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Crafting Memory
Review of
Jane Urquhart, *The Stone Carvers*

If history is more or less bunk, then memory is more or less craft. In *The Stone Carvers* Jane Urquhart depicts characters who are traumatically hauled into the modern age, and suffer for it. This painful journey begins with the foundation of a pioneer village in South-western Ontario and ends with a redemptive kind of healing on former French battlefields after WWI. Across all this time and space, memory and the power of art and craft are crucial in maintaining social fabric as well as the individual psyche.

It is no coincidence that Henry Ford uttered his famous maxim in 1916, at the height of the WWI. Given the massive upheavals wrought by the Great War, the temptation to discard the past may well be overwhelming. However, none of Urquhart's characters find fulfillment or satisfaction by repressing their memories, and so they are forced to face the past through visual media in order to overcome it.

The Stone Carvers echoes many of Urquhart's earlier concerns; there is no doubt that she returns to certain formal and thematic interests. One of these is the narration of family saga, as in *The Whirlpool* (1986) and *Away* (1993). *The Stone Carvers* starts with the foundation of Shoneval in the mid-nineteenth century. Father Archangel Gstir is sent by the eccentric King Ludwig of Bavaria to establish a religious community in the wilds of untamed Canada. Almost by coincidence (or divine intervention) he meets Dieter Becker, a master carver who embraces the opportunity to practice the craft he loves in the service of God. Becker is the founder of the family which is to be stretched upon the rack of modernity.

This novel also echoes *The Underpainter* (1997), which tells of Austin Fraser, an American minimalist painter whose artistic vision is linked to his withdrawal from the world. The emphasis on visual art is crucial here, and Urquhart's training in Art History is evident in both novels. However, *The Stone Carvers* is more concerned with public sculpture, specifically in the person of Walter Allward, the Canadian sculptor who directed the monumental memorial at Vimy Ridge, where the Canadians won the gratitude of the French in World War One. It also reflects Urquhart's concern with landscape, especially the French landscape, and the place of the human within it.

However, Urquhart is not merely content with narrating the achievements of a famous and eccentric sculptor: Allward is a minor character at best. In fact, he fades

into the background as Klara and Tilman Becker assume centre stage—in this way the novel narrates a more personal, subaltern memory rather than grand national or world history. Furthermore, great public sculptures exist alongside ‘lower’ artforms, such as the creation of religious pieces and even the craft of dressmaking. In the first part, “The Needle and the Chisel”, Klara is depicted as an spinster, self-exiled from village society, who devotes equal time to the dressmaking her mother took pride in and the sculpting which her grandfather employed to help found the town.

Indeed, the depiction of Klara and Tilman evoke another theme of Urquhart’s which is central to *A Map of Glass* (2005): the relationship of the individual to the world they live in. Like Sylvia Bradley, Klara Becker is a woman who is staunchly reclusive, and for Klara this is due to the deep losses she experienced in her early life. Not only does her brother run away, but her lover volunteers to go to the War never to return, and her mother dies from cancer. She restricts herself to her private realm, while her brother follows his nomadic tendencies and goes on the road to voluntarily become a tramp. This is Tilman’s instinctive response to his parents’ attempts to keep him at home by chaining him to the barn. There is a deep rural anti-modernism in his father’s speech: ‘You see...we are all tied to a place...We’re stuck to it. What if I were to up and leave? What if I were to wander off? Then who would keep the fields?’¹ Despite their rupture, Klara and Tilman eventually reunite and find a way to overcome the trauma of their experiences.

Just as *The Stone Carvers* tells of a community’s gradual and reluctant passage into the modern age, it also narrates the wrenching trauma this implies for individuals. Klara’s greatest loss is that of her lover, Eamon O’Sullivan. The novel takes some time to get through their courting: Eamon is guarded and shy (but persistent) and Klara becomes angry with his lack of forwardness. However, eventually their love is tumultuous and romantic in a rural and even pastoral setting. This encourages the reader to share Klara’s pain when Eamon decides to go to the War. It is no coincidence that he is enamoured of the new technology—the aeroplane—which makes Klara’s loss even more connected to the onset of modernity. Because of his decision she rejects him completely.

Klara’s brother Tilman also experiences deep losses through his own experience of the Great War, especially in the small victory experienced by the Canadians at Vimy Ridge. He loses a leg in a grenade blast which only compounds the trauma of witnessing the horrifying deaths of friends and comrades. In fact, Urquhart’s stark portrayal of these experiences stands in contrast to Klara’s dogged repression of memory, and it is a little difficult to believe that Tilman is able to face the reality of his experiences as simply as Urquhart suggests. Nonetheless, he returns from the war and for the first time in his life settles into a community as the adopted son of a large family of Italian immigrants. His work in a factory for the war-wounded gives him a sense of purpose and the opportunity to take up carving once more.

Despite both siblings’ attempts to repress the past, they eventually find ways to face their memories and overcome the trauma they have experienced. Having burnt or discarded every reminder of Eamon, Klara takes the imprint of a waistcoat she designed for him and painstakingly reconstructs it, simultaneously embodying her own memories of him. Tilman eventually returns to the family farms and faces Klara, and although their reunion is fraught with grief, they eventually reconcile their differences and reconnect. Finally, Klara persuades Tilman to return to France in order to help work on the great memorial being constructed by Walter Allward.

This is where the novel reaches its climatic sense of redemption. By engaging in the act of collective remembrance which is the cornerstone of war memorials, Klara

and Tilman are able to properly face the trauma of their pasts and move beyond it. They are both able to engage in romance and share intimacy with a loved one. Allward's project enables them to embrace life once more and link their personal loss and tragedy to that of thousands of others of their nation, and even humanity as a whole. *The Stone Carvers* stops short just before WWII, and although it tells of Allward's psychological disintegration due to fears for his monument in the insanity of further mass destruction, Urquhart's main characters presumably live on in a kind of restful repose.

While this novel is highly readable and engaging, certain criticisms of it do hold weight. As *Kirkus Reviews* writes, 'Intermittently clunky symbolism and occasional outcroppings of melodramatic improbability dilute the force of this otherwise impressive fifth novel.'² This is unfortunately true: the imagery of Klara's sculpture of the abbess is too obviously a simple device to express her feelings about Eamon's departure. Even the main characters are really vehicles for particular ideas rather than having a vibrant life of their own. The rather glib, romantic ending where the two couples come together (almost for a group hug) does seem to reflect the pat, simplistic kind of closure which is more at home in Hollywood than a gripping historical fiction which gives expression to the pain and trauma of modern experience.

Nonetheless, this is a novel which is well worth reading. It spans a huge scope in both time and space, from pioneering Canadian history to interwar memorializing in France. This broad scope is deftly handled. More importantly, Urquhart poignantly depicts the pathos of tragic modernism and a defining moment for the Canadian nation. The significance of Vimy Ridge might be usefully compared and contrasted to the Australian experience of Gallipoli. The real value of *The Stone Carvers* is that it depicts the effects of WWI, not just on the men who went to fight in the trenches but on their loved and loving ones back home who felt their loss acutely. It is the difficulty of fighting on this home front, and the role of visual memory in dealing with deep trauma, that this novel portrays most effectively. It offers hope for even the most scarred victims of modern history.

Notes

¹ Jane Urquhart, *The Stone Carvers* (Bloomsbury, 2001) 68.

² Review by *Kirkus Reviews*, at Powell's Books, accessed at: <http://www.powells.com/cgi-bin/biblio?isbn=0670030449>