

“The Opposite of History is Forgetfulness”: Myth, History, and the New Dominion in Jane Urquhart’s *Away*

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Article abstract

Jane Urquhart's *Away* provides a moving illustration of Eli Wiesel's adage that "the opposite of history is forgetfulness." As a historical novel, *Away* lacks the discursive heterogeneity and interrogativeness typical of the historiographical metafiction so prevalent in recent English-Canadian novels. Instead, its blending of historical realism and the marvelous provides a more seamless and less openly dialogic postcolonial historicizing of myth, raising questions about migration, identity, power, and the force of nationalism. *Away* also provides an allegorical engagement with the degradation of the environment in contemporary capitalist society. The generic features of magic realism are aptly suited to dramatizing the complex relationship between myth, history, politics, and cultural identification, as the rich blend of historical realism, fantasy and folklore in *Away* illustrates.

“The Opposite of History is Forgetfulness”: Myth, History, and the New Dominion in Jane Urquhart’s *Away*

HERB WYILE

IN A TIME of what Fredric Jameson calls “the enfeeblement of historicity” (303), it seems notable that a substantial proportion of celebrated recent fiction in English Canada is concerned with the past: Guy Vanderhaeghe’s *The Englishman’s Boy*, Anne Michaels’s *Fugitive Pieces*, Thomas Wharton’s *Icelfields*, and Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees*. Of these fiction writers whose work has achieved international acclaim in the last few years, however, Jane Urquhart stands out for her sustained engagement with history over the course of her four novels: *Changing Heaven*, *The Whirlpool*, *Away*, and *The Underpainter*. This recent surge of historical fiction differs from the historical fiction so much in vogue in nineteenth-century Canada, particularly because of its inscribing of a consciousness of the problems of writing about the past and its disruption of the traditional ontological, epistemological, and discursive boundaries between history and literature. Urquhart’s 1993 novel *Away*, a complex narrative of Irish immigrants exported to Upper Canada during the great famine, makes an important contribution to this interrogation of history, particularly through the complex interpenetration of history and myth in the novel. In his essay “Myth and History” Eli Wiesel, writing of the destructive power of myth in the history of the Jews, observes that “there is myth in history just as there is history in myth” (22) and concludes that “in the Jewish tradition the opposite of history is not myth. The opposite of history is forgetfulness” (30). Wiesel’s comments about the complex relationship between history and myth have a lot of resonance for *Away*, which provides a good illustration of the discursive complexity of contemporary historical fiction and of its potential not just to question traditional verities about history but to address pressing contemporary issues as well.

History and myth, like fact and fiction, have often been presented

as binary opposites. Particularly within the empiricism that has dominated nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century historiography, history essentially has been seen as a scientific, factual, objective representation of the past, governed by assumptions about historical causality, progression, and continuity. By contrast, myth has been largely associated with a poetic, prehistorical consciousness and seen as a symbolic discourse which stands in a figurative rather than representational or mimetic relationship to reality. History, as Wiesel argues, has been the privileged term: "Myths imply morality or immorality, whereas history calls for objectivity. Myths take sides; history remains neutral. Myths display passion; history is opposed to anything resembling passion. Its only contact with passion is the readiness to record it as it does anything else" (23). Such a dichotomy has long had its critics, but it is being increasingly undermined in contemporary discussions of historiography informed by poststructuralist theories of historical discourse. The work of historian Hayden White in particular, as well as that of Michel Foucault, Dominick LaCapra, Joan Scott and others, has contributed to a sustained critique of scientific rationalism in historiographical discourse, exposing historiography's subjective, fictionalizing, and often mythologizing qualities. Historians, of course, have often been accused of mythologizing their subjects, but such a tendency has been seen in the terms of empiricist historiography as just bad history, the product of rhetorical excess and a lack of necessary historical objectivity. Contemporary theorizing of historiography, however, has more fundamentally blurred the distinction between fiction and history as discourses, asserting that history involves the same subjectivity, selection, narrativization, and figurative conventions as fiction. White argues in "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," for instance, that narrative is the mode through which historians naturalize historiographical discourse as a presentation of the real, "out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary" (27). Such questioning of the mimetic viability of historiography and such underlining of the continuities between fiction and historiography suggest that the traditional oppositions between truth and fantasy, history and myth, fact and fiction are grounded in a problematic "metaphysics of realism" that both contemporary theory and contemporary fiction have profoundly troubled.

Historical fiction has always raised interesting questions about the relationship between myth and history, as the genre provides a curious alchemy of the two, integrating recognizable historical figures and epi-

sodes with fictionalized ones. Characterizing it in fairly traditional terms, Avrom Fleishman observes that in the historical novel, “the generic properties of plot, character, setting, thought, and diction . . . operate on the materials of history to lend esthetic form to historical men’s experience” (8). Such a model of the historical novel, however, presumes a separation of historical material and literary imperatives that the work of theorists like White has substantially undermined by illustrating that such “historical material” is only available to us already inscribed by such “generic properties.” Though the historical novel traditionally has been associated with the portrait of a detailed historical reality — what Gyorgy Lukacs describes as the “extension and application to history of the creative principles of the great English realist writers of the eighteenth century” (62) — contemporary historical novels have more substantially troubled the distinction between myth and history in various ways: by quite consciously rendering historical material within mythic frameworks; by departing from traditional standards of historical plausibility; and by questioning the reliability of the historical record and drawing attention to the rhetorical, fictionalizing and mythologizing tendencies of historiographical discourse.

Like Jack Hodgins’s *The Invention of the World* and, to a lesser degree, Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*, Urquhart’s *Away* provides a valuable contribution to this troubling of the distinction between history and myth because of its lyrical style, its poetic structure, and its foregrounding of the complex relationship between the magical and the real, the mythic and the historical. The novel juxtaposes the continuity, causality, and progression traditionally associated with a historical consciousness with the poetic, magical, iterative qualities traditionally associated with myth. The historical novel is generally grounded in a detailed, realistic, pivotal, sociopolitical context; as Lukacs puts it, the genre is concerned with “the portrayal of the broad living basis of historical events in their intricacy and complexity, in their manifold interaction with acting individuals” (43). To a degree *Away* provides this kind of historical verisimilitude and context, but the narrative is also filled with remarkable, magical episodes and events, and is marked throughout by the presence of the supernatural. To be sure, the Highland Jacobites in Walter Scott’s prototypical historical novel *Waverley* reflect a folkloric sensibility and superstition similar to the Rathlin Islanders of *Away*; the downfall of the Highland chieftain Fergus Mac-Ivor, for instance, is foreshadowed by a “ghastly visitant,” the “Bodach Glas” (Scott 398). Urquhart, however, seems much less concerned than Scott with historical accuracy, and has a

greater concern with the archetypal. Given the degree to which *Away* employs romance conventions and symbolic patterns, Anne Compton includes the novel in her argument that “the romance is Urquhart’s mode because untamable landscape is her subject” (213). “Urquhart’s work,” she feels, “marks a further revival, a late twentieth-century renaissance, of the romance” (213).

However, while the presence of romance elements in *Away* is indisputable, it is important to recognize the effect of the novel’s other generic affiliations. First of all, the treatment of history in *Away* certainly affiliates it with “historical novels proper,” in which, as Helen Hughes observes, the aim is to appreciate not just the past but also the present as the ultimate outcome of that past (4). In this respect, though *Away* may be part of a revival of the romance, it certainly does not belong with the escapist, stock historical romances in which “well-known stories, reassuring in their familiarity, are used and re-used” and in which “the ‘past’ setting is a ‘pretext’ which ‘helps one to enjoy the fictional characters’” (Hughes 2, 4). These distinctions are not, however, ultimately distinctions about the historical accuracy of different forms of historical fiction. One of the implications of contemporary historiography is that the “notion of a ‘real’ past which can in some way be captured undistorted in a historical text is itself a product of history”; therefore, in any work of historical fiction, “the presentation of history is as much a part of the ‘myth of the past’ as the invented story” (Hughes 8).

Indeed, a consciousness of the issues of epistemology and literary representation that historical fiction raises has been increasingly foregrounded in contemporary Canadian fiction, as works like Timothy Findley’s *The Wars* and *Famous Last Words*, Susan Swan’s *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, and Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient* testify. *Away*, however, raises questions about history without sharing these novels’ discursive and generic self-consciousness, which affiliates them with what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction, in which “fictional and traditionally non-fictional genres interpenetrate” (74). Instead, it seems tempting to view *Away* as a historical novel with strong affinities with magic realism, in which “the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence — admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism” (Zamora and Faris 3). This affiliation is somewhat complicated by Urquhart’s debts to Celtic myth, as echoes “of lost Irish mythology,” as Libby Birch observes, “continually surface in Urquhart’s work” (118) — a mythology

in which “the pride and energy of reality are allied with the magic and beauty of fantasy” (Gantz 3). However, as Amaryll Chanady argues, magic realism can be distinguished from older forms that combined the real and the magical because the implied author of the former “presents the irrational world view as different from his own by situating the story in present-day reality, using learned expressions and vocabulary, and showing he is familiar with logical reasoning and empirical knowledge” (22). Though in magic realist texts the supernatural and the natural are part of a continuous fictional world, there is an implicit, if generally unacknowledged disjunction between them, what Chanady calls an “unresolved antinomy.”

The term “magic realism” has long been a contested term, its history marked by a confusion and merging of two definitions in particular: magic realism as a defamiliarization and rendering marvellous of the real, and magic realism as a conjunction of the supernatural and the real. At times, it is used indiscriminately, as William Spindler observes, “to describe almost any work of literature or art that somehow departs from the established canons of realism” (75). While the term continues to be a focus of debate, with critics questioning its appropriateness, legitimacy and applicability, it remains a convenient one for describing texts in which the ostensibly realistic and the ostensibly fantastic coexist in the same narrative space, not only showing the way the two often blend in folklore and in popular consciousness, but providing a vehicle for sophisticated commentary about social, political, and cultural assumptions and artistic conventions. Though magic realism is typically associated with Latin American writers such as Alejo Carpentier, Carlos Fuentes, Isabel Allende and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the term has gained a broader applicability, including, as Stephen Slemon observes, in English Canada, where it provides interesting possibilities “within the context of English-Canadian literary culture and *its* specific engagement with post-coloniality” (409). Because of the term’s strong association with Latin America, some have objected to the extension of its usage to writing in the so-called “developed” world (e.g. Flores), but, as Chanady points out, the origins of the term are European (17) and the textual characteristics it describes are by no means exclusive to Latin America (20).

The increasing prevalence of the kinds of generic conventions associated with magic realism is in part attributable to their effectiveness for representing the interplay between myth and history, as a novel like *Away* illustrates. *Away* seamlessly combines the verisimilitude and plausibility typical of the historical novel with the spectral and magical, constructing

a fairly detailed historical context while retaining the sense of exoticism, mystery, and otherness typical of the romance. As Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris observe, “magic realism is a mode suited to exploring — and transgressing — boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic. Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction” (5-6). It is a mode that can be used to foreground, as do the more blatantly dialogic and metafictional historical novels, the relationship between literary discourse and the writing of history, and in *Away* Urquhart makes use of the generic blend typical of magic realism to raise important questions about realism in the historical novel and about the tension between historical consciousness, popular belief, and political and cultural nationalism.

To a much greater degree than most Canadian historiographic metafictional novels, *Away* sutures historical realism with the fantastic, the mythic, and the poetic. The novel reflects the chronological progression typical of the historical novel, following the O’Malley family from Rathlin Island in Ireland during the great famine of the 1860s, to the backwoods of Upper Canada, and ultimately to post-Confederation Ottawa and the assassination of Thomas D’Arcy McGee. However, the main structural devices and thematic motifs of the book frame the historical progression of the narrative in a mythic pattern and give it a lyrical tone and an archetypal resonance. To begin with, *Away*, like Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*, is explicitly grounded in an oral framework: as Esther O’Malley prepares to lay down to die, her last act is “to give shape to one hundred and forty years” (21) by remembering the family story told to her by her grandmother Eileen. Esther’s “whispering in the dark” (21) of the story of her great-grandmother Mary and her grandmother Eileen comprises the bulk of the novel and creates a link across five generations. Running through Esther’s tale is a series of metamorphoses (Ovid being the novel’s resident muse) which have marked the lives of Eileen and her mother Mary and Esther’s life as well. Indeed, the oral frame itself constructs the genealogy of Esther’s own metamorphosis: at the beginning of the novel, Esther recalls a conversation at age twelve, in which Eileen warns her of the dangers of metamorphoses and of changing names; the story Eileen tells Esther will reveal her to be Esther’s grandmother, prefiguring the revelation at the end of the novel that her mother Deirdre, raised as her uncle Liam’s child, is Eileen’s daughter: “I am speaking of the kind of name change that turns you into someone else altogether, someone other than who you are, the change that takes you off to somewhere else” (9).

These metamorphoses are variations on the state of being “away,” a kind of possession by the faeries or Sidhe, who “have been, like the Angels, from before the making of the earth” and whose “own country is Tinnan-Og . . . under the ground or under the sea, or it may not be far from any of us” (Gregory 11, 9). At the beginning of Esther’s tale, her great-grandmother Mary pulls a drowned sailor from the sea off Rathlin Island and from thence is transformed, present but absent, there but not there, haunted by the drowned sailor “from an otherworld island” (8). Though the people of Rathlin Island hope to salvage her (and preserve themselves) by marrying her to the skeptical schoolteacher Brian O’Malley, she vows, paradoxically, “I will be your wife but I will not be your wife” (57). In Upper Canada, Mary (her name changed to Moira) is true to her word when she leaves Brian and their children to live by the shore of Lake Moira to be close to her spectral lover, her frozen body returned to the family seven years later by her Ojibway friend, Exodus Crow.

Mary’s enchantment by the drowned man is replayed in Eileen’s infatuation with the militant patriot, Aidan Lanighan. Descriptions of Aidan echo the image of the drowned man, and Eileen’s feeling of familiarity with him suggests the continuing presence of the daemon lover: “There’s something in me that remembers you from somewhere....How could I know you this well?” (290-91). While such overt echoes of Mary’s fate project an air of the spectral over Eileen’s relationship with Aidan, her enchantment, though romantic like Mary’s, is political as well. Her attraction to Aidan is very much wrapped up with her embrace of Irish Catholic militancy and her belief in Aidan as the focus of Irish revolutionary hopes in Canada. Thus, when she is repudiated by Aidan after the assassination of D’Arcy McGee and after the revelation that Aidan has been acting as a spy on McGee’s behalf, she realizes that she has been under a spell, has essentially been “away”: “So this is what it is to be away, her mother’s voice told her. You are never present where you stand....Your flagstones are a series of dark lakes that you scour, and the light that touches and alters them sends you unspeakable messages. Waves arch like mantles over everything that burns. Each corner is a secret and your history is a lie” (345). From the beginning, *Away* establishes in the history of the women of the O’Malley family a sense of repetition and the presence of the supernatural, both characteristic of myth:

They were plagued by revenants. Men, landscapes, states of mind went away and came back again. Over the years, over the decades. There was always water involved, exaggerated youth or exaggerated

age. Afterwards there was absence. That is the way it was for the women of this family. It was part of their destiny. (3)

Thus the dominant force in the O'Malley family history is a kind of destined repetition, the inevitable presence of romantic enchantment which is given supernatural and archetypal overtones: "In this family all young girls are the same young girl and all old ladies are the same old lady" (325).

This sense of destiny and the pattern of enchantment is repeated in Esther's own life when a fisherman, whose "dark curls, his pale hand and his bright green eye" (354) echo Mary's drowned sailor and Aidan, takes refuge from a storm in her house on Loughbreeze Beach. The pattern, however, is repeated with a difference, because Esther "was told a story at twelve that calmed her down and put her in her place" (3) and has taken Eileen's advice "never to go away" (9), a caution which sets up a tension between change and stability that runs through the book. Eileen's intention is to convince Esther of the advantages of stability, and Esther benefits by being able to recognize the familiar (familial) pattern when it appears in her own life: "It was his swimming to her land, the storm, his journey over beach stones that mattered. The unpredictability of his arrivals and the certainty of his departures. Between his visits, when she found herself waiting, she knew it was for a kind of completion — his absence from, not his presence in her life" (354). Winter puts an end to his visits and "Esther stayed alone on the land" (354).

However, though Esther's life is as a result less tumultuous than Mary's or Eileen's, she has no children and therefore no audience for her family history, and in this sense the O'Malley family saga raises concerns about historical consciousness and cultural continuity. As Esther tells her story to an empty house, she sees herself as the equivalent of a bardic poet, repository, and conduit of oral culture:

Esther lying still in her sleigh-bed feels like an Irish poet from a medieval, bardic school. She is aware that those men and women lay in their windowless cells for days, composing and then memorizing thousands of lines, their heads wrapped in tartan cloths, stones resting on their stomachs. Esther has neither rocks nor plaids with her in this bed but shares with the old ones a focused desire. Nothing should escape. (133)

The frame story serves to disrupt the chronological progression of the narrative and to provide it with a certain didactic urgency, thus giving *Away* an oral quality more typical of myth than of historical narrative. More significantly, it also (not least of all because the story will die with

Esther as the last descendent of the O'Malley line) foregrounds the relationship between the oral tradition and historical memory, and underlines the importance of preservation and continuity in the face of change and disintegration.

Another important element of *Away* which contributes to the novel's blending of the historical with the fantastic and the poetic is Urquhart's use of the parts of an Irish triad to structure the narrative: "The three most short-lived traces: the trace of a bird on a branch, the trace of a fish on a pool, and the trace of a man on a woman" (n.p.). Avrom Fleishman argues of the substance of the historical novel that "there is an unspoken assumption that the plot must include a number of 'historical' events, particularly those in the public sphere (war, politics, economic change, etc.), mingled with and affecting the personal fortunes of the characters" (3), and such relatively detailed and specific historical events indeed provide the larger canvas to the O'Malley family saga. However, the section titles give a metaphoric cast to each stage of the family history, and effect a kind of narrative containment of the historical within the personal, the poetic, and the mythical.

The first section, "A Fish on a Pool," concentrates on Mary's enchantment by the drowned sailor and her marriage to Brian O'Malley, and concludes with the family's coming emigration to Canada, though the broader background to the dilemma of Mary's being "away" is the exploitation of Ireland by the English, the great famine of the 1860s, and the massive, forced exodus of a substantial proportion of the population of Ireland. The title of the section refers obviously to Mary's attraction to the sea, her discovery of the drowned sailor, and her subsequent transformation, the fish being, as Birch observes, a common form taken by "the hidden tribes of the *Tuatha de Dannan* (the people of the ancient Mother Goddess)" (116) in Celtic mythology. But it also refers to Mary's encounter with her Anglo-Irish landlord Osbert Sedgewick, a passionate naturalist, whose collecting of natural specimens is symbolic of his exploitative, if well-intentioned, relationship with his tenants and of his obliviousness to the lives and suffering of the Irish peasantry. When Mary encounters Osbert taking specimens from tidal pools and implicitly criticizes his disturbance of nature, Osbert is shaken by Mary's spectral air and the effrontery of her suggestion. Echoing the Celtic tradition that "one received wisdom at the water's edge" (Ellis 44), his encounter with Mary haunts Osbert and compels him to leave off his collecting. Osbert is even prompted to intervene in the family's fate by making sure that they are included in the list of those to emigrate to Canada to alleviate the suf-

fering caused by the famine; he insists to his brother Granville that there is “this light in her . . . and it must not be put out” (122). Thus Mary leaves her “trace” on Osbert — indeed, so much so that ultimately he follows the family to Canada. As these two encounters (Mary with the dead sailor and with Osbert) reflect, the “personal fortunes” of Mary are certainly shaped by the larger historical context of the famine, but that serious and realistic sociopolitical situation, in an ontological blending typical of magic realism, occupies the same space in the narrative as the mythical, archetypal situation of the woman who is “away.”

The title of the second section, “A Bird on a Branch,” foregrounds the mythic and uncanny, as it gestures both to Mary’s Ojibway friend Exodus Crow and to Eileen, both of whom have prophetic abilities and project a certain sense of destiny on the family’s fortunes over the course of the rest of the narrative. Eileen, who has inherited something of her mother’s prophetic ability and supernatural aura, as a young girl spends much of her time in a willow tree beside the O’Malley’s cabin in the backwoods of Hastings County. She foresees, for instance, the coming of Exodus Crow just before he arrives with the frozen body of Mary in tow, as well as the later arrival of Osbert Sedgewick. Exodus, as his family name suggests, serves as a spiritual guide and messenger for the O’Malleys, since he has been instructed by Mary to tell her story to her children, specifically to Liam, who, he says, because he “will move forward and make the change, *must* hear the story” (175). Exodus contributes to the mythic quality of the story because he recognizes in Mary a mutually shared quality of *manitou*, “the spirit that is everywhere” (176), but also because his message from Mary and the advice he gives the family confirms a sense of foreordination. Liam indeed does go ahead to make “the change,” becoming a successful landowner and capitalist and thus freeing the family from a history of poverty. However, he makes the change by selling the family’s land grant to Osbert Sedgewick, who has followed the family to Canada and seizes on the possibility, which “the crow” reveals to Eileen, of gold on the property. The sale brings upon the family, as Exodus warns, “the curse of the mines,” a desecration of landscape for profit which, by the time of Esther’s narrative, has reached a kind of crescendo. Thus while the middle section of the novel portrays the struggle of Irish immigrants to forge a living on the less-than-fertile Canadian Shield and the struggle over sustaining or jettisoning an Irish identity in a new land, arching over its historical realism is a sense of destiny and of supernatural powers governing the fate of the O’Malley family. Here Celtic mythology, in which the Sidhe often take the form of birds, merges with the

trickster tradition so important in Ojibway and other native cultures, giving the novel a conspicuous dash of the syncretism that is such an important feature of Latin American magic realism.

The title of the final section, “The Trace of a Man on a Woman,” suggests the romantic priorities of the narrative of Eileen’s relationship with Aidan Lanighan, but the romance is very much bound up with the broader fabric of Irish-Catholic nationalism and Fenian agitation in Canada and the reaction to D’Arcy McGee’s “betrayal” of the cause. Eileen falls for Aidan as he “dances” the hopes and aspirations of the Irish Catholics in the Seaman’s Inn in Port Hope, and later follows him to Montreal where she insists on participating in the patriot cause by concealing a pistol which Aidan intends to take “as a precaution” (323) when going to hear D’Arcy McGee speak in Parliament. By giving the pistol to Aidan’s cohort Patrick, Eileen serves as unsuspecting accessory to the assassination of McGee and foils Aidan’s attempt to prevent it. Thus when McGee is shot, Aidan accuses Eileen of killing him, of being in “some kind of dream...some kind of goddammed otherworld island” (343). The spell (both romantic and political) is broken. “His dance was not a petition to McGee,” Eileen realizes; “it was an expression — an affirmation — of partnership. Whenever Aidan danced, the voice of D’Arcy McGee had been present, dancing with him in the room” (343). The departure of Aidan echoes the departure of Mary’s daemon lover, and Eileen returns home to Port Hope in a similarly enigmatic, spectral state, telling Liam, “I’ve given up on outer words.... I live on an otherworld island” (346). Thus Eileen’s participation in the politics of a pivotal historical era — the struggle for cultural cohesion and political consensus at the time of Confederation — ultimately leads to a repetition of the mythic pattern that governs the history of the women of the O’Malley family. The relatively brief “trace” of Aidan on Eileen marks her for the rest of her life: “I can’t, you see,” she tells Esther, “get the face of a certain young man out of my mind” (351).

Anyay thus presents an interesting mixture of the ostensibly mythical and the ostensibly historical. Such significant historical contexts as the great famine, the grim crossing of the Atlantic in the immigrant ships, Confederation, and the Fenian agitation leading up to the death of D’Arcy McGee provide the background, but also a great deal of resonance and significance, to a family saga that is very much grounded in Irish popular beliefs, shaped by the repetitive pattern and supernatural influence typical of myth, and bolstered by echoes of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Strengthening the affiliation that such a blend suggests with magic real-

ism, which Fredric Jameson describes as “a kind of narrative raw material derived essentially from peasant society, drawing in sophisticated ways on the world of village or even tribal myth” (302), is the recurrence of characteristically magic-realist scenes throughout the narrative. “In magical realism,” as Chanady observes, “the supernatural is not presented as problematic” and the reader “does not react to the supernatural in the text as if it were antinomious with respect to our conventional view of reality, since it is integrated within the norms of perception of the narrator and characters in the fictitious world” (23). In these scenes, particularly marvellous or uncanny details or events stand out in contrast to, but without disrupting, the historical verisimilitude of the rest of the narrative. For instance, emerging from the ship wrecked off Rathlin Island are cabbages, barrels of whiskey, and “a large quantity of silver teapots, so perfectly designed against spillage that they proved very seaworthy as they bounced cheerfully towards the beach” (6). The appearance of Mary’s corpse when she is returned to her family is spectral and mystical: her “beautiful, pale, frozen” body “is dressed entirely in buckskin,” her hair coated with frost, “making her appear to be almost translucent” (173). Thomas J. Doherty, a latter-day St. Patrick, charms the skunks off Liam’s property by making signs and writing messages with stones. Finally, Eileen boats through a Montreal defamiliarized not so much by time but by an epic flood (the prodigious force of nature being a recurrent feature of Latin American magic realism): “Small boats were rowed in and out of large ground-floor windows. A cabinet full of broken china swept majestically towards an intersection” (305). Magic realism, as Jameson suggests, is grounded in a blending of historically and culturally disjunctive contexts and “betrays the overlap of the coexistence of precapitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features” (311). Thus its generic features are aptly suited to dramatizing the complex relationship between myth, history, politics, and cultural identification, as the rich stew of historical realism, fantasy, and folklore in *Away* illustrates.

Urquhart engages these issues in *Away* most particularly in her portrait of Irish Catholic nationalism and the effect of immigration on cultural and political identity, providing a persuasive supplement to Slemon’s illustration that English-Canadian magic-realist texts can “comprise a positive and liberating engagement with the codes of imperial history and its legacy of fragmentation and discontinuity” (423). The nationalism of Urquhart’s characters reflects the continuity between the mythic, the historical, and the political in Irish Catholic culture and folklore, but its transportation to Canada is portrayed as problematic and tied

to a larger pattern in which immigration is, in a fashion, another form of being “away.” In an interview conducted while she was writing *Away*, Urquhart commented that she was writing about cultural identity, immigration, and generations of Irish Catholics who are “tribal, hysterically Anglophobic and very sentimental about their lost homeland,” but noted that she intended the novel to “show the parallels between all immigrants’ experiences” (qtd. in Zettell 21). Thus running through *Away* is a portrait of nationalism as a legacy of cultural cohesion, beauty, and oppression that is both lyrical and political, but whose transportation to a new context raises important — and certainly postcolonial — questions about the nature of history and cultural memory.

The portion of the novel set on Rathlin Island gives *Away* a strong nationalist momentum, underscoring the history of oppression by the English: the religious persecution, the deforestation of Ireland, and, in the immediate present, the banning of hedge schools, the exploitation leading to the famine, and the forced exodus as an expedient solution. Urquhart underscores the injustice of the situation, through, for instance, the brilliantly executed scenes of evocative, wearied stasis as the family starves to death during the famine and through Brian O’Malley’s eloquent, passionate protestations and his efforts at cultural preservation: “The old language will disappear forever, and all the magic and the legends. It’s what they want, what they’ve always wanted, to be rid of us one way or another” (74). At the same time, Urquhart steers away from melodrama, not least through her choice of antagonists: rather than blatantly exploitative villains, the Sedgewick brothers are well-meaning, eccentric, non-absentee landlords. In some ways, the Sedgewicks are no less fantastic than Mary’s dead sailor, underscoring the politics of exploitation perhaps more forcefully because of their oddball behaviour — their fiddling while Ireland burns, so to speak. Their esoteric naturalist and folklorist pursuits — Granville composes romanticizing laments “concerning the sorrows of Ireland” (39) — reflect a detached possessiveness and superiority towards nature and their peasant tenants alike; in a typically seriocomic scene, their discussion of the famine gets sidetracked into a pedantic argument about the potential validity of an oral story, revealing their patronizing fetishization of oral culture and their obliviousness to the material deprivations of their tenants.

The Sedgewicks subsequently opt to solve their tenants’ misery by quite naively exporting them across the Atlantic — “the ships are clean and well maintained... and the food on them is of the highest quality, yes?” (121), Osbert ingenuously asks a land agent. However, the bitter-

ness of such a history of exploitation is, of course, not left behind; the Promised Land, in many respects, is more of the same. This is signalled, before their departure, by Colonel Tarbutt's Anglocentric colonial settler's guide, which demoralizes the inhabitants of Rathlin Island by listing as things that "should be taken along on a journey to the northern portion of the new world" such staples of Irish Catholic peasant life as "engraved prints of Windsor Castle, Buckingham Palace, and the Queen, Epsom salts, field-glasses, folio for pressed wildflowers, golf clubs, two good hounds for hunting" (117), and so on. After the family has settled, Brian is dismayed to find that Orangeism has likewise been exported to Upper Canada, and that "many of his Protestant neighbours had taken the pledge to eliminate Catholicism wherever they might find it" (198); in a replay of the prejudice he experienced in Ireland, his career as a school-teacher comes to an end when, after his teaching of history takes a nationalist turn, hysterical reaction to Fenian raids in 1866 prompts the Board of Trustees of his township to request his retirement. To further underline the migration of oppression across the Atlantic, Osbert Sedgewick reappears (an ironic saviour who walks across water — on stilts), his estate having collapsed because "we sent so many away that there was no one left to work the estate and no money left either" (218). When Eileen reveals the gold that is on the property, Osbert buys out the children with the money from the sale of his estate, once again taking into his possession Brian and Mary, around whose graves he has a hired man "install a decorative wrought-iron fence" (282). Thus the persistence of a spirit of Irish Catholic nationalist feelings on the part of the O'Malleys and others is to a great degree supported by the persistence of the factors that cultivated that nationalism back in Ireland.

While sentiments of Irish cultural and political nationalism are expressed most explicitly by male characters like Brian, the Captains O'Shaunessey, and Aidan Lanighan (even if it turns out he doesn't mean it), that sense of the past is also more privately and mystically present in both Mary, who "had fragments of the old beliefs" which "had not been completely stolen from her" (75), and in Eileen. Before the family leaves for Canada, Mary's daemon lover shows her visions of the passion and suffering of her history, which "are not being shed" but rather "accumulated" (127), and of her participation in one of the great waves of emigration: "when you go, this is what you become part of" (128). Later, Mary's conversation with Exodus Crow underlines a history of colonial exploitation that sounds very familiar to him: "After she had been in the forest for several winters she told him dark things; about the time of the

stolen lands of her island, and of the disease, and of the lost language and the empty villages and how the people who once sang were now silent, how the people who once danced were now still" (184). As a repository of cultural memory and the pain of colonial exploitation, Mary provides a good illustration of the subtle merging of the mythic and the political which characterizes so many magic realist texts.

The exchange between Mary and Exodus gives a particularly post-colonial twist to Leonard Cohen's phrase "let us compare mythologies," but it also reflects the need for carefully nuanced articulation of power relations in a settler-invader culture in postcolonial analysis that Canadian critics such as Diana Brydon (194) and Donna Bennett (196-97) have called for. To underline the postcolonial resonance and characteristically magic-realist syncretism of this scene, however, raises not just reservations about applying the term "postcolonial" to a settler-invader culture like Canada, but also reservations about the appropriateness of linking magic realism and postcolonialism. Sara Suleri, for instance, cites Salman Rushdie's objection "to the convenience with which this critical term is appended to postcolonial literatures" (181), and Homi Bhabha's sweeping reference to magic realism as "the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world" (7) has been rightly questioned by Aijaz Ahmad as an instance of "metropolitan theory's inflationary rhetoric" (69). While, as Catherine Cundy argues of Rushdie's work, labels such as magical realism "carry with them preordained ideas ... that sometimes reinforce the sense of a lack of originality in contemporary literature" (99), it seems important to retain the term because of its usefulness in highlighting parallels within the broader trend of genre-crossing in contemporary literature, particularly in postcolonial cultures. Suzanne Baker makes a persuasive case that postcolonialism and magic realism are a suitable match because they are hybrid discourses and contest the interconnected strictures of colonialism and realism: "In opposition to straight-forward, rational and controlled order which is the dominant style of imperialism, magic realism mixes fantasy and reality, fact and myth, while resisting classical expectations of closure and unity." Thus writers "who wish to avoid the inscribed colonial values inherent in the realist mode may opt for the subversive possibilities of magic realism to challenge the restrictions of circumscribed colonial space" (87). While certainly distinctions need to be made between different kinds of postcolonialisms and different deployments of magic-realist strategies, I would argue that the continuity of anticolonial sentiments and belief in the supernatural in the O'Malleys' "new world" in *Away* certainly participates in such a contes-

tation. It might be argued that *Away's* postcolonial and magic-realist elements are part of a broader, inappropriate and appropriative migration of oppositional, "Third World" energies to the "developed" world, but I think that what a novel like *Away* illustrates is that a questioning of colonial assumptions and of the hegemony of historical rationalism is hardly out of place in Canada. Thus to consider *Away's* generic affiliations is not to turn a Sedgewickian taxonomic eye on the novel, but to recognize that generic affiliations create not only aesthetic effects but political and cultural resonances as well.

If Mary, like Exodus, provides a postcolonial articulation of the ravages of colonial oppression, with Eileen and Liam, the next generation, the portrait of nationalism takes a more ambivalent turn, as the relationship between the two shows how problematic the weight of cultural heritage can be in a new land. Liam, Ireland-born, has forgotten the motherland: "All he remembered of Ireland was a flat stone beyond the threshold of a door, the rest of the past had fallen away" (166). Bitter over his mother's abandonment of the family and having had responsibility thrust upon him, Liam has no time for the preservation of his Irish heritage; he rejects the mythological aspects of her passing and confronts Brian over the validity of Exodus's story: "Do you believe in this spirit?... Do you believe in this fairy tale?" Brian answers only, "I didn't used to" (190), and it is Eileen who completes the thought: "He believes it... because it is true" (191). That such expressions of skepticism are rare in *Away* further affiliates the novel with magic realism, as an "explanation of the supernatural, or an attempt to analyse the perspective that differs from our normal view of reality, would only draw our attention to the strangeness or even impossibility of certain events and beliefs" (Chanady 149). Instead, the novel is characterized by what Chanady calls authorial reticence: "The unnatural is naturalized by commenting as little as possible on it, and reducing the distance between the narrator and the situation he is describing" (160).

"Naturalizing the supernatural" in a fashion typical of magic realism, Eileen thus illustrates how belief in the supernatural is very much bound up with the preservation of cultural identity in the novel, but so does the pragmatic Liam through his rejection of both. As Brenda Cooper argues, "it is neither possible nor appropriate for magical realist writers to present in an unmediated, undistanced way, the pre-scientific view of the world that some of their characters may hold" (33); thus Cooper modifies Chanady's characterization by arguing that "it is precisely the mix of authorial reticence with authorial irony that is a defining feature of the magical realist text" (34). After Brian's death, Liam reflects, mystified, on

the resilience of his father's nationalism: "What was it that lodged the homeland so permanently and so painfully in the heart of his father?" (207). When Liam discovers from *The Canadian Geological Survey* the existence of the Canadian Shield, which has been frustrating his efforts to farm, he repudiates Brian, "thinking of men more enterprising than his father" and realizing that none "of them was Irish" (209). Liam ultimately plays the role of the colonized Irishman, identifying with the capitalist ethic of Osbert Sedgewick, whereas Eileen sees Osbert simply as her parents' former landlord. Indeed, when Liam achieves the dream of owning the white house which he sees as a child on the long voyage to the backwoods of Upper Canada, he buys land in a Loyalist village, becoming a landlord and thus one of the oppressors himself. Eileen is quick to point out the irony: "I think that the English took the land from the Indians same as they took it from the Irish. Then they just starve everybody out, or...they evict them, or both" (279). The pragmatic Liam thus becomes a "mimic man" and shows the perils of one extreme of the experience of the immigrant — an attempt to completely jettison one's inherited mythology and culture.

Though Liam's apparent neo-colonialist behavior and betrayal of his heritage is checked by his accommodation of his Irish squatter Thomas Doherty (and his marrying of Doherty's daughter Molly), it is Eileen who carries on her father's nationalist aspirations (as well as her mother's more mystical burden of her people's history). In Eileen's flirtation with revolutionary nationalism in the final section of *Away*, history and mythology merge in a fashion that inverts but is no less problematic than Liam's desire for a cultural and historical *tabula rasa*. Eileen, like Mary, absorbs in a more lyrical and spiritual fashion the legacy of her people's history through listening to Brian's songs and stories:

But his sister, [Liam] knew, had ingested the stories, their darkness — the twist in the voice of the song, the sadness of the broken country — and had therefore carried, in her body and brain, some of that country's clay. She who was born into a raw, bright new world would always look back towards lost landscapes and inward towards inherited souvenirs, while he sought the forward momentum of change and growth, the axe in the flesh of the tree, the blade breaking open new soil. (207-08)

Eileen by age thirteen has absorbed her father's "Irish revolutionary songs" and "cheerfully sang about the hanging of brave young men, wild colonial boys, the curse of Cromwell, cruel landlords, the impossibility

of requited love, and the robbery of landscape while she built snow castles” (199).

Her commitment to the revolutionary cause, however, is catalysed, and compromised, by her relationship with Aidan Lanighan. After her first encounter with Aidan, Eileen becomes an avid reader of the polemical nationalist and Catholic newspaper *The Irish Canadian*; her mooning over Aidan is mixed with politics, and her perception of the cause is constructed as a naive romanticism. Evoking the Irish mythological hero Finn MacCool, she envisions Aidan as part of a band of gallant patriots, galloping “over hills with the wind in their hair or [leaping] back and forth on the trunks of enormous, floating trees.... They were brothers-in-arms, fiercely loyal, and their arena was the new dominion.” She believes, furthermore, that although she is a woman, “Aidan Lanighan’s touch had guaranteed her a role in the theatre, the performances, that made up their lives” (293). In her patriotic enthusiasm, Eileen demonizes D’Arcy McGee and becomes fixated upon him. “Translating from myth to life the songs her father had taught her” (296) and spurred by McGee’s rejection of Aidan’s “petition,” Eileen comes to view him as a traitor. This naïveté about McGee’s politics is compounded by her misreading of Aidan’s attitude towards McGee (which is quite conveniently never voiced but expressed in his dancing, with which his audience soulfully — but apparently gullibly — communes). Resenting McGee for his hold on Aidan, Eileen in her devotion to the cause is dangerously uncritical, her patriotic ideals constructed as myth moving further from reality: “The idea of the oneness of the tribe, the imagined collective voice, calmed her. There were no uncertainties” (330). Her desire for “power, collusion, the potential for tragedy” (298) is conveyed as being fairly extremist: “I’ve come to help you ruin the traitor McGee” (310), she tells Aidan. However, when it seems that Aidan is about to carry through with the assassination, “Eileen was appalled by the anticipated act shaping itself in her mind” (341), suggesting that there are limits to her revolutionary ardour.

The surprise ending of *Away*, in which the primary protagonists are revealed respectively as a political ingenue and a spy, somewhat abruptly reconfigures the portrait of Irish Catholic nationalism in the novel (even if, in retrospect, there are signs both of Eileen’s naïveté and Aidan’s disagreement with Eileen’s nationalist clichés). The novel cumulatively builds a strong consciousness of a history of colonial oppression, and the continuity of a heritage whose eradication has been an ongoing part of that exploitation, but the force of that consciousness becomes complicated in the new and fairly volatile political environment of Confederation-era

Canada. Through the contrast between Liam and Eileen, Urquhart suggests the need in such a situation for moderate accommodation: Liam's attempt to slough off his Irish heritage comes across as a distorted, extreme assimilation, a form of colonial cringe, whereas Eileen's clinging to a fetishized mythology is portrayed as a distorted, extreme resistance to accommodation which has serious, potentially disastrous, consequences.

Because of the way in which *Away* dramatizes the metamorphoses of cultural heritage and inherited mythology in a new environment, it is very compelling to read the novel in the light of Marie Vautier's post-colonial articulation of myth in historical fiction in *New World Myth*. Though *Away* lacks the narrative self-consciousness of the novels around which Vautier builds her definition of "New World Myth," it nonetheless to a degree displays the kind of postcolonial transformation of the function and resonance of myth that Vautier describes. Traditionally, Vautier argues, myths, as prior, essential, and superior stories, have been employed in literary texts "to enhance an ordinary story and keep the paradigmatic original story alive in a contemporary form" (52). *New World Myth*, in contrast, articulating itself "against that out of which it originates, . . . introduces not only a notion of flexibility but also a social, political, historical, and temporal component into the traditional concept of myth as something immutable, eternal, and, especially, transhistorical. The term itself is oxymoronic; it deliberately introduces a historical dimension into traditional notions of mythic universality" (35). Vautier argues, furthermore, that *New World Myth* blurs the boundaries between fiction, history, and myth and, therefore, that to the catalogue of post-modern paradoxes "we may now add the concept of 'myth' as comforting *and* disquieting, structuring *and* decentring, old and traditional, and new *and* generative" (50). While *Away* may not be postmodern, such a description captures the effects of its very ambivalent use of myth.

New World Myth, moreover, is notably historiographic, "concerned with both epistemological uncertainty and the need to know, . . . intent on imaginatively reclaiming the past while flaunting its awareness of the processes involved in this act" (Vautier 35). While *Away*, in contrast, is distinct because it lacks the historiographic self-consciousness so prevalent in contemporary Canadian historical fiction, it is still a historical novel and features the characteristic representation of well-known historical figures, which tends to raise historiographic questions all the same. Compared to Heather Robertson's sustained portrait of Mackenzie King in her *The King Years* trilogy or George Bowering's rendering of George Vancouver in *Burning Water*, the portrait of D'Arcy McGee in *Away* is

relatively (and somewhat curiously) oblique, but it is nonetheless ultimately tied to the interplay between history, myth, and immigration. As Marina Allemano observes, it is typical of historical novelists to limit their portrayal of major historical figures to avoid “the problems that would arise from having to deal with the many known factual aspects” (51), and in *Away* the view of McGee is restricted to a highly filtered and increasingly hostile response on the part of Brian, Eileen, and other Irish Catholics. Associated with the republican Young Ireland movement in the 1840s, McGee was initially an eloquent North American exponent of Irish Catholic political and cultural nationalism; as Brian reflects, McGee “understands the injustice,...the terrible black heart of it” (166). Brian later repudiates McGee after his notorious speech in Wexford denouncing Fenianism in North America and criticizing republicanism and “the flaws in the Irish Catholic character that left that group open to manipulation by such creatures” (Urquhart 199). That McGee is hardly the turncoat and villain Brian, Eileen, and the O’Shaunesseys make him out to be is suggested only somewhat subtly by Urquhart’s presentation of him as an eloquent and persecuted supporter of confederation: “when he opened his mouth to speak, the world around him stood at silent attention,” though “in recent months he had opened his mouth to speak far too often” (283). Absent from the novel is the image of McGee in nationalist iconography as “one of the founding Fathers of the Confederation of Canada” and “a peacemaker in racial conflicts and the prophet of a federal nation” (Slattery xii), or even as a “dynamic social visionary” (Kirwin 10).

Urquhart does suggest his populist appeal and conciliatory sentiments through the speech he gives just before his assassination, emphasizing renewal and unity and the erasing of divisions: “there would be no factions, no revenge for old sorrows, old grievances. Everything...was to be new, clear; a landscape distanced by an ocean from the zones of terror. A sweeping territory, free of wounds, belonging to all, owned by no one” (337-38). Eileen, however, though impressed with his eloquence, feels all the more a sense of betrayal: “Lost landscapes through which she had never walked were unfolding, hill by hill, in Eileen’s thoughts. To her, McGee was the worst kind of enemy, the truly guilty; the one who knows the beauty and betrays it” (339). Here Urquhart captures the paradoxical difficulties posed by the persistence of anticolonial sentiment to McGee’s vision of a more equitable, less hierarchical, and in that sense postcolonial, state. The loyalty to their new home that McGee preached to his fellow Irish Canadians, as Isabel Skelton argues, had for many Irish Catholics connotations of “truckling to alien rulers, that unworthy ac-

ceptance of arrogant pretensions, against which every Irishman of spirit had struggled for centuries” (439), and Eileen obviously reads his words in this light. Later, however, talking to Esther, Eileen concedes that she “should be grateful to D’Arcy McGee for something.... He put me in my place” (350). This somewhat enigmatic reference to the revelation of her state of being both romantically and politically “away” serves, to a certain degree, to contain McGee’s role in the novel, restricting him to providing a trace of history on the O’Malley family myth, in which a trans-historical pattern is repeated once again. However, he leaves his mark all the same, particularly because Esther is to learn from Eileen’s experiences and will remain “grounded,” bound to the land, which means, in Urquhart’s terms, bound to history as well.

Urquhart’s presentation of the assassination, itself a focus of a considerable amount of historiographic debate, is likewise submerged within the family saga. Historically, Patrick James Whelan was charged and hanged for the assassination, which was attributed to McGee’s Fenian opponents (of which he had many). However, as Skelton observes, “it was never felt that the whole truth was known. Much of the evidence which hanged Whelan was purely circumstantial, and he, to the last, maintained he was innocent” (540). Furthermore, as T.P. Slattery argues, it seems unlikely that Fenians were ultimately responsible (325-6). Urquhart, like many historical novelists, is cagey in her presentation of the actual event, which in the novel comes as an interruption of the heated discussion between Aidan and Eileen over the whereabouts of the pistol: “Then her words were cancelled by the sound of a single shot and the sight of a white top hat rolling away, cartwheeling down a wooden sidewalk” (342). As Urquhart observes in her acknowledgements, *Away* “does not pretend to solve the mystery”; rather, as Janet McNaughton argues, “Urquhart uses this assassination to explore what it meant to be Irish and Catholic in 19th-century Canada, the nature of nationalism, and the wisdom of nursing old political wounds in a new land” (44). The somewhat oblique presentation of the assassination, which merely suggests by association that “the man called Patrick” (335) is responsible, throws the emphasis on Eileen’s participation in revolutionary politics and the fetishized, romanticized nationalism that leads to her romantic, cultural, and political alienation. In this respect, McGee’s presence in the novel as the epicentre of debates over the place of Irish immigrants in the new dominion contributes to the kind of historicizing effect that Vautier sees in New World Myth, in which “myth exchanges its traditional function as transhistorical master narrative...for a function characterized by post-

modern indeterminacy, complex postcolonial attitudes, a questioning of history, and a developing self-consciousness that creates provisional and relative identities" (xi).

In *Away*, this function is particularly evident through the frame story and its focus on Esther, in her old age, as the recipient and teller of the story. As with most historical novels, the past is not just the past, and just as important to the paradoxical relationship between historicizing and mythologizing in *Away* is the novel's contemporary relevance. Historical fiction, whether postmodern and historiographic or not, generally provides a means of commenting on the present as well, and in *Away* the engagement with questions of cultural heritage and history is extended, through the device of the frame story, to the present. Here the novel's affiliations with magic realism are still important; Jameson describes the importance to magic realism of "the articulated superposition of whole layers of the past within the present" (311), and that idea is very much allegorized in the frame story. In the landscape of Loughbreeze Beach are buried fragments of the past, and archaeological imagery appears repeatedly in the narrative to figure Esther's consciousness of the past in the world around her: "Under the sand of the peninsula that reaches out into the lake there exist rooms whose wallpaper depicts bridges, willows, and streams — the scenery of a foreign land. Under the water at the end of a germinating jetty there are pilings clothed in seaweed that remember the search for a white sail and a pale hand" (19). However, the stories that preserve the past are slipping. Eileen stores messages around the house and tapes stories to the furniture, an image reminiscent of the scene in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in which Jose Arcadio Buendia, to combat the effects of amnesia on the inhabitants of Macondo, attaches signs and explanations to objects: "Thus they went on living in a reality that was slipping away, momentarily captured by words, but which would escape irremediably when they forgot the values of the written letters" (53). Esther's narrative is her last stand against this slippage: "She wants to reconstruct the pastures and meadows that have fallen into absence — the disassembled architecture, the great dark belly of an immigrant ship, a pioneer standing inland stunned by the forest, a farmer moving through the beams of light that fill his barn" (21). Because Esther has no audience, her story, as Sheila Ross argues, "is a lamentation for a lost mythology," but *Away* itself "is an enactment of its revitalization" (176). In this regard *Away* reflects an important dimension of magic realism as a literary mode, its "impulse to reestablish contact with traditions temporarily eclipsed by the mimetic

constraints of nineteenth- and twentieth-century realism” (Zamora and Faris 2).

Whereas the rest of the narrative inscribes a sense of the cumulative power of history and the mythic patterns with which it is interlaced, the frame story, by focussing on the destruction of landscape — which Compton argues is a consistent and central preoccupation in Urquhart’s work — dramatizes an erosion of the past. In the background of Esther’s narrative swan song is the relentless operation of a limestone quarry (the curse of the mines realized), which is associated not with a recovery of the past but with the destruction of memory: “in Eileen’s world abandoned structures decomposed, sinking back into the landscape from which they had sprung. In Esther’s lifetime she has seen architecture die violently. It has been demolished, burned, ripped apart, or buried. Nothing reclaims it” (135). The “industrial process that converts landscape into cement” — of which, as Compton observes, “Esther’s regenerative story is the antithesis” (213) — undermines the efforts at preservation or remembering that Esther’s narrative and, by implication, Urquhart’s represent: “Esther thinks of the million-year-old fossils that decorate these stones and how the limestone record of their extermination has brought about the demise of her own landscape, the enormous hole in the earth, the blanket of concrete dwellings that is obliterating the villages she knew as a child” (Urquhart 20-21). The men on the night shift of the cement company are clearly allegorized; they are figures of violence and historical ignorance, working in darkness, never bending “to the floor to rescue a fossil released by dynamite” (237). Their activity takes on political overtones, as they are described as being “out of step with the rhythms of the rest of the world” and “represent the most dangerous kind of shape changers: those who cannot see, because of darkness, beyond the gesture of the moment” (238). Coming at the beginning of the final section of the novel, before Eileen’s romantic and political involvement with Aidan, this image presents something of a coda for the revolutionary activity of Aidan’s patriot acquaintances and for Eileen’s naive participation. It suggests the destructive nature of a static, inflexible adherence to myth, but it also suggests the implications of blindness and an expedient fixation on the present in contemporary society.

Indeed, the final image of the novel makes a larger association between the cement company as a representative of industrial activity, capitalism, and the loss of historical consciousness, as the work of the night crew breaks the silence in the wake of Esther’s death:

Now the land itself fragments, moves away from piers in boats named after brief histories towards other waters, other shores. No lamps at

all are lit tonight in the empty house on Loughbreeze Beach. The men at the quarry, angered by something they don't quite understand, set their jaws and shift the gears of their equipment with grim forcefulness. Under the glare of artificial light the fossilized narratives of ancient migrations are crushed into powder. The scream of the machinery intensifies. (356)

That the boats pulling up to the company pier to receive the limestone — the commodified residue of “landscape and fossils” (352) — are named *Sir John A. Macdonald* and *The New Dominion* consolidates the parallels between the two eras. Thus *Away* makes a lyrical appeal for the preservation of historical memory, of the cultural and political archaeology of a nation.¹ Yet it also fearfully dramatizes the contribution of an obsession with production and consumption to “the enfeeblement of historicity,” most immediately because of its effect on landscape: “The traces of wounds left behind by industry are permanent. Fragile architecture abandoned by settlers is not” (Urquhart 11). Both the nineteenth-century sequences and the twentieth-century narrative that frames them illustrate the dangers of historical myopia, an expedient and fetishized preoccupation with the immediate, and in this fashion *Away* provides a synoptic assessment of the state of the dominion — from the literal “new dominion” at the time of Confederation to the “new dominion” of our present global capitalist era. Speaking of writers in Western Canada, at a time before Urquhart had yet to establish her reputation as a novelist, Geoff Hancock observes that magic realism “may recover truths that have been degraded by the onslaught of commercial activity, environmental pollution, and a decline of the ideal which the New World once promised” (43). What is particularly compelling about *Away* is that it both participates in that process of recovery and dramatizes the degradation that has rendered that recovery such a pressing need.

Urquhart's *Away* thus provides a moving illustration of Wiesel's adage that the “opposite of history is not myth” but “forgetfulness.” As a historical novel, *Away* lacks the discursive heterogeneity and interrogativeness typical of the historiographical metafiction so prevalent in recent English-Canadian literature. Instead, its blending of historical realism and the marvellous provides a more seamless and less openly dialogic, but no less effective, postcolonial historicizing of myth. In *Away*, Urquhart weaves a powerfully lyrical, magical, and historically detailed narrative that underlines the importance of a consciousness of the past but also an appreciation of the mythic patterns within which the past comes down to us (and not just in the oral tradition). The novel thus demon-

strates that what we think of as history and what we think of as myth are not neatly separable, as the terms of rationalist empiricism would have it, but are interpenetrating aspects of our perception — and hopefully our sustaining — of the past. As a narrative of immigration, *Away* also dramatizes, through the contrast between Eileen and Liam, what a delicate balancing act that sustaining of the past in a new home can be, raising particularly postcolonial questions about migration, identity, power, and the force of nationalism. Finally, *Away* provides an allegorical engagement with the degradation of the environment in contemporary capitalist society, powerfully illustrating the resilience and versatility of historical fiction and demonstrating that while it can be a retrograde means of aestheticizing the past it can also be a highly effective means of political, social, and cultural critique.

NOTE

¹ My commentary here owes a debt to Shannon Smyrl's interesting discussion of the allegorical significance of this commerial activity in a paper presented at the 1998 conference of the Association of Canadian and Quebec Literature, "The Trace of a Culture on a Nation: Global History and the Displaced Nation-State in Jane Urquhart's *Away*."

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