

Meditations on the House

The Poetics of Space in Jane Urquhart's *Changing Heaven* and *The Whirlpool*

On Christmas Day, between the early morning opening of gifts and the evening meal, I read Jane Urquhart's *Away*, one of the gifts of the day. Quite soon after, I read *Changing Heaven* and *The Whirlpool* back-to-back. Urquhart creates worlds one wants to last; as Gaston Bachelard says in *The Poetics of Space*, the poet places us on the threshold of oneirism, where our dreams can be entered. "The great function of poetry is to give us back the situations of our dreams" (15). In Urquhart's poetic prose, the reader experiences a sense of enlargement—of possibility—the presence, Rilke calls it in *Duino Elegies*, of the perilous archangel (Elegy Two). My meditation on the house in Urquhart's fiction arose, then, quite simply and subjectively from the situation of my reading, combined with the sense of enlargement which her work licenses. More analytically, Urquhart's presentation of character through the characters' thoughts, dreams, and imaginings, rather than through the events of their lives, invites attention to the house: in her fiction characters' dreaming and remembering occur in well defined interior spaces. In Urquhart's novels, characters develop through a poetic spatiality which extends from the intimacy of the house to realms unlimited.

Much has been said about landscape in Urquhart's fiction, but little has been said about the house, which seems to be an image of considerable importance, even of genesis. Interviewed by Geoff Hancock, Urquhart, explaining how "other people's memory stories" enter her poetry and prose, says, "When I hear a story I visually construct the house where the story occurred, the garden outside the house, the road that passes by the front

door, the town the house is in and so on” (35). In her fiction, the house is both opposed to, and an entrance to, landscape, which, in its “turbulence and flux” (Canton 4), is one expression of chaos. Order and chaos (Hancock 36), house and universe, are polar opposites, needing one another; there is no entering chaos but from the house.

Of the three novels, only *Changing Heaven* fails to achieve the effect of enlargement, or achieves it to a lesser extent. Since Urquhart’s novels provoked my thinking about poetic space, I wondered if my diminished satisfaction with *Changing Heaven* had to do with this aspect of the novel. Having established, rather personally, how this article arose, let me begin anew.

A spate of books reimagining nineteenth-century fictions has recently appeared—Timothy Findley’s *Headhunter*, Julia Barrett’s *Presumption*, Lin Haire-Sargeant’s *The Story of Heathcliff’s Return to Wuthering Heights*, Emma Tennant’s *Tess*, and Jane Urquhart’s *Changing Heaven*. One might assemble another list of returns to the eighteenth century although these tend toward appropriations of form rather than content. In this genre, Urquhart succeeds more than most (and most do not succeed) but her success in *Changing Heaven* comes in spite of, not because of, the return to a nineteenth-century model. The language is magnificent (if occasionally extravagant), but structure and character do not match language. The structure of *Changing Heaven* is inorganic, overly elaborate. Like two fabrics (images of drapery, silk, sewing recur) lying side by side, the nineteenth-century and present-day sections of the book are unseamed; other parts are overstitched. Ann and Arthur, present-day characters, have too neatly similar childhood encounters with Tintoretto. More significantly, the parallelism—the way in which the nineteenth century explains the modern—illustrates a lack in the present-day narrative.

Structurally, the alternating ghost (beginning 1900) and character (beginning in the 1950s) chapters make for discontinuity. That spectral time and human time coincide in the final section does not compensate for the diminution in tension in the alternate ghost chapters, conversations between spooks, really, during which they sort and sift and settle the accounts of their lives (42). Arianna Ether, dead balloonist, acts as the auditor of what Emily Brontë has to say on ferocity, creativity, and love. Arianna’s persistent question as to how she died gives the ghost chapters some push, but it is not enough to “inspirit” this side of the novel. In a metafictional way, Brontë’s

remarks on writing comment upon Urquhart's making of the novel. Urquhart writes about a writer (Ann Frear) writing about a novel (*Wuthering Heights*) whose author is a revenant in Urquhart's own text and in the life of her writer-character. Confused? The revenant comments, in conversation with her companion ghost, on subjects in Urquhart's novel. Obsession and possession, not acts of writing, are, however, Urquhart's subjects. Critics and reviewers speak of Urquhart's interest in obsession (Vanwart 47; Canton 4). I prefer to think of her characters as dreamers, and their dreaming is obsessive. They dream of vastness, interminable space. Obsessive dreams of space (Jeremy Unger's for skies and polar regions and Ann's obsession with weather) and Ann's dream of entering heaven through the "other" (her attempt to possess Arthur) involve these characters in circumnavigational journeys. Such dreams, and their resultant journeys, must, however, begin on earth. A tension must exist between the terrestrial and the aerial, between the house where one dreams and the universe one aspires to. The house—whatever its form—is the *terra cognita* from which the dreamer takes flight. When the intimate space of dreaming (the house) is absent, we cannot follow flight. A poetics of intimate space prefigures a poetics of immensity.

Changing Heaven invites comparison with *Wuthering Heights*; scenes from the latter are replayed in the former. *Wuthering Heights* is a powerful place in the reader's memory. The personal experiences of the reader congregate around images of house, moor, crag, but especially around the house, so that years after reading, one says "Nelly Dean" and smells the Christmas cakes and feels the cool, damp, flag floor. Geography and domestic space are so thoroughly realized in *Wuthering Heights*, they seem to be places we have been. Like us, Ann Frear is a reader of *Wuthering Heights*. As a child, *Wuthering Heights* is a blizzard she stumbles into (18); for the adult Frear, it is a space as memorable as a room, a cave, a beast's lair.

A sense of space, both intimate and immense, is invitational in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Perhaps it has to do with her experience of the moors or her own dreaming at Haworth parsonage. As readers we enter the spaces of her novel, conflating these with our own experiences, but we cannot reach the originating source. *Wuthering Heights* may be read, but not rewritten.

Wuthering Heights is a book about a house. Its verticality (atop a hill) bred the gargantuan aspirations of its two main characters, and its isolation concentrated those appetites. The rage and wrath of their passion was nourished in attic rooms, lofts, and peculiarly enclosed chambers. *Changing Heaven*

aspires to but does not occupy the space of *Wuthering Heights*. As a result, Ann Frear is a pale version of Catherine and Jeremy Unger, the Heathcliff-like character, is an effect without a cause. An unsatisfying dispersal of character marks *Changing Heaven*, because the characters are unhoused.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard writes that “great dreamers profess intimacy with the world. They learned this intimacy, however, meditating on the house” (66) in the “*chrysalis*” of a house which enabled “both the repose and flight of being” (65). Urquhart creates great dreamers in her fiction; the successful dreamers move from intimate space to immensity (sky, water, wind), that is, from the house to the universe. In fiction, as in poetry, the great dreamer, the poet-character, licenses the reader’s own daydreaming: “a world becomes . . . accessible to our daydreaming” (Bachelard 47). The fiction of dreaming enables in the reader a similar movement from intimacy to immensity.

A fully realized house—and that doesn’t mean description—is requisite if the reader is to credit, and be complicit in, a character’s dreaming. We do not need the geometry of the house—“Inhabited space transcends geometrical space” (Bachelard 47)—but we need to experience with the character the planes of daydreaming in the enclosed space. Intimate space is the agent of character integration (Bachelard 6). Character integration begins from this site (the house); character and site are fused. Between sheltered space and storm space, a dynamic dialectic exists; at whatever pole the dreamer stands—house or universe—each awakens the dream of the other.

Changing Heaven does not create the intimate spaces, which the reader can enter, where characters dream the immensity they move towards. Of course, the novel does present several levels of a Toronto house and an upstairs room in a west Yorkshire cottage. Additionally, there is a white room. But these spaces have the non-intimacy of a tourist home. *Away* and *The Whirlpool*—novels that do succeed in terms of poetic space—are not appropriation novels; in each of these, characters dream in intimate inhabited space and move towards its opposite, limitless world.

In *Changing Heaven*, Ann Frear (freer than what?) “wants to write a book about disturbance” (2), but disturbance can only be known by way of repose. We know little of the dailiness and duties of her life. A present-day academic, her work focuses on weather in *Wuthering Heights*, a novel with which she has been obsessed since childhood. Eventually she will admit to

her lover, Arthur Woodruff (Heathcliff at ground level), that all her words on weather are really about him. Weather is her metonymic heaven. Jeremy Unger, nineteenth-century balloonist, parallels Anne; he dreams of polar regions, expanses of white emptiness.

It might seem that each of these dreamers, and their dreams, is sheltered in intimate space—Ann’s west Yorkshire cottage and Jeremy’s white room at Dover. The room at Dover is, however, not a protected space for dreaming; Jeremy’s beloved, Arianna, must shed her past for their tryst in the white room. The room is an ice box, fixing time—erasing the past, precluding the future. Although the site of sexual intimacy, it is the opposite of individual integration since it strips memory and prohibits imagining. As a natural reflex to the polar room, Arianna dreams a house, which is everything the room is not. Jeremy’s dream of immense snowfields, the “home” to which he eventually journeys (199), must have been nurtured in some intimate space but this side of the dialectic never emerges.

Arianna’s forbidden dream of a house stands opposite Emily’s dream of *Wuthering Heights*, and as their century-long spectral conversation unfolds, we understand how the Haworth parsonage enabled Emily to invent her dreamhouse. “We [at Haworth] were besieged, you see, by something other, something outer, regardless of how we were sheltered” (82). In the attraction of the terrestrial for the aerial, the dreamer would draw down the universe into the house (Bachelard 66); so Emily longs “to haul some of the stars I saw from my bedroom window into the parlour in the afternoon” (82). When a house can be dreamed, invention proliferates: “I invented them [Catherine and Heathcliff] so they could invent each other” (82). They lived “[a] permanent state of unfulfilled desire” (84). The exultation in longing which characterizes Heathcliff and Catherine’s relationship may seem, as it is described here by Emily, adolescent, but the lovers’ unfulfillment is an extension of Emily’s dream of a house. A state of impermanence, never finality, characterizes the dream of a house (Bachelard 61). Emily’s emphasis in her conversation on her dream of a house, a subject to which she frequently recurs, indicates that her dream generated not only a house but also the characters, and their passions, that tenant *Wuthering Heights*. Love, Emily says, has “architectural properties” (137), and conversely, for Heathcliff, everything about the house—“the flagstone floors,” “the winds that assault his house”—are “memoranda” of Catherine (146).

Ann Frear, no more than Jeremy Unger, knows intimate inhabited space.

She careens into immensity without first living intimate space. Neither the several-levelled house of her childhood nor the motel rooms of her assignation with Arthur Woodruff constitute inhabited space. Urquhart does not shelter her character in intimate space enabling her to dream immensity, as Emily Brontë dreamed it at Haworth. Without a realized inhabited space—a mix of dailiness and a place of dreaming—Ann Frear is dispersed, non-integrated. A clinician's report—the sights, sensations, conversations experienced by the character in a series of rooms—supplants integrity of character: a pathology of character replaces presence.

The west Yorkshire cottage to which Ann Frear flees (part two), escaping her past, is a space nuanced with literary associations. A launchpad to immensity—Ann's extravagant hopes for heaven via Arthur Woodruff—this cottage is little different from Jeremy Unger's white room.

As is appropriate for one whom literature has claimed, Ann makes her assault on heaven with words—"an orgy of speech" (223), desperate talk. But Arthur Woodruff—whom she joins, without invitation, in Venice, where he is inspecting Tintorettoes—is not the angel to bear her heavenward. He insists upon his attachment to daily life, his ordinariness: "I'm not what you think . . . desperate or passionate. . . . I'm fixed, Ann, stationary" (236). Clearly, hers must be a solo flight, but there is too much flight, too much heaven. Grounded Arthur is merely dull; he is no substitute for the place of repose in which dreaming begins. *Changing Heaven* gives us heaven with no earth—no nook, corner, room, house where heaven is dreamed. There is no entrance to this immensity. Jeremy Unger's dream of unlimited, unmarked polar space is unoriginated, and Ann's dream of heaven begins not in inhabited intimate space but unfolds like a tourist's appropriation of the intimate spaces of the inhabitants' homes in a toured landscape, in this case a literary landscape.

We can credit, can join (indeed, are irrevocably joined to) a character's dream of immensity if it arises in intimate inhabited space. *Changing Heaven* is rare atmosphere without a house on earth. Of course, it need not be a house; hut, cave, a single room, the branches of tree will shelter a poet's dreaming. And the universe that the poet dreams in that sheltered space need not be the known universe. The kingdom which Mary (O'Malley) dreams amidst the daily tasks of her Rathlin island cottage and in an Ontario homestead is not of this earth (*Away*), and Fleda (*The Whirlpool*) dreams, and finally departs for, a wilderness of tree, wind, and water

because a tent sheltered dreaming. A poetics of space, in these two works, renders comprehensible the longing for universe.

Prologue and epilogue frame *The Whirlpool*. Because he had the “conventional life” of “a copy clerk” (11), Robert Browning daydreams the dilapidated Palazzo Manzoni his own, imagines it restored and full of friends: “In his daydreams the old poet had walked over the palace’s swollen marble floors and slept beneath its frescoed ceilings . . .” (9). In well-being, listening to the calm lapping of the canal, which nudges the side of his house, Browning dreams past his ordinariness to the possession of that extraordinary structure. The poetics of the prologue situate Browning in repose, anticipating imminent death. That anticipation is linked to “dream architecture; the unobtainable and the unconstructed” Palazzo Manzoni (epilogue 237). Aware that the gondola moored below will bear his body to the cemetery, Browning thinks of the boat as “chrysalis” (237). Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* speaks of the house as *chrysalis*, place of “both the repose and flight of being” (65). Prologue and epilogue, focusing on Robert Browning’s death, illuminate the poetics of space in the rest of the novel, an account of Fleda McDougal’s movement from intimate space to interminable space.

The Whirlpool provides those spaces a reader can enter, bringing the most personal recollections with her, because its characters are fused to intimate inhabited space. It is scarcely possible to speak of the characters of this novel without mentioning domiciliary space. *The Whirlpool* is a novel of integrated characters—memory and imagination fluent, past and present interpolated—and of characters integrated with space. Whether it is Maud Grady in the gothic structure, Grady and Son (house and business), with its attached embalming room, or Fleda’s tent, these domestic spaces are places of thought and dream. Maud’s house is rooted in earth and in history. The surrounding garden, orchard and cemetery—places where Maud not only works but dreams—is the site of the battle of Lundy’s Lane. “[S]he lived, worked, and slept in the same series of rooms . . .” (42). In this house, long-settled and imbricated with history, Maud has her “travels.” She is often “away in the memory of her dead husband’s memories” (95), and from the objects found on the bodies of those whom the whirlpool has claimed, she construes whole lives. Confident in the well-being the house affords, Maud Grady, roaming its corridors or settled in a corner, “visits” the horizons of

other lives. Truly a resting place (a meaning implicit in the business function of the structure), Maud's house enables her to imagine these horizons.

Sharing the house is Maud's son, known only as "the boy" or "the lovely boy" (153). His silence, his wordlessness, puzzles and sometimes provokes sputtering rage in his mother, a rage she immediately regrets (66-67). Something is wrong with this boy (autistic, one reviewer says); he seems to inhabit a vast solitude. The boy is sifting in silence the "I" from the "non-I": "[T]he word *world* moved lazily behind his forehead, followed by the word *water*" (75). The image of the body and the self is formed in intimate space, in the cradle, in the first house, but something is askew here. There is no "I," no name; he does not name himself (201). The "non-I" is overwhelming; the boy is located, or unlocated, in the immensity of the "non-I."

In perhaps the most poetic passage of the novel, the boy conquers the world with words: names of objects or names of actions are desperately repeated; then, descriptions of others' actions proliferate: "Now you are climbing the stairs. . . . Now you have come to the top, now you are walking down the hall" (200); and then a manic need to organize the contents of the house sets in (204-06). The child fills the world, the open, with words: "The child spoke constantly; his mother and her employees hardly at all" (163).

Between the boy and the chief male character, Patrick, a visitor to this Niagara Falls area, a great sympathy develops. The boy must recognize in Patrick a companion, another who inhabits immensity. And to Patrick, the boy's disconnected words are recognizably the language of poetic association. In the dialectic of house and universe, each character in *The Whirlpool* stands at one pole or another, and there dreams its opposite. From the boundless world, the boy, as the narrative ends, comes home. Patrick belongs to immensity.

Although he is housed, a visitor at his uncle's farm, Patrick has so long dreamed landscape that he lives in the territory of his dream, the landscape. Patrick is a "refugee" from Ottawa. In his clerical work there, and in the society and conversation of friend and workers—"utter loneliness" for him (69)—he had experienced "panic" (70). The landscape, by contrast, is a "pure, solitary state" (192). Conceiving the plan of swimming the whirlpool, he will "take the world above with him" (81), "a journey" without maps, beyond language (221). Intimate with immensity (the landscape), he is poised on a precipice (the whirlpool) from which, if he enters its mystery, there will be no return. Throughout the summer, he considers the

whirlpool, and speaks of the projected swim. No one believes him. Sometimes he thinks of the whirlpool as architecture (the tug of the house from the position of immensity), and sometimes as flesh. In his mind, he conflates the whirlpool with the woman Fleda, whom he observes in secret. The possession of the woman—his need to know her movements, habits, history—is not a desire for intimacy. Signs or acts of domesticity in her revolt him. Speech, that is her speech, is unwanted and unheeded; he wants to keep her completely still (128). When towards the end of the summer, she tries to draw close to him, he responds to her intimacy with distance: “I don’t *want* to be this close to you. Not now, not ever. . . . I want the distance” (181). Unlike the whirlpool, she is ordinary not mysterious: She “pulled his fantasy into the mundane architecture of fact” (182). Patrick is one for whom intimate space has no attraction; in immensity, he does not dream its dialectic opposite, the house. Wherever, long ago, he dreamed interminable space (and we are told where), he has made his choice.

Fleda stands at the pole opposite to Patrick. In a house, a tent actually, she dreams the universe. Years earlier, in other inhabited spaces—in her first house and in a hotel—she had conceived of her dreamhouse, one which is now under construction in Cedar Grove, just yards from the whirlpool. But over the summer (1889, according to her journal), for Fleda, the dreamhouse, the projected house, becomes inadequate. Although she has already, in the move to the tent, “broken out of the world of corners and into the organic” (142), during the summer and the long dream in the solitude of the tent, she will complete her departure from architecture (143), daydreaming a house without walls, a wilderness. The tent opens onto space. In the primitiveness of this refuge, the tent, Fleda feels herself becoming a part of the whirlpool (145); she responds to “*the pull of the open dark*” (151). The tent and the forest (the “*unsurveyable*” [151]) neatly illustrate the dialectics of sheltered space and storm space, house and universe. The poet who daydreams in the well-being of sheltered space welcomes the storm. Fleda is called to adventure. Ultimately rejecting the geometrical house, with its long-considered floor plans and excellent windows, she refuses, as well, the role of angel in the house, a role offered through marriage and symbolized in her husband’s gift of Coventry Patmore’s poems. Because she is rapt in dreams, Patrick confuses Fleda with the whirlpool, and she, for awhile, mistakes him for what she is dreaming.

Patrick—already in immensity (the landscape), poised on the brink of

annihilation (the whirlpool)—sees Fleda as part of the landscape, but she is infuriatingly independent of his efforts to keep her still, quiet, and distant. It is distance and, finally, absence he wants from her: “[I]t was *she* he desired to be absent from” (217). The desire of the beloved’s absence, as Rilke similarly recognizes, is integral to the dream of immensity.

And you, dear women
who must have loved me for my small beginning
of love toward you, which I always turned away from
because the space in your features grew, changed,
even while I loved it, into cosmic space,
where you no longer were. . . . (Rilke, “The Fourth Elegy”)

Similarly in *Changing Heaven*, Jeremy Unger’s peculiar kind of love for Arianna requires absence; the beloved is cherished through absence not presence, but it is an absence which is felt as possession not lack. Jeremy arranges Arianna’s absence (the ballooning accident) to possess her more fully. The dreamer of immensity becomes intimate with vastness; for such a dreamer, the absence of the beloved is union. This is the condition which Fleda, too, achieves. When Patrick, after Fleda’s attempted intimacy, turns his attentions away, Fleda feels, at first, like “an abandoned house” (193), but when her anger subsides, she merely separates the “man who visited” from “the one in her dreams,” whom she can keep “in the dream house in her mind” (196). Fleda no more needs his real presence than she does the projected house in Cedar Grove. Rilke calls the cosmic space toward which one dreams “the Open”: “[T]he natural world looks out/into the Open” and “Lovers, if the beloved were not there/blocking the view, are close to it” (Elegy Eight), but “Aren’t lovers/always arriving at each other’s boundaries?” (Elegy Four). In the immense, the beloved’s absence is tolerable, is necessary.

Primitiveness and simplicity make the tent a superb example of intimate enclosed space. In a house of many rooms, the one room or corner must be found, but in the tent, site of basic needs and simple domestic tasks, the body is one with enclosed space. In the tent’s protective space, Fleda drifts: “*I think about the water all the time. It is constantly on my mind*” (61). At the end of her summer of dreaming, “an idea was forming, taking vague shape. Departure” (218). To her journal, Fleda confesses:

I can’t imagine this house any more. David is very pleased with the progress . . .
but I just can’t imagine it.

Yesterday, I found the Old River Man's cave halfway around the whirlpool. . . . This cave seemed better. I wanted to stay there. People did once, but not on this continent. (218)

When departure is chosen, the dialectic between house and universe—tent and continent—collapses, and the dreamer is liberated even from her own dream (Bachelard 198). The center becomes one with the horizon, and the poet is intimate with immensity.

Jane Urquhart creates great dreamers. In *Changing Heaven*, the earlier fiction *Wuthering Heights* is substituted for the enfolding space of the house, in which and because of which a character dreams. Ann Frear does not enter the “heaven” she aspires to. She crashes, awakening on earth (*Changing Heaven* 238), where she will find, or construct perhaps, a first home—a hut, a house, for dreaming. In *The Whirlpool*, the poet-dreamer Fleda McDougal becomes intimate with immensity because her dream of it was housed, protected, in the caressing walls of a white tent.

In commenting on the dialectic of domiciliary and immense space in Urquhart's two novels, I have been trying to understand my diminished satisfaction with *Changing Heaven*, establishing what I believe that novel lacks. But perhaps the lack I sensed is fundamental to Urquhart's point. What Ann Frear needs is succinctly named by Mary Ann Smart in “Emily's Ghost,” her review of the novel: “the essential underpinning of a life”—the “domestic foundation that allowed Emily [Brontë] to create her masterpiece” (28). The poetics of space in Urquhart's work suggests that the daydream of infinity begins in the felicitous space of the house. *The Whirlpool* creates what *Changing Heaven* does not—a domain of dreaming, but its absence in the latter confirms that there is no changing heaven but from the house.

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