Mouvances Francophones

Volume 5, Issue-numéro 1 2020

Repentirs, Reprises, Remords, Ecart

Dir. Servanne Woodward

Conference report: Monumental Dust The Architecture of Jane Urquhart

Servanne Woodward
swoodwar@uwo.ca

DOI: 10.5206/mf.v5i1.10519

Monumental Dust: The Architecture of Jane Urquhart

Jane Urquhart talked to a full audience, considering the Corona virus context, in the evening of March 11, 2020, in the neo-gothic Conron Hall of University College, at the university of Western Ontario. The Arts and Humanity dean, Michael Milde, sent us a reminder that:

She is the author of eight internationally acclaimed novels, among them *The Whirlpool*, which received “Le prix du meilleur livre étranger” in France; *Away*, winner of the Trillium Award; *The Underpainter*, winner of the Governor General’s Award and a finalist for The Orange Prize in the UK; and *The Stone Carvers*, which was a finalist for The Giller Prize and the Governor General’s Award, and for Britain’s Booker Prize. She is the author of a collection of short fiction, and four books of poetry. Jane Urquhart has also written a biography of Lucy Maud Montgomery, and was editor of the most recent Penguin Book of Canadian Short Stories. Her work, published in many countries, has been translated into numerous foreign languages. She is a Chevalier dans l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France, and is an Officer of the Order of Canada. Jane is the current Western Writer-in-Residence and is an adjunct professor in the School of Creative Writing at the University of Toronto.

Her talk was entitled “Stretching the Word Canvas: How Visual Art Painted Itself Into My Novels”.¹ Drawn to the talk because of her French distinctions, and because I had seen *The Stone Carvers* displayed at Barnes and Nobles and Chapters all year, I learnt that the art that inspires her writing constitutes the “architecture where her characters evolve and interact” (in the answer she gave one of my colleagues). I took away the following analysis of her presentation that constitutes my report on her event.

*
* *

Her first slide is a Tintoretto. *El Lavoro* is a childhood reminiscence. A young daughter is brought to the Toronto Museum of arts and discovers a version of this large painting divided by square inch. The good people of Toronto are to buy a square inch of this grand architectural view until it can be brought home. Young Jane buys the eye of the dog, the only sign of life at the center of this great vacuous space with an overly busy graphic floor. Strange floor, orderly littered with organized curves in a room full of nothing. As a young girl, Jane collected the animus of this architectural piece, an eye over a “written” floor ready to turn his head and glance back at the visitors-intruders. Or is it a distracted Cerberus who neglects his gate-keeper duty. The painting was eventually purchased, exhibited, and then placed in holdings, in the basement of the museum, but it was brought back to life when the president of Italy came to Canada, and participated in a ceremony unveiling the Tintoretto in Toronto.

The next art piece inspired *The Stone Carvers*, and it is a large rural Ontario church decorated with German statues. This leads Urquhart to speculate on its “German” origin that must be local, rooted in Canada. Urquhart then shows a Medieval German Virgin from Germany, with long flowing hair like Magdalena and with a shirt of hair veiling her nude body — in other words, a new version of the Tintoretto furry dog. It is the way she visualizes the favorite statue of the stone carver, the one he can donate to the church only after he passes away. He misses his boy whom he wants to see back home. Meanwhile he is in his workshop, in another version of the space of *El Lavoro*, and his daughter comes in and wipes away the shavings from the head of a sculpture. Eventually, sculptors produce a lot of dust and shavings that may cover previous works. The carver’s daughter retrieves the statue from those fallen discarded fragments and resurrects it to its splendor with a swipe of her skirt.

¹ Event Listing: <http://www.events.westernu.ca/events/arts-humanities/2020-03/jane-urquhart.html>

The following slide shows the white monument dedicated to Vimy, a sort of phoenix with wings in the process of unfolding unevenly—all those boys who never came home, and who turned into “dust” well before their time! They never fathered either daughters or sons. Vimy is linked to the Ontario church somehow, according to Urquhart.

The last slide is the mural at the Gander International airport.² Urquhart reminds us that it was the site that hosted the flights that needed to be redirected on 9/11. Indeed, we all recall in our mind’s eye the two monumental towers reduced to ashes imploding onto themselves and trapping so many in horrendous death, and then the white-grey dust covering the heads of first responders. Nobody to wipe their head. The building of the Gander International airport was previously as empty as a mausoleum, almost immediately obsolete, and decorated with a “tempera” mural, made with a thousand eggs, whose shells fell to the ground. A thousand eggs that did not hatch. A thousand eggs that gave birth to a mural. The artist, Kenneth Lochhead, had to mix the pigments with his brush in each yolk, inching away, to deposit this powder on the wall with hair or fur—as brushes are made. The project took a long time; either he was missed by his family or he missed son, daughter, and wife. The end piece is a large composition. It was glued like a second skin to the central room of the airport, in between the gates between sky and earth, made to be seen by crowds of people who never came; yet seen in passing by the people who were saved from 9/11; whose crafts needed safe heaven. Like the Vimy memorial reminds us, some were saved; some were remembered, ashes to ashes under the V gates of Heaven opened like the cover of a book.

Eventually the monumental Gander mural is miniaturized as a book mark that Urquhart refuses to purchase because by then, she has rejected or outgrown her recollection impulse, and as well, the myth of the phoenix has morphed into a Eurydice scenario. Somehow rereading, revisiting the architecture of the book, all these little live graphics buried in the pages of wood shavings and other binding agents should be left in place. No more retrieval. No second life. Nobody will be brought home. Purchasing the confetti-pixelated Tintoretto or encountering the dog’s eye, might now jeopardize the return of the loved ones; the turn of a page with another read could condemn them to Hades forever.

*
* *

As the author delivers her paper on the coherence and incoherence of the art that “painted itself into” her novels, she may expect it to become autonomous and interpreted, not just heard. My colleagues who headed our Dean’s call to come and hear Jane Urquhart will or will not recognize what was communicated by what was said. It is my hope that if she were to peruse this letter to her and to her readers, perhaps she would.

Servanne Woodward
The University of Western Ontario

² <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/gander-airport-mural-significant-1.5253318>