

Body/Landscape/Art

Ekphrasis and the North in Jane Urquhart's *The Underpainter*

From its opening paragraphs, Jane Urquhart's novel *The Underpainter* (1997) signals its engagement with, and subtle problematization of, the iconic wilderness aesthetic of the Group of Seven. It does so primarily by exploring a particular representational process central to this aesthetic, by which human bodies are consumed by and rendered into landscape. This process is epitomized by a detailed description in the novel's prologue of "a large, human-shaped peninsula of rock, known as The Sleeping Giant" (2):

This unconscious granite figure is famous. In the summer, tourists driving the gorgeous north shore of Lake Superior stop their cars and stare across Thunder Bay at his reclining body. Passengers who have travelled on the Trans-Canada train can bring his physique to mind long after mountains and prairies have faded from memory. He is twenty miles long, this person made from northern landscape, and, in 1937, no roads as yet have scarred his skin. According to the Ojibway, who have inhabited this region for hundreds of years, he was turned to stone as punishment for revealing the secret location of silver to white men greedy enough to demand the information. He will lie forever obdurate, unyielding, stretched across the bay. (2)

The introduction of the figure of the Sleeping Giant this early in the novel suggests that it will play a central role in the narrative that follows. It is referenced only occasionally in the remainder of the book, however, and functions instead to hint at an alternative narrative to the one that actually unfolds—the story of a cold, emotionally detached artist who travels north every summer to paint Lake Superior from its north shore.

The narrative suggested by the Sleeping Giant is the colonization of already occupied land by white settlers and the capitalist exploitation of its resources as viewed from the perspective of the Ojibwa. While the Ojibwa myth attributes the Giant's rendering as landscape to an Indigenous cause—a punishment for sharing Aboriginal-owned resources with colonizers—the novel's primary concern is with the broader causality of the Giant's condition: the practices of colonization and resource exploitation that precipitated his betrayal. The passage makes a direct link between these enterprises—explicitly linked elsewhere in the novel to artistic representations of the North, in one of many echoes suggesting the works of and critical responses to the Group of Seven—and the narrative “erasure” of the Giant, enacted through his metaphorical subsumption into the landscape. The Trans-Canada train and the “scarring” of the Indigenous body-as-landscape by the building of roads are thus presented as hostile encroachments, becoming metonymic of the injuries inflicted on Indigenous peoples by white settlement. In beginning with this narrative of the Ojibwa (who are conspicuous by their absence in the remainder of the novel), Urquhart signals its function as a frame for what is to follow—a troubling and unsettling backdrop to the novel and the practices of artistic representation it depicts, and an implied reference point for a subtle counter-discursive revision of the narratives underlying these practices.

Urquhart's novel is narrated entirely in the first person by its protagonist, the fictional American landscape artist Austin Fraser.¹ Austin's narrative is punctuated by frequent ekphrastic passages in which he describes paintings from various stages of his career, including the *Erasures* series, whose composition makes up the novel's “present” and spurs Austin's recollections. Ekphrasis, the literary depiction of visual art, is the primary figure I want to discuss in this essay: my reading here operates within a paradigm that I have elsewhere termed an “ekphrastic methodology” for reading postcolonial literatures and cultures (Brock, “Framing Theory”). Using the term ekphrasis metonymically as well as drawing from its common (and specific) usages in the analysis of interartistic representation, such an approach interrogates imperialist scopophilia by exploring, for example, the complications between what Henri Lefebvre terms “conceived space” (361)—a “geometric” conception of space epitomized by the detached, “objective” viewing eye constructed by linear perspective in visual art—and the proprietorial colonial gaze. As a reading strategy that locates the intersection between temporal and spatial artforms as a site for negotiating the complex space-time problematics

inherent in postcoloniality, this methodology seeks in part to document instances of ekphrastic engagement with imperialist visual artworks, locating in their temporalizing impetus a counter-discourse to colonial spatiality. Such work is especially important in Canada, where settler-national claims to already inhabited land have historically been staked in spatial terms, epitomized by an unmatched corpus of wilderness painting—dominated by Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven—that establishes the colonized space as empty and, through its use of the “rational,” ordering logic of linear perspective, declares dominion over, and complete, objective understanding of, that space. In such a context, the capacity of ekphrasis, in James A.W. Heffernan’s words, to “envisag[e] a silent object” (302) lends it the power to unsettle imperialism’s enshrinement of its own cultural authority, revealing the narratives that lie hidden within its tidy constructions.

As practised by the Group and their associates, the landscape painting represents space devoid of time, a placeless void containing neither inhabitants nor their narratives, which therefore presents itself at once as empty territory for physical occupation and a blank page upon which the colonialist enterprise can inscribe its own history entirely untroubled by a temporality preceding its own arrival. For W.J.T. Mitchell, landscape art represents “something like the ‘dreamwork’ of imperialism, unfolding its own movement in time and space from a central point of origin and folding back on itself to disclose both utopian fantasies of the perfected imperial prospect and fractured images of unresolved ambivalence and unsuppressed resistance” (10). Crucially, this characterization of landscape representation underscores the collapse—or “folding”—of temporality which enables the landscape painting to depict its “perfected prospect”; just as importantly, however, it points to the traces of narrative which are imperfectly suppressed by this folding, and which might therefore be recuperated. My contention is that ekphrastic landscape depictions such as those found in Urquhart’s novel represent a powerful means to such recuperation, an arena in which postcolonial narratives of indigeneity, conquest, resistance, and suppression are able to *unfold*.

Taking my cue from postcolonial, feminist, and ecocritical treatments of the Group of Seven’s wilderness aesthetic, including its oft-cited erasure of Aboriginal presence from the landscape and its complicity with the exploitation and destruction of the very wilderness it celebrated,² I shall suggest that Urquhart’s ekphrastic techniques enable her to critique this aesthetic at a formal as well as an ideological level, by inhabiting, so to speak, the frame of

the image, and thereby exposing the paradoxical and conflicting representational steps underlying its treatment of the wilderness. My reading does not diminish Cynthia Sugars' characterization of Urquhart—made in the context of a discussion of her earlier novel *Away*—as a writer whose staging of the “conflict between an assertion of a postcolonial cultural-national identity and an awareness of the colonizing implications of such nationalist assertion” is complicated by her “indulgence in a nostalgia for a certain kind of settler nationalism” (4). I am equally mindful, however, of Stephen Slemon's caution that the theorizing of settler-invader societies within a postcolonial framework remains radically incomplete unless it engages with the invariably compromised postcoloniality characteristic of the “neither/nor territory of white settler-colonial writing” (30). Like that of *Away*, the postcoloniality of *The Underpainter* is deeply ambivalent, critiquing the material consequences of colonialism while frequently participating in its discursive constructions—especially a discourse of Romantic self-identification between white settler and landscape. Shelley Kulperger's description of *Away* as “a kind of self-aware ‘beneficiary narrative’” (77) seems an apt one to apply to *The Underpainter*. Urquhart addresses her own complicities, but addressing them does not automatically absolve her.

If the Sleeping Giant passage that opens the novel marks it as a “beneficiary narrative,” the full significance of the iconography Urquhart employs is only slowly revealed through a series of episodes concerning body-landscape relationships, all of which implicitly or explicitly echo this opening figure of a body composed of landscape. Many of these episodes concern Austin's model and lover Sara, who lives in the northern Ontario town of Port Arthur (now part of Thunder Bay) to which he makes annual summer trips to paint the Lake Superior landscape. For the most part, Austin remains cold and cruelly detached—even abusive—in his relationship with Sara, though his detachment is undermined by occasional bursts of intense feeling. Austin's emotional attachment to Sara reaches its most intense point following a dream in which he believes she has drowned. He feels compelled to visit her, and climbs silently into bed beside her. He finds himself examining her body, and is moved and alarmed by his reaction to it:

And now, late in the morning, the watery sunlight ran down and across the geography of her body as if she were lying in a bright, shallow river. Me swimming there beside her. I was not fully awake. I broke open in the face of this vitality, this brilliance, the shining strength of the beautifully constructed bones of her face. I could scarcely look at her. Finally, the room, my own body, my own language disappeared, and all I was able to do was say her name. (82)

Even as he is undergoing this unsettling emotional experience, he is already reconfiguring it in the spatializing aesthetic terms that more comfortably fit his terms of reference. By rendering it as landscape, Austin is able to respond aesthetically to the *geography* of Sara's body, rather than acknowledging her as a being with her own history and psychology—a *temporal* entity with whom a deeper emotional connection could be either possible or necessary.

The momentary strength of his attachment, which he finds deeply unnerving, and its neutralization by the imaginative submersion of Sara into “a bright, shallow river,” recall Austin's earlier response to the death of his mother from scarlet fever: “In my child's mind, the colour of her disease was a band of red on the ice my mother spoke of, and I could see her, actually see her, move across it to the place where the ice turned from grey to black, until finally I could see her enter the inky waters of the Great Lake” (31). In both cases, the landscape becomes a kind of psychic repository for Austin, in which emotions and their accompanying narratives are consumed and suppressed. Austin's child's mind substitutes the narrative of his mother's consumption by the landscape for the traumatic one of her illness and death; the prospect that Sara's life might become a narrative in which he is intimately involved is similarly suppressed. Reflecting on his relationships with those who have played a significant part in his life, Austin acknowledges that he has suppressed all those narratives that threaten to involve him personally, and states that “[a]s I saw it then, each life I touched had found its focus and was existing in a kind of aftermath” (34).

These passages aid the characterization of Austin, portraying his devotion to art as pathology, existing at the expense of functional human relationships. When coupled with the overarching figure of the Sleeping Giant, however, they reflect a strikingly persistent trope in the novel: the consumption and erasure of human bodies and experiences into and by the landscape. This consumptive process becomes the primary site for what I have suggested is a sustained counter-discursive engagement with the Group of Seven's oft-criticized yet still massively influential wilderness aesthetic and nationalist rhetoric, as becomes evident when the above passages from Urquhart's novel are considered alongside two paintings by Group artists. Both Edwin Holgate's *Nude in a Landscape* (c. 1930) and F.H. Varley's *A Wind-Swept Shore* (1922) represent notable exceptions within the Group's wilderness oeuvre, signifying not only bodily presence but specifically the presence of those bodies whose absence I want to suggest defines the Group's wilderness: respectively, female and Aboriginal bodies.



Edwin Holgate, *Nude in a Landscape*. c. 1930. Oil on canvas, 73.1 x 92.3 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada. © Estate of Edwin Holgate, Jonathan Rittenhouse, executor.

In Holgate's painting, an easy harmony appears to exist between the "topography" of the female nude—her breasts, hips, and thighs—and the features of the landscape—the hills in the background, the islands in the lake that dominates the middle distance—that mirror this topography. In Varley's painting, meanwhile, two (or is it three?) Aboriginal figures walk towards the foreground of an otherwise archetypal Group image. These paintings might therefore be read as proofs of the fallacy of the "erasure" arguments that dominate Group criticism by demonstrating that human figures—even Aboriginal ones—can and do exist within the prevailing wilderness aesthetic. Such a reading, however, belies the complexity of the relationship between these bodies and the landscape they inhabit. In both images, the figures are integrated into the landscape to the extent that they become almost indistinguishable from it. The figures are not so much in harmony with as in the process of being consumed *by* the wilderness scene, a consumption staged through the continual play of tensions between body, landscape, and body-as-landscape. The Aboriginal figures in



F.H. Varley, *A Wind-Swept Shore*. 1922. Oil on wood panel, 30 x 40.6 cm. McMichael Canadian Art Collection, gift of Mrs. E.J. Pratt. © Varley Art Gallery, Town of Markham.

Varley's painting are incongruous, aesthetically incompatible with the image in which they appear. They are travelling outwards, leaving both the land and the framed space of the image behind—perhaps forever. Even in this they are interrupted, however, as they are perpetually in the process of being placed under erasure *by* the land: the most distant “figure” could be either a human figure or a boulder. While Holgate's nude remains (for now) a little more distinguishable from the land, she too is threatened by erasure from, and consumption by, the land. As if expressly to separate her from the rocks upon which she reclines, she lies on a white sheet, which functions as a boundary marker between body and landscape. At the extremes of the composition, however, her body strays off the sheet and into direct contact with the rocks. Her body becomes indistinguishable from the land at these points, her flesh threatening to disappear into the light browns of the rock at the bottom left, while the dark shadow cast on the rock at the top right makes it impossible to tell where the landscape ends and the nude's black hair begins.

Far from disproving the common critical assertion that the Group's aesthetic is one based on representational erasures, these two paintings are unusual only in their demonstration of the *processual* aspects of these erasures. I read the Group's representational economy as drawing from notions of the First World War as a proving ground for the young nation (and specifically its men), and augmented by the characterization of Tom Thomson's death in the wilderness as its own kind of "war death." This economy relies upon the notion of the landscape as a warlike alter ego to the (white, male) artist-figure, who alone is equipped to match it in combat. This construction requires that the hostile wilderness defeat—and consume—the bodily traces of all other presences in the landscape, including traces of both Aboriginality and femininity, whose essentialized characteristics are taken on by the wilderness itself. The body (metonymic of presence, culture, and narrative) *becomes* landscape (symbolic of absence, nature, and pure spatiality). This strategy ensures that the Group's masculine, Eurocentric, settler-nationalist self-image is all that remains in the wilderness, as its lone, worthy adversary: all other narratives are "folded" into pure space where, safely domesticated, they can be romanticized as harmless attributes of the wilderness itself. What emerges is thus a dualistic system of gendering and racializing the land: the wilderness is *conceptualized* as white (aided by the persistent associations of snow and winter), male, and warlike, and subsequently—yet, in the landscape painting's "folding" temporal scheme, also simultaneously—*transformed* into a space that is Aboriginal, feminine, and passive.³

This dualistic construction, however, continually threatens to compromise the *wildness* of the wilderness, an attribute which is absolutely necessary to the trope of the artist-hero. In the first place, there is the impulse towards documentation, the paradoxical desire to articulate the artist's presence at the scene of a wilderness that is defined entirely by *absence*. For Jonathan Bordo, the Group of Seven's construction of wilderness is critically undermined by this tension between the aesthetic desire to deny human presence in the wilderness on the one hand, and "the *having been there* but also the *having to be there* in order to record as work one's being there" on the other (117). A resultant feature of many of the paintings, Bordo argues, is the presence of a subjective trace in the form of a "symbolic deposit" (117), most often realized in the anthropomorphic form of a foregrounded solitary tree. This body-landscape construction "frames," and hence domesticates, the wilderness space "by domesticating the nomadic in the wilderness thought

into a delimitable physical space, possessing qualities of wilderness. Taken together, the anthropomorphic and the architectural reduce wilderness to the condition of the park, a kind of real estate” (Bordo 120).

In recasting it as “a kind of real estate,” the Group’s paintings shift the wilderness closer to a familiar pattern of settler discourse in which newly discovered land is unambiguously feminine-gendered, represented as nurturing mother, a passive vessel of fertility that exists solely to sustain the masculine-gendered pioneer-settler. While the hostile, barren Northern wilderness eludes this kind of agrarian feminine gendering, Bordo’s “wilderness park” is a more conventional settler landscape—a passive vessel whose mineral resources are laid open for male exploitation. Tellingly, Urquhart’s ekphrastic narrative in *The Underpainter* seizes on the paradoxes Bordo identifies in the “wilderness park” construction, and makes them central to the novel’s critique of the Group of Seven’s school of nationalist landscape painting by repeatedly invoking the kind of erasures seen in *Nude in a Landscape* and *A Wind-Swept Shore*, and tracing them to the contradictory documentary impulses of her own white, male artist protagonist.

Urquhart’s construction of Austin at once suggests and resists direct mapping onto the members of the Group of Seven. The depictions of Austin’s character and artworks suggest various members of the Group at different times, but most often Lawren Harris: like Harris, Austin is able to pursue his art due to the wealth of his father, who, like Harris’ father, has grown rich from the opportunities afforded the ambitious and resourceful capitalist by the new settler nation;⁴ Austin, in common with both Harris and his novelistic foil, the real-life American artist Rockwell Kent, experienced the death of a parent early in life (Austin loses his mother, whereas the childhoods of both Harris and Kent were marred by the deaths of their fathers); the novel focuses on Austin’s paintings of the north shore of Lake Superior, the site of many of Harris’ most iconic works; and these works are themselves suggested at times, notably when Austin describes his preference for aerial perspective, and his painting of the horizon “in a crisp, possessive way, as if, having chosen to render it, I felt I must bring it up close for inspection” (130). Various trajectories within Austin’s life also match those of Harris: Austin’s career charts a Harris-like course from early “pastoral” watercolours (45), through an increasing tendency towards abstraction, to the near-total abandonment of realist forms, and his retreat south of the US-Canada border after his final abandonment of Sara mirrors the flight in 1934

of the recently divorced Harris and his second wife Bess (the former wife of Group biographer and devotee F.B. Housser) in the wake of their scandalous affair and marriage.⁵ Most significantly, there is the title of Austin's last collection of paintings, which he assembles during the course of the novel. In having her character name his collection *The Erasures*, Urquhart underscores the significance of her recurring body-landscape consumption trope by linking it with perhaps the single greatest preoccupation of Group criticism. Cumulatively, her references to Harris and the Group strongly suggest an engagement with the representational strategies of these real-life artists. That other textual evidence resists a simple one-to-one relationship between Austin and any member of the Group does not diminish these links. Indeed, I want to argue that, on the contrary, it is precisely this uncertainty of reference which lends the novel its unsettling power.

The Underpainter signals its engagements with the Group of Seven's aesthetic by drawing links between Austin's aesthetic and emotional erasures and narratives of exploitation and colonization. This is best illustrated by paying close attention to a few pivotal pages, in which Austin makes an exception to his usual summer routine by remaining in Port Arthur into September. A dramatic metaphorical sequence is initiated by a disturbing sex scene—a near-rape—that occurs in an interlude in a painting session during which Austin has had Sara hold a particularly difficult pose for long periods:

I lifted up the flannel nightgown she had hastily thrown over her and began to caress her legs, the body I had been so carefully rendering, pulling first one, then the other ankle towards me so that the limbs would straighten. I removed my own clothes and lay on top of her, stretching her arms out from her sides by grasping her wrists and finally, because my arms were longer, pushing the heels of my hands into her palms. After I had entered her, I clamped her legs shut with my knees, making sure every inch of her body was covered with my own, making sure she was immobile. I held her head still with the pressure of my mouth on hers, the weight of my torso making it impossible for her to arch her back. I couldn't see her at all. The only part of her body that was moving was her heart, hammering against her ribcage. (168)

The relationship between this troubling scene and Austin's artistic philosophy is revealed shortly afterwards, when Austin recalls his belief "that I was drawing—deliberately drawing—everything out of her, that this act of making art filled the space around me so completely there would be no other impressions possible beyond the impressions I controlled" (170). In all aspects of his relationship with Sara—sexual, emotional, aesthetic—Austin insists on total control, refusing to admit anything that might reflect a

capacity on Sara's part for agency, much less autonomy. The implications of this desire for control can be understood by considering it alongside the body-landscape translations at work in the Group of Seven's paintings, which the novel invokes not only by repeatedly referring to bodies as landscapes and vice versa, but also by suggesting a paradoxical relationship between presence and absence—analogue to Bordo's narrative of the "witnessed" wilderness—within Austin's desire for absolute possession of Sara. To possess Sara in the manner he desires is to have absolute control over every facet of her being so that he can render them all in paint (a making of art that is also a form of emptying, a "drawing out"); exercising this control, however, entails Austin's constant presence and *participation* in a relationship whose reciprocity he tries but fails to suppress. Austin confesses that "although I wanted every detail of her in my painting—her body, her ancestry, her landscape, her house— . . . I would have preferred not to be known by her at all" (170).

Immediately following these passages, the novel draws an explicit parallel between Austin's aesthetic and violent sexual reductions of Sara to landscape and the body-landscape narrative of the Sleeping Giant. At Austin's invitation, Sara leads Austin on a walk "away from the lake, taking paths Sara had known since childhood, into the woods of The Sleeping Giant, the man mountain, the Sibley Peninsula. We followed swift-moving shining streams that Sara referred to, poetically, as the veins of the slumbering Gargantua" (172). The metaphorical equivalency drawn between streams and human veins in this passage recalls the watery imagery used in the earlier scene in which Austin experiences his unsettling reaction to "the geography of [Sara's] body," and the parallel is underscored by Sara's ambiguous comment that "[t]here is more than one way to visit the body of a man" (172). Initially, Austin recalls, he failed to understand the implications of this comment: "I thought the allusion was sexual, until she told me of the Ojibway legend that claimed the whole twenty miles of the human-shaped peninsula was the warrior Nanibijou, whose body had been turned to stone after he revealed to the European acquirers the location of the sacred silver" (172). However, while the persona of Austin-as-narrator is often employed as a more self-aware foil for his younger self, in this instance the novel maintains an ironic distance between its metaphorical economy and Austin's narration: once he hears the Sleeping Giant narrative, Austin immediately assumes that his initial interpretation—that Sara has made a sexual allusion—is erroneous. Even the older, wiser Austin fails to appreciate the multiple layers on which Sara's oblique statement functions: as a comment on his sexual conduct,

his artistic practice, and the discourses and practices of colonial and ecological exploitation (united in the figure of the Sleeping Giant) with which they intersect.

These parallels form the crux of the novel's counter-discursive engagement with the Group of Seven's wilderness aesthetic. Austin's various renderings of Sara as landscape are linked to the exploitation of Aboriginal-owned mineral wealth by the figure of the Sleeping Giant, a man transformed into landscape as a result of colonialism and its devastating ecological impact. The Sleeping Giant hence forms the central metaphorical figure around which Urquhart structures a set of equivalencies, between aesthetic and sexual violence, colonial and ecological exploitation, and the Group of Seven's body-landscape constructions. In the novel's closing pages, these parallels are finally, and briefly, acknowledged by Austin himself, as he reflects, in terms that mirror his one-sided relationship with Sara, on his one attempt to paint the peninsula: "It was the shape of The Sleeping Giant I wanted to fit into one of my paintings; neither its natural nor its supernatural history interested me. My father and I had both exploited this landscape—differently, it's true—but we had exploited it nevertheless" (327).

This passage makes explicit the novel's metaphorical unification of the paradoxical mode of witnessing characteristic of the Group of Seven's wilderness paintings and Austin's emotional abuse of Sara, whose history he similarly rejects. In positioning Austin and Sara's relationship as central to her engagement with the Group's aesthetic, Urquhart takes a critical stance that is at once settler-nationalistic, ecofeminist, and postcolonial, and therefore both strategic and complicit. Strategic because, in unifying the metaphorical and literal colonizations experienced by a white Euro-Canadian woman, the Indigenous Ojibwa and the land itself, Urquhart is able to engage counter-discursively with colonial discourses and practices without claiming to speak for socio-political positions not her own; complicit because, by allowing her own subject position of white womanhood to stand allegorically for the profound dispossession of Canada's Indigenous peoples, she marginalizes the experience of literal colonization in favour of metaphorically "colonial" tropes and thus undermines the status of "beneficiary narrative" from which her novel principally derives its moral authority.

Without minimizing the problematic aspects of Urquhart's connotations, I want to continue to focus on how their strategic aspects enable a counter-discursive engagement with the Group of Seven's aesthetic that displaces

the established discursive connotations of its body-landscape translations. Metonymic of this engagement is a reversal of the prevailing body-into-landscape transformation enacted by a pivotal episode in which Austin decides to salvage his relationship with Sara. Hoping to atone for his past sins by finally allowing himself to form an intimate attachment to her, Austin leaves Sara a note informing her that he wishes to meet her at the hotel in Port Arthur. Austin watches from his hotel bedroom window as Sara approaches, slowly becoming distinct from the snow-covered figure of the Sleeping Giant “like a fugitive cell that had broken loose from the stone architecture of his body” (330). As she advances, hour by hour, Austin is confronted with the exact reverse of what up to now has been his imaginative strategy: he has continually sought to bury emotions, narratives, and human experience in the landscape; now, with Sara’s emergence *from* it, he must confront all that he has suppressed. Faced with the enormity of this realization—that “I, who had previously been so restrained, would now engage in such blatant exposure that when I was finished she would have the entirety of my life in her possession” (331)—Austin flees in terror, leaving Port Arthur, Sara, and Canada behind for the last time. It is, significantly, this realization of the ultimate impossibility of possessing without being possessed, of witnessing without being witnessed, that precipitates Austin’s final retreat from Canada, metaphorically uncoupling the Group of Seven’s representational economy of narrative suppression and erasure from the constructions of settler nationhood with which it remains closely associated in public discourse. In its function as a repository of Austin’s suppressed emotions and narratives, the landscape of the North functions, just as in the Group of Seven’s wilderness aesthetic, as the artist’s double or alter ego. In Urquhart’s ironic reinterpretation, however, it is the artist’s emotional inadequacy, rather than his heroism as combatant, that is reflected in the landscape. Narrating from his old age, Austin concedes that all of his canvases are to some degree unsatisfactory: his paintings of Sara are, as his friend Rockwell Kent tells him, “as cold as ice” (261), because, as in his landscape paintings, he has merely “painted [himself] over and over” (178).

Urquhart’s choice of the impulsive, tempestuous Rockwell Kent, the real-life American artist fictionalized in *The Underpainter*, as a foil for Austin is a fascinating one, exploiting the novel’s carefully drawn parallels between Austin and Lawren Harris and shedding additional light on both its strategic and complicit elements. In her book *A Distant Harmony: Comparisons in the Painting of Canada and the United States of America*, Ann Davis compares

the northern landscape paintings of Harris and Kent, which bear a remarkable visual resemblance to each other. Positioning both Harris and Kent as figures who—like the fictional Austin Fraser—“straddle the fence that divides realism from symbolism in the history of North American art” (103), Davis identifies a shared visual vocabulary of “isolated and simplified sculptural forms” and “severe, monumental compositions conveying the impression of a magnificent, lonely grandeur” (126). The northern canvases of these two artists, Davis argues, would at times be virtually indistinguishable but for what she identifies as the key difference between them, “Kent’s oft-times propensity to focus, within the immensity of nature, on man” (107). Davis explains this key difference with reference to the differing philosophies and motivations underlying the artists’ respective works: the art of the staunch socialist Kent, she argues, was “humanistic in both its aims and its orientation” (107), while Harris’ “unending search for the spiritual ideal” contributed to the increasingly stylized forms of his empty landscapes, and finally to his total abandonment of realism (126).

Davis’ detailed comparisons are extremely convincing, and provide ample explanation for Urquhart’s construction of a straightforward opposition between Rockwell’s *joie de vivre* and the ascetic devotion to form and composition shared by Austin and Harris. However, it is arguable that Davis and Urquhart—the latter by implication—overstate the differences between the aesthetics espoused by Kent and Lawren Harris. It is true that, in line with Davis’ argument, those of Kent’s landscape paintings where human figures are absent—such as *Admiralty Sound: Tierra del Fuego* (c. 1925)—are almost mistakable for the Lake Superior canvases of Harris or his fellow Group member Franklin Carmichael. The simplified, rounded forms of Harris and Carmichael are much in evidence, as—strikingly—is Bordo’s foregrounded tree, as a blasted, gnarled organizing feature. To a viewer more accustomed to the Group’s works, therefore, encountering a painting like Kent’s *The Trapper* (1921) is an uncanny experience, its human figure giving the impression that an alien presence has found its way into one of Harris’ works. Yet Kent’s more humanistic vision of landscape—like Urquhart’s—is a highly romantic and ultimately ethnocentric one that, if it transcends the austerity of Harris’ aesthetic, remains heavily dependent on it. The human figures in Kent’s landscapes (even the Indigenous figures that populate his Arctic paintings) draw heavily from the quasi-mythic, neoclassical imagery found in his celebrated illustrations of *Moby Dick* and his poster art: they are celebrations of an indomitable American spirit, epitomized by the figure of

the worker who in turn embodies the ideals of Enlightenment humanism—the very ideals, in other words, that European imperialism sought to export to the New World. No less than for Harris, for Kent the North is a space in which the colonizing male's spiritual inheritance of the land is established.

While Kent's conception of the Northern wilderness—like Urquhart's—is deeply bound to both Eurocentric and settler-nationalistic discourses, it maintains a vision of harmony (albeit a harmony underscored by proprietary claims) between the land and its inhabitants, eschewing the Group's combative narrative and therefore also situating itself in opposition to the ecological exploitation in which the Group's aesthetic is implicated. Notwithstanding the common ideological ground shared by Kent and the Group of Seven, therefore, *The Underpainter* strategically occupies the principal site of *difference* between them—Kent's socialism set against the Group's unabashed enthusiasm for capitalist expansion and development in the North—to underline the complicities between the Group's aesthetic of erasure and the enterprise of resource extraction. After their first meeting, Austin and Rockwell spend an evening of heavy drinking together, which culminates in Rockwell leaving Austin on a park bench with a “crudely lettered sign” pinned to him: “Do not disturb me,” it read. “I am a landscape painter and my father is a capitalist” (141). While at one level this scene represents a good-natured prank cementing a new friendship after the bonhomie of the previous evening, it also underlines the irresolvable differences between the anthropocentric bias of Rockwell's art and the exploitation and narrative suppression that characterize Austin's—a telling parallel with Davis' comparisons between Kent and Harris. The link between erasure and exploitation is made explicit by the novel's exploration of Austin's working method on the symbolically central *Erasures* series: his underpaintings depict the narratives that he has appropriated from acquaintances, friends, and lovers, but that are literally and metaphorically erased by subsequent layers of glaze. The contrast between Austin and Rockwell Kent is thus part of a decentring strategy that realigns the Group of Seven's wilderness aesthetic with exploitation and repression rather than the spiritually pure asceticism with which it is associated in the writings of Harris and F.B. Housser. The wilderness continues to function as alter ego to a white male artistic consciousness, but, in Urquhart's revision, it is no longer a valiant combatant but a repository for the narratives which might reveal the artist's fundamental inadequacies.

The novel's ekphrasis liberates these narratives from their psychic repository, hinting at the incompleteness of the erasures effected by Austin's

mode of Northern representation, and therefore also by the real-life modes which are implicitly referenced in it. If such recuperative aims provide ample reason for the novel's employment of ekphrastic modes, however, such an expository impulse *within* its frame of confessional first-person narration remains puzzling. It is repeatedly suggested that the narratives the novel recovers from its still images are wrested from a reluctant Austin, and are a source of immense pain to him: "I want none of this" (47), he insists, emphatically, of the flood of memories that continually torments him. Urquhart offers few clues as to where this confessional impulse—away from the entombed spatiality of the past, and *towards* the temporality with which Austin's art is imbued by Urquhart's ekphrases—might originate within Austin himself. If he displays considerable guilt at his treatment of various figures from his past, this is continually offset by his misanthropy, which seems entirely undiminished in his attitude to his housekeeper Mrs. Boyle.

A consideration of this paradox at the structural heart of the novel—a series of confessional narratives from a character who seems incapable either of confession or repentance—reveals another dimension of the novel's multifaceted critique of the Group of Seven's wilderness aesthetic. It focuses our attention on the only possible remaining source of the ekphrastic impulse from within the frame narration, namely the ultimate failure of Austin's strategies of narrative suppression. That Austin's artistic strategy of obscuring his underpaintings with layers of translucent glaze may not be entirely successful is hinted at in his "premonitions of penitenti . . . , those ghosts of formerly rendered shapes that the artist has intended to paint out forever. In the future, I feared, they would rise to the surfaces of my pictures like drowned corpses, bloated and obscene, regardless of glazes or the number of layers of zinc white, titanium white, and lead white I applied to the canvases" (181). This fear appears to have been realized when Austin complains that "[e]ven though there is nothing in me that wants to court the past, it fills my mind, empties my painting" (9). Penitenti are a constant threat to Austin—particularly in his autobiographical *Erasures* series—because of the existence of images from his own life in his underpaintings, themselves resulting from a desire to document the episodes that they represent. This impulse, seemingly in direct contrast to the near-pathological strategies of suppression on display elsewhere, is evident in Austin's first encounter with Sara, when, "watching her, her unselfconscious grace, I wanted to interrupt the task [of sweeping], to add my own presence to the image" (14).

Symbolically, the technique Austin employs in the *Erasures* series reflects the fundamental conflict upon which all of his works are predicated, between documentation and suppression. Austin's *Erasures* series provides an unusually literal illustration of the way in which the impulse towards documentation, the artist's desire to record his presence at the scene, can exist in direct conflict with the representational system by which the work is conceived, potentially drawing unwanted attention to the suppressed narratives which underlie it. The systems of representation at work in the *Erasures* thus present an identical paradox to that inherent in Bordo's "wilderness park," which, of course, is itself intimately concerned with the politics of erasure.

The origin of the novel's ekphrastic impulse, then, is situated in the moment at which the artist asserts his own presence into the ostensibly "unwitnessed" scene, a moment of irresolvable conflict and paradox. By inserting her ekphrastic representations into this moment, Urquhart is able to subvert the artistic strategy of narrative suppression and its resulting aesthetic erasures, restoring the narrative presence of elements that would otherwise exist only in the form of "underpaintings" within Austin's representational systems. The wider implications of the novel's critique, however, are determined by Urquhart's management and foregrounding of its intertextual references to the Group of Seven's paintings. She achieves this effect through the strategic manipulation of what John Hollander has termed "actual" and "notional" modes of ekphrastic representation (209)—the former referring to works of visual art that exist in the real world, the latter to fictional artworks. Urquhart's negotiation of the relationship between these types of ekphrasis is best understood with reference to the "subdivisions" of Hollander's categories offered by Peter Barry in his essay "Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis," where he proposes the subdivision of actual ekphrasis

into "closed" and "open" variants. In the closed type, [the text] makes it explicit that it is not speaking about a real, witnessed event, but about what is seen [in the image under discussion]. In the "open" type, by contrast, the object of the ekphrasis is presented "unframed," and so could be taken as a description of (say) an actual scene, rather than a pictorial representation of that scene. (156)

At times, the parallels between Austin and Lawren Harris encourage the reader to view the descriptions of Austin's landscape paintings as "open actual" ekphrases: real-world referents are never explicitly identified, but the iconic status of the Group's landscapes means that they are likely to be called to the minds of readers as the implied references to them accumulate. I have been arguing, of course, that it is not only the framed spaces of

Austin's artworks that constitute concealed instances of actual ekphrasis: in their engagement with a highly specific set of representational practices peculiar to the Group's wilderness aesthetic, the recurring body-landscape constructions of both Sara and the Sleeping Giant function as entirely unframed "open actual" ekphrases.

If the "open actual" elements of Urquhart's ekphrastic representations serve to highlight the intertextual relations between the novel and the paintings of the Group of Seven, these relations are countered even as they are suggested by a number of factors that refute a simple relationship between Austin's paintings and those of the Group. The fact that Austin is not Canadian, but American, is the most immediately obvious of these factors, and one that seems strongly to discourage a reading of him as representative of a collective renowned for its nationalist affiliations. In addition, a handful of passages that directly reference the Group confirm that its real-life artists, like Rockwell Kent and Austin's teacher Robert Henri, are alive and working in the novel's fictional world, meaning that there is no allegorical "gap" with regard to the Group which could simply be filled by Austin. Such refusals of the associations that are strongly suggested elsewhere in the novel resist straightforward readings of Austin's works as even "open" actual ekphrases, seeming to place them instead within the notional category. In this context, Barry's subdivision of notional ekphrasis into "fictional" and "conceptual" variants is especially significant. Fictional notional ekphrasis "is presented in entirely 'realist' terms—it has (for instance) a fictional artist and a fictional provenance . . . it just hangs on the wall and people look at it, and sometimes talk about it and what it depicts" (Barry 156). Conceptual notional ekphrasis, meanwhile, is "markedly different," having "'supra-realist' characteristics which no real art object could have" (156). At first glance, it seems obvious that Urquhart's depictions of Austin's paintings belong firmly to the "fictional" category: the novel contains detailed descriptions of the provenance of the works, of their display in various galleries and collections, and of critical responses to them.

Yet on closer inspection of the passages that describe the *Erasures* canvases, a reading of them as entirely realistic begins to feel overly simplistic. There is a definite shift in the novel from ekphrastic depiction that is undoubtedly of the "fictional notional" variety to that which seems to display what Barry terms "supra-realist" qualities. The first instance of detailed ekphrasis in the novel describes a (proposed) painting which can be visualized relatively unproblematically by the reader:

Tomorrow I will begin the underpainting for my next picture. I will paint Sara, the inherited house, the fist of Thunder Cape on the horizon, the frozen lake, her hands, the Quebec heater, the slowly fading fires. I will paint the small-paned window, the log walls, a curtain illuminated from behind by winter sun, the skein of grey I never saw in Sara's hair. Then carefully, painstakingly, I will remove all the realism from it, paint it all out. (15)

In sharp contrast to this is the novel's final ekphrasis, a lengthy description of a "painting" which eludes visualization entirely—as a realist work or even an abstraction—containing an implausible combination of elements including "the look on my father's face the afternoon he knew that he was disappearing into wealth," "Sara's skin glowing in the yellow light emanating from a thousand autumn birch leaves," "hills and trees, gold-leaf birches, skies and lakes and distances," and "all the possibilities that we believe exist in alternative landscapes" (339-40). The shift from "fictional" to "conceptual" notional ekphrasis introduces an increasingly insistent element of metafiction into the ostensibly realist narrative. Attention is increasingly drawn to the fact that the depictions of Austin's paintings—in particular the *Erasures*—are symbolic rather than realistic constructions, a fact which inevitably causes the reader to return to seeking the signified of the novel's ekphrases in its intertexts, and to readings of them as "open actual" ekphrastic depictions. In its self-conscious manipulation of intertextual references, the novel creates an irresolvable tension between readings of its ekphrases as "open actual" and "conceptual notional."

The sophistication and subversive possibility of this ekphrastic slippage become evident when considered alongside Neta Gordon's more straightforward interpretation of Urquhart's use of ekphrasis in her article "The Artist and the Witness: Jane Urquhart's *The Underpainter* and *The Stone Carvers*." In contrast with the reading I have offered here, Gordon identifies Urquhart's ekphrastic mode as purely "notional," arguing that "[i]n writing the visual, [Urquhart] explores the distance between witness and artist, and then the distance between art and its witness" (71). Gordon's discussion of ekphrasis amounts to a half-paragraph aside in an essay that focuses on the components of *The Underpainter* relating to the First World War, and as such devotes little space either to landscape depiction or to uses of the visual.⁶ There is, however, an important relationship between Gordon's identification of Urquhart's ekphrases as unambiguously notional and her wider argument that *The Underpainter* represents a move "away from self-conscious fictionality" (3), which eschews the referential play underscoring "postmodern pastiche" in order to stage a conflict between the artist and

the witness to historical events, with the latter representing the ultimate index of veracity. I have been arguing that, on the contrary, the landscapes depicted in *The Underpainter* place witnessing *itself* into crisis, and that it is the artist's ambivalent relationship to the act of witnessing that is continually foregrounded in order to disrupt the wilderness image's naturalization of the figure of the absent witness.

Identifying the ambiguity of Urquhart's ekphrases, then, is key to recognizing—in opposition to Gordon's reading—the extent to which *The Underpainter* participates in the postmodern conventions of metafiction and referential play as a counter-discursive strategy. The tension and referential uncertainty created by the continual and irresolvable slippage between “open actual” and “conceptual notional” ekphrastic modes are crucial to the novel's engagement with constructions of Canadian settler-national identity. The slippage between these two ekphrastic modes disrupts the settler-nationalist myths of the Group's paintings in two opposing yet complementary ways. It simultaneously foregrounds the histories of exploitation and suppression to which the Group's aesthetic of emptiness and the establishment of an “essential” Canadian settler nationhood are inextricably tied *and*, through Austin's American nationality, disrupts the established links *between* the Group and “Canadianness.”

Characteristic of Urquhart's broader ambivalence regarding the discourses of settler-nationalism in *The Underpainter*, the implications of this decoupling are ultimately left uncertain: while the novel's perpetually unresolved ekphrases effect a wholesale deconstruction of nationalist *form*, aligning the capitalist, exploitative, and suppressive forces of the Group of Seven's wilderness aesthetic with *Americanness* leaves the door ajar for the re-entrance of a recuperative *Canadian* settler-nationalism, shorn of its less desirable qualities. While this may represent, according to taste, a disappointing equivocation or a richly productive blueprint for a responsible articulation of cultural nationalism, what is less ambiguous is the novel's displacement of the combative, masculine narrative at the centre of the Group's representations of North from its prominent position within discourses of Canadian nationhood, allowing the haunting, half-buried lives, stories, and peoples at its periphery to surface. In the wake of this decentering, fragmentary suggestions of alternative stories, like those of the Sleeping Giant, are allowed to rise to the surface of Urquhart's novel like the pentimenti which strike such fear into Austin.

Through its foregrounding and exploiting of its own intertextuality via the innovative use of notional and actual ekphrasis, Urquhart's novel provides an

instructive illustration of the critical potential of ekphrastic representation as a mode of engagement with technologies of imperialist representation, but, more than this, underlines the interconnectedness of the formal, aesthetic dimensions of such media and their ideological content. Without transcending the complicities of its own subject position, a novel such as *The Underpainter* is capable of imaginatively inhabiting the very moment of production of non-narrative modes of imperialist representation, and, by highlighting the instant in which temporality is arrested—or “folded”—in the spatial plane of the visual art object, to at least begin to “envoice” those whose narratives have been suppressed by it. Beyond the formal play with which ekphrasis has traditionally been associated—and beyond even the postmodern self-referentiality with which more recent interventions such as those of Heffernan and Barry have increasingly identified it—lies a genuinely radical critical potential which, in refusing to leave the entombed artifacts of imperialism buried, carries the potential to unearth—or “unfold”—some of the colonial enterprise’s best-concealed narratives.

NOTES

- 1 I follow the convention throughout of referring to fictional figures (including Austin) by first name and real-world figures (such as Lawren Harris) by surname. In the case of Rockwell Kent, who exists both in the real world and the fictional world of Urquhart’s novel, I thus maintain a distinction between Rockwell (the character) and Kent (the artist).
- 2 There is an extensive body of critical work documenting the problematic aspects of the Group of Seven’s empty wilderness aesthetic, especially with regard to the representational erasure of the land’s Aboriginal inhabitants and complicity with capitalist exploitation of its resources. For a wide selection of excerpted essays, plus an excellent overview, see O’Brian and White.
- 3 For reasons of space, I have found it necessary to state a number of contentious arguments about the Group’s representational economy (especially with regard to its construction of gender) as if they were established facts, or at least supported by a broad consensus. I differ significantly from the still prevailing view that the Group’s wilderness aesthetic is characterized by an unambiguous feminine gendering of the land consistent with agrarian settler discourse elsewhere (see, for example, Mackey; Grace). I argue in detail for my own position in my essay “Envoicing Silent Objects: Art and Literature at the Site of the Canadian Landscape.”
- 4 Lorna Jackson identifies this parallel with Lawren Harris, though not the others I have outlined, in her review of *The Underpainter*.
- 5 I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer at *Canadian Literature* for drawing my attention to this commonality between Austin and Harris.
- 6 The present essay, of course, does just the opposite, focusing solely on the novel’s engagement with wilderness depictions and not on its war components. While the novel’s

First World War narratives are fascinating and complex in their own right—and might in a longer piece add a further dimension to my reading of the Group of Seven's combative wilderness aesthetic as heavily inflected by Great War iconography—length requirements restrict my focus here to the most direct engagements with the Group and their art.

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