "There is no place at all for unhappiness such as mine in a world as beautiful as this" (304), she goes to her room and kills herself with an overdose. What her statement indicates is that, while the artist owns beauty, the witness owns unhappiness and that it is risky to transform one into the other; something (or someone) may be lost in the process.

Urquhart contrasts Augusta's necessary cautiousness regarding her own memories with the recklessness with which Austin uses the memories of others for his own art and whims; he refers to himself as "an accumulator, a hoarder. I trespassed everywhere and thieved constantly" (33). The disconsolation that Austin's meddling will produce in Augusta on the winter night in 1937 is foreshadowed by a scene in which he is unwilling to alleviate the shame of a woman, his longtime lover and model Sara, whom he has been two days late in meeting. Having failed to keep an entirely capricious appointment to meet her at a miner's hotel, Austin has forced Sara to endure two days of piteous looks from a strange group of men and, after finally showing up, will not join her in the breakfast room to publicly justify her waiting. He remarks that he wants to be able to "draw [shame] in her face and body, ... [to] add pain to the composition" (203). Austin believes that he can visualize the miners' memories of lone Sara and asks the reader, "What ... is more intimate than this: total recollection of a scene I had never witnessed, but one over which I nonetheless had perfect control?" (203). On the night of Augusta's storytelling and suicide, Austin once again meddles with memory by bringing George's pre-war lover Vivian, who left him the day after their elopement, back to the china shop for an impromptu reunion that proves horribly painful to all involved. The point Urquhart is making here is that, though he has initiated events, Austin has not considered himself to be involved. His art, the "high art" against which he ridicules George's affinity for the decorative art of china painting, has turned Austin into a ruthless capitalist of loss and sorrow. After finding the bodies of Augusta and George, who has killed himself upon losing Augusta, Austin admits



that what has transpired was a result, not of his “cruelty,” but of his “carelessness” (312). What is important to note here is that in exploring Austin’s belated cognizance of his own part in provoking a double suicide, Urquhart is criticizing the artist’s detachment from the living source of his art. Significantly, the concluding emphasis on Austin’s self-indictment eradicates any sense that Urquhart is hesitant about honouring the witness’s story. The veracity of Augusta’s memories is never questioned in the novel; rather, the narrative suggests that any steps the war insider may take to come to terms with personal trauma, even steps towards forgetting, are justifiable and perhaps necessary.

Although Urquhart’s *The Stone Carvers* is likewise taken up with the paradoxical combination of control and detachment that defines an artist’s relationship to his or her work, the novel culminates with a very different notion of “whim.” The narrator’s declaration that “the impossible happens as a result of whims that turn into obsessions” (390) overtly refers to Father Gstyr’s vision of the stone church in Shoneval, to the wild schemes of King Ludwig, and at once to the Vimy memorial and the political resolutions that have necessitated its erection. This matter of political “whim,” of a nation’s part in rendering massacre necessary, even mundane, is suggested repeatedly. Joseph Becker laments the work of the Canadian sawmills, in which he “witnessed the massacre of a tree trunk large enough for a beautiful sculpture of God the Father himself,” in which glorious, living trees are reduced to “the terrible ordinariness of planking” (17). This image of the destruction of the Canadian forests, felled to serve “an island referred to as the Motherland” (74), alludes to the deaths of soldiers who entered World War I because of Canada’s unquestioning support for England. The novel’s framing of this national stance as a type of “carelessness” is clarified by the portrayal of Tilman’s work and residence in the artificial limb factory after he returns to Canada as a war veteran:

An otherwise dull and unpromising civil servant made a name for himself by suggesting that as most of the boys were still on crutches ..., some of them at least might be gainfully employed making wooden legs for themselves and others like themselves .... After a day filled with the problems of construction geometry, bad meals served in the adjacent cafeteria, and struggles with inadequately maintained machinery, the young men, Tilman included, would clump painfully up the stairs to the dormitory. Here at night Tilman’s dreams ... would be interrupted by the shouts of nightmare-ridden men who had not even begun to recover from the trauma of the war. (232-33)

Like the trees Joseph grieves for, the young men, now physically and psychically wounded, are only valued for their potential use-value; unlike the forests, they appear to be non-renewable national resources. Once the need for artificial limbs has been exhausted, "the same government that had called these young men so earnestly to arms now cast them unceremoniously into the streets" (235).

Urquhart's use of the term "unceremonious" here is all the more ironic in light of the same government's almost fanatical undertaking to commemorate those who fought and fell in the war. As historian Alan R. Young asserts, in the 1920s and 1930s, Canadian war memorials were erected "in almost every city, small town, and village throughout the nation" ("Memorials" 5). Most of these memorials communicate "in a spirit of condolence a mythology ... [in which the] dead are presented as warriors or knights who have fallen on the field of honour or lie sleeping after sacrificing themselves in defence of some great and good cause" (13). In *The Stone Carvers*, even the artist engaged in "high art" is associated with the forces of a somewhat thoughtless yet overbearing bureaucracy. Initially, Allward's work as a sculptor causes him to disregard the war, "his preoccupation with casting larger and larger objects blocking his view of the carnage in the papers" (266). The narrator frames his awakening to the war as an anticipation of the obligatory official response to horror. Allward's desire to memorialize the war is a desire for a grand gesture, for something that cannot be ignored (268), for something "perfect enough that it would seem to have been built by a vanished race of brilliant giants" (269). Thus, the problem of war art that Urquhart presents in this novel is similar to the matter of Austin, a war outsider, who engages in exploitation and erasure; the artist here is guilty of erasing horror by transforming the particular into the allegorical. Austin's longing for his work to be exhaustive is linked with Allward's resolve that the stone figures in his memorial stand for everyone (337).

This whim turned obsession hinges on Allward's aspirations towards perfect agelessness and ahistoricity: the stone he wants "must carry within it no previous history of organic life" (269); his indifference to the models he employs, who seem "too specifically human to be fully interesting," switches to a "huge compassion" for the sculpted figures who are "perfection[s] of plaster" (350). Allward's interview with Giorgio Vigamonti, a Canadian war veteran skilled at carving names, demonstrates the artist's insensitivity to the very group he ostensibly seeks to honour; Allward's response to Giorgio's pained admission that he was promoted to corporal simply because, unlike his fellow soldiers, he "was neither

missing nor dead” is to brand the soldier unheroic and applaud him for it (288). In this scene, Allward even appears to forget why, as he puts it, “the whole vicinity still stank of death” (288). Giorgio can “remember” (288) the war, the cause of the smell. Allward, however, is like Cobley’s privileged war outsider not burdened by “an emotional reaction to the war” (Cobley 107), and can choose to focus his attention on the stone, which has “nothing putrid about it” (Urquhart 289).

Giorgio’s acknowledgment that he remembers the war, along with his desire to work on a monument to his memories, operates in tension with the novel’s extensive investigation of both denial and disappearance, which are here the forms of erasure that threaten to replace the experiences of the war insider. Urquhart’s focus on the construction of the Vimy memorial is, in large part, a meditation on what it means to memorialize those who have “gone missing,” on what the value of so many carved names, so much attention to beauty, might be in the face of a terrifying, mass vanishing. The narrator suggests that the disappearance of men is to be expected: “The young [men] were bred to run away, to flee toward that which was not easily known,” whereby even daily work, the so-called “resumption of duty was an act of escape” (152). The novel warns of two effects of this sort of deliberate disappearance. For Tilman, apparently born with “wanderlust,” the desire to eschew the intimacy he is somehow embarrassed by, to simply roam unfettered by any obligation towards another human, is ultimately recognized as a liability. His encounters with Phoebe, the vagrant-child whose grief for her dead baby alienates her from both her lover and from a secure sense of herself (184), and with Refuto, whose habit of refusing everything derives from his fear of being refused by those he thinks he has injured (209), serve as warnings for Tilman about “the burden of denial” (209). After the war, Tilman is encumbered by memories that no one, not even his sister, wants to hear about (243); his first real attempt at offering memory is met with a type of refusal as Recouvrir “understood very little of what the English-Canadian said” (325). Yet it is in this moment of attempted communication, in which Tilman abandons his former habit of isolation, that his first intimate bond is forged; soon after, Tilman and Recouvrir become lovers and make “each other fresh and beautiful and whole again” (330). That the name Recouvrir means both “to recover” and “to cover up” in French, however, suggests that even here Urquhart is hesitant about what Tilman’s act of bearing witness signifies. On the one hand, Tilman does manage to heal a part of himself and to become a source of healing for another; on the other, the intimacy between Tilman and Re-

couvrir functions to subdue, to anesthetize their shared pain rather than to articulate it.

The second effect of deliberate disappearance is indicated in the story of Eamon. While Tilman comes close to being stuck with a painful "burden of denial," Eamon actually does disappear into his own craving for "that which was not easily known" (152). After having "caught" Klara, his own bird with the neck of a swan and hands like doves (79), Eamon soon fixes his desire on flying an aeroplane, an "adventure [that] had nothing to do with her" (127). Klara is convinced that it is Eamon's naive and ill-considered obsession with the airplane, his ignorance of the dangerous power of the unknown, and his cruel willingness to walk away from his family and lover that cause him to "vanish" into the war (166). When she carves his portrait into the monument, the "expression had about it the trustfulness of someone who did not know he would ever be missing, lost from the earth" (340).

While it is male soldiers, those "missing in action," that Canada's Ministry of Defence tries to account for via the memorial, Urquhart is also interested in how the war triggers types of denial and/or disappearance in female war participants. In *The Underpainter*, Urquhart explores the link between Augusta's addiction to forgetting and her experience as a nurse in France; in *The Stone Carvers*, the category of the war participant is widened further to consider those, particularly women, who have been left behind to battle with the pain of remembering. Much more than in *The Underpainter*, the issue of what constitutes appropriate work for men and women is explored. Klara's skill for carving, tailoring, and farming, for "men's work" as the nuns deem it (10), denote her as an odd sort of woman even more than the fact that she is unmarried. Moreover, her talent as a carver, which even Allward recognizes (337), develops in spite of the fact that her grandfather directs his instruction to her brother, only "reluctantly hand[ing] her some wood and a knife" (39).

The work of grieving for the vanished, however, is thought to be the province of women; as the carver Juliani explains to Giorgio, women instinctively knew how to grieve, how to remember, in an appropriately patriotic manner, as if they understood and prized their chief role in the war (276). The narrator suggests, though, that "no matter how much it is cherished, an absent face that is a fixed reference becomes tyrannical, and tyranny eventually demands revolt, escape" (332). Several of the novel's grieving women end up engaging in their own kinds of deliberate disappearances which are as dangerous as those of the young men who go off to war; as in *The Underpainter*, Urquhart is here considering the pos-

sibility that certain forms of remembering may prove to be unsafe, that the capacity to forget may be essential to any war participant. Even before the narrator describes Phoebe's form of desertion, Helga, mother to Tilman and Klara, is portrayed as withdrawing into her own anger over "the total dematerialization of her son" (33). Though she believes that her mother's cancer, her death, was cultivated in this angry void, Klara is foolish enough to engage in a similar sort of retreating in the face of Eamon's departure. Klara's determination to "train herself in the art of stoic apartness" (31) eventually leads her to feel such rupture between herself and others that she cannot conceive of herself as existing in the present (169). It is only after her work on the memorial and her forgiveness of Eamon for vanishing that she, like her brother, can again participate in life, and in love.

Like her brother, Klara finds a means to heal herself by bearing witness, though, like her brother's experience, this healing is bound up with forgetting, an "unravel[ling]" (376). Further, Urquhart describes both scenes of Klara's rendering, her carving of Eamon's face and his name, in terms of the artist's response to them; it is Allward's ratification of Klara's carving that ultimately gives her rendering meaning. Just as Austin's paintings provide the framing, communicative context for Augusta's experiences, Allward's memorial is described as the "huge urn he had designed to hold grief" (377); the grief expressed by war insiders Klara and Giorgio in their carving the name of a vanished man becomes, in the end, a means for the artist to "achieve balance" (377).

Urquhart's misgivings about the artist's reproduction of the witness are, of course, set in tension with her own course of controlling the experiences of Great War insiders. To a large extent, Klara's achievement in *The Stone Carvers* reads as a fantasy of an author struggling with her own desire for balance in the recreation of horrific experience; the novel enacts an outsider's desire to ratify the work of war insiders who really just want to forget what they have experienced. *The Underpainter* and *The Stone Carvers* are, however, as invested in valuing acts of commemoration as they are in distinguishing between the claims of the witness and the artist (and my use of the word "claims" is meant here to suggest both "rights" and "assertions"). And, though the form of her novels does not invite the sort of collaborative readerly participation as that of *The Wars*, Urquhart's description of Austin's process of painting and Allward's designing allow her to investigate the double relationship commemorative art has to its audience. Brydon suggests that the photographs in Findley's narrative reflect his "focus on making the reader see" (57); similarly,

Urquhart's two latest novels depend on notional ekphrasis, or the literary representation of imaginary visual art. In writing the visual, she explores the distance between witness and artist, and then the distance between art and its witness.

Austin's technique of painting involves a long process whereby an underpainting of realistic images is then covered by layers of paint. Austin is bemused by the critical response to this technique, commenting, "There is nothing, you understand, like an obscured subject to give critics something to talk about. Even those who had been either indifferent or hostile to my work in the past wrote long, reflective essays about the hidden subject matter that, under the circumstances, they were forced mostly to imagine" (183-84). The identification of the reader in this passage reminds us that, unlike Austin's critics, we are not "forced to imagine"; we have "seen" the subject matter of Austin's paintings. Likewise, Klara's carving may be "read" by us differently than by the "fictional" tourists and mourners who read the memorial for its allegorical representations. Through this paradoxical arrangement, Urquhart attempts to describe the double bind of art (whether visual, literary, or otherwise), which reproduces horror or trauma. On the one hand, though we cannot "see" Austin's paintings, we do know more about the underpainting than the fictional viewer does by way of narrative description; though we may know the Vimy memorial from photographs or postcards, we now "imagine" it as more specific than it appears. Our encounter with art has shown us something of horror that might otherwise have remained hidden, and yet which is not a whole story or one story of many, but only a necessarily overdetermined attempt to express the inexpressible. On the other hand, Austin's role as a "trespasser" and "thief," and Allward's as a perfectionist and allegorist, have revealed the way in which the artist's relationship to horror and to memory is radically different from that of the witness, and that the contemporary aspiration to remember at all costs is a privilege that comes with having nothing of immediate horror to forget.

In turning her attention to the Great War in *The Underpainter* and *The Stone Carvers*, Urquhart has redefined the interest in the relationship between myth and history that imbues her earlier work. As Young has noted, the prevailing understanding of Canada's participation in the Great War is heavily indebted to a myth of "heroic sacrifice." This myth entails that the wartime sacrifices made by Canadians were "noble," that Canadians "showed themselves in the Great War to be a special people," and had thus earned "the status of a distinct and separate nation" ("National" 155). Urquhart approaches this national myth not as a sort of ahistorical reposi-

tory of innate beliefs, but as a form of reproduction, or art, that is also potentially a form of erasure. What the myth has is its beauty, and here we should remember that even Augusta associates beauty with “this world,” with life. In turning the historical moment into allegory, the myth communicates to a wider audience, as is the objective of the memorial at Vimy. The wholeness of myth provokes remembrance from those who are both temporally and experientially distant from the event of horror. However, Urquhart’s portrayal of Austin and Allward as men who turn a nation’s grief into art “like ... scientist[s]” (*Stone* 350) shows us that, as the raw material of such myths are recontextualized, particular moments of loss and love are always obscured. Even as myth allows the war outsider to remember that which he or she has not seen, in its transcendence of the historical moment, myth, especially the mythic memorial, has the potential to eliminate any need for the war insider’s act of bearing witness and, perhaps, any obligation the greater populace has to recall the precise origins to their site of grieving and remembrance. However, Urquhart also suggests, particularly in *The Stone Carvers*, which depicts Tilman, Klara, and Giorgio participating in the conversion of their experiences into art, that the construction of a mythic memorial may provide the insider with an avenue towards forgetting, towards a safer sort of anaesthetic.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Robert Henri (1865-1929) was a leader of the American Ashcan School of urban realist painting. Rockwell Kent (1882-1971) was one of Henri’s students and went on to work as a graphic artist.

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