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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/300>

DOI: 10.4000/ces.300

ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2018

Number of pages: 109-118

ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Anne-Sophie Letessier, ““Isn’t the Place Only Ruins and Vacancies Now”: Reconstructions in Jane Urquhart’s *A Map of Glass* (2005)”, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 40.2 | 2018, Online since 05 November 2019, connection on 04 April 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/300> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.300>

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“Isn’t the Place Only Ruins and Vacancies Now”: Reconstructions in Jane Urquhart’s *A Map of Glass* (2005)

Jane Urquhart’s *A Map of Glass* hinges on reconstructions which are informed by the characters’ sense of depredation and dereliction when faced with places which are but “ruins and vacancies.” This paper proposes to analyse such reconstructions as providing the groundwork for a reflection which attempts to puzzle out the intricate issues of place, land, inheritance, belonging and memory.

It has now become commonplace in criticism on Jane Urquhart to underscore the intimate relation between storytelling and landscape (Cuder-Dominguez 201). Yet, the indiscriminate use of the latter term seems to ignore the Canadian author’s exploration of its polysemy. Like her other novels, *A Map of Glass* (2005) is fraught with pictorial allusions, from sixteenth-century Flemish painter Joachim Patinir to American land artist Robert Smithson, whose 1969 outdoor installation *A Map of Broken Glass* inspired the title of the novel. Nevertheless, it introduces a decisive shift as Urquhart’s attention veers away from the probing of the visual and pictorial definition of landscape.¹ By creating the character of “landscape geographer” Andrew Woodman (*MG* 96),² she goes back to the etymological meaning of the word “landscape”: a composition of man-made spaces superimposed on the surface of the land (Jackson 7).³ Since landscape is perceived in the novel as an “embedded, physicalized memory” retaining the traces of previous occupations (Urquhart, “Confessions” 81), the focus is less on the adjustment of European cultural and aesthetic heritage to a new geography – as in *The Whirlpool* (1986) or *Away* (1993) – than on the legacy left by the colonial past.

Structurally, *A Map of Glass* hinges on a reconstruction: the interpolated nineteenth-century Woodman family saga, which comprises the second section of the novel, and whose authorship is ascribed to Andrew. The character’s death in the prologue brings together Sylvia, his former lover, and Jerome, who found his body while on an artistic retreat on the abandoned Timber Island. In the long conversations which ensue from the encounter and which constitute the frame narrative, the middle-aged woman and the young land artist discuss Andrew’s life and work and reminisce about their past. Both express the same acute sense of loss when faced with Ontario’s vanishing rural landscape: the “heartbreaking neglect” of rotting fence lines along fields “destined to become the wilderness of asphalt” (*MG* 16), the “sad, neglected” farmhouses built by “the earliest settlers in the province” (*MG* 36), the “sad refuse” left by the wood industry on Timber Island (*MG* 97).

1. Historically, the term first designated the pictorial representation of a tract of land before it came to refer to its perception, namely “a portion of land that the eye can comprehend in a single view” (*Webster’s*).

2. The pagination for all subsequent quotations from *A Map of Glass* will be given directly between parentheses in the body of the text.

3. In the first essay of his seminal *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, John Brinkerhoff Jackson underlines the need for a new definition of the word. The one he proposes relies on etymology: the combination of the noun “land,” which, “as far back as we can trace the word, [...] meant a defined space,” and the suffix *-scape* which can both designate “a composition of similar objects” (as in the related word “sheaf”) and land creation (as in modern German *schaffen*, “to make”) (Jackson 6-7).

These descriptions seem to echo the fate of Coomavoher, an abandoned nineteenth-century Irish village about which a peasant from a neighbouring community exclaims: “isn’t the place only ruins and vacancies now” (MG 256). The deliberate indeterminacy of the unusual plural “vacancies” suggests more than mere dereliction. Ruins testify to the precariousness of human efforts to inhabit the world and carve out places for themselves (Besse 40). The phrase, which yokes together the tangible and the intangible and amplifies the tension between presence and absence, is a reminder that a place is never merely a location in the world (Ashcroft 156, Cresswell 20). In its “most straightforward definition,” it is “a meaningful location” which human lives have invested with value and emotional attachment (Cresswell 7). In sharp contrast with the pathos of the deserted village, however, the ruins in the Ontario rural landscape are the remnants and reminders of the transformation of uncolonized space into a colonized place. As such, they represent the “inherited memory of destruction” (MG 99) and their disappearance is construed as the symptom of “ecological forgetting” (MG 99) in a former settler-in-vader colony unwilling to remember that its “wealth [was] founded on the slaughtering of wild animals and the clear-cutting of forests” (MG 255).

Be they literal in nature, as is the case of Jerome’s land art installations, or discursive, as with Andrew’s chronicle of his ancestors, reconstructions go beyond the simple indulgence in colonial nostalgia.⁴ As Sylvia insists at the end of the letter she gives Jerome before returning home, the attempt to recover, restore and revive the past is not just bound to fail,⁵ it is a perilous lure: “*we cannot reconstruct. The dead don’t answer when we call them. The dead are not our friends*” (MG 368, italics in the text). The prefix *re-* suggests a critical and creative response to a sense of dereliction and depredation. My contention is that Urquhart’s concern with “ruins and vacancies” should be read in the light of her on-going investigation into the relation of human lives to “the land as physical environment, aesthetic milieu and possible habitat” (Omhovère 17). Reconstruction thus provides the groundwork for a reflection on how individuals and communities conceive of, relate to, and bond with a place. In a novel which is an example of post-colonial revision of Canada’s settler past, such a reflection disrupts the logic of binary oppositions – displacement/emplacement, place/placelessness, rootedness/rootlessness – in an attempt to puzzle out the intricate issues of place, land, inheritance, belonging, and memory.

Emplacement, Genealogy, Accretion

When Sylvia introduces herself by explaining that she has always lived in the house her ancestors built, Jerome exclaims: “Then you are settled, [...] a settler” (MG 48), an appraisal that reads like a pun erasing the idea of displacement attached to the noun.⁶ The middle-aged woman’s intimate knowledge of the geography and history of her county is her defining characteristic in the novel: she has memorized the 1878 atlas of

4. Urquhart’s engagement with post-colonialism is something of a moot question among scholars. In an article about *Away*, a family saga which follows the lives of Irish immigrants in the historical context of the Canadian Confederation, Cynthia Sugars argues that the novel evidences “an indulgence in a nostalgia for a certain kind of settler nationalism,” more specifically “for a particular scripture of a foundational Canadian narrative” (4).

5. Nostalgic restoration produces a sanitized travesty as Sylvia notes: “A few houses in the County had been restored by city people seeking charm [...] and always seemed to her to be unnaturally fresh and clean, as if the past had been scrubbed out of their interiors, then thrown carelessly out the door like a bucketful of soiled water” (MG 37).

6. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a “settler” as “one who settles in a new country; a colonist.”

Prince Edward county (*MG* 40, 88, 128),⁷ is able to “list from memory the entire genealogy of [her] father’s family” (*MG* 128), and knows “the histories of the old settlers as well as she kn[ows] her own body” (*MG* 37). When discussing this with Jerome, she insists on the immediacy and “physicality of the past” (*MG* 117), her sentiment that, like the family objects stored in the attic, the past is always “retrievable” (*MG* 108). The memorability of the settlers’ history, however, does not give rise to an epistemological questioning. It is addressed as the condition for the development of “emplacement,” a term coined by Urquhart which coalesces a sense of place and belonging to a place. As Sylvia explains to Jerome, “those who are emplaced are made that way by generations of their people remaining in the same location” (*MG* 325).⁸

The text repeatedly makes a point noting the character’s “geographical intimacy” born out of “the experience of a long, multi-generational relationship with place” (Urquhart, “Confessions” 20). Traveling through her county on the way to Toronto, Sylvia finds comfort in the familiarity and “reliability” of the “visual reminder[s] of the past” she sees through her car window: the cairns, boulders and hedges which form the “biography of stones” left behind by the old settlers (*MG* 37). The metaphor equates human industriousness transforming the terrain with the writing of a text on the earth’s surface, thereby bringing to the fore the readability of the inscriptions. What the character sees as “markers” endow “the surrounding environment with a measure of human containment” (Pogue Harrison 351), both temporally and spatially. Not only do they circumscribe, organize and ultimately contain indifferent space, but they function as relics binding Sylvia to the past and her ancestors. Their presence provides a historical sense of continuity which allows her to reconstruct and trace her lineage in one locality. The notion of “emplacement” could thus be read as a resolution of the post-colonial dialectic of place and displacement falling somewhat short of expectations. The novel seems to accommodate such a reading at times, especially when it sets up Sylvia’s rooted identity against the rootlessness of Jerome, the embodiment of the (post)modern man who knows nothing of his family’s past (*MG* 128, 362) and who is “so mobile that he has not the time to establish roots” (Tuan 183). And yet, the text relates Sylvia’s emplacement to geographical confinement (*MG* 110, 127) as continuity and stability transform into stasis and paralysis, which is evidenced in the character’s unnamed condition.⁹ Leaving aside clinical interpretations, construing Sylvia’s emplacement as a symptom entices the reader to ponder her identification with her ancestors’ place and un-settles the comforting “biography of stones.”

While the character delights in the image of the land as palimpsest used by British historian York Powell in *The Relations of History and Geography* (*MG* 93), the colonial “accretions which become the dense text that constitutes place” come under scrutiny in the novel (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 190). The tactile maps Sylvia makes for a blind friend eventually lead her to reflect on the meaning she ascribes to place: “Each aspect of her County – her own territory – had been named, filled, emptied, ploughed

7. The atlas is but one example of the “omnipresent Victoriana” (Lorre 187) in a novel which gives pride of place to descriptions of Canadian nineteenth-century material culture.

8. Urquhart’s understanding of the term bears close resemblance to Yi-Fu Tuan’s definition of rootedness: “it means that a people have come to identify themselves with a particular locality, to feel that it is their home and the home of their ancestors” (194).

9. Even though scholars generally agree to see in Sylvia’s “disability” (*MG* 116) a form of autism, the text conspicuously refuses to spell out a diagnosis.

and planted long ago; all the harvests belong to the dead who insisted on their entitlement" (MG 147). From the rephrasing of the reference to an administrative unit into a claim on land, to the last word, which designates the legal right to possess it, Sylvia's evocation of her relation to her county relies on the notion of property as a mode of inhabiting a place. The series of past participles draws attention to what has been done to the land: the "colonizing process [which] appropriates, defines, captures the place in language" through naming (Ashcroft 134),¹⁰ and the civilizing work of agriculture which, according to the political philosophy of John Locke, legitimizes the settlers' appropriation of the New World (Ashcroft 163).¹¹ Sylvia can therefore claim the land as emotionally hers because her ancestors made their claim to land through naming and labour. The text undermines what would amount to complacency by alluding to the eviction of indigenous people and the erasure of this eviction, in other words the very process of overwritings and rewritings participating in the palimpsestic construction of place. The dissonant note this introduces becomes more prominent when the ancestors' voices become interwoven with fragments from the morbid nursery rhyme "Who Killed Cock Robin":

"I cut the trees, built the mills, sawed the boards, made the roads, fenced the fields, raised the barns," they had told her in the dark of her childhood bedroom. *I, said the sparrow, with my bow and arrow.* "I drew up the deeds, made the laws, drafted the plans, invented the history, prescribed the curriculum," the dead whispered. *I, said the rook, with my little book.* They beat out a telegraph in her blood, one that read, "I fought the wars, buried the dead, carved the tombstones." *I, said the fish, with my little dish, And I caught the blood.* (MG 147, italics in the text)

The settlers' proud assertions are juxtaposed to the animals' responses to questions the text does not quote, a bathetic collage which provides the postcolonial revision of land claim legitimacy. The three lists are thematically organized: the productive ordering of nature, the written word as a vehicle for legal and cultural authority, and the deadly outcome of military conflicts. Taken as a whole, they may be read as outlining Canadian history, from the agricultural development of the colony to the elaboration of cultural nationalism after the 1867 Confederation. Yet, in the absence of temporal markers, what gives the passage its cohesion is the nursery rhyme, more specifically, the first and second verses quoted earlier on in the text (MG 113), thus closely associating the ancestors' litany with an unacknowledged, initial wrongdoing: the robin's murder gruesomely illustrated in the book Sylvia discovers as a child in the family house attic (MG 56-7). Situated at the very end of the first section, the passage ushers the reader into the nineteenth-century interpolated narrative about the Woodmans while offering an interpretative template. "The Bog Commissioners" is a variant of the settlers' stories so familiar to Sylvia, but one in which the hardy pioneers have given way to greedy entrepreneurs and the unfettered pursuit of profit. Andrew Woodman's reconstruction of his family story is not a search for roots or cultural location; it deals with "the heritage

10. In the nineteenth-century interpolated narrative, Branwell Woodman ridicules the "singular lack of imagination" evinced by colonial toponyms, townships being named after the entrepreneurs who sold them off and "everything else [...] after European towns and villages" (MG 218-19).

11. "As much land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much is his property. [...] God gave the world to men in common. [...] He gave it to the use of the industrious and rational (and labour was to be his title to it) [...]" (Locke n.p.)

of guilt” (Lorre 192) for a wrongdoing detrimental to the land and to the investment of human lives in a place.

Place, Foundation, Inheritance

When the interpolated narrative opens onto the cartographic description of the Thousand Islands in the Saint Lawrence River (*MG* 153), the reader has already learned about the most significant events in the Woodman family story. In the course of her conversation with Jerome, Sylvia summarizes the bare facts about the patriarch Joseph Woodman’s work in Ireland as a bog commissioner, which gives its title to the second section (*MG* 98), the rise and fall of the Woodman empire on Timber Island (*MG* 99), and the family hotel buried in sand (*MG* 77, 131). As she wonders whether it was “Andrew’s reconstruction that [...] filled in the gaps” in his record of the family narrative (*MG* 225), the *mise en abyme* engages the reader in a similar act of reflection. The extent to which “The Bog Commissioners” self-consciously relies on the generic “building blocks” of romance (Frye 4) is reminiscent of the narrative strategy Urquhart experiments with in *Away* and which brings readers “to question their adhesion to the fictions through which settler colonies negotiate their self-representation and, along with it, an endurable version of the past” (Omhovere 61).¹² For all the romantic *topoi* – the star-crossed lovers, secret weddings, recognition scenes, vindicated orphans, and oracular prophecies (Frye 4) – the second section is not a New World romance nor are the Woodmans founding settlers: the family story is marked by a series of displacements, each associated with the vacating of a “raped landscape” (*MG* 99) once the natural resources have been depleted.

While the “Bog Commissioners” retraces the story of the Woodmans starting from their arrival in Canada at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, its opening conspicuously manifests a double silence. Very little if anything is said about England as the place of origin¹³ and Urquhart refuses to depict the moment of the original encounter with the New World: there is a twenty-year-long ellipsis in the chronology between the mention of Joseph Woodman’s departure for the Canadian colonies (*MG* 155) and his son Branwell’s return to Timber Island after a stay in Paris. This narrative strategy throws into relief the first description of the island, which even at its peak is but ruins. Hoping to be reunited with a “pastoral and bucolic” landscape, Branwell is appalled at the evidence of his father’s flourishing industry:

everything for a time probably appeared to him to be [...] *raw and unfinished* and in what looked to be a state of complete destruction. *Felled and ruined* trees were being floated down the lake to his father’s docks. *Raw and unfinished* timber was being hastily assembled in order to construct the merchant ships that would litter the lake’s surface, ships that would eventually carry not only timber but also animals, barrels, china, furniture, food, bolts and nails, cast-iron cooking utensils, shotguns, salt, axes, hacksaws, looking glasses, bolts of cloth, cannons, cannonballs, and human beings. (*MG* 161, italics mine)

12. In *A Map of Glass*, Urquhart decides to fully exploit “the thrilling potential” of “romantic *topoi* such as the family house swallowed by sand or struck by lightning” which, in *Away*, “are cursorily mentioned” (Omhovere 62).

13. Joseph Woodman’s wife is the sole member of the family who is presented as “never [having] successfully managed to emigrate from England in her mind” (*MG* 183). Whereas her son Branwell, who aspires to become a painter, delights in her descriptions of “picturesque fields,” her practical daughter dismisses her “rhapsodizing about distant places” that she herself will never know (*MG* 183).

In sharp contrast with the description in the frame narrative of Jerome's glorious visions of huge vessels being launched (*MG* 22), the narrator's choice of qualifiers indicates some inner recoil. The chiasmic construction brings to the fore the unusual combination "ruined trees," which signals a moral reprobation sharpened by the evocation of lucrative trafficking, the ships becoming the objective correlative of the greed of commerce. The seemingly never-ending list of merchandise, which equates goods and human-beings, precludes Branwell's comforting belief that this spectacle is still "preferable" to Louis XIV's military *plans-reliefs* which he discovered while visiting the *Invalides* (*MG* 161-2). The somewhat naïve opposition between commercial enterprise and military imperialism, as well as the benign image of Canada as a "peaceable kingdom" underlying it (Omhovère 57), is of course unsustainable, and Urquhart makes a point of reminding her readers of the role of the Canadian timber industry in the production of the "pugnacious vessels of the [British] Admiralty" (*MG* 199).

The adjectives "pastoral" and "bucolic" evince a second set of remarks. Branwell the artist and his father the entrepreneur share the same ideal of agrarian landscape. In the latter's dream of draining the unproductive Irish bogs to transform them into "fields of golden grain" (*MG* 155), agricultural exploitation trumps aesthetic consideration, thus drawing attention to the political, economic, and imaginative assumptions the pastoral landscape embodies as a colonial trope.¹⁴ Those assumptions are evidenced in the author's exploration of the correlation between (bio)colonialism and environmental "vandalism" (Urquhart, "Confessions" 75) as the plot of the framed narrative proceeds through the unrelenting repetition of depredation. In the heyday of the timber industry, Canadian wood "re-emerge[s] in the shape of furniture in a multitude of Victorian parlours" (*MG* 199) until "not one serviceable tree remain[s] in the vicinity of the tributaries and rivers that flowed into the Great Lake" (*MG* 224-5). A generation later, orchards and poplar woods are cut down to make way for cash crop farming, barley having suddenly become "very profitable" on the American market (*MG* 238). By the time the central section draws to a close, the process of degradation that Jerome wishes he could film has taken place twice-over. The Woodman empire collapses in less than fifty years and Timber Island is abandoned after the second generation. Then it is the turn of the Ballagh Oisin, the hotel Branwell and his wife Mary bought on the mainland, to be buried in sand after intensive farming practices on their son's estate have depleted the soil (*MG* 238). A helpless witness to the slow destruction of the place she carved out for herself, Mary wastes away and dies, having been "depleted along with the soil" (*MG* 238). While the character's death from grief is another example of the way Urquhart draws upon the generic codes of romance, the image suggests a common vulnerability shared by human bodies and the places they inhabit.

Surrounded by the decaying remains of her father's timber empire, Annabelle decides to have her beloved sister-in-law buried on Timber Island and commissions a stone angel for her grave. Something more than the desire to make a memorial for Mary's death is at stake in this episode. The middle-aged woman strives to come to terms with both the irretrievability of the past – the impossibility of going back to the original

14. The tragic irony is that Irish bogs are the result of clear-cutting. "Ireland never looked the way we imagine Ireland looks. [...] It was in fact known as Derry, and 'derry' means 'oak' in Irish, and it was an entirely forested – hardwood forested – island. The first thing the British did when they got there was clear-cut, because they had already clear-cut England" (Urquhart, "Confessions" 75).

wilderness – and the indifference of a future “that would have nothing to do with her or her family” (MG 225). Burying Mary on Timber Island is a gesture of symbolic re-appropriation. As Robert Pogue Harrison underlines in his reflection on the conditions under which places come into being, “the surest way to take possession of a place and secure it as one’s own is to bury one’s dead in it” (354). The grave marker is indeed a sign which stands for what it stands in: the ground of burial. The deictic in phrases such as “here lies,” “*ci-gît*,” is “an indicator that appropriates the ground of indication” (Pogue Harrison 352) and thus contributes to the founding power of the marking. For Annabelle, the grave provides the “empty, changed world of the island” (MG 226) with a center, once again transforming space into place, albeit precariously. The forward-looking impetus of progress carries with it the promise of oblivion which gets fulfilled in the twentieth-century frame narrative. When Jerome discovers the tombstone during his retreat on Timber Island, its meaning is eclipsed by the aesthetic musings of the artist on his newest project (MG 21).

There is, therefore, something slightly jarring in the young land-artist’s glib enthusiasm (while reading the historical geographer’s notebooks about Timber Island) about “hav[ing] it all reconstructed, [...] hav[ing] it come to life, or come back to life” (MG 326). Such a statement ignores that “any construction is shadowed by the oblivion it is erected against” (Callahan 154). It also fails to recognize what underpins such a reconstruction. Whether it be mapping the remains of the colonial past (MG 38) or reconstructing the history of Prince Edward County through the lens of his family’s story, Andrew’s involvement with memorial geography stems from what he deems a “dynastic necessity” (MG 77). The interpolated narrative, which re-constructs the story of the woman who was buried on Timber Island, might be read as an attempt to re-inscribe the deictic, both the repetition of Annabelle’s compensatory gesture and the recognition of a debt which cannot be redeemed. Andrew’s sense of place, therefore, cannot be dissociated from the inherited responsibility which besets him. Here lies the difference between the characters in the novel. For Andrew, just like for Sylvia, “in certain landscapes, [...] all you can see are ruins, all you can feel is the past, your own ancestry or that of someone else” (MG 117). Place is always perceived as a “memorial of times past” (Tuan 179). Jerome’s aesthetic endeavours lead him, on the contrary, to think of place as “time made visible” (Tuan 179).

In Place, Memory, Dis-Placement

The chapter introducing the young artist’s character traces the origin of his involvement with land art to a painful realization when revisiting the place where he built tree houses with his father as a child. The journey is prompted by images, the vividness of which demonstrates that memory is “place-supported” (Casey 187). Because of the materiality of the physical location, “the tree near a dirty stream” (MG 14), memories of the “loose board knocking against a branch,” of the large nails used in the tree house’s construction, and of his father’s smile are inscribed in the landscape; conversely, the remembered has “incorporate[d] place into its own content” (Casey 184). Hence the character’s anguish at discovering that a housing development has replaced the vacant land, the tree, and the stream: “There was simply no way to place even the few scraps of memory he had retained” (MG 14). The alteration of the terrain causes a harrowing disorientation since the young man no longer recognizes the remembered place and

only sees a meaningless site “indifferent to what might occupy it” (Casey 185).¹⁵ The destruction of the physical locale seems to erode the preservative power of place, its ability to hold and contain the remembered. What is threatened is the very possibility of finding “points of attachment onto which to hang one’s memories, [...] to retrieve them” (Casey 186). In the installation inspired by this experience, Jerome attempts to “rebuild” and give shape to his childhood memories of the tree-house (*MG* 14). Both the choice of using discarded material, such as torn plastic and broken objects, and the decision to construct “temporary and incomplete structures” (*MG* 14) testify to the artist’s desire to eschew memorialization to better comment on the precarious memorability of abandoned places.

Jerome’s later projects seem to veer away from the reflection on the memory of place and towards the “idea of nature’s memory” (*MG* 19). The young man sees himself as a “chronicler” who “record[s]” and “document[s]” the evidence of natural degradation: “peeling paint, worn surfaces, sun bleaching, rust, rot, the effects of prolonged moisture, as well as [...] the larger shifts of erosion and weather and season” (*MG* 11-2). While the choice of verbs used to describe the artist at work minimizes the difference between the historical geographer’s task and the land artist’s projects, there is a reversal of perspective. Andrew, who maps history, both literally and figuratively (Callahan 151), is interested in the spatialization of time. Jerome is intrigued by the way the metamorphosing process of decay temporizes space. That he should be fascinated by Robert Smithson’s work is therefore unsurprising. Standing at the edge of Timber Island and looking at the shapes created by ice on the surface of the river, the young artist muses about Smithson’s *Map of Broken Glass*, a temporary installation composed of “pieces of glass [...] heaped [...] into a haphazard shape” (*MG* 18). Despite its title, the piece “counter[s] the symbolic contract provided by a map” by denying the viewer “perception of pattern over time or repeatability of perception” (Callahan 139). What matters is less some hypothetical referentiality – Smithson came to “believe the glass structure [...] was shaped like the drowned continent of Atlantis” (*MG* 18) – than the play of transient light on and through glass when “the structure [...] leap[s] into [...] vitality” and becomes an event marked by mutability and instability (*MG* 18).

Like Smithson’s, Jerome’s aesthetic exploration of the ideas of time in space, decay and renewal, is informed by his interest in “built things going back to nature,” in “germination” (106-7). The inspiration for the work which establishes the young artist’s reputation thus comes during a series of walks through Ontario’s derelict rural landscape:

He began to think of fences as situations rather than structures. Like an act of God or a political uprising, they seemed to him to mark the boundaries of events rather than territories. And like events, he felt that these fences had come into being as a result of a great deal of energy, flourishing on the edges of labor for a few hard decades, then collapsing onto a ground whose only crop now was an acre of windblown weeds. (*MG* 17)

The passage hinges on substitutions. The idea of structure – fences as constructed objects – gives way to that of situation, which insists on their relative position in space and time. In the same way, fences are no longer perceived as enclosures, “the very mark of

15. I borrow this understanding of the opposition between site and place from Edward Casey’s explanation of the Aristotelian definition of place as *periechon*, “literally ‘a having’ or ‘holding around’” (186). Casey further argues that “it is the stabilizing persistence of place as a container of experiences that contributes so powerfully to its intrinsic memorability” (186).

property” (Ashcroft 163), but as manifestations of time taking place. It is telling that, whereas Sylvia and Andrew would see in them “the evidence of the behaviour of [their] forefathers” (MG 96), Jerome’s vision dissociates fences from human industriousness: they are no longer the product of labour but what delineates its location, which does not deny human intervention but questions the crisp distinction between imprinting culture and imprinted nature. “Ruined fences” (MG 47) therefore do not merely occupy abandoned waste lands; they are a liminal zone (“edges”) of adaptation and transition.

Jerome’s *Fence Lines* is a multi-media work of art which combines black and white photographs and a three-dimensional installation: six lines made out of “boulders and fence wire, branches and decaying rails” which “reconstruct the frail, disappearing remnants of the fences” (MG 17). The relationship between the art object and the actual, physical location it stands for does not obey the logic of mimetic representation. It is reminiscent of the dialectic “site/nonsite” theorized by Smithson. The installation in the gallery, the “nonsite,” is an abstraction of the locale outside the gallery, the “site,” insofar as it transforms the artist’s experience of following decaying fence lines into a three-dimensional logical picture. Even though there is no hierarchical relation between the two, the “nonsite” always remains a “non-sight” (Tiberghien 116). The pictures and the organic materials collected on location refer the viewers back to the fence lines while serving as a reminder of their finite life span. The body of objects in the art gallery temporarily stalls the process of degradation and brings decay to a form of temporary stasis appropriate to an art exhibition, but nature continues to consume and disintegrate the locale. Time and weather decompose the work of art at the very moment when the artist offers it to the public’s gaze. Because “site” and “nonsite” are mutually dependent, it comes into being through this discrepancy, this dis-location (Tiberghien 236). Dislocation, therefore, is not synonymous with an absence of place. On the contrary, “[t]he work of art constructs its place by displacing a site” (Didi-Huberman 36, my translation), a paradoxical place, displaced and anachronistic, which the viewer is invited to invest and inhabit, however briefly.

While Jerome refuses to give the viewers the comfort of “lyrical” explanations of his work (MG 17), the text warns the reader of the possibility of misinterpretation. Despite the success of the exhibit – the artist sells some of his pictures to private and public collections – “[t]he sense of loss that he felt in the face of decay, of disappearance [goes] unnoticed, uncommented upon by the critics” (MG 18). Urquhart’s novel is informed by the painful awareness that there are very few “enduring places,” and that “most monuments cannot survive the decay of their cultural matrix” (Tuan 164). Compounded with the author’s anxious fascination with ruins, this may explain the somewhat *fin de siècle* atmosphere of a novel where one of the protagonists considers herself “part of [a] vanishing species with [her] pioneer ancestors and a [...] focus that drifted to the past” (MG 128). As harrowing as the question “*is there no place left?*” is (16, italics in the text), Urquhart’s characters never indulge in bemoaning regrets about the erosion of an authentic, rooted sense of place and modernity’s “creeping placelessness” (Cresswell 44). Underlying Sylvia and Jerome’s conversations, the latter’s land art projects, and Andrew’s family story, is the recognition that inhabiting is no longer synonymous with dwelling. Because such a “dis-location” upsets traditional definitions of place, Jean-Marc Besse argues, it calls for “new aesthetic and intellectual categories” to be apprehended (131, my translation). *A Map of Glass* does not purport to formulate

these categories, but may be read as an open-ended reflection on how “ruins and vacancies” entice us to re-examine what it means to be in place.

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