

Walking Towards the Past: Loss and Place in Jane Urquhart's *A Map of Glass*

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The country was to him a living being, developing under his eyes, and the history of its past was to be discovered from the conditions of its present.¹

In this paper I examine the notions of *loss* and *place* in relation to the mourning of our personal and historical pasts.² In doing so, I draw upon the psychoanalytical writings of Julia Kristeva in an analysis of Jane Urquhart's 2005 novel *A Map of Glass*. I read *A Map of Glass* in the winter of 2006, just after having submitted the final draft of my dissertation to my examination committee for oral defense. My doctoral dissertation³ investigated Kristevan psychoanalytical and literary theory and how the processes of separation, loss and idealization are connected to "lost nature"—and how, in Kristevan thought, nature is *a historical past*. Thus, as I read the novel I was particularly interested in how the themes of loss and mourning are explored in Urquhart's text.

My inquiry into this topic and Urquhart's novel took on greater personal significance when, upon completion of my oral exam, I accepted a postdoctoral fellowship at York University in the Faculty of Environmental Studies. In April 2006 I went to Toronto for the very first time and purchased a house near the shores of Lake Ontario. This is where Urquhart sets her story, describing and documenting, within the pages of her novel, the history of the early settlers and the timber industry. In this sense, Urquhart's novel literally became, for me, an instructional map and guide to the place and people of Ontario.

The story is also about emplacement, displacement, and change—themes that would profoundly impact my life as my family and I prepared for the move from Calgary to Ontario in the spring of 2006. As a result of the sudden developments in my own life, this paper evolved as an accumulation of fragments of thoughts and impressions collected while in the midst of traveling back and forth between Ontario and Alberta as we relocated, our lived-experience mirroring a central theme of the novel—the transitory nature of place and people's lives. However, for the sake of this paper there are three main topics I wish to explore.

First, I wish to discuss the Kristevan notion of lost nature as a lost historical past. Urquhart's novel is an in-depth exploration into loss—loss of place, loss of nature, loss of love, loss of memory, and even loss of language itself—and the necessity for the recovery of loss, and therefore our historical past, through the re-remembering of stories. Thus, this novel both examines the notion of, and provides an excellent example of, "spaces [that] can tell stories and unfold histories...through artistic and literary practices." I also wish

to examine the theme of the “mapping” of place in the novel, as well as the unlikely pedagogical relationship that develops between the two central protagonists, Sylvia and Jerome, as she reconstructs the stories of her ex-lover’s life and her own, and he becomes transformed in the “telling.” My hope is that this analysis will raise further questions about how the disappearance of place and the mourning of this loss “interrupt and transform how we live and learn together.”

Kristeva and Loss

Kristeva’s conception of the imaginary is a vital locus for her thinking on subjectivity and history. This thinking makes a strong commitment to revealing the hazards of being ordained to a merely linguistic universe, and so losing a world of nature, for this is also to lose a historical world.⁴

My reading of *A Map of Glass* begins with Kristeva’s psychoanalytical writings on loss. Kristeva argues that there is an “original” object (which she associates with the maternal feminine) from which the pre-verbal subject must separate in order to achieve individuation. This separation, according to Kristeva, involves a violent splitting (abjection) followed by loss and mourning. Successful mourning is supported by an imaginary construct, which Kristeva refers to as “the imaginary father.” The imaginary father, in contrast with Freud’s and Lacan’s prohibitive father, is a loving figure which supports the subject’s entrance into language. According to Kristeva, an inability to let go of the maternal object, along with the failure of the signifier to uphold the subject, results in a depressive or melancholic state. However, for Kristeva, depression also marks the “remnant of freedom” because depression “indicates the child’s consent to lose the mother’s body,” and the resulting sadness and pain are an *awareness of loss*. The depressive state becomes mourning when there is an acceptance of the loss of the original object.

From a Kristevan perspective, successful mourning involves a complex process of “negation,” where loss is accepted in the form of signs. Thus, the beginning of language lies in an “awareness” of and the “negation” of loss. Kristeva (1987) explains:

Signs are arbitrary because language starts with a negation of loss, along with the depression occasioned by mourning. “I have lost an essential object that happens to be, in the final analysis, my mother;’ is what the speaking being seems to be saying.” But no, I have found her again in signs, or rather since I consent to lose her I have not lost her (that is negation), I can recover her in language.⁵

For Kristeva negation is not the only requirement for entrance into language, but also the *conveyance of loss* through a series of successful mournings.⁶ Thus, for Kristeva, the remnant of freedom is signaled by incomplete mourning and a “return” to the site of pain: “For what this return means in

Kristeva is a discovery of suffering subjectivity where loss and mourning have been locked in...the return involves bringing the barricaded discourse into connection with the affect from which it is cut off.”⁷ In a Kristevan aesthetic, conveyance of loss requires “unique discourses that are successive symbolizations/experiences of loss (as well as love).”⁸ These include narration (stories of loss and love), psychoanalytic or hermeneutic listening, art, —and, most relevant to this paper, “mapping” as a form of artistic practice and expression.

Key to Kristevan thought is her association of the original lost object with lost nature, which she claims is a lost historical past.⁹ Kristeva argues that “lost nature” *cannot* be recovered but turns up in fantasy as loss or “unspoken memory.” In other words, what is lost cannot be restored, only the loss. Giving form to this loss (and love) is an ethics for Kristeva.

Now let me turn to the novel. The novel opens with the dramatic disappearance of Andrew, a historical geographer, who suffering from Alzheimer’s wanders lost on the snowy banks of Lake Ontario. The final passages in the opening chapter set up the action in the novel.

He knows the island was the beginning—knows this in a vague way, not having the words for either island or beginning. He must get to the place that water touches all around because without the beginning he cannot understand this point in time, this walk in the snow, the breath that comes into this mouth and then departs in small clouds like the ghosts of all the words he can no longer recall. If he can arrive at this beginning, he believes he will remember what was born there, and what came into being later, and later again, and later again—a theorem that might lead him to the now and of effort and snow...He walks for some time on the hard, pale river, his left sleeve now and then brushing against the arms of snow-laden pines. Eventually his body comes to know it is exhausted and takes the decision to lie on the smooth bed of ice and snow...He sleeps for a long time. And when he awakens he discovers that his body has been covered by a thick, drifting blanket that is soft and cold and white. The whole unnamed world is so beautiful to him now that he is aware he has left behind vast unremembered territories, certain faces, and a full orchestra of sounds that he loved. With enormous difficulty he lifts his upper body from the frozen, snow-covered river and allows his arms to rest on the drift in front of him. The palms of his gloved hands are open to the sky as if he were silently requesting that the world come back to him, that the broken connections of heart and mind be mended, that language and the knowledge of a cherished place re-enter his consciousness. He remains alert for several moments, but eventually his spine relaxes and his head droops and he says, “I have lost everything.”¹⁰

This sets the tone for the remainder of the novel. What follows is the remarkable tale of Andrew and his ancestors and the rise and fall of the timber industry on Lake Ontario, as related by Sylvia, his lover, to Jerome, a young installation artist, who discovers Andrew’s dead body in the ice. When Sylvia discovers that Jerome has found Andrew’s body, she leaves her home in Prince Edward County and sets out to Toronto in search of the young artist. However,

what we learn at the outset of the novel is that this is Sylvia's first expedition out "into the arms of the world" as she suffers from a "condition"—although never actually named, one assumes it to be related to autism.

Sylvia's internal world represents fixity and stability, symbolized by her house which is like a museum filled with inert objects such as candle sticks and a collection of cherished porcelain miniature horses: "She preferred the stillness, the sheen, of the three miniature beasts on this table. There had once been four horses, but her mother, cleaning, had broken one. Sylvia had mourned for months."¹¹ The stillness of the world inside her house is contrasted with the transitory nature outside, as when Sylvia describes the spring thaw as the "anniversary of sorrow—everything moist, transitory, draining away, disappearing."¹² Sylvia is married to Malcolm, a kind yet patriarchal doctor who observes her and studies her condition as if she were a scientific specimen. When Malcolm visits her the first time in her parent's home for a family dinner, he gently lifts one of the china horses and she whispers to him "they don't like to be touched, to be changed."¹³ Malcolm, the reliable and good doctor, is contrasted with Andrew, who she unexpectedly meets in a chance encounter one day walking on the street when he pulls her away from oncoming traffic. With Andrew her life changes and she experiences feeling for the first time: "Until Andrew had opened the door of the world for her, the physicality of the past was mostly brought toward her by the objects stored like relics inside her family home."¹⁴ Indeed, Sylvia even views herself as a kind of relic, as she expresses in one of her conversations with Jerome:

I have an odd mind. There are times when I can't move it around, can't take it to a new subject of concentration. It sticks...it sticks to things, things that I've come to understand other people have little, sometimes no interest in at all...But my own strangeness, I think, is that perhaps I have lived too long in the same place, too long in the same house, thinking about sofas no one sits on, cupboards no one opens filled with silver and china and linen no one ever uses. Any more. There are also Bibles no one reads and ancient photo albums no one ever looks at, old letters no one ever glances at. Except for me, of course, except for me. It is as if I were an extinct species mysteriously catapulted into the beginning of the twentieth-first century...¹⁵

With Andrew, Sylvia, perhaps for the first time, experiences anguish and pain from which she can no longer retreat—"there was no longer any escape available to her in the comfort of her known world."¹⁶ As she leaves Malcolm and the safe-haven of her childhood home for the city, she reflects:

No matter how careful still the horses stood, in the end, even they couldn't stop things from happening. They couldn't stop the time that marched so noisily over their heads. They couldn't prevent me from leaving the room, walking down the hall, out the door. Neither you, nor your goodness, nor china horses could keep me forever away from the arms of the world.¹⁷

Sylvia's "Condition": Autism and Representation

Sylvia's "condition" is certainly one of the great enigmas of this story. In trying to understand the symbolic significance of having Sylvia as our narrator, I inquired further into the meaning of autism in psychoanalytic theory. In his essay *Killing Me Softly (Autism, Time, and Representation)*, Michael Turnheim offers a psychoanalytical interpretation of autism, which draws on the theory of Kristeva's predecessor, Melanie Klein.¹⁸ Klein's theory of the subject involves the processes of introjective and projective identification. To summarize briefly, from a Kleinian perspective, the infant child introjects good and bad internal objects. The child attempts to project the bad objects outside into the external world, so as not to be overwhelmed by them (and overcome by the death drive). This leads to a kind of aggression or violence against the m(other). This persecution against an other causes feelings of anxiety and guilt in the child, which is subsequently followed by a depressive phase and eventually a normalization. The problem, postulates Turnheim, is that "autistic persons never go through this primordial paranoia. Since they have never created an enemy, they have never been persecuted and, for this same reason, they don't have an ego." Thus, according to this interpretation the yet-to-be subject remains bound to the original object and there is no awareness or experience of loss.¹⁹

According to Turnheim, on his reading of Derrida, originary violence sets up the possibility of sequential time. Turnheim writes that "autism is first of all a time problem...time has to be opened up and this opening is violent. There has to be a sort of deal—I accept the violence of the unfolding of time and I get something else. This deal does not work in autism, it is refused."²⁰ I liken this to Kristeva's argument that a refusal of negation prevents mourning and the pre-verbal subject remains bound to the maternal object. This is most noticeable in the speech patterns and development of autistic persons. Turnheim elaborates this point in more detail.

In autism there are isolated meaningful actions which do not seem to be linked to what was before and to what will come after. On the level of speech there are strategies which help to be able to survive in a social world constituted by a certain unfolding of time...for example speaking by imitating whole sentences spoken by another person ("echolalia"), which means that the unfolding of time is borrowed from the other, ready-made.²¹

We detect examples of such speech irregularities in Sylvia. Early on in the novel, we learn that "Malcolm had taught Sylvia about conversation."²² Sylvia, for instance, explains that "The introduction of a new piece of information usually requires that a question be asked, he had explained, even if the information comes about as a result of a previous question."²³ In another example, on her second meeting with Jerome, Sylvia opens the conversation with "Much warmer weather" and continues "This was one of the many

climate-related remarks that Malcolm had suggested she use when he was trying to teach her the skills of social interaction. She had learned many things about the weather during this period, had developed a fascination for it in fact watching reports on the television and reading books about meteorology until her insistence that it should become the focus of any conversation had led to Malcolm's banning of the subject altogether."²⁴

A most revealing example of the idea of original violence opening up sequential time is illustrated in a passage where Sylvia recalls looking at the images in a picture book when she was a child. The difficulty with this passage is that it then raises again the question again of Sylvia's "condition," or as Jerome asks desperately at the conclusion of the novel "Was there ever a condition?"²⁵ In this passage I am referring to, Sylvia describes the impact of seeing a decal which portrayed "a beautiful robin, his wings limp, falling back toward the earth because an arrow had pierced his side, producing one bright bead of blood," and a scene with a fish with a saucer in its mouth to catch the blood, and a rook with a scroll of paper and a dove with tears.²⁶ Urquhart writes:

Until those paper decals resting inside a child's album, those birds, that riverbank, Sylvia had remained uninterested in the stories her parents had tried to tell her, not understanding the idea of sequence, believing all living things were as attached to their singularity as she was to hers. She had looked at picture books, of course—mostly those that concerned animals—but the images in those books had seemed to her to be self-contained: static, a horse in a field, a spider on a web—nothing that suggested one scene related to another. Now, quite suddenly, she had come to understand that the blood dripping from the robin's neck and the flight of the departing sparrow were connected, and that from this blood, this flight, came both spontaneous events and planned ceremonies, though she wouldn't have known the words for such things at the time. And she had understood as well, that from such a chain of images, from action and reaction, there came a depth of feeling that was portrayed on the final illustration. A suggestion of this feeling seemed to be moving out from the page and into her own mind in the same way that, in winter, something her parents called electricity sparked from her sweater onto her skin when she was dressing. Years later, as a young adult, she had come across the poem: the words that interpreted those images that she had so carefully examined, then shunned. One verse stays with her always.

Who'll be the chief mourner?

I, said the Dove, I'll mourn for my love

*I'll be the chief mourner.*²⁷

“Who Killed Cock Robin”

As a rather lengthy aside, the inclusion of this particular nursery rhyme does not seem coincidental, nor is it insignificant to environmental thought, and I believe might have been chosen by Urquhart not only for its cautionary message but also for its historical relevance. Rachel Carson had sung *The Ballad of Cock Robin* in her *Silent Spring* in the early 1960s, bringing to the attention of Americans the unforeseen consequences of pesticide use (DDT) on robin and other bird populations. In her Scripps College Commencement Address, she proclaimed: “Man has long talked somewhat arrogantly about the conquest of nature...now he has the power to achieve his boast. It is our misfortune—it may well be our final tragedy—that this power has not been tempered with wisdom, but has been marked by irresponsibility; that there is all too little awareness that man is part of nature, and that the price of conquest may well be the destruction of man himself.”²⁸ Paul A. Lee, keynote speaker at the 2000 Earth day ceremonies, comments in his address that when Rachel Carson sang *The Ballad of Cock Robin* in *Silent Spring* and bemoaned the effect of DDT on robin populations, it was the wakeup call that led to the first Earth Day.²⁹

The connection to Rachel Carson and *Silent Spring* is again alluded to when Sylvia mentions the nursery rhyme to Jerome. He recalls the verse and wonders “How...had this bird-filled children’s dirge entered his family’s suburban world of freeways and strip malls and cement apartment buildings on the edges of the city? A world conducive neither to birds nor children.”³⁰ However, the connection is drawn out more explicitly a little further on in the novel:

Each aspect of the County—her own territory—had been named, filled, emptied, ploughed and planted long ago; all harvests belonged to the dead who insisted on their entitlement. “I cut the trees, built the mills, sawed the boards, made the roads, fenced the fields, raised the barns,” they had told her in the dark of her childhood bedroom. *I, said the sparrow, with my bow and arrow.* “I drew up the deeds, made the laws, drafted the plans, invented the history, prescribed the curriculum,” the dead whispered. *I, said the rook, with my little book.* They beat out a telegraph in her blood, one that read, “I fought the wars, buried the dead, carved the tombstones.” *I, said the fish, with my little dish, And I caught the blood.*³¹

Indeed, the poem is a kind of epitaph for the story of Andrew’s ancestors, the Woodmans, which is at the center of the novel. Here we are given a detailed account of the complete deforestation of Timber Island. We read from one of Andrew’s journals that “thousands of acres of forests would be floated to [Joseph Woodman’s] docks on Timber Island, so that the logs could be assembled into rafts. Then the rafts would be poled downriver to the quays at Quebec, where the timber was loaded onto ships bound for Britain. This went on for years and years, until all of the forests were gone.” Andrew’s

journal also recounts the story of Woodman's children, Annabelle and Branwell, and how the hotel run by Branwell and his wife comes into ruin by the accumulation of "sand" from soil depletion as a result of not rotating barley crops. "All this sand," cried Branwell bitterly, "all this sand because of people's obsession with money." Ultimately the hotel is buried completely under the sand. As Sylvia explains to Jerome, Andrew inherited that "memory of destruction;" she adds "Andrew thought he was the history that his forebears created, he felt responsible for that history, I think, and for those people. They are my responsibility now."³²

Sylvia and Jerome

One of the most interesting aspects of the novel, from a pedagogical point of view, is the relationship that evolves between Sylvia and Jerome. Sylvia leaves her enclosed world and sets out to Toronto to find Jerome and then in the Levinasian sense makes an ethical demand upon the young artist. She tells him directly "You found him...You can't have forgotten that...and because of that you brought him back to me.... The day you found Andrew you became the present, the end of the story, the end of my story, the reply to the last unanswered question."³³ There is a deep sense of pathos in their first encounter. They are an unlikely pair. One is not sure whether to feel empathy for Sylvia, this middle-aged woman darned in plain grey clothes, or Jerome, the young troubled pale-skinned artist. Sylvia's narration begins somewhat tenuously, and after reading the following passage I was reminded that the encounter with the other involves a "fine risk" or as Sharon Todd writes, "Each of us is burdened with a responsibility for the Other that is not of our own making."³⁴

"I sometimes can't recall his face," Sylvia said. She hesitated for a moment, then continued, "When I knew about you, I thought that—"

"Don't forget that I didn't know him," Jerome interjected. "I want to help out, but, because I didn't know him, I'm not sure what—"

"You...you came across him accidentally and so...so did I, and I've come to believe that without these accidents there really is nothing, nothing to life at all."
"Tell me," said Jerome. "Tell me about Andrew Woodman, how you came to know him."³⁵

It is a teaching and learning story. Sylvia reconstructs the past for Jerome (and the reader) through both her gift of Andrew's journals and through her personal narration. This is evident from Jerome's enthusiasm as Sylvia describes the hotel filled with sand:

"I can almost see," said Jerome, a hint of surprise in his voice, "everything you say. Everything you're talking about".... "about your hotel," he added, "Mira would have said it was like a children's story. In a children's story anything at all can happen," he said with surprising conviction. "The most impossible things and"—he looked at Sylvia—"as long as the story is being told, we believe everything. Or at least I always believed everything."³⁶

Similarly, at the end of the novel, Jerome remarks :

"Because I'd been out there on the island surrounded by the remnants of what had existed in the past, it was astonishing for me to have it all reconstructed, to have it come to life, or come back to life....And I was a bit surprised....We like the story," he said, "but somehow it made me think that everything in the world is just a mirage, just a suggestion, gone before it is graspable...stasis, stability, that emplacement you just speak of. Stability seems to me, sometimes, to be just another way of saying the end"

For the first time it occurred to her that she might have troubled this young man. "You'll forget this," she said.

"No, no, I won't Jerome looked solemn for a moment, then glanced at Sylvia and smiled. "I won't want to forget. Not the story. Not the things we've talked about." "And the truth is, I want to know, I guess I always wanted to know what happened to him. And now I want to know about you."³⁷

An ethical and affective bond develops between Sylvia and Jerome as she offers an account of their meetings, the painful partings, and her final separation from Andrew. What we see here in their relationship is an excellent example of what Todd refers to as "learning as the time of listening." As Todd explains, "When I listen, I surrender myself to the other's dense plots, to the profound idiosyncrasies that mark her speech as bearing her own historical relevance without knowing how or why, and I yield to her appeal to me to respond to welcome her...What is at stake here is the development of a capacity for the continual renewal of the self in relation to another who signifies."³⁸

Indeed, as Jerome listens to Sylvia's story he becomes troubled and is forced to confront the demons from his own past. Moreover, by the end of the story, he has become concerned and anxious about Sylvia's well-being—and feels responsible for her. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know what to do about her. I might be about to let her down, somehow."³⁹ At the end of the novel, when Malcolm comes to the city to retrieve Sylvia and bring her home, he tells Jerome that the whole story of Andrew is a hallucination, a fabrication, brought on by her "condition," and that Sylvia has made everything up. At that moment, Jerome realizes that "Everything in him now wanted to protect this woman."⁴⁰ Thus, Jerome, through Sylvia's act of narration, comes to feel obliged to care for her, and similarly, through his own act of reading the journals, a renewed commitment to the past and the history of the land and its people. The question of what is real or what is fiction is

not what is at stake. It is, as Jerome suggests, about having faith in the story—in the telling.

Mapping the Past

The novel, as the title suggests, is a story about “mapping.” There are a number of mappers in the novel—first, Andrew, the historical geographer, as well as his grandfather, Joseph Woodman, who made maps of the bogs in the nineteenth century. Sylvia, too, is a map-maker. She makes tactile maps out of fabric, wood, and stone for her blind friend, Julia. There is also Mira, Jerome’s partner, who makes what she calls “swaddles,” which are a kind of tea cozy for old discarded objects such as an abandoned rusty pail that she finds in alleyways. There is also Annabelle, Joseph Woodman’s daughter, who collects scraps of wood from the decks of ships for her “splinter book” and, of course, there is Jerome, a young installation artist who considers himself a “chronicler” of the natural environment and, like his idol, Robert Smithson, and the installation artists of the 1960s, is drawn to “abandoned scraps of any material: peeling paint, worn surfaces, sun bleaching, rust, rot...”⁴¹ Indeed, one of the central questions raised in the novel is how to preserve, or “map,” lost or abandoned objects. For example, when Branwell’s wife dies, Urquhart writes: “Branwell spent his time...aimlessly sorting through his wife’s possessions: her dresses and coats, hairbrush and mirror, odd bits of jewelry, hairpins and nets, pots and pans, and a variety of other cooking utensils, her small collection of pine butter moulds...things he had barely paid attention to until now. He believed that something should be done with all of these abandoned objects, but he had no idea what, and knew, in any event, that the sand would claim everything in the end.”⁴²

Grade Four Family Ancestry Project

Incidentally, while I was rereading the novel for this paper, my nine-year-old son, Aidan, came up to me and asked for an old family object that he could bring to class to share for his Social Studies project. After considering his request for several moments, I suggested my husband’s antique coffee urn that he had inherited from his grandmother, Aidan’s great-grandmother. The next morning Aidan called me from school and said that he needed the coffee urn that day and asked if I would bring it in. So I took out the coffee urn, a very delicate piece with an oil burner attached underneath, and spent over an hour polishing the black tarnish off until it glimmered. I took it in at the end of the class period, as I had no intention of leaving our most cherished family heirloom at school. I asked if I could stay. When I walked into the class with the coffee urn the kids’ mouths all dropped and the room filled with “ahs.” The students were sitting in a circle on the carpet sharing their objects.

There were a few children yet to take turns. There were coins, and war medals, a charm bracelet, and black and white photographs displayed neatly on the carpet. As the students presented their objects, the teacher would ask them about the object's history. The coins, the teacher said, were a good choice. They were from WWII Germany and displayed the Nazi swastika on them. One girl brought in a war medal and a charm bracelet. I had been watching the girl fingering the charms intensely, eager to share the bracelet, but then the teacher said only one object and suggested the war medal would be a better choice. It was from her grandfather who had served in Africa—a “researchable” history. There is also an autistic girl in Aidan's class. She was very engrossed in a black and white photograph. The teacher asked her about the people in the photo, but she didn't know. Still, she was fond of their long white dresses and the cameos on the women's collars and insisted on talking about that. Then it was Aidan's turn. He took the coffee urn. The teacher asked him where it came from. He said it had belonged to his great-grandmother, Alice Smith, from Liverpool, and then he read the inscription on it (*Presented by the Headmaster and Staff of Lothian Road School to Miss Jane P. Morrison Sewing Mistress on the occasion of her retrial after 32 years service, April 1915*). The teacher asked how his grandmother had obtained it? He turned to me, questioningly. I did not know, so I wavered a guess and said she must have got it from Miss Morrison, and suggested that perhaps they had been friends. When the teacher said he would have to find out more about its origins, we were both a little discouraged.

This activity raised a couple interesting questions for me, in light of having read Urquhart's novel. I wondered, *In which ways does the past make demands upon us, or our students?* And, *Who decides what gains/maintains significance?* In the end, Aidan did not use the coffee urn (because it was not researchable) yet this is the family heirloom that is most precious to my husband and for a brief few moments to my son. In the end we pulled out some first edition stamps. These were better because they depicted figures of famous people, such as Gandhi, or events, like the launching of space shuttles—things that are identifiable and could be easily researched on the Internet. A few days later, I asked Aidan what they were going to do with the objects. He said that first they were going to sketch them, and then they were going to make a sculpture of the objects. Afterwards I thought, “*Is this mapping the past?* Perhaps the coffee urn would have been better after all.”

Now let me return to the novel, and Jerome's art installations, and how this relates to the title of the novel, *A Map of Glass*, with the hope of bringing together some of the scattered fragments of thought in this paper. Jerome uses mainly ice in his art work. He is fascinated by “the way it heaved itself up on end and onto the water shore like some ancient species attempting to discard an aquatic past.”⁴³ Of course, it is also in ice where Jerome discovers Andrew's body fully preserved. In recalling the scene, Jerome describes Robert Smithson's art installation “A Map of Glass” (see Figure 1):

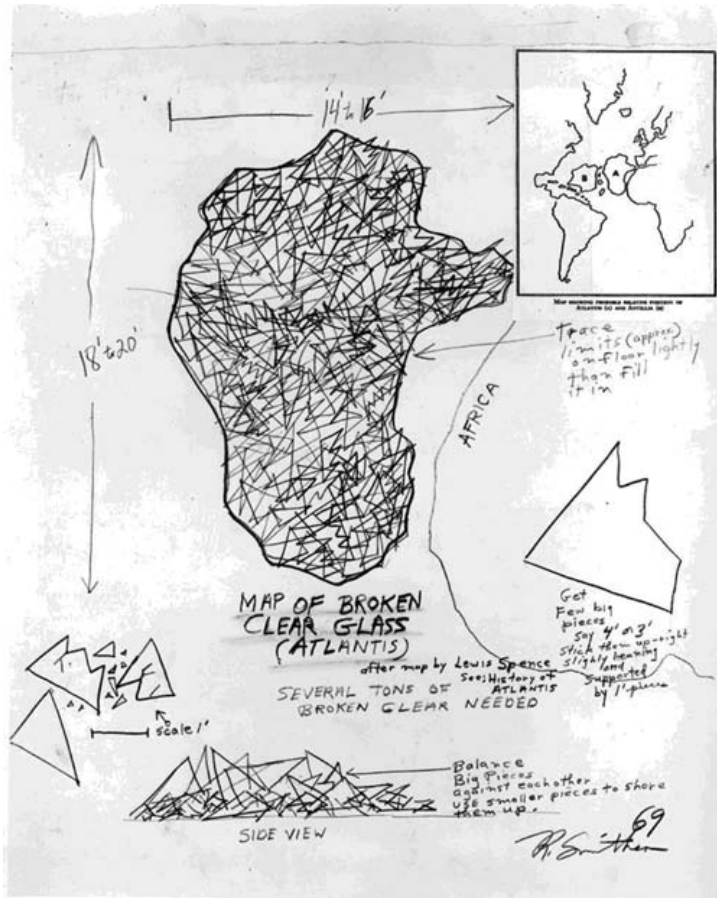


Figure 1: Robert Smithson's *A Map of Broken Glass*

According to something Jerome had read...Smithson had come to believe that the glass structure he had created was shaped like the drowned continent of Atlantis. Perhaps this explained his need to use a material that would suggest the transparency of water. But Jerome was drawn to the brilliance and the feeling of danger in the piece: the shattering of experience and the sense that one cannot play with life without being cut, injured. The sight of the ice at this moment and in this place, ice rearing up against the shore of the island, the disarray of the arbitrary constructions that were made by its breakup and migration, seemed like a gift to Jerome, as if something electrifying beneath the earth were sending signals to the surfaces of everything he was looking at.⁴⁴

As we see from Jerome's description, and as I have argued throughout this paper, the movement from an internal world dominated by unorganized drives

and fantasy to external reality and representation involves a violent opening—however, as we see in this example, in the experience of artistic expression, that violence is also rewarded with a moment of jouissance.

Smithson's Non-sites

By drawing a diagram, a ground plan of a house, a street plan to the location of a site, or a topographic map, one draws a "logical two dimensional picture." A "logical picture" differs from a natural or realistic picture in that it rarely looks like the thing it stands for.⁴⁵

This quotation serves as the epigraph to Urquhart's *A Map of Glass* and the opening sentences to Smithson's *Provisional Theory of Non-sites*. Smithson's theory helps to illuminate the relationship between landscape, the past, and artistic (or literary) expression. Elaborating on a Non-Site, Smithson writes,

The Non-Site (an indoor earthwork) is a three dimensional logical picture that is abstract, yet it represents an actual site.... It is by this dimensional metaphor that one site can represent another site which does not resemble it—this The Non-Site....Between the actual site and The Non-Site itself exists a space of metaphorical significance. It could be that "travel" in this space is a vast metaphor. Everything between the two sites could become physical metaphorical material devoid of natural meanings and realistic assumptions.⁴⁶*

What I find most interesting about Smithson's theory is the notion that the space between a Site and a Nonsite is a space of metaphorical possibility. Moreover, as David Maisel has noted, the use of mirrors and glass in his installations "serve Smithson's purposes well; he aims to 'map' a seemingly cool, rational logic that, upon inspection, reveals its inability to be resolved, its alogic."⁴⁷ Kristeva makes a similar argument—that the space between the semiotic (unorganized bodily drives) and the symbolic is "the very space of metaphorical shifting."⁴⁸ As Kristeva puts it, metaphor is "an indefinite jamming of semantic features one into the other, a meaning being acted out."⁴⁹ Moreover, she adds in *Tales of Love* that "metaphor becomes antithetical, as if to blur all reference, and ends up as synaesthesia, as if to open the Word to the passion of the body itself."⁵⁰ Indeed, this might explain Kristeva's own fascination with art installations.

Kristeva and Art Installations

In my research for this paper, I was fortunate to come across several passages in Kristeva's essay "Revolt and Imagination" where she takes up the topic of art installations. By way of summary, I wish to offer an excerpt from Kristeva,

as she very eloquently ties together the themes of psychical life, installation art, and narration. She begins her account with a description of her own aesthetic encounter with two installations:

These two installations, or, if you prefer, sculptures, one by the German artist Hans Haacke, the other by American artists Robert Wilson, in different ways represented the collapse of a foundation. Haacke's unusual installation had visitors walk on a ground that shifted, crumbled; Wilson's ground did not erode but caved in, sank. A field of ruins, on the one hand; sinking ground, on the other. Viewers were fascinated, overwhelmed by volume, as if a troubling question had physically seized them in these two spaces. Loss of certainty, loss of memory. Political, moral, aesthetic loss?...

The simple fact that an installation has been created in a place where the foundations are disintegrating gives rise to a question as well as to anxiety...a question, a sub-version, a re-volt in the etymological sense of the word (a return toward the invisible, a refusal and displacement). And this question is a sign of life—certainly a modest, humble, minimal one but already a detour, a revelation, a shifting of the collapse—and it is deeply affecting. Of course, it isn't quite jubilation or exultation, as the response being formulated is mute, but it is a sign of life nevertheless, a timid promise, anguished and yet existent.

Many young artists make installations rather than simple art objects. Are these merely signs of an incapacity to produce a distinct and intense object? An inability to concentrate metaphysical and aesthetic energy within a frame, on a piece of wood, in bronze or marble. Perhaps. But I think something else is at stake. In an installation, the entire body is called on to participate through its senses—sight, of course, but also hearing, touch, sometimes smell. As if creating an object, these artists seek to situate us in a space at the borders of the sacred and ask us not to contemplate images but to commune with beings, an unquestionably tentative and sometimes unvarnished communion but a call nonetheless. (I am reminded here of a passage in the novel where Sylvia watches Mira perform an interpretive dance on loose sand on Jerome's apartment floor). And seeing these young artist's installations, tangles, bundles, pipes, fragments, and various mechanical objects, I got the impression that beyond the malaise of a lost foundation, they were communicating this: the ultimate goal of art is perhaps what was once celebrated as incarnation. I mean by that the desire to make one feel—through abstraction, form, colour, volume, sensation—a real experience.

Contemporary art installations aspire to incarnation but also to narration. These installations have history: the history of Germany, the history of prehistoric man, the history of Russia, as well as the more modest personal histories. An installation invites us to tell our story, to participate, through it and our sensation, in a communion with being. It also produces an unsettling complicity with our regressions, for when faced with these fragments, these flashes of sensations, these disseminated objects, you no longer know who you are. You are on the verge of vertigo, a black hole, fragmentation of psychical life that some call ...autism. Is it not the fearsome privilege of contemporary art to accompany us in these new maladies of the soul?⁵¹

I think this passage offers a fine description of Urquhart’s novel. I believe that Urquhart’s literary work of art must itself be read and interpreted as an installation piece—a map of glass. Understood in this way, it is an enormous artistic and literary achievement; albeit humble and modest in its promise.

I realize I have done very little by way of explanation to bring the scattered fragments of this paper together. But in keeping with the spirit of Urquhart’s novel, these fragments are indeed a reflection of each other—and can be read as another kind of “map.” However, that being said, Urquhart’s *Map of Glass*, read through a Kristevan lens, does raise critical questions for us as educators to consider about the relationship between primary violence, education (and I mean this in its original Latin sense *educere* “to bring or lead out”), and mourning what is always already a ‘lost’ past.

Finally, by way of conclusion, I would like to return to the scene of the Grade Four classroom and to the family ancestry project so as to pose a question. What I would like to suggest is that a pedagogical event was indeed experienced by the students, the teacher, and myself during that activity, but it was not recognized for what it was—*our personal and aesthetic loss*. And if we are unable to recognize it, *who will be our chief mourners?*

Notes

- 1 Urquhart, *A Map of Glass*.
- 2 This paper was originally written for the CACS President’s Symposium Pre-conference: “Imagining and Re-Thinking the Historical and Cultural Spaces and Places of Curriculum.” (York University, May 2006).
- 3 Moore. *Women, Nature and Hermeneutic Inquiry*. Dissertation. (University of Calgary, 2006).
- 4 Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity*.
- 5 Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 43.
- 6 Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva*, 104.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 106.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 106.
- 9 Feminist theorists have criticized Kristeva for treating the maternal body’s “naturalness” as a fact (e.g., Coward, Butler). But as Sara Beardsworth notes, “Kristeva is well aware that the fact of the maternal body as a stand-in for nature is a social fact. Her attention to the maternal body simply takes the historical projection of nature onto woman at its word” (p. 219).
- 10 Urquhart, *A Map of Glass*, 4-5.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 117.

- 15 Ibid., 127.
16 Ibid., 46.
17 Ibid., 89.
18 Turnheim, *Killing Me Softly (Autism, Time, and Representation)*.
19 Ibid., 4.
20 Ibid., 5.
21 Urquhart, *A Map of Glass*, 5.
22 Ibid., 71.
23 Ibid., 71.
24 Ibid., 73.
25 Ibid., 359.
26 Ibid., 56.
27 Ibid., 58. italics original.
28 Lee, *The Ballad of Rachel Carson and the Historical Origins of the Environmental Crisis and Earth Day*, 1.
29 Ibid., 1.
30 Urquhart, *A Map of Glass*, 113.
31 Ibid., 147-148.
32 Ibid., 75.
33 Ibid., 50, 75.
34 Todd, *Learning from the Other*, 141.
35 Urquhart, *A Map of Glass*, 73-75.
36 Ibid., 133.
37 Ibid., 326-327.
38 Todd, *Learning from the Other*, 146.
39 Urquhart., *A Map of Glass*, 324.
40 Ibid., 359.
41 Ibid., 12.
42 Ibid., 278.

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