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Translating the Sublime
Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool*

Jane Urquhart's third collection of poetry, *The Little Flowers of Madame de Montespan,* depicts Louis XIV, that great orderer of the landscape, stumbling through the forest at the edge of Niagara Falls in a nightmare. In *The Whirlpool* (1986), this nightmare becomes reality when all of the characters in the central section of the narrative, including the historian, Major David McDougal; his wife, Fleda; the poet, Patrick; the local undertaker, Maud; and her nameless son, find themselves surrounded by the sublime geological chaos of the Falls and the whirlpool below in the summer of 1889. Taken together, the novel's central section and the frame story concerning the last days of Robert Browning, effectively portray the difficulties attending the translation from the old world to the new and, more specifically, the repercussions of imposing the concept of the sublime onto an alien landscape.

Originally introduced in discussions of rhetorical technique in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the sublime gradually disrupted the harmony which had previously shored up rule-governed, neoclassical understandings of art. Disseminated primarily through Boileau's translation of Longinus in 1674, the concept became linked, not so much with concrete rhetorical or stylistic features, as with the revelation of "a quality of thought and the emotions which that quality, vividly presented, evokes" (Monk 32). Writing some twenty years after Boileau, John Dennis extended the concept's parameters by investigating, not the sublime object, but the emotional responses of individuals who experienced the sublime. Dennis's

contribution reinforced the connection between the sublime and "enthusiasm," a set of emotions or "passions"—including joy and terror—that were aroused by circumstances whose cause was not fully comprehensible (Dennis qtd. in Monk 48). With the increased attention focused on the ambiguous nature of the sublime experience, the idea of the inexpressible began to gain ground. As Samuel Monk explains, the sublime filled a need not met by neoclassical categorization, which threatened to provide "a too great standardization of literature under a theory of a universalized nature, and a tendency to overemphasize the value of reason in art." In contrast to previous modes of categorization, the sublime provided "a justifiable category into which could be grouped the stronger emotions and the more irrational elements of art" (Monk 85). In accordance with Monk, Bryan Wolf suggests that the sublime offered the writer a way of "adding to his or her text a dimension of power and mystery that conventional empiricisms lacked" (Wolf 196-97). Yet, as we will see when we turn to Urquhart's novel, whereas the sublime may have provided a means of escaping ossified traditions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, by the nineteenth century, it had already been appropriated by the established discourses.[1]

In his discussion of the sublime, Jean-Francois Lyotard suggests that this appropriation occurs when the fundamental question raised by the sublime—a question which throws progress, rules, and presence itself into doubt, which Lyotard formulates as "Is it happening"—is betrayed by translating this question "as a waiting for some fabulous subject or identity: 'Is the pure people coming?. . .'" (209). For those interested in the sublime, the importance of Urquhart's text lies in its offering equally valuable insight into the potential dangers of the concept by foregrounding the relation between sublime quests for transcendence and the discourse of imperialism and its forms of domination. In many ways, the novel can be taken as a cautionary tale because it demonstrates that, while the sublime signals a crisis between the known and the unknown, the resolution of this crisis is in no way predetermined: the sublime can just as easily be invoked to promote a reinscription of a rule-governed system, as it can to instigate a break with tradition which, in the novel, is associated with Europe.

In interviews, Urquhart suggests that she set the story in 1889 because she wanted to contrast the old world with the new and investigate the problems surrounding translation—the difficulties that Canadians experienced when they attempted to impose old-world modes of categorization onto the new:

> Part of the reason that late nineteenth-century Canadian poets were having problems, or at least in my opinion, was that they were trying to impose Wordsworth's daffodils in the total disorder of the Canadian landscape . . . . In *Whirlpool Dream House*[2] a young man [Patrick] with an old-world idea of what a poet should be is trying to live out that fantasy in nineteenth-century Canada. (Interview 38).

Ultimately, by engaging with the sublime, *The Whirlpool* highlights the fact that, as language users (readers and writers), individuals have a choice whether to support misguided attempts to translate European culture onto the new world (and thereby neutralize the sublime) or whether, by stressing the poetic and associative aspects of language, to support the efforts of sublime deterritorialization.[3]

Reliant on European modes of categorization to organize aesthetics, landscape, and gender roles, the principal characters in *The Whirlpool* are, for the most part, perplexed when confronted with Canada's distinctly non-European historical and geographical contours. Before going on to look at the way in which two of the characters, namely the poet, Patrick, and Maud, the undertaker, deploy the sublime, I wish to consider, more generally, the way in which the characters' responses to the new world are mediated by the old-world discourses. In some instances, the dependence on these discourses proves crippling. For example, we are told that Patrick, unable to deal "effectively with the body or soul of the new country, had found himself, at thirty-three, eking out a subsistence salary as a clerk in the capital city . . . " (69). Rather than investigate the possibility of constructing new paradigms or even, at the very least, acknowledge the disjunction, he looks to the old-world literature for escape from the Canadian landscape which he cannot fathom. As the narrator explains, night after night "he disappeared into the old-world landscape with Wordsworth, Coleridge, or Browning" (69). But escape is impossible precisely because the old-world descriptions cannot account for the radically different features of the new. Even his uneducated wife recognizes the futility of his endeavour to hide from reality. Exasperated, she tells him, "'You're never going to find Wordsworth's daffodils here'" (69).

Patrick's reliance on models from the old world eventually jeopardizes his physical and mental health. He travels from Ottawa to his uncle's farm in Niagara Falls in order to recuperate from the effects of his alienation (at work, and within the country as a whole), which have culminated in a physical and mental breakdown (69). His sickness, and the attendant sense that

words were being erased from his mind, signal the dangers of attempting to impose the linguistic order of the old world onto the new. There can be no seamless translation, and the text repeatedly highlights the perils that result from engaging in this type of fantasy.

Critics have suggested that Patrick, Fleda, and David "form the triangle that ignites the plot" (Hodgson 116). But these characters are linked less by emotional ties than their mutual need to develop strategies of adapting to a new country. In Patrick's case, his inability to adjust to the new world compromises his relationships with others, especially Fleda. Early on, Patrick's and Fleda's paths cross when the poet goes for a walk on Whirlpool Heights. He glimpses Fleda from a distance and becomes instantly infatuated with her. Although Fleda invites Patrick to develop a closer relationship, he is unwilling and/or unable to accept her offer. Like his beloved Browning, who had "placed himself in the centre of some of the world's most exotic scenery and had then lived his life there with the regularity of a copy clerk" (11), Patrick (who *is* a clerk), can never bring himself to abandon his solitary, mechanized existence. When Fleda demands authentic intimacy rather than a relationship based on voyeurism, Patrick abandons her. Shifting his obsession from her to the landscape, he becomes obsessed with the idea of swimming across the whirlpool—a sublime quest which proves fatal.

Like Patrick, twenty-nine-year-old Fleda is captivated by the whirlpool, and she, too, voraciously consumes volumes of English Romantic poetry. She repeatedly compares the landscapes described by the poets to her own surroundings. But rather than strive to render the process of translation invisible, as Patrick does, Fleda recognizes the incongruity between the old and new world. For example, at the beginning of the novel, while on her way to her husband's property, Whirlpool Heights, she peers out of the streetcar's window and carefully examines the geography beyond the city limits. She is immediately struck by the disjunction between the European landscape she reads about and the actual landscape she inhabits:

> The tough old rocks of the escarpment were in evidence everywhere, varying in size from the jagged edges along the road to the cliffs that dropped down to the river . . . . The hill country of England, as Fleda imagined it, or gentle undulations of the Tuscan countryside, had *nothing to do with this,* nothing to do with this river side of the road. If she turned and looked through the windows on the opposite side of the car, however, she would see nothing but acres of rigidly

> planned, severely trimmed orchards. It was a geography of fierce opposites. Order on one side and, nearer the water, sublime geological chaos. (31; my emphasis)

In her book, *Margin/Alias: Language and Colonization in Canadian and Québécois Fiction*, Sylvia Söderlind argues that this kind of recognition alone—the ability to allow the disjunction to remain visible—constitutes a deterritorializing strategy (19).

When the novel opens, Fleda has already rejected the traditional codes of domesticity and begun to experiment with deterritorialization. She has previously vacated one house and, more recently—to the horror of the town matrons—has left her husband's lodgings at Kick's Hotel in the town of Niagara Falls in favour of dwelling in a tent set up on Whirlpool Heights. As the story progresses, she moves even closer to abandoning this temporary structure, until, finally, she leaves her marriage and escapes into the woods. Fleda decides to abandon her husband (and the role of wife) only after thoroughly grasping the claustrophobic and stultifying implications of living in the traditional home gradually being erected on the property.

Whereas Fleda sees the effects of colonization, her husband, the historian, Major David McDougall—the final character in the "triangle"—remains blind to its effects. Despite his blindness, he nevertheless negotiates between the old and new worlds. Reacting to what he perceives as Canada's unhealthy Eurocentric focus, David embarks on a quest to sever Canada's ideological attachment to Europe and the U.S. Whereas Patrick clings to the European model of the romantic quester, David apparently favours a strategy which celebrates and reinforces the divide between Europe and the new world. In his capacity of military historian, he takes it upon himself to furnish Canada with an orderly past of its own. Specializing in the siege of Fort Erie, he dedicates his life to proving that Canada won the battle of 1812 against the Americans. Ironically, his desire to free Canada from attachments to Europe and America leads him to embrace a form of nationalism that simply mirrors the models that he claims to reject. His rabid nationalism is comically evident when he speaks to Patrick and expresses his desire for an indigenous history:

> "Yes, we need real writers . . . thinkers . . . that think Canadian. Thinking Canadian is a very lonely business, my boy, and don't forget it. Do they think Canadian at

> the University of Toronto? No, they don't. They think Britain . . . the Empire and all that nonsense. Do they think Canadian in the churches? No, they don't. They think Scotland, Rome. Why not a church of Canada, I ask you? Surely we could at least have our own religion. I'll bet this group assembled here doesn't have more than one Canadian thought a day, and they pretend to be interested in Canadian history!"

In his search for an authentic Canadian history, David, like Patrick, also emulates the European figure of the romantic, solitary quester. To recall Lyotard's model, both Patrick and David translate the potentially subversive force of the sublime—"Is it happening?"—into a question of waiting for the "fabulous subject or identity"; in David's case, it is the Canadian identity which is anticipated.

After Fleda leaves him, however, David understands, on some level, the limitations of his position. He finds himself recalling his aunt, a woman whose life progressively shrank to the confines of a single room. In the midst of this recollection, he comes to the realization that his desire for an orderly history and the concomitant betrayal of the sublime are linked to the same fatal longing for stasis that claimed his aunt. Suddenly, he sees that his own life "had been moving down a path which would eventually carry him through the door of his still unconstructed house. And while he had imagined walking through the door of the house, he had never considered stepping back outside" (230-31). Ultimately, by conforming to the old-world models, both David and Patrick remain unwitting victims of a European legacy, associated with stagnation and death.

The novel signals this connection with death when Patrick's fatal quest to swim the whirlpool and David's inability to resist his obsession with order bring both men into contact with Maud, the local undertaker. David meets Maud after he is summoned to identify Patrick's body, but the reader is introduced to Maud from the start. Although not part of the "triangle," the experiences of both Maud and her son also underscore the difficulties associated with adapting to the new world and the risks associated with invoking the sublime.

Maud's negotiations with the new world are complicated by the death of her husband and in-laws two years before the events in the novel. In the blink of an eye, Maud found herself in possession of the family home and business. Yet rather than revel in her newly acquired freedom, Maud continued to subscribe to a European protocol. In the initial phases of her widowhood, she dutifully followed the cultural codes and transformed herself

from a proper wife to an equally proper widow: she became the "perfect symbol of animate deep mourning," encasing herself in folds of noxious black crape for two full years (22).

As the narrator explains, the fabric of Maud's costume comes from Halstead, England, and is woven by employees at Courtault Limited: "The workers—mute, humble, and underpaid—spent twelve hours a day, in hideous conditions, at their steam-powered looms pounding black silk threads into acres of unpleasant cloth" (21). At first, it is not clear why the narrator dwells on the origins of the fabric, and the digression into the history of the cloth only makes sense when viewed in the light of the text's more general concern regarding the origin of the repressive order which threatens to regulate life in the new world. But the history of Maud's mourning garb illustrates the harmful aspects of the unself-conscious translation of values and practices from the old world to the new. In particular, the exploitation that characterizes relations between factory owner and employee at the Courtault establishment are reinscribed on the bodies of women who believe they should wear the fabric in Canada.

From the description of the material, it would seem that the cloth is designed solely to punish women for having the audacity to survive their husbands: "It encased the female body . . . in a suit of crumpled armour. . . . [I]t scraped at the neck and dug at the armpits. It clung to the limbs and rasped at the shoulder blades. It lacerated the spine if that series of bones ever dared to relax. And it smelled, always, of grave mud and sorrow" (20-21). In her dreams, Maud imagines escaping the onerous task of wearing this costume. Instead of wearing the crape herself, she offers a cape made of the stuff to her dead husband. But he "would reject it, outright . . . . [and] after this refusal, Maud would once again drape the heavy material on her own shoulders realizing, as she did so, where it rightfully belonged" (23).

Referring to Coventry Patmore's description of the ideal woman as "an angel in the house," the critic Aritha van Herk describes Maud as "an angel in the house of death" (15). This description is apt because, even before her husband passed away, Maud was expected to live in a saintly state of suspended animation:

> [W]hen she was newly married, the periods of enforced quiet had disturbed Maud—times when she had sat dutifully over some senseless piece of embroidery while downstairs mourners had recited measurements for coffins. It had

> been as if, in her own life, emotion had been held in suspense, so that the rest of the world could live and love and, more importantly, die. (43)

But, as we will see, Maud does not remain a static angel, and the force that sets itself in opposition to the discourses of nineteenth-century Europe and ultimately frees her is embodied by her son.

In many ways, Maud serves as a foil for Patrick. For this reason, the experiences of these two characters—more than those of David or Fleda—best illustrate the tensions that arise when old-world narratives are imposed on the new. The aesthetic concept of the sublime constitutes a principal mechanism which Patrick and Maud use to negotiate between chaos and order. Patrick relies on the Kantian notion of sublime to maintain a unified sense of self. By contrast, Maud, although initially bound by the dynamics of the Kantian sublime, transforms this aesthetic structure into what the feminist critic Patricia Yaeger describes as "the sublime of nearness." Maud resolves the crisis associated with the sublime in a fashion which allows her to develop a relationship between self and other.

The central portion of the narrative is prefaced by the following quotation: "For everyone / The swimmer's moment at the whirlpool comes." This line from Margaret Avison's poem intimates that everyone must negotiate chaos. The question is not whether chaos will enter the system, but what bargain will be struck with the other. In the central section, chaos is figured by the whirlpool located downriver from the Falls. Fleda underscores this association when she suggests that "it was a geography of fierce opposites. Order on one side and, nearer the water, sublime geological chaos" (31). The novel associates the whirlpool with the archetype of the labyrinth when the historian explains its origins to Patrick.

As David McDougal states, the whirlpool below the Falls was formed because, at one point, before the "'ice age came along and filled it up with rocks and soil,'" there had been a fork in the river. Even though the fork no longer exists, "'some of the water still wants to go that route. But, of course, it can't because there is nowhere to go so it turns back on itself'" (103). David goes on to explain that his wife interprets the whirlpool in terms of the quest structure of romance and views it as a metaphor for "interrupted journeys. As if the river were Ulysses or something" (103).

At first, Fleda, who views the whirlpool from above, describes it as a "cumbersome, magnificent merry-go round." From her distanced vantage point—a drop of three hundred feet—she sees only the "awkward, ceaseless

motion of going nowhere . . ." (32).[4] When she launches her toy boats into the current, noting that not many of her crafts are "able to go the distance," she is forced to revise this initial impression and to admit that "the water is dangerous" (60). But the power of the whirlpool to wreak havoc—to instantiate chaos—is most forcibly demonstrated in the scene which portrays the fate of the stuntman, Buck O'Connor, a young man who attempts to brave the whirlpool in a boat he constructed himself from "the antlers and the tanned hides of several moose" (116). Consistent with the character of chaos as "anything where the parts are undistinguished; a confused mass or mixture, a conglomeration of parts or elements without order or connection" (*OED*) ,the whirlpool pulverizes the stuntman and his boat; as one spectator explains, it was "difficult to determine . . . which areas were beast and which were human, but there was one thing certain: neither had survived the journey in their original form" (133). In addition to this association with confusion and disorder, the whirlpool is also aligned with the image of chaos as a "void" (*OED*). The link between whirlpool and chaotic void is drawn when Patrick remarks that the sound made by the whirlpool is "a negative sound, the sound of silence . . . a vacuum of sound . . ." (222).

The novel not only sustains this identification between chaos and the whirlpool, but goes on to underscore the gendering of the labyrinth. This overlay of gender first becomes explicit when Patrick identifies the whirlpool as Woman.[5] Early on in the novel, he finds himself infatuated with both Fleda and the whirlpool, and he actually confuses the two. When describing his plan to swim across the whirlpool to David, Patrick silently acknowledges the conflation: "Suddenly, he was uncertain whether it was the water or the woman he was talking about" (102).

In his study *Male Phantasies*, Klaus Theweleit discusses the prevalent association in literature between women and water:

> A river without end, enormous and wide, flows through the world's literatures. Over and over again: the women-in-the-water; woman as water, as a stormy, cavorting, cooling ocean, a raging stream, a waterfall; as a limitless body of water that ships pass through, with tributaries, pools, surfs and deltas; woman as the enticing (or perilous deep . . .). (283)

Theweleit argues that the representations by male writers of "woman-as-water" reflect pre-Oedipal desires for the dissolution of the Oedipal split between id and ego sustained upon entry into the symbolic order.[6] He suggests, further, that the attraction / repulsion which often constellates around

the figure of woman as water indicates the tensions experienced by a subject whose externally imposed identity is based on this split (204).

Yet, as Lyotard reminds us, between "the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe this contradictory feeling—pleasure and pain, joy and anxiety, exaltation and depression—was christened or re-christened by the name of the *sublime*" (198-99). In his study of the sublime published in 1757, Edmund Burke highlights both terror and delight when he emphasizes that the sublime produces a feeling of "delightful horror" (136). And in *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant also identifies the ambivalent response seemingly elicited by the sublime object. He remarks that during the sublime experience the mind feels agitated and experiences a rapid alternation of "repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object" (115). Whereas for Burke, the sublime simply produces terror and astonishment, Kant views these responses as merely the first step of a complicated cognitive process. In order to understand Patrick's method of resolving his encounter with the sublime whirlpool, Kant's model must be explored in greater detail.

According to Kant, pain and pleasure are bound together because, initially, when the mental faculties cannot comprehend an object's magnitude (as in the case of the mathematical sublime) or power (the dynamical sublime) and provide an instantaneous representation of the object, the individual experiences pain (108). But this sensation is quickly replaced by one of pleasure after the mind "sinks back into itself" and becomes aware of reason's demand for synthesis—a demand which would have remained invisible, ironically, were it not for the failure of the imagination (109). In the Kantian sublime, the individual transcends human frailty and mortality because the blockage of the imagination prompts an act of self-analysis, which acquaints the mind with reason's demand for totality—a demand which "indicates a mental power that surpasses any standard of sense" (111). Fear mingles with delight when the mind becomes aware of "its own sublimity, which lies in its vocation [its duty to obey reason] and elevates it even above nature" (121).

In Urquhart's text, the whirlpool affords a concrete image of the "interrupted journey," the blockage of the imagination which forces the mind to turn back on itself; and the feelings of pleasure and pain, fear and desire, that Burke and Kant isolate, characterize Patrick's attitude toward both Fleda and the whirlpool. Initially, it remains unclear whether he wants to

transcend nature in the fashion outlined by Kant, or whether his ambition lies in healing the split between id and ego as described by Theweleit. At first it seems as if Patrick wishes to efface boundaries. While he meditates on his plan to swim across the vortex, he specifically expresses a desire for the dissolution of personal boundaries:

> Submerge. To place oneself below and lose character, identity, inside another element . . . . The world above. That's where he lived all the time now. Patrick had not swum for years. He remembered the liquid envelope, the feeling of total caress . . . Patrick standing alone at the top of the bank, made a decision. He would swim again somehow. He looked out over the difficult whirlpool. He would swim there and take the world above with him, if necessary. This would be his battle and his strength. (80-81)

Although his claim supports the belief that he wishes to undo the work of the symbolic order and return to a pre-Oedipal existence, his subsequent assertion that this would be his "battle and strength" indicates that, quite the contrary, he will continue to identify with the position of the sublime hero.

Tragically for Patrick, by ultimately conforming to Kant's model of the sublime experience, which depends on the rigid separation between self and other, he forgoes the chance to experience the deterritorialization that he longs for. When Fleda casually mentions that she hoped that they might have been able "to get close to each other . . . ," he responds by thrusting his face into hers and shouting, "I don't want to be this close to you. Not now, not ever. Look what happens . . . when we're this close we can't see each other at all . . . This close, you're a blur . . . and I'm nothing . . . completely nothing . . . nothing but a voice" (181). Here Patrick expresses his greatest fear and his greatest desire, that of becoming "nothing . . . completely nothing"—a fear which Kant suggests stems from the imagination's fear of losing itself in the "abyss" of the sublime (115). As Burke clarifies, sublime delight only arises when danger and pain do not "press too nearly."

But Fleda challenges Patrick's claim to "want the distance" by betraying her knowledge that Patrick visits Whirlpool Heights almost on a daily basis, and watches her through his binoculars. Her revelation of his voyeurism utterly destroys his sense of safety:

> He felt that his privacy, his self, had been completely invaded. He was like a walled village that had been sacked and burned, just when it was feeling most secure . . . How *dare* she? he thought, as if she, not he, had been the voyeur . . . . He was furious . . . Patrick did not look at her, would never look at her again. She was not supposed to be aware of the focus of the lens he had fixed on her. (182)

At this point, Patrick determines to separate his lofty quest from Fleda, and the image of the soiled workaday world that she has come to represent: "She became the smudge of the news on his fingers, the ink from his employment on his hands, the ugly red brick of his small house. Still, there was a swimmer in his mind and that swimmer would descend the bank without the woman, alone" (186). His decision to persist in his quest is ultimately a decision to retreat from society.

In her essay on the sublime, Frances Ferguson confirms that the sublime promotes this type of withdrawal:

> a kind of opting out of the pressures and the dangers of the social, because the sublime elevates one's individual relations with that mountain (or whatever natural object one perceives as sublime) above one's relationship to other human beings. Sublime experience cannot be taken away from you precisely because it is being set up as an alternative to the relationships among humans in society that make the question of referentiality have its force. Further, even though the sublime object is such because it is more powerful than the perceiving individual, any humiliation or abasement that may be involved in one's submission to a sublime object is preferable to humiliation by another person. (73)

Patrick, a man who cannot stand crowds, who cannot control his panic and disgust in their midst, who must recite nursery rhymes to distract himself from the overwhelming sense of bodies pressing up against him, before fleeing from the smell of "sausage on its collective breath," is clearly unable to deal with the "pressure and dangers of the social" (122-23). Earlier in the novel, he suggests to Fleda that he wants to live "weightless" (178). At bottom, his flight from humanity represents a flight from the gaps in meaning, the instabilities, that mark communications among humans. He finds comfort in the romantic notion of the solitary quest: "It was the landscape that he wanted and needed, uncomplicated setting, its ability to function and endure in a pure, solitary state" (192).

Patrick's ultimate refusal to renounce the old-world order and engage in deterritorialization is clearly reinforced by his subsequent interpretation of his recurring dream. In this dream, he always finds himself walking through the rooms on the ground level of his uncle's farmhouse. All of the rooms correspond to reality, but when he reaches the end of the parlour, in the position normally occupied by a large window, he finds a door which opens onto a mirror-image of the ground floor, except that the contents are "entirely scrambled":

> In this space, the dining room with its cold, blue walls and perfectly regular flooring, was filled with wheels and teeth and blades and smelled of damp, rotting burlap. The harsh, golden light of the kitchen, on the other hand, would expose undulating sinks and counters, soft tables and doughboards resembling the overstuffed furniture of the parlour. The parlour had become as smooth and untouched as ice; its surfaces reflecting not its own contents at all but those of rooms Patrick had never even imagined until that moment.
>
> He would awaken, always, with blood pounding in his head and an intense fear that all the objects in the room where he slept would suddenly be unfamiliar and out of context. (1919)

Recalling this dream immediately after his final confrontation with Fleda, Patrick asserts that "for the first time [he] understood its meaning, its message":

> Keep the sequence of fear, of quest, of desire in logical order—compartmentalized and exact. . . . Do not confuse fear with desire, desire with quest, quest with fear. Otherwise the world scrambles, becomes unidentifiable, loses its recognizable context.
>
> A simple shift of objects, events, emotions, from their rightful place brings chaos. And the world you live in enters nightmare.
>
> He had dislocated and mixed categories, had confused the woman with the whirlpool, had believed, in some crazy way, that she *was* the landscape . . . .
>
> There would be no more confusion. He was through with the woman. From now on, whenever he visited Whirlpool Heights, and he knew he would visit often, it would be the landscape he was courting. (91-92)

Initially, Patrick's acknowledgement of his earlier misguided conflation of the woman with the whirlpool would seem a positive step. As Klaus Theweleit argues, the sexualization of males [and females] involves the manipulation and control of desire. The young boy's "desire is—indeed is *required to be* directed solely toward women. All of the growing boy's ideas, hopes, dreams, and plans must be focused and fixated on the conquest of that one object, women" (375). Arguing that this disciplined desire, which takes the initial form of an incestuous desire for the mother, is reductive and forecloses choice because it is "installed in the subject from without, by society" (377), Theweleit asserts that, in fact, desire "cries out for something else: 'It isn't my mother I wanted. It was never her—or even simply a woman. I wanted to know the world, produce it, people it with my creations. I wanted to explore every possible connection, visit every site on earth and leave again" (376). Patrick seems to attain this recognition when he chastises himself for believing that he wanted this woman rather than the world.

However, while he rejects the conflation, his desire still remains fixated

on an ideal notion of "pure, solitary landscape," which indicates that he remains committed to maintaining his defensive position; he still wants to keep the elements in his life "compartmentalized and exact." Rather than explore the possibility that his recurring dream offers him a glimpse of what he longs for and has repressed, namely, the opportunity for deterritorialization, he interprets it as a warning to maintain an ever stricter order. Henceforth, he will police the division between self and other with even greater vigilance.

When he meets Maud's child in the street toward the end of the novel, this renewed commitment to order and boundaries is apparent. In the course of their poetic exchange, it becomes obvious that the boy, who is seemingly autistic, does not understand the meaning of pronouns. More precisely, he does not know the difference between "I" and "you," and Patrick takes it upon himself to teach the child the difference. Although the boy successfully makes the distinction, an aura of disappointment hovers over this achievement. Afterwards, Patrick muses to himself: "Self and other. That's the way it always was. To merge was impossible except for short periods of time. Impossible and undesirable" (188). His remarks seem sensible, the product of a rational mind, but the narrator clarifies that he has failed because, despite any assertions to the contrary, he longed for closeness but he was never able to break down the wall that separated him from others: his whole life had been "a dance in which the partners turn away" (220). But, as we have seen, this dance was choreographed, in part, by the aesthetic of the sublime, which is based on sacrifice.

The idea of sacrifice is integral to the Kantian sublime because the lofty natural phenomenon which first inspires awe in the viewer is sacrificed—reduced to an object—and is used merely to prove the superiority of the viewer's mind, so that what begins as an "excessive interest" in nature ends with an "excessive disdain of nature" (Weiskel 76). But the category of nature also includes our natural bodies, which explains why one of the "things the sublime enables us to discount is our life," and why Schiller was able to develop Kant's view into a justification of suicide under certain conditions (Weiskel 95).

Ultimately, Patrick opts for something that looks very much like suicide. He fulfils his desire to heal the split between ego and id in the most perverse fashion: he ventures in the whirlpool and drowns. And yet, rather than "lose character" and escape the order associated with the old world, he

becomes its victim. But, as I suggested earlier, Urquhart's text offers more than an illustration of the dangers associated with the sublime. In its portrayal of Maud, the novel highlights an alternative to the obsessive and destructive *pas de deux* between subject and object which is characteristic of the Kantian sublime.

When the novel opens, Maud has recently taken over her dead husband's role as the town's undertaker. She now looks after members of the community who die, as well as the tourists who drown themselves in the Niagara River. The bulk of her work begins when tourist season arrives in the spring. The River Man, mentioned earlier in conjunction with Patrick's death, assists her in collecting the bodies, or "floaters" as they are termed by the initiated. But these unnamed and unclaimed bodies, or, in some cases, fragments of bodies, which arrive at her door trouble her greatly. She feels an urgent need to impose order onto the chaos wrought by the whirlpool, the force that erases the identity of each body. Her method of imposing order involves writing down all available information concerning each corpse into a book, entitled "Description of Bodies Found in the Niagara River, Whirlpool, etc., 1887—." This process is potentially infinite, and, for this reason, can be aligned with Kant's definition of the mathematical sublime. Unlike the "dynamical" sublime, where the imagination is paralysed by the awesome power of nature, in the case of the mathematical sublime, the imagination is faced with the impossible task of synthesizing a seemingly infinite amount of data (Kant 111). Ironically, when Maud first opens the book in the spring, she finds that "the book itself was unidentified" because the gum label which had adorned the leather cover had disappeared over the winter (48). The threat of chaos never ceases.

In an effort to stave off chaos, Maud also constructs a private museum, which consists of a cupboard filled with numbered canvas sacks, each one containing the possessions of an unknown and unnamed body. We are told that she builds "a frail network of history around each death . . . . This was how she maintained order, how she gathered together some sense out of the chaos of the deaths around her" (165). Not surprisingly, her obsession with order affects her relationship with her strange, silent son.

In one episode, Maud takes the child into the garden and tries to impress on him the Adamic role as namer of the world. "Gar-den," she says to him slowly, pointing to the expanse. To her consternation, he gives no indication that he is even aware that she is speaking (64). Frustrated, Maud is forced to

recognize that this "absurd naming of objects had become one of the rituals of the day" (65). Inside the house, she can calmly utter an inventory of the objects, but when she is no longer within the confines of those four walls, where the number of objects to name is seemingly finite, "the enormity of the task confounded her" (65-66). Her predicament once again recalls Kant's discussion of the mathematical sublime.

Eventually, the futility of her task, coupled with the child's unresponsiveness, drives her into a rage. In her anger, she pins the child between her legs, jerks his head upright, and peels back his eyelids, forcing him to stare directly at the sun. Then she screams the word "SUN!" over and over into his ear. Despite this violent attempt to conscript the boy into the symbolic order, he does not relinquish his role as a force of subversion. He continues to work, not in the name of the Father, but in the unnamed efforts of deterritorialization. Although he groans his first word, "sawn," in the garden (with the play on the words "sun" and "sawn" underscoring the division instituted by the symbolic)[7], the boy's bizarre linguistic practice, which includes mimicry, recitation, and parody (all forms of quotation) demonstrate the impossibility of enforcing order, stability, or ownership of language. Toward the end of the novel, his verbal acts of deterritorialization culminate in his physical reorganization of his mother's house.

One day when Maud is away, the boy (in a gesture reminiscent of Patrick's nightmare) scrambles the domestic order which she has created. He takes all her possessions and rearranges them, so that her home became "a puzzle" (204). Unlike Patrick, who feels only horror when faced with a loss of order and the blurring of categories—a loss which unleashes fears of becoming "nothing"—when Maud returns and sees what her son has done, she experiences only curiosity. She recognizes that this alternative system of classification may be an expression of the other and that these "strange little assemblings might be the key to the child's mind; a garden she'd been denied access to for years. In her heart, she felt like letting him continue. Rearrange it, she would say, it might be better" (206).

When she discovers that the boy has also invaded her museum, emptying the canvas sacks and removing the labels from the shelves, so that all hope of resurrecting the "incredible classification process" is lost, she is finally forced to renounce her pursuit of sublime transcendence. She ceases to obey what Kant describes as the "law of reason"—the law which insists on

"the idea of a whole" that the imagination can never adequately represent (109). In Maud's case, this "whole" was associated with the belief that she could restore an absent identity in its totality through a relentless process of collection. Until her son interrupts this process, she behaves as if, by patiently collecting fragments from the nameless dead, she will ultimately discover the name and put an end to chaos. But her son's gesture of emptying her museum demonstrates that these fragments were never parts of some greater, unified whole, and that reason's image of totality remains an illusion in the world of experience. When the boy interrupts her impossible quest, he pierces to the heart of the illusion of sublime transcendence. As the narrator explains, he had caused "all the objects that surrounded her, all the relics she had catalogued, to lose their dreadful power. He had shown her what they really were: buttons, brooches, tie-clips, garters . . . merely objects" (215). Maud, prior to her son's intervention, betrayed the sublime (to recall Lyotard's model) by translating its doubtful question, "Is it happening," into "a waiting" for an immanent identity. Whereas Patrick uses the sublime moment to reinforce the arbitrary divide between self and other, order and chaos, Maud seems grateful for the opportunity to remove this obstacle. Her resolution addresses a pressing concern regarding the discursive legacy from the old world which Patricia Yaeger identifies, namely, "How do we move away from our . . . allegiance to an imperial Cartesian Adamic self . . . toward a model of the self that permits . . . an exploration of the pleasures of intersubjectivity?" (205). In Maud's translation of the Kantian sublime into "the sublime of nearness," the struggle typical of the Kantian sublime is retained, but, as Yaeger suggests, "the conflict is rewritten so that the desire for closeness with the other that the conventional sublime tries to repress remains visible and viable . . . " (204). In the final section featuring the undertaker, we see this formerly isolated woman pulling her son "closer to her own warm body" (233). Her life becomes a dance in which the partners turn toward one another.

At this point, one wonders what enables Maud and not Patrick to revise the choreography of the Kantian sublime. The novel seems to suggest that the answer lies in the difference between their investment in traditional discourses—a difference which is informed by gender. When the novel opens, Maud has already begun to realize that she stands to gain little by conforming to the roles of bride, wife, or widow, which have been imposed on her by the old-world narratives (149). By contrast, although Patrick feels constrained

by these same narratives, they nevertheless guarantee him, as a man, a slightly more privileged position. For this reason, he persists in conforming to the role of the solitary quester who affirms his subjectivity by dominating the sublime object.

Although I have restricted this discussion to an examination of characterization, I would like to conclude by pointing out that the text's commitment to deterritorialization has an impact on the formal structure of the work as well. The central story traces the intersecting lives of five characters. There is no single hero. The text, composed of over forty discrete sections, alternates from the adventures of one character to the next. Like a merry-go-round, it offers the reader a whirling vision of colour and incident. With its shifting focus, the novel ensures that whatever plot can be said to "exist" owes its tenuous existence not to the unifying presence of the hero, but to the reader's ability to fabricate meaning through a poetic process of association. Like the child's chaotic speech, this polyphonic structure, which invites readers to compare the experiences of the various characters, also *works in the service of* deterritorialization because the multiple meanings which proliferate as a result of this type of associative structure frustrate any impulse toward containment. In the end, as readers we must also strike *our* bargain with chaos: "For everyone / the swimmer's moment at the whirlpool comes."

NOTES

1 By "discourse," I refer to what Catherine Belsey describes as a domain of language-use, a particular way of talking (and writing and thinking). A discourse involves certain shared assumptions which appear in the formulations that characterize it (5).

2 This was the working title of the novel.

3 The term deterritorialization is used by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* to describe the subversion of entrenched discourses.

4 My thanks to François Lachance for pointing out that Fleda's initial understanding of the whirlpool as an innocent merry-go-round is dependent on her distanced perspective.

5 In using the term Woman, I refer not to actual historical individuals (i.e. women), but to what Teresa de Lauretis describes as the product of various social technologies of gender, which assign individuals to a particular category that does not exist out there in nature (4).

6 In my use of this term, I draw on Chris Weedon's definiton of the symbolic order as the social and cultural order in which we live our lives as conscious, gendered subjects,

which is structured by language and the laws and social institutions which language guarantees (52). For Lacan, meaning and the symbolic order as a whole are fixed in relation to a primary, transcendental signifier which Lacan calls the phallus, the signifier of sexual difference, which guarantees the patriarchal structure of the symbolic order (53). See Lacan, pp. 67, 198-99.

7 According to Lacan, the child's first use of language constitutes a fall into alienation and reification because, when an individual represents himself, he does so as if he were an object among objects.

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