Away: the sense of place and the voices of the self

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1 Jane Urquhart's fiction bears witness to a passionate relationship to weather and landscape. The Canadian poet, short story writer and novelist was deeply influenced by the wilderness environment of Little Long Lac, the small mining town near Geraldtown Ont., where she was born and spent her early childhood. In a little girl's perception of reality every minute detail is meaningful, indeed as the Canadian writer puts it:

'It is important to recapture that sense of knowing where the piles of sticks were in the backyard, and how the garden grew and looked, and what the bark of the tree was like.'

Yet, at the age of six, Urquhart had to move to Toronto. Her recollections from a land of lakes and forests were then to blend in with the "wordworlds" of her favourite books. The discovery of European literature was to exert a lasting influence on her psyche, one book in particular - *Wuthering Heights* - was nothing short of a revelation. Any sense of the limitations of the self in an urban environment was soon to be transcended by the compendia of mental images conjured up by the Yorkshire moors through the words of Emily Brontë:

'I've carried the moors inside my head ever since I read *Wuthering Heights* as a kid. I began writing a series of poems about all the female Brontës and found myself drawn more and more to Emily, probably because she was attached to the landscape.'

2 Needless to say the powers of the words had to be put to the test of reality. Jane Urquhart did go to Yorkshire, and the result was a novel: *Changing Heaven*, in which, to quote Eudora Welty, she felicitously managed "to make a dot on the map come passionately alive".

3 Travelling to shed light on a part of oneself which is already present somewhere, deep buried in the silent mind, is a pattern which Urquhart inaugurated at an early stage of her fiction-writing. In her 1987 preface to *Storm Glass*, her only short story collection so
far, Urquhart insisted on her attraction to places which she knew very little and on the
decisive influence of the concept of "otherness" in her narratives:

It seems to me now that the word "other" is important in that it was an attraction
to the mysterious "other" that started me writing short fiction in the first place. 5

The mysterious other probably refers as much to the subjective innerness as it does to the
miscellaneous sights and landscapes so vividly called up in Urquhart's fictions. For all her
allusions to the practicalities of travelling, the Canadian writer is also keen on armchair
travel. For, when all is said and done:

Writing fiction can be, you see the most satisfying of armchair travel 6,
which is yet another way of saying that writing is a peripatetic experience as real and
concrete to the mind as the more tangible excursions from Canada to Europe and back.

What is also at stake is the "self" itself. Indeed, through a change in place, it is the lack of
fixity of the "self" that is highlighted. The fact that the "self" is an ongoing event is made
plain enough through a constant exchange between the natural and cultural
configurations that we lump together under the term "place"; the fact of travelling
brings this aspect to the fore. A journey, because it involves changing one's habitual
environment, correlative implies forming new responses. Prompted by unfamiliar
surroundings the traveller's consciousness is led to construct other relations with the
outside world. We shall argue that in Urquhart's case, discovering new places is tightly
linked with the mnemonic activity of calling up snippets of texts or with the hermeneutic
process of reading up on local lore and legends, hitherto unknown and which prove to be
relevant to the present, unwonted situation. In other words, through the experience of
travelling the never completed, ever changing "self" is immersed in novel spaces while
recollecting literary pictures or exploring new texts. Journeying is then a textual
adventure almost as much as it is a spatial one.

Through writing fiction, the "implied author" builds up a relationship with a narrator or
some selected protagonists. Such a dialogic exchange is bound to become even more
forceful when the story relates a space shift, accompanied by a culture shock induced by
unfamiliar locations. Indeed some characters are then liable to act as relays or
intermediaries between the writer's disorientated "self" and the new environment. In
Urquhart's narratives, the function performed by local voices is essential as it stimulates
the writer's imagination and helps her internalize an experience which, ultimately,
widens the horizons of the "self". The blurred contours of the author's persona are
rendered even more fuzzy on account of the journey which makes for mutability,
changeability, or to quote Urquhart: "a feeling of vertigo... like Peter Pan's conquered
pirate ship careering through the sky" 7.

Escaping one's usual surroundings does not necessarily entail a release from the pains
and tensions of daily life since, as Urquhart's first person narrator puts it in John's cottage:
Sometimes what you are running away from and what you find when you stop
running and arrive somewhere else are almost the same thing - variations on a
ghostly theme 8.

Yet, there are occasionally more fruitful and fortunate experiences, away from home,
during which an event, quite unexpectedly becomes, to borrow Urquhart's phrase, "a
positive print of a shadowy negative in the mind". Both John's Cottage and Italian Postcards,
each in their own peculiar way, demonstrate that a trip may act - to take up the above-
mentioned photographic metaphor - as a developer. In the first story, a short stay in
Yorkshire helps bring about the dissolution into space of a broken, fragmented self. In
Italian Postcards, sojourning in an Assisi convent precipitates an emotional earthquake, thus causing a hidden or plainly ignored side of the "self" to erupt violently.

The chain of the events pictured in both John's Cottage and Italian Postcards can be broken down into a fairly straightforward diegetic pattern. In each case, the young heroine flies to Europe for a vacation. In John's Cottage the first-person narrator endeavours to run away from a futureless love affair with one "Canadian John". On arriving in Yorkshire, probably in the vicinity of Haworth, she rents a cottage that had previously been occupied by "one Yorkshire John": a Peter Panesque figure who lived in close harmony with the moors and the winds. In Italian Postcards, the second narrative, Clara is first seen as a child nursing a cold in her bedroom while looking at Italian postcards collected by her mother, then, there is a leap ahead in time, and without transition, Clara as an adult, accompanied by her husband, spends a short break in Europe. While perusing the story of Santa Chiara's unrequited love for St Francis, Clara indulges in a flitting passion for a monk who remains out of reach. In both stories, the trip to Europe stretches the limitations of the self.

We shall see first how, prior to the journey, the "self" is defined either through allusions to void and emptiness or through some barely expressible hankering after a definitive, cataclysmic change. Then, once the character has moved away, the voices of the "self" are intermingled with the memories treasured in written texts, or spread about by word-of-mouth tales. References to landscapes help reveal a sea-change in the protagonist who is staying abroad, as we shall then try to show. Eventually, whether the heroine returns to Canada as in Italian Postcards or stays in Europe as in John's Cottage, the fact of being away, or of having been away, underscores the openness and undefinedness of the many-faceted, elusive self.

Empty homes and the hankering Self

In both John's Cottage and Italian Postcards, the period previous to the journey is, as it were, a stasis marked by powerlessness and paralysis. In this respect, references to the spatial background are significant in that they point to the benumbed, prostrate state of a "self", still very much at the shadowy negative stage.

There is first a complete absence of specific geographic location. Anonymity prevails. The woman-narrator in John's Cottage lives somewhere on the North American continent, in a modern country with sophisticated high technology and the latest amenities: a country where central heating abounds and where fires are lit for decorative purposes at night.

The urban environment with its high rise flats, poured concrete and gigantic sheets of plate glass, could be found anywhere. Similarly, the view from Clara's bedroom does not provide any clues as to a possible location which might personalize the scenes of her childhood:

Outside the window a small black garden and some winter city or another. It does not really matter which.

Home lacks in individuality and is devoid of any idiosyncratic touches. For the homodiegetic narrator in John's Cottage, home is a succession of partitioned rooms, in which over the years, she has lived invariably cut off, sealed off even, from her already married lover, whose other life she knows virtually nothing about. The adulterous couple...
only meet occasionally for furtive trysts in hotel rooms. Places which are smooth and featureless, totally deprived of memories:

all poured concrete and mirrors and plate-glass windows that looked out on more poured concrete.\(^{11}\)

Once, a bird flew into the gigantic plate of glass of the hotel building so that, ever after, curtains were to be pulled as if any incidents which might later on be construed as a reminiscence were to be banished, in an affair that had to remain featureless: a blank. Love scenes are played out stealthily and it is as though John the lover wanted to go through with them and cancel them out almost simultaneously:

He made me come to him in those grey neutral rooms he rented. He locked me into them and pushed me out of them. He covered himself with me later and then he showered me off.\(^{12}\)

In *Italian Postcards*, home is neat and tidy but also lacklustre and somewhat dull. The little girl's sick room is monochromatic: "Soft grey wallpaper with sprays of pink apple blossoms...pink dressing-table...two or three pink pillows propping her up" and when the wallpaper is ultimately removed by an Italian exile, sick with nostalgia for his home country, it is replaced by "rigid geometric designs". Paradoxically enough, it is the improbable Italian landscapes in crude technicolors that take on the vividness of reality and set the child day-dreaming:

And then the postcards; turquoise, fuchsia, lime green - improbable colours placed all over the white spread...as she tries to imagine her mother walking through such passionate surroundings.\(^{13}\)

In both narratives, home, which is in fact a misnomer, appears to be an extension of the "self" that it mirrors and somehow reifies. In *John's Cottage*, the attention paid by the narrator to trifle, insignificant details, testifies to her keen sense of estrangement and loneliness. The emphasis is laid on concrete, mundane observations. The décor is reminiscent of Beckett's world, in which the cumbersome materiality of objects seems to exclude the possibility of any human influence:

I knew every detail of the rooms I lived in; the cracked paint around the windows, the stains on the carpets, that bit in the corner where the paper was beginning to peel.\(^{14}\)

In *Italian Postcards* home is reduced to the nondescript sickroom of the girl who is kept away from school. It is redolent of the mustard concoction which the girl must allow her mother to put over her chest. It is neat and orderly, filled with the humdrum noises of household duties. It is a stultifying place that is deprived of any exterior vistas. The only solace that can be brought to the girl is the collection of postcards that summon up improbable, fairy-tale like landscapes.

Home fosters and exacerbates an urge to break down walls and partitions in *John's Cottage* or a desire to escape into the iconographically represented referential world of bright Mediterranean sceneries in *Italian Postcards*.

In *John's Cottage*, the woman-narrator enters into a dialogic exchange with the lines of *Peter Pan* which, by threading in and out of her sealed-off world, obliterate any tangible barriers between the inside and the outside. The window becomes the emblematic aperture through which the fairy shadow of John, the lover, might slip in or out according to his fancy. Unfortunately if the woman-narrator has stolen John's shadow,
the latter cannot be bothered to have it sewn back on, which further compounds the heroine’s sense of lonesomeness:

I wasn’t sure that his shadow wasn’t my own, that I hadn’t sewn it onto the toes of the wrong body by mistake.15

In Italian Postcards, the music of the names of foreign places arouses the girl’s imagination. Then, as the mustard plaster starts biting into the flesh, Clara, who is all wrapped up in her contemplation of the postcards, is suddenly mesmerized by the expression of excruciating pains on the faces of the Pompeiians, at the very moment when disaster is about to strike:

In the postcards Pompeii is represented, horrifyingly, fascinatingly, by the inhabitants themselves, frozen in such attitudes of absolute terror or complete despair that they teach the child everything she needs to know about heartbreak and disaster.16

In both stories, home is represented as neither fulfilling nor fully happy, yet it is also the initial place for an experience, a "negative", as it were, that may, or may not, turn into a positive print. In actual fact, as might be expected, both stories, each in their own way, are to provide the reader with positive prints.

"Away" and the polyphonic Self

Both John's cottage and Italian Postcards picture a journey to Europe that brings about a subjective sea change. The sceneries which are described give an outer, tangible shape to the fleeting forms of the mindscape and, simultaneously, the vistas of the geographic world are a visual, graphic correlative to the "wordworld" of Urquhart's literary landscapes. In John's Cottage, the echoes and voices from the fairy tale blur the boundaries between inwardness and outwardness and introduce a subtle dialectics of presence and absence. In Italian Postcards, references to the hagiography of Santa Chiara of Assisi brings out a paroxystic experience of being separated from the self.

- "I" and the fairy tale

By travelling to Yorkshire, the narrator of John's Cottage breaks the vicious circle in which she is trapped. Because she could not keep John, her Canadian lover with her, she was reduced to stealing his shadow. Yet, unlike Peter Pan, John did not attempt to retrieve his shadowy double by slipping into the narrator's room. In fact, the shadow died out wherever the young woman happened to land up in the course of her peregrinations from one destination to another:

You see, John's shadow was always in my luggage, and no matter how far I ran or where I ended up, that shadow ended up there too.17

Her trip to Yorkshire proves to be decisive in that it allows her to inhabit a cottage that is haunted by a presence, that of its former occupant: another John, a good lad, a sort of gypsy, described as a "good mate" by the local menfolk and as something of a rascal by the ladies. This second John who has become a legend with the garrulous Yorkshire villagers will prove a fellow companion for the narrator. Indeed, unlike his Canadian counterpart, he is not shown as a mere elusive shadow but as a vivid character who bestows colours and contents upon seemingly empty places:

...I looked directly into the face of the moon which was framed directly, dead centre, in the single pane of glass. It was a male face startling and powerful...A face
filled with all the oddly familiar unfamiliarity of someone you are going to get to know very well, very soon."

"John of the Open Windows" turns out to be the positive print of his Canadian namesake: "John of the Neutral Rooms", destined to remain at the photographic negative stage! In the case of John the Canadian, presence is absence or "unfamiliar familiarity". Indeed, the latter goes to great lengths to rub out any signs of tangible presence. He insists on obliterating, cancelling out any memories. He erects barriers, compartmentalizes time and likewise partitions off places. The part of his life the narrator belongs to must remain steeped in oblivion, void and nothingness: a blank... Conversely, although "John of the Open Windows" has moved away towards some unknown destination, he still fills the cottage; his absence is presence: "familiar unfamiliarity". The cottage registers the life of the elements which is undistinguishable from John's cosmic vitality. Windows rattle when winds pick up, the rain flows in and, at night, the moonlight floods in through the attic windows. For Yorkshire people the weather permeates every moment of life and they often talk about it in terms of its absence indoors. In John's cottage any dichotomy between indoors and outdoors is abolished since waterfalls are let in, so much so, that on one occasion, as the villagers like to recall, the dilapidated house was turned into a small scale whirlpool:

"that river came right down the stairs and another one in the kitchen door at the back and out by the door at the front."  

The narrator's sojourn within the cottage is conducive to an ecstatic experience, in other words to a release from the limits of the self. The cottage's threshold and window sills emblematize the fusion between the boundless expanses of the moorland and the flimsy shell of the secluded dwelling. Memories of tales and legends freely move in and out of the heroine's mind much in the same way as the draughts eddy in through the cracks and slits of the age-old country house:

As I climbed the narrow staircase I remembered from childhood all the things that could possibly sneak into your bedroom at night; Peter Pan and Tinkerbell and Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy and Guardian Angels and the Lord... 

Not only is the cottage open to the changing weathers but it seems to be carried away by the twirl and swirl of the storms until it somehow appears to be careering through Neverland. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, the stay within the isolated Yorkshire cottage may be interpreted both as a return to the innermost sensations and early recollections called up by childhood readings and as a leap forward into boundless spaces precluding barriers and limitations.

At the end of John's Cottage, the shadow of the ever-absent, real lover is eclipsed by the all-pervading idea of the Yorkshire "faery lover". Thanks to this impish, playful character, "as unreal and as real as a memorized fairy tale", the partitions of the "self" are temporarily transcended. "John of the Open Windows" acts as a myth of presence, a presence which batters down the limits of the isolated individual and fills up cosmic spaces. Quite significantly, in the very last lines, the long-estranged "I" of the woman-narrator finally coalesces with "the idea of John" - the Yorkshire sprite - thus allowing the reader to join in their cosmic ballet:

Everywhere there is weather now, it colours all the rooms as the idea and I sleep in the lavender bed...and then there are the elements that belong to us...Then birdsong, the bright eyes of a wild animal gaining entrance to your life...
Clara and Chiara: the specular game

34 As Clara reads *The Little Flowers of Santa Chiara* during her stay in Assisi, she becomes increasingly wrapped up and entangled in the Saint’s martyrdom. From that point onwards, Italy ceases to be a foreign location with improbable colours and exotic names. Through a dialogic process, the words couched in the Saint’s confessions echo in the heroine’s mind. They touch off a paroxystic experience in which the "self" has to come to terms with a part of itself which had until then been ignored, or which had probably remained below the level of consciousness.

35 As a woman, Clara is first confronted with a religion which she feels excluded from:

> In fact, with the exception of the basilica with its electrified confessionals and famous frescos, she has not dared to open the door of any church in town. They are spaces that are closed to her and she knows it.

36 In the convent, the only monk she and her husband come across remains distant and aloof as if he did not exactly belong to this world:

> Clara wonders if the priest, who is working in front of her, has also passed into another life, ... Whether he lives a sort of Through the Looking Glass existence.

37 All her attempts to catch his attention and make him acknowledge her presence fail. She is thus led to experience vicariously the ordeals undergone by Chiara, whose passion for Francis was doomed to remain unrequited on account of the vows which the Saint had pronounced:

> Beware of the poison of familiarity with women, he had told his fellow friars.

38 In a way, *Italian Postcards* illustrates the "phenomenology of reading" expounded by Iser. Clara is shown in the process of bringing to life, or of "realising" the intertext: Chiara's supposed *Little Flowers* (printed in italics), according to her own individual disposition. The passages which Clara reads and quotes extensively only take on meaning in the presence of the monk who remains out of reach. Thus, there is a constant counterpoint between Chiara's hopeless passion:

> 'I think she was a very unhappy woman. She kept on wanting to see Francis and he kept not wanting her. The poor girl... she was in love with him, I expect. He was probably God to her...'

39 and the heroine's own experience of exclusion which is all the more unbearable as it does not even seem to be premeditated:

> Rejection without object, without malice, a kind of healing rejection; one that causes a cleansing ache.

40 As the story unfolds, Clara's sense of estrangement becomes more and more acute as indeed in the process of reading and rereading the narrative of Chiara's sorry plight, the contemporary heroine keeps rearranging and reorganizing her own memories into new patterns:

> In the middle of her seventh afternoon in the rose garden, after she has finished reading a chapter entitled 'The Canticle of the Creatures' (which she practically knows now by heart) , Clara decides that her heart is permanently broken. How long, she wonders, has it been this way?

41 What *Italian Postcards* shows is Clara's own response to what Iser would call the 'unwritten text' of *The Little Flowers of Santa Chiara*, the part which "stimulates the reader's creative participation". Here, however, more than merely creative participation, it is a long-denied,
and hitherto unacknowledged dimension of the "self" which the dialogic relation to the
intertext brings up to the surface.

Chiara's hagiography stresses the pain and humiliation, physical mortification and moral
hardships willfully endured in the name of love, be it sacred or profane as the borderline
between the two is a moot point. By putting the emphasis upon sorrow and grief – *dolore* –
the Roman Catholic tradition of hagiology provides the heroine with a paradigm of
feminine endurance and fortitude. Chiara is seen as an emblem, an icon. The epiphanic
moment in the story occurs precisely when it dawns upon Clara that the torments which
she has been reading about are also part and parcel of her own experience, when at last
she is able to own up to the fact that she has till then always denied expression to an
essential part of her innermost self:

This is not a new disease, she knows suddenly. It's been there for a long, long time;
a handicap she had managed to live with somehow, by completely ignoring it.31

Away: the landscapes and the self

Landscapes have been described as an obsession in Urquhart's fiction writing. They are
more than a backdrop to the narratives, they are often the way stories begin in the
writer's imagination. Conversely, real landscapes are never to be the same again once the
story teller has completed her narrative. Coming to grips with landscapes then implies
both the allure to convey a unique visual sensation through the medium of language
and ultimately an incredible sense of loss once the literary project has been achieved. Of
her long-standing passion for the Brontë's sceneries Urquhart said:

In a way you finish with it by writing a novel. I moved away from the Yorkshire
moors after finishing *Changing Heaven*.32

Both titles *John's Cottage* and *Italian Postcards* evoke some kind of spatial or geographic
references. The first one is in fact a direct allusion to the ultimate destination of the
narrator's journey when "John's cottage" will be intrinsically linked to "the cottage's
John" (p. 112), the second by contrast, designates the starting point of a journey since the
unlikely colours on the postcards turn out to be real after all. With Urquhart the literary
evocation of stays in Europe is imbued with the overwhelming presence of landscapes
that either contribute to, and mirror, the expansion of the self or spark off the process of
fragmentation and eruption of the inner layers of consciousness.

In *John's Cottage*, landscapes are sharply divided up into two distinctive areas: the
moorlands above and the valley down below. Those two contrasted geographic locations
are marked off by climatic changes: whereas the winter snow is still shining on the hill
tops, spring flowers can already be seen in the valley. Despite variations in the weather
and colours, moorland and valley nevertheless do not duplicate the dichotomy between
openness and enclosure which the narrator brings out when she calls up the Canadian
cityscape. Valley and moorland do not so much suggest an opposition between boundless
space and absence of spaces as they conjure up a different sense of liberty amidst equally
attractive stretches of landscape:

The moors were composed of great swaths of ling, heather and bilberry and the
colours there were earthy charcoals, sepias and umbers. The valley was a deep, lush
green.33

The climactic episode in the short story is induced by the heroine's unexpected discovery
of one element of the landscape: a "bit of architecture" which the narrator identifies as
symbolical of the new John, the Yorkshire John, who in fact stands for her new life, her renascence, as it were, in the land of moors and erratic storms:

One day when I’d wandered farther than usual down the length of the valley I came across a bit of architecture that I decided was the very essence of John. 

47 Quite significantly, the isolated construction is a wall which, instead of erecting a barrier between outwardness and inwardness, between sky and earth or between water and moorland, epitomizes the free harmonious exchanges between the natural elements. The roof has long since vanished, a rivulet of pure, fresh waters flows amidst its rockery and the holes in the wall have never been repaired. Unlike the huge plate glass sheets of the Canadian skyscrapers, they allow the free passage of wind, birds and human creatures, thus obliterating any obstruction between outside and inside:

Below all that sky row after row of glassless windows - the true wind-holes of old.

48 Not only does the wall symbolize a fusion, an osmosis between the inside - "the confused garden of the interior" - and the outside - "the rest of the world" - but it also reverberates and modulates the alternating wails and howls of the winds, thereby turning their wild, anarchic disorder into a cosmic symphony. Sounds ultimately become attuned to colours through, as it were, some form of synaesthesia that seems to do away with any barriers under whatever forms and shapes:

And then there are the elements that belong to us, song of wind, tint of moonlight until morning.

49 In the second narrative, Clara’s journey to Assisi has been prepared in a way by childhood recollections. Italy was to be associated with various sensations: the gaudy colours of postcards depicting virtually surreal sceneries, the strange consonances of "cumbersome words such as basilica, portcullis, Etruscan and Vesuvius", oddly mingled with the pungent odour of the mustard concoctions biting into the skin. As it turns out, the trip to Italy, that takes place much later in the heroine’s life, acts as a catalyst which churns up those long-forgotten emotions. Indeed Italy is pictured as an odd combination of conflicting realities. The country is seething with vitality whereas death and the macabre are omnipresent; this paradox is aptly encapsulated through Donne’s oxymorons in which passion and death, fertility and sterility violently clash:

Go and light a tomb at night
Get with child a mandrake root.

50 In the turmoil of her contradictory feelings, the heroine quotes Donne and thinks about Blake:

Clara is thinking Blake...in Italy of all places.

51 In fact, the stay at the wrongly named Hotel Oasie will prove anything but a period of rest, a non secular vacation with all the moral hardships that are part and parcel of a mystic retreat, and in Clara’s case nothing short of a shock and trauma.

52 The silence of the convent is the first characteristic feature of the new Italian surroundings. By contrast, the complete absence of noise only contributes to exacerbate the subdued, muted inner voices which scream inside and would cause a general havoc if they were to be let out:

Screaming, she thinks now, as she opens door after door of Hotel Oasie, would be practically a catastrophe in these echoing marble halls.

53 The roses in the cloister, to which the monastic gardener lovingly devotes all his care and attention, oblivious of Clara’s human presence nearby, further compounds the heroine’s
deep-seated sense of solitude. Left to her own thoughts, Clara/Chiara at this stage, increasingly yields to a diffuse sinking feeling:

[The monk] is working close enough now that their shadows almost touch. A vague sadness stirs Clara's heart, stops, then moves again.\(^{40}\)

which mentally she brings herself to formulate, the Italian landscape serving as an objective correlative for long-unacknowledged misery and discomfort:

A vague sadness stirs near Clara's heart, stops, then moves again. Restless lava shifting somewhere in the centre of a mountain.\(^{41}\)

Under Giotto's skies, quelled impulses take on more vivid colours and, little by little, assert their presence. Clara indulges in a fleeting passion for the unattainable priest. Her desire feeds on the impossibility of ever reaching him, probably because such hopeless hankering after a presence that is denied is commensurate with her own sense of loss. The mediaeval imagery of the inaccessible Lady in her secret garden is reversed as, here, it is man, the monk, who, though ever-present, remains irrevocably unattainable. *Italian Postcards* expresses languishing, sensuous passion imbued with mysticism, from a deliberately feminine standpoint. If may be reminiscent of *The Song of Solomon* in its overt sensuality and erotic undertones, yet here it is man who is the object of desire.

In *Italian Postcards*, Jane Urquhart captures the elusive instant when stifled feelings finally erupt, just before being crushed back into the inner recesses of the mind. The Italian landscape, notably the Vesuvius, is instrumental in actuating such sudden surge of self-awareness.

Symbolically, it is in the middle of the seventh day spent in the Assisi convent that the heroine's emotional unrest reaches its acme, thereby releasing pent-up tensions and frustrations. This very intimate moment when Clara finds herself suddenly faced up to her own personal history is metaphorically rendered through images of molten lava surging up from the earth's bowels. After being first cherished and glorified for their own sake, the moral pains, metonymically evoked through allusions to the lashing and mortifications of the saints and martyrs:

Now she examines the wound and it burns in the centre of her chest...Now the pain of it moves into her whole body; past the pulse at her wrists, down the fronts of her thighs, up into her throat.\(^{42}\)

are then rooted out from the inner self to coalesce with the Italian scenery. This projection of innermost passions out onto the landscape account for the unique poignancy of the Italian natural colours, which Giotto's impasto captured with such force, especially the dark blue of his skies and his inimitable olive green. It is precisely at the very moment when the heroine is just about to let out the scream carrying all the pathos of her life experience that it dawns on her that never ever will she bring herself to commit that act of transgression. Urquhart seizes the liminal instant when what could have resulted in a cathartic scream is finally held back. This precise moment is also the starting point of the writing process, since the repressed scream is to dissolve into meaning. Thus Urquhart pinpoints clearly how much the idea of a story is born through a passionate interchange with the landscape.
Away and the "Other" beside he Self

The Celtic concept of "awayness", in relation to the "self", has been widely explored in Urquhart's 1994 novel, entitled Away, in which the novelist sets out to relate the experience of Irish immigrants bound for Canada. The writer explains the idea of awayness, steeped in legends and folklore with the following words:

I'm very curious about the concept that the Irish have of a person who is Away - someone who has been touched by the supernatural world. When such a person returns to the cottage kitchen, that person is not really back. The Irish sometimes believe that if a certain person has been touched by the supernatural, that what you have in that cottage kitchen is a supernatural being who has been disguised as that individual.

In Italian Postcards and John's Cottage the notion of "awayness" is already hinted at, if only tentatively, to evoke both the fact of moving away and the idea of being separated from the "self" that results from it. The motif of the double, of the character split - which is seminal in Away, the novel, through the presence/absence of Mary-Moira - is suggested firstly through the dual figures of John of the Neutral Rooms and John of the Open Windows and secondly through Clara/Chiara.

The concept of "awayness" appears at an elementary, unsophisticated stage through the dialogic interchange between Clara's feelings and emotions and Chiara's biography. As Clara mentally reconstructs Chiara's hardships and sufferings, she blends in her own pains with the Saint's, thus defining a sort of in-between persona (or second self) that is neither Clara nor Chiara. By gradually shedding the extraneous layers of her social "self" in the process of reading Chiara's hagiography, Clara ends up probing into the more hurtful recesses of her being. In a sense, she reaches to the core of her own self, such as it appears to be at one particular moment of her life history. It is therefore the specular exchange with a feminine double which helps bring out into the open, if only for a flitting instant, the deep buried undercurrents of long-suppressed emotions; hence the volcano metaphor mentioned previously.

The heroine's final confrontation with the Saint, laid out in her glass catafalque in St Damien Church ends up being a scene of self recognition. The spectacle of the martyr's mouth, for ever frozen in an expression of intense pain, mirrors the heroine's silent acknowledgement of her sufferings. Just as the Saint never uttered any personal claims in her life of constant self-denial, just as she was never allowed to exchange a single word with Francis and was not even suffered to bid him farewell on his deathbed, so hundreds of years later Clara's scream is never fully expelled. It seems to erupt from beside the self:

She can actually see the sound waves that are moving in front of her.

and is both liberated and denied full expression at the same time:

She wonders if she has begun to shout...her brain begins its voyage back into the inside of her skull.

The Saint's open mouth therefore emblematizes a set of opposites which are expressed through oxymorons: a scream that is doomed to stay silent and the impulse of one single instant which is bound to remain unchanged for eternity:

The dead mouth is open, shouting pain silently up to the electricity...It is the heartbreaking that is durable, Clara thinks to herself, experiencing the shock of total recognition.
Before flying back to Canada, the young woman purchases a postcard depicting Chiara, then for the whole of the journey, keeps hugging close to her this mirror image of feminine hardships.

In John’s Cottage, there are two opposed and mutually contradictory characters: "the shadow of John" and "the idea of John", which in fact may be said to refer to the heroine’s very "self". The empty, ever-fleeing "shadow of John" points to the narrator’s incapacity to exceed the boundaries of her locked up, solipsist "self". Whenever she believes she is carrying her lover’s shadow alongside, it invariably turns out that the shadow might very well be nothing more than the empty contours of her own solitary self, stalking her:

…by the time I stepped off the plane in northern England I was so stunned, so absorbed that I wasn’t sure that this shadow wasn’t my own, that I hadn’t sewn it onto the toes of the wrong body by mistake.48

John’s shadow therefore underscores the negation of the imaginary realm, the impossibility of ever gaining access to a tantalizing Neverland:

Wendy and Peter began to have adventures, John and I shared no adventures.49

In Canada, it is as if the narrator’s "self" were irretrievably confined within the barriers of neutral rooms without any hope of crossing the window frame to merge into the changing heaven and the breezy weather. By contrast, the "idea of John" opens up spaces where the heroine, temporarily deserting her "social self", may move away and go off to the Fairy World, to which, deep down, she belongs. To that extent, "the cottage’s John" heralds the "faery lover" of Away with whom Moira, that is Mary’s "other self", is to stay despite the façade of a mundane life. The dual figure of John may then apply to the she-narrator. At first, the woman protagonist herself is the shadow which she alludes to:

He made me come to him in those grey neutral rooms he rented. He locked me into them and pushed me out of them. He covered himself with me and then he showered me off.50

A shadow who vainly endeavours to follow a partner and who, in the process, does nothing but fill up her void with absence. It takes a journey to Yorkshire for the heroine to enter the "Others’ world", peopled by the flying boys and fairies of her childhood reading, in a cottage where windows may be left open and where weather may occasionally be a presence indoors. At the end of John’s Cottage, the shadow has been replaced by a lively ever-present idea: the essence of John, which, by filling the landscape, gives substance to the isolated woman. What the story does not tell the reader is whether or not on returning to Canada after her sojourn in this Otherworld/Neverland the narratress would know where to look for the ghostly remnants of her former self, the empty shell that she had left behind.

Conclusion

Jane Urquhart is a visual artist for whom landscapes are an intimate experience of the inner self. She also confesses to having been a compulsive reader early in childhood, and a child who reads lives in a fictitious world that is much more real for him/her than the real one:

Reading as a child is also a very visual experience. A world is created in the reader’s mind.51
When she was still no more than a young girl, Jane Urquhart became obsessed with *Wuthering Heights*, a unique reader's experience which she has evoked in her novel *Changing Heaven*. Paradoxically enough, though she is Canadian, a country deeply marked by climatic contrasts, Urquhart's most striking experience of the weather and the elements has always taken place outside America, in Europe and more particularly in the Yorkshire moors:

> My experiences of the natural world and the elements have really taken place elsewhere than in Canada.  

So in a way, Urquhart's journeys to Europe can be said to have transmuted into a practical, sensory experience, a reality which was already a vivid, subjective landscape. Hence the image of the colour print of a photographic negative may aptly be used to describe Urquhart's discovery of Europe.

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**NOTES**

2. Ibid., p. 20.
8. Ibid., p. 102.
11. *John's Cottage*, p. 103.
15. Ibid, p. 104.
17. *John's Cottage*, p. 102.
19. Ibid., p. 111.
21. Ibid., p. 113.
23. *Italian Postcards*, p. 123
24. Ibid., p. 121.
25. Ibid., p. 118.
ABSTRACTS

A travers la totalité de sa production littéraire, Jane Urquhart traduit une même relation passionnée/passionnelle aux paysages. L’évocation des espaces naturels mêle le sens aigu du détail visuel aux réminiscences des lectures de l’enfance. Paradoxalement, pour cette habitante du Nouveau-Monde, c’est en Europe que l’échange avec les éléments trouve le plus de force. De l’aveu même de l’écrivain, "John’s Cottage" et "Italian Postcards", les deux nouvelles étudiées dans cet article, sont thématiquement proches. Il s’agit à chaque fois d’un voyage en Europe : Angleterre et Italie, au cours duquel une jeune femme se retrouve face à elle-même. Le paysage, que ce soient les étendues sauvages du Yorkshire ou le volcan du Vésuve, catalyse des pulsions longtemps ignorées, ou refoulées et provoque un tumulte intérieur profond qui ne trouve un exutoire que par le passage à l’écriture. Dans l’un et l’autre cas la confrontation avec un "ailleurs" géographique est indissociable d’une relation dialogique avec les voix d’une mémoire du Texte : "Peter Pan" ou "Les Petites Fleurs de Sainte Claire".