ESCAPING THE FRAME: CIRCUMSCRIBING THE NARRATIVE IN *THE WHIRLPOOL*

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In Jane Urquhart's novel, *The Whirlpool*, rotary motion (as demonstrated in Fleda's dream, in the whirlpool, or in the treadmill regimen of dull routine), becomes symbolic of death when Maud associates her children's hearse with the coaches on merry-go-rounds in Toronto (44).[1] The surreal superimposition of death on childhood amusement also informs Maud's obsessive fantasy with the dead girls whom she prepares for burial. Her relationship to these children attempts to fulfill her thwarted childhood wish to retrieve her own "broken dolls" (138). Despite the illusory candy-floss veneer which coats terms such as the "magnificent merry-go-round" (32), delusional stunts or heroic quest fantasies end in death stripped of romantic associations. Urquhart exposes the glorious dead as ugly floaters reduced to "complete chaos, [and] severed limbs" (209).

In the frame narrative of the novel, Urquhart imagines Robert Browning's death in Venice, and thereby articulates her polarized aesthetic of death, contrasting the perfect corpse (232) to the horror of the "floater" (115). The other issue which Urquhart emphasizes is the basic human need to mythologize and sustain illusions about death. For example, in the prologue and epilogue of the novel, Browning confesses his jealousy of Shelley's poetic death and mythologizes him as a type of "Adonis" (18). Yet he also sees the drowned poet both as a disgusting "bloated corpse" (17) and as a beautiful water spirit (236-7).[2] I am going to argue that the need for romantic illusions, which, in this novel, are associated with death, imprisons the characters and retards the process of psychic freedom contingent upon the dismantling of these illusions. In parodying the Homeric quest and in subverting the myths of Arachne and Ariadne, Urquhart elucidates the way in which mythi-

cal structures, imposed from without, distort the protagonists' vision of reality. Romantic idealizations, including the trope of the drowned poet and the demon lover, comprise yet another imposed form created by male poets. Urquhart emphasizes the need to destroy or revise these dangerous constructs which inspire delusions and constitute a psychological trap.

While mythic constructs give rise to dangerous fantasies, social boundaries create a false sense of order and, operating on the principle of exclusion, appear to deflect the sense of chaos provoked by death and passionate women. Urquhart suggests that men's fear of women, demonstrated in Patrick's need to control Fleda, is based on the stereotypical slippage of the chaste wife who insidiously transforms herself into a seductive adulteress. Threatening social chaos, this transformation jeopardizes the institution of marriage, a social construct which blurs the borders of identity and, in *The Whirlpool,* denies Fleda and Maud opportunity for growth. While death erodes the border of subjectivity, it also releases Maud from her tyrannical husband, Charles: it occasions both a prison and a portal. I am going to argue that in order to achieve empowerment, Fleda and Maud are compelled to destroy or escape the frame of these symbolic borders.

Trapped within both the sphere of her professional responsibilities (receiving and preparing the victims of the falls for burial) and her social status as widow, Maud is connected to death and water. Her relationship to "fallen" corpses associates her with Kristeva's idea of the abject as that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules," (4) as "the place where meaning collapses" (2). In *The Whirlpool,* the borderless abject is located not only in Maud and in the cadavers which she prepares, but also in the river which defies "boundaries, borderlines, territories" (221). But boundaries are also drawn again when, for example, Fleda becomes the excluded "other" (188, 195).

Maud and Fleda's resistance to identification with architectural models establish their status as post-colonial subjects.[3] The dismantling of walls and houses and Fleda's final journey suggest the deconstruction of Imperial codes. In order to design their own lives, they escape a despotic central structure from which they are excluded. Grounded in difference, their respective identities can only be established through the deconstruction of labyrinthine societal walls. Repudiating imposed models and imported roles,

Fleda and Maud distance themselves from a stifling community and seek freedom on the margins. With the motif of flight, Urquhart celebrates the metamorphic shedding of Maud's submissive posture as an indeterminate spider-like insect and her emergence as a self-defining butterfly who transcends cultural restraints. Similarly, Fleda dissolves her romantic idea of a demon lover constructed from imported texts, dismantles her dream architecture and escapes the frame of the novel. Paradoxically, Urquhart appears to both parody and capitulate to the trope of the romantic journey, thus trapping the reader within her fictive maze.

As weaver of the text, Urquhart distinguishes between the imported Victorian fabrication which imprisons and her authorial fabrication which provokes a revision and collapse of old constructs.[4] An artist personified as a spider in the act of demolishing his web—"unravelling what he had woven" (194)—Patrick stands in contrast to Urquhart as fabricator: she privileges his repudiated, borderless world of feminine "chaos" (192). Initially exploring and then ultimately rejecting feminine transformations, Patrick, an aspiring poet and civil servant from Ottawa, deploys the frame of the technocratic lens as a medium of attaining stability and control. Visiting his uncle's Niagara County farm while convalescing from a nervous breakdown, Patrick engages in a quest to discover a way out of his regimented existence.

Maud's opportunity for escape, involving a period of constrained dormancy and gradual metamorphosis, occurs after the sudden, unexpected deaths of her husband and in-laws. Maud finds herself responsible for managing her deceased husband's undertaking establishment.[5] Trapped within a professional role which demands she perform the part of an exemplary mourner, Maud adopts the conventional mourning attire of her era. Succumbing to a sense of duty, she is victimized by the prevailing cultural code which dictates that she encase herself for a period of two years in traditional Courtauld crape. Shrouded within this oppressive fabric, Maud's torment is emphasized in the language of violence and subjugation ("lacerated," "forced" [22]) and her days are consumed in attiring herself in her funeral clothing. Her mourning garments, depicted in terms of "crumpled armour . . . grave mud and sorrow" (22), evoke the spectre of a terrifying past which included wife abuse (92). The clothing assigned to women such as Maud is literally incapacitating and life-threatening, caus-

ing a "partial blindness," which leads her more than once into the paths of vehicles (28). The mourning costume which physically imprisons Maud and permanently stains her torso, appears to reduce her to a human arachnid, "a strange, black-veiled creature . . . groping blindly from stone to stone . . . struggling along in her cocoon of crape" (76). Embodying the alien status of the Other, Maud envisions the conception of her son in terms of "spiders, egg sacs, and webs" (96).

Trapped within the societal web of tradition, order and categories, Maud is victimized by her husband, a man who feels compelled to capture, preserve and categorize each new species of spider he discovers. She responds to the order imposed on her; playing a dual role both as victim and imposer of order, she duplicates Charles' structure rather than stepping outside of it. Caught in a matrimonial web, she covertly identifies with "the black widow," a spider which gains the upper hand in a world of marital battles by cannibalizing her mate (91). Maud is forced to spend her evenings discussing spiders ("when it was a choice between funerals or spiders, what alternative did she have?" [89]) inculcated with the notion of "duty" (22, 43), and her spider-like activity (peering out at the world beneath a latticed veil [28], crocheting beneath "a complete mesh of aged webs" [90]) is a capitulation to her husband's obsession, which she resents or perceives as "useless" (96). But Maud paradoxically emulates her husband; she becomes a collector of dead objects and, like Charles, becomes obsessed with categorizing. She succumbs to the futile task of collecting and sorting odd items in the hope of later identifying an endless series of nameless victims discovered in the whirlpool (48). This activity becomes an obsession driven by the need to create the illusion of an ordered universe. Although the compulsion to collect and document, to create museums devoted to death, is primarily associated with Charles and David, Urquhart reverses this masculine role by positing Maud as a collector who covets her "own personal reliquary . . . . This was her museum" (96).

In characterizing Maud as both spider and transforming chrysalis, Urquhart forces the old construct of the venomous woman, the mythical Arachne, to cross its own gender boundary.[6] She posits Charles as chief spider and web spinner: "He walked through her dreams in a shroud of thick webs" (23). When Maud questions her husband about an example of arachnid rape, he cites

the sadistic courtship ritual of the "thrice-banded crab spider" (91). The image of the dominating, banded spider is projected onto the ghost of Charles who haunts Maud's dreams, wearing "a black band wound around his hat" (23). In Charles's perverse, hierarchical world of men, spiders and women, Maud's limited, decorative status relegates her to a useless existence well beneath that of his cherished spiders. Noticing a doily which more than likely she had made, Maud comments: "There it rested looking for all the world like a well-ordered web; round, white, transparent. Something a marbled-orb-web-weaver might have made but wouldn't, Maud knew, because it was utterly useless" (96). Like Charles' immobilized spiders, safely encased behind glass and thus no longer dangerous, Maud remains quietly contained within her marital home, bored and spinning. Nina Auerbach, in *Romantic Imprisonment*, argues that "the very emphasis in Victorian iconography on female placidity and passivity, on exemption from mobile and passionate energy, expands into dreams of metamorphosis, transcendence, and redemptive monstrosity" (163).

Images of entrapment and metamorphosis, spiders and webs, and of the hidden larva preparing to escape its circumscribed existence, call to mind the myths of Arachne and Ariadne. J. Hillis Miller, while explicating Ruskin's theory of the labyrinth in his essay "Ariadne's Thread," notes that "The Minotaur, as Ruskin saw, is a spider, Arachne—arachnid who devours her mate, weaver of a web" (72). Urquhart, challenging Ruskin's "conflation of Arachne and Ariadne" (Miller 66), posits Charles as the Minotaur; Maud, who does not anticipate any divinely-inspired mythological figure to rescue her, develops the resources to cast her own clue in order to wind her way out of the labyrinthine trap of marital ties. Once, while crocheting, Maud attempts to persuade Charles to allow her to remove the "mesh of aged webs" which festoon the upstairs level of the house, but he adamantly refuses (90). After Charles dies, in keeping with his mania, Maud envisions "an entire sepulchre made for him from the webs of energetic spiders" (77).

Spinning or sewing, both traditional means of female economic support and dark symbols of feminine power,[7] are presented as futile activities associated with domestic imprisonment and death. Accordingly, Maud's mother-in-law's death is marked by the "needle halted in mid-stitch" (26). Maud's tedium, as she sits "dutifully over some senseless piece of embroidery" (43), echoes

Patrick's perception of his wife's knitting as an "unfathomable lengthy project to which there might never be an end" (185). The association of underworld subjection is emphasized in the fabrication of Courtauld crape: "The workers—mute, humble, and underpaid—spent twelve hours a day, in hideous conditions" (21). Unlike the stereotypical image of the devouring woman, the spider/femme fatale, lying in wait to snare her man, Maud is forced into her role as the victim of an intolerant culture.

While emphasizing both the exploitation in the manufacturing of crape and the isolation in domestic fabrication, Urquhart also appears to complicitly reinscribe the cliché of women's work as being merely decorative and useless. She provokes a re-thinking of this construct in focusing our attention on it, and elevates the feminine domestic production in which she herself engages.

Urquhart's image of Maud "struggling along in her cocoon of crape" (76), conflates and blurs the boundaries of insect forms which undermine the woman/arachnid theme; the image of the "cocoon" foreshadows Maud's eventual metamorphosis into a self-sufficient individual. Her freedom from patriarchal tyranny will transform her from spider to butterfly, from Arachne to Psyche, airborne and beautiful. Despite Charles' efforts to have Maud conform to his rules, her vision penetrates beyond the web of her obscuring black veil and she refuses to resign herself to a societal role which demands arrested growth (149). Maud's sympathetic attitude toward the black widow, a spider which passively accepts its entrapment and Charles' chloroform treatment (91), reflects her misgivings about her domestic life, which is characterized by periods of "enforced quiet" and suspended emotions (43). Charles' death releases her from the prospect of being fixed within his collection of "silenced and stilled" spiders (89).

Threatening to transgress culturally inscribed boundaries during a seditious dream, Maud attempts to violate gender-defined dress codes by shifting her mourning garment onto the shoulders of Charles' ghost (a paradoxical symbol of the law, a power which extends beyond the grave and becomes increasingly insubstantial and spectral). He rejects her cape, handing it back, and overcome by guilt, Maud symbolically acquiesces to her burdensome societal role (23). In an effort to appease her husband's ghost, Maud commissions a brooch made from Charles' hair. The brooch, symbolizing entrapment and immobility, signifies Maud's encap-

sulation of Charles, which in turn foreshadows her emancipation. It also reflects the sombre cast of her life, the "world of graves and weeping," a static world entombed beneath "a bubble of thin glass" (23). The "transparent barrier" (23) is a metaphor for the glass coffin associated with Victorian marriages, an image explicated by Johan Lyall Aitken in *Masques of Morality*:

> The stories of female heroes once ended with marriage—often the marriage hearse—or death, the glass coffin of masochistic revenge, the sickly beauty celebrated from Edgar Allen Poe to Louisa May Alcott. (32)

The glass barrier also alludes to Maud's alienation, which establishes her as a social pariah, an outcast: "she knew which clubs to avoid, which social events to stay away from. The Historical Society, dedicated to facts and personalities already buried, was almost safe" (114).

Kristeva's idea that corpses or cadavers in themselves signify a type of border, corresponds to Urquhart's theme of the fall, imaged in the setting of the novel:

> The corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall)... is cesspool and death... There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver. (3)

According to Kristeva's theory of abjection, Maud's act of ministering to cadavers relates to Urquhart's theme of the border, depicted as coincident with the Niagara river: "It was a geography of fierce opposites. Order on one side and, nearer the water, sublime geological chaos" (31). As a widow who prepares corpses, "the most sickening of wastes . . . a border that has encroached upon everything" (3) and is relegated to a life of gathering and disposing of cadavers, Maud is doubly identified with death and therefore doubly marginalized; this explains the symbolic foundation for the ostracism she endures. Like Maud, Fleda becomes abject, a social outcast associated with water and putrefying corpses.

In an attempt to understand and cope with a world which is often surreal, a world of decaying spider webs and corpses, signifying the continual inscription and erasure of borders, Maud acts out a peculiar drama "in her inner theatre" (93). She is obsessed

with dead little girls whom she fetishizes, and displaces her maternal emotions from her son onto these immature "fallen women." The "dolls" (135), whom she describes as fragile "china" figurines and ethereal "angels" (137), reflect the insidious vision of women as delicate, mindless toys with which one can play dress-up. Maud associates the children's hearse with "a wedding cake" (44), mating marriage and death, in a manner suggestive of her own experience. In *The Whirlpool*, marriage involves a loss of identity: the boundary of the self collapses as the girl surrenders to her husband.[8] The image of the dead girl embodies a perfect, impotent specimen that can never become mature wife and domineering shrew, nor commit adultery. Given away during her marriage ceremony, the veiled doll is consigned to spend the remainder of her days "playing house." The wedding gown symbolizes the limited future of the bride who will be expected to adhere to restrictive cultural codes and conform to her husband's expectations. Infantilization is one such expectation: "they are always dressing you up" (149). Maud's insight into the plight of Victorian brides deepens when her assistant, Sam the embalmer, relates the grotesque tale of a young woman suffering from tuberculosis who dies while being married. The girl, obscured by the wedding dress which she is too weak to wear or resist, is stuffed into a coffin surrounded by traditional wedding garments. Musing on "the frozen, immobilized bride, coerced into it and then dead and unable to ever grow" (149), fixed and preserved like a spider in Charles' collection, Maud addresses the dismal prospect of her own future. She confronts her diminishing status, echoed in the toll of "bride, wife, widow" (149), a future portending death-in-life as a voiceless outcast, and determines to resist this horrifying frame of static passivity.

Maud's son, a younger reflection of Patrick (201), confined by autism, eventually helps Maud develop self-consciousness and an interest in life—and in her child as a human being rather than the spawn of a spider. This boy, a haloed Christ-type ("possessor of all the light" [215]) who assumes the role of saviour, metaphorically links Maud's "world" with the prison mirrored in the "water" (75) and helps his mother to surface. His ceaseless provocations finally arouse Maud to a state of consciousness which impels her to shift her perspective and acknowledge her past as a "dark wall": "She had never, since her husband's death, allowed the child access to the other, brighter side of that masonry" (215).

The dismantling of architectural symbols, which occurs throughout the text in relation to both Fleda and Maud, suggests a release from a psychic prison: in Maud's case, she abandons her obsession with categorisation.

While Maud is identified with a form of hybrid insect, Fleda is identified with the falls (100). Her transformation foreshadows the shift from Patrick's romantic idealization to one that inspires "horror" (188, 207): a Medusa (167). Initially welcoming Patrick's vision (128), Fleda construes herself as a fanciful extension of the whirlpool (142, 145). This fluid association corresponds to the phase in the novel in which Patrick and Fleda hope to merge their poetic fantasies. When their relationship shatters, the symbolic borders representing difference are re-erected in order to re-establish order. Thus, it appears that difference operates on two distinct levels: the masculine preoccupation with division based on difference and the feminine identity grounded in difference (opposed from without and yet embraced), which affords freedom. Once Patrick repudiates his conflation of Fleda and the whirlpool (180, 192), she becomes abject: the falls are seen as an appetitive maw, which threatens to swallow the border (195).

Fleda, like Maud, is trapped in a dismal marriage, eventually recognizing that her ideological "separation from her husband" can never be overcome (120). Both women's marriages are associated with accumulated debris, "with kept things" (105, 223),[9] which they eventually discard, symbolizing a rejection of Victorian standards and mores. If Fleda remains with her husband, she risks being pulled into a relationship in which she will be denied the opportunity to gain autonomy. David insists on playing an erotic version of "dress-up" with her in which he fantasizes that she is Laura Secord, his inspiration and idol (50), thereby paralleling Maud's fetishization of "dolls." This perverse eroticism, echoing the fate of the "immobilized bride" in a world "where they are always dressing you up" (149), portends spiritual death for Fleda, unless she finds a way out. By responding erotically to the simulacrum of a dead woman, David performs an act of mock necrophilia. Teasingly, Fleda resists the romantic frame in which David tries to enclose her, reminding him that romantic women were likely to "conveniently die" (52).

David also attempts to dictate Fleda's choice of literature as a means of controlling and framing. Disturbed by his wife's ob-

session with Robert Browning, David gives her a volume of Coventry Patmore's poetry. Although generally obtuse and out of touch with his wife's emotional needs, David's perception of Browning's poetry as constituting a threat to his hold on her is not entirely unfounded. In *Sex and Marriage in Victorian Poetry,* Wendell Stacy Johnson notes that Browning's early poetry envisions "sexual love as a creative force and . . . marriage as bondage" (186) and his later work suggests that "marriage . . . can be both a social limitation or constricting bond, perhaps to be broken" (193). Antithetical to Browning's ideology, Patmore's vision of marriage conveys an ecstatic religious tone:

> For Patmore marriage is not only a contract; it is, again, a sacrament, and a sacrament that virtually replaces the eucharist . . . as the central expression of divine love in human life. (Johnson 74)

Patmore's collection of nuptial poems in *The Angel in the House* celebrates an idealized marriage in which his wife assumes the role of caged domestic angel, one who accepts with "joy . . . her subjected place" (77). When Fleda questions David about Patmore's angelic wife, she muses that "it must be uphill work being an angel, especially in a poet's house. Maybe she died of ennui" (52). Johnson includes the following quotation from John J. Dunn's essay, "Love and Eroticism: Coventry Patmore's Mystical Imagery," which recounts the unenviable fate of this lady: "The pasha-like Patmore . . . delights in ennobling his weak, slightly irrational wife, just as God takes pleasure in strengthening the irresolute and fallible soul by bestowing on it the immeasurable privilege of his love" (Johnson 77-8). Resisting the role of the subservient ideal woman, Fleda determines that "she wouldn't ever want to be Patmore's wife, Patmore's angel. Not now, not ever" (54).

Ironically, although she refuses David's angelic idealization, Fleda enjoys the prospect of performing for Patrick when she becomes aware of his voyeurism (144). The implicit danger for Fleda in adopting this role is suggested in her characterization of Patrick as a supernatural wraith, "an intruder, a ghost" (144) and in the imprisoning obsession which "began to surround her" (157). Fleda's condition of being "haunted almost constantly" (157), is reminiscent of Maud's relationship with Charles' ghost, symbolic of a vestigial tyranny. Objectified by Patrick's mechanical gaze,

Fleda finds herself trapped within "a bubble" (157), but on the single occasion when he enters her terrain and briefly confronts her as another human being, the prison is transformed to a romantic bower: "the forest was thick here, seemed to isolate them somehow, close them in together in an accidental intimacy" (178). Like the bower, circumscribed images such as the whirlpool and the ring have feminine associations. On first catching sight of Fleda, Patrick is struck by the symbolism of her wedding ring which covers "the word *Ring* on the book's cover ["The Ring and the Book"] (40), an ominous coincidence which foreshadows the end of Fleda's marriage.[10] Browning's lengthy antigamous poem, based on the historical account of an actual trial, involves an Italian nobleman who deliberately killed his wife. The heroine, Pompilia, "is spoken of as a trapped bird, and the Francheschini household is repeatedly alluded to in imagery of enclosure, darkness, the stifling prison that is like a tomb" (Johnson 230). While Fleda describes her former quarters in a manner that reminds us of Pompilia's domestic prison—"[I] spent my days trapped in that stuffy hotel"; "I can almost count myself an ex-prisoner" (36)—Patrick focuses on his image of Fleda at the window: "It was the woman's enclosure there and her looking out that mattered. As he stood there, looking up, his mind filled with glass" (109).

Fearing her impending "enclosure," the borders signified by the stakes driven into the earth, Fleda mourns the loss of her transitory role as imaginary architect (141-2). Unlike the free-flowing designs of her "dream" house (141), actual domestic architecture constitutes the patriarchal "call to order" (140) and the "fortress" associated with "caged torpor" (142). Fleda anticipates the completion of the real house planned by her husband, dreaming that "the whirlpool lived in the house" and "as long as she was in the house she was always being pushed around by it in a circular fashion from room to room to room" (101). In this instance, the infernal conflation of house and whirlpool suggests an enforced domestic routine, inexorable control and the loss of Fleda's self-determination. Freed from patriarchal influence, this conflated image is later inverted to suggest a positive reconciliation of architecture and nature: "the acre had become her house. The acre and the whirlpool . . . she breathed whirlpool and kept her place there and her fire" (142).[11] While Browning's poem portrays marriage as a dangerous prison, confirming David's fears, it also

alludes to the hegemonic power of the Victorian tradition evidenced in Maud's costume and Fleda's "English bone china" tea cup (40).

Challenging the romanticizing of women such as Laura Secord and Patmore's wife, Fleda invokes Tennyson's symbol of constrained female power, the accursed "Lady of Shallot" (sic) (52). Fleda's linking of Patmore's imprisoned "angel" (52) with her demonic sister mirrors the Victorian inability to construe earthly women. As Nina Auerbach notes,

> . . . women exist only as spiritual extremes: there is no human norm of womanhood, for she has no home on earth, but only among divine and demonic essences. This imaginative scheme does not believe in a human woman. The 'normal' or pattern Victorian woman is an angel, immune from the human condition. (*Woman and the Demon* 64)

Like Maud, spinning in her house, her vision obscured by a latticed veil, the "glassy countenance" of the imprisoned fairy lady weaving in her bower is limited to the shadows reflected in her mirror. The image of the transparent barrier alludes to the metaphoric, filamented prison of social ostracism and confined feminine territory elucidated in *The Whirlpool*. This topos emerges in Maud's static, microcosmic world of graves "placed under a bubble of thin glass" (23), in Fleda's image of entrapment within "a bubble she couldn't break" (157), and in Patrick's vision of Fleda as "a woman in a painting . . . in a legend" (39).[12] Anxiety concerning latent feminine power, reflected in the masculine focus on control and sexual repression, gives rise to images of women immured in glass prisons and glass coffins. Auerbach argues that the Victorian patriarchy viewed woman as a protean, deceptive and dangerous being, who, despite her guise as an angel, could "modulate almost imperceptibly into a demon, while retaining her aura of changelessness" (*Woman & Demon* 107).

While Patrick's poetic image of Fleda as a "woman wanting out" (111) alludes to The Lady of Shalott, Fleda sees Patrick as her "demon lover" with whom she imagines herself to be spiritually aligned (176). She views him as her masculine counterpart, a figure struggling to break the shackles of his rigid culture in the hope of immersing himself in a metaphoric, mythological realm, free from domestic routine. Contrary to Fleda's romantic image, Patrick is a parodic demon lover, characterized by the narrator as an old camera or "telescope" (80): "he felt the lens in his brain creak

open" (82). Significantly, he first spies Fleda while attempting to capture the image of a thrush in his fieldglasses, his "instruments of distance" (98). Instead, he frames her as a legendary woman in a painting, encircling her like a caged bird framed within the double focus of his lenses and his eyes. In *The Whirlpool*, the masculine gaze, associated with Patrick's fieldglasses and the science of optics, (astronomy, biology—"a glass under a lens in a laboratory" [182]) exemplifies an objectifying, technocratic universe.

Patrick's voyeurism can be seen in terms of a Freudian scopophilia, described by Laura Mulvey as "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (8). Mulvey goes on to point out that "at the extreme, it can become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms, whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other" (9). Like David, who desires an angel in his house, Patrick constructs Fleda as a Nature goddess: "Distant, serene, untouchable. So much a part of the landscape that the foliage in which she stood seemed to germinate from her" (123). She becomes an immobilized object framed in his gaze, rather than an active human being with needs of her own, needs which he could never satisfy (eg. 207). When Fleda attempts to engage him in conversation, Patrick silences her in order to preserve her mythological status, to prevent her from descending into the role of human housewife: "He did not wish to hear her then. This questioning was an independent action, an act . . . of betrayal" (127).

Distancing himself from actual experience, Patrick deploys his fieldglasses to maintain a romantic vision in which Fleda remains "completely still" (97), (reminiscent of Charles' paralyzed spiders and the immobilized bride) and "chained in his mind" (108). Urquhart's use of violent language supports Mulvey's assertion that

> voyeurism . . . has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness. This sadistic side fits in well with narrative. Sadism demands a story. (14)

When Fleda fractures Patrick's illusions (foregrounded earlier in the image of "his mind filled with glass" [109]), she forces him to

acknowledge her as a human being rather than a Nature goddess, incurs his wrath, and leaves the "green cocoon" (180). As punishment, Patrick decides to treat Fleda as a cipher from which he must divorce himself. Metaphorically reversing his mental telescope, he attempts to obliterate her, to "diminish her in his own memory, possibly even in hers. She would shrink and shrink . . . Eventually, she might disappear altogether" (194). Engaging David in lengthy conversations concerning military history, Patrick sadistically excludes Fleda: "In a subtle shift of alliance, he entered David's territory, cunningly, as if he had been there all along. Fleda was isolated, other, driven to remote corners" (195).

In admitting to Patrick that she was an active player in his game, that she was aware of "the focus of the lens he had fixed on her" (182), forcing him to acknowledge her as a woman with a voice and mind of her own, Fleda commits the equivalent of blasphemy. Commenting on such transgressions, Margaret Hallissy states that "according to St. John Chrysostom, a significant component of Eve's sin is 'acting on her own,' Lilith's behaviour repeated" (96). Patrick's sadistic behaviour toward Fleda is foregrounded by his earlier attitude as a parodic version of Perseus, protecting himself from Medusa. By framing Fleda in her handmirror, which he deploys as an instrument of mediation, Patrick ensures that he maintains distance and secures the border separating "self and other" (107, 188). When Fleda demands to be confronted directly, she notices that "he is looking at me . . . as though I were an eclipse, too dangerous to be perceived directly" (168).

Convinced that his earlier desire for union with Fleda—"to become a part of the impression" (103)—was misguided, Patrick incarcerates himself within the sterile prison of "logical order—compartmentalized and exact" (191), thus enacting a return to the world of domestic routine which, earlier, he and Fleda had mutually rejected.

> Self and other. That's the way it always was. To merge was impossible except for short periods of time. Impossible and undesirable. He imagined the woman aware of his watching, possibly even performing. The idea filled him with horror. (188)

As long as Patrick is able to sustain his vision of Fleda as a greenwood goddess, she embodies a parodic templar form (cf. note 7)—parodic because it is an imprisoning vision: "The woman he wanted

remained completely still while everything moved around her, towards her and away from her, while he controlled the distance" (128). Urquhart deploys images such as the "labyrinth" (15) and temple in order to heighten the parodic character of Patrick's quest, his need to discover "the centre" (180), and his vision of Fleda as a romantic greenwood emanation. Turning his back on his earlier construction of Fleda as the still point of the turning world, Patrick reverses his original intention—"learning the woman"—deletes her from his landscape, and determines to seek the demonic centre of the whirlpool, rather than the hearth fire, and opts for the amniotic, "weightless" (177) state of the "floater" (161). Patrick converts a romantic greenwood forest to a wasteland: "This landscape now soundless, heavy with anxiety and seemingly endless" (218). He destroys their metaphoric bower, "unravelling what he had woven" (194), and evokes the spectre of Maud's husband, ironically conjuring Ruskin's "monster in midweb," the Minotaur (Miller 66).

As mentioned earlier, women in *The Whirlpool* are associated with horror if they are perceived as powerful and self-determined. Consciously rejecting societal boundaries, Fleda recognizes her precarious status as outsider: "In another era she might have been burned at the stake" (141). Dissolving walls and boundaries, Fleda both rejects domestic constrictions and inverts gender roles. She plays the role of aggressor—"voyeur" (33, 182) and rapist—"He felt that his privacy, his self, had been completely invaded. He was like a walled village that had been sacked and burned" (182). Her decision to disclose her feelings in the hope of initiating an adulterous relationship, constitutes witch-like behaviour: a woman who dares to transgress patriarchal borders.

Urquhart challenges domestic existence, seeing it in terms of futile routines: darning socks, embroidering useless decorative items, and entering interminable figures in ledgers. And yet, she also suggests that embroidery and fabrication of quilts represent a powerful art form which comments on history (cf. note 4). Both the large-scale manufacturing of crape and the individual act of fabricating a doily are associated with subjection, which in turn is linked to the mythical punishment of Arachne, condemned to sew ring on ring in order to construct her web. Urquhart posits that escape is at hand for the imaginative individual capable of resisting social norms and embarking on the journey of self-discovery. She does

not, however, offer a liberating solution which would free women from the necessity of performing domestic chores.

Fleda is able to break her ties when she envisions her fairy-tale forest as a wasteland where she will spend the rest of her life trapped within a domestic frame. Although the ungoverned setting at "Whirlpool Heights" satisfies Fleda's spiritual needs, her circumstances remain essentially unaltered: her life with David, regardless of the location, entails performing the role of angel in the house, a role she has outgrown—she is no longer willing to be dressed up and infantilized. Fleda arrives at the conclusion that any marital home, regardless of its form, "would produce a similar fortress and the feeling of caged torpor" (142). Unlike Patrick, whose aborted quest for an illusory centre—impelling him toward the "sea inside the womb" (183) and a "weightless" amniotic existence (177)—leads to a literal dead end (226, 232), Fleda, despite her preoccupation with "imaginary architecture" (141), manages to abandon the notion of an ideal centre—the dream home (141)—and dissolves her illusory borders. While her imaginary architecture affords freedom, real walls impose an imprisoning environment in which she performs her daily rounds, rounds that reflect the rhythm of the whirlpool and the domestic activity of spiders.

At times the whirlpool suggests a type of celestial music (35); at other times it is associated with an imprisoning obsession which leads to myopia (exemplified by Fleda's construction of Patrick as demon lover rather than a maladjusted young man). Like Maud, who is assisted through the agency of her son, Fleda's illusion of her demon lover is shattered by Patrick; her vision clears when he threatens her with annihilation—"She felt like an abandoned house. He was closing doors, drawing curtains, nailing windows shut" (193). Although it appears that freedom entails self-reliance, both women rely on masculine catalysts to bring them to a state of recognition that enables them to shed obsessive attitudes. Maud's metamorphic journey begins in the dark prison of Courtauld crape and categorical obsession, and ends as she emerges in her yellow dress, an emancipated, enlightened woman. Her enlightened sensibility involves a deconstructive effort, orchestrated by her son, through the destruction of her collection, imaged in the novel as the tearing down of an imprisoning wall (215).

By calling attention to the need to escape a limited existence, Urquhart challenges the fixed societal codes and traditions which

prevent the characters from exploring their potential. In addition, she suggests that museum collections, which validate an interest in preserving relics and animals for display beneath glass cases, are founded on the societal urge to order a threatening universe, a universe which contains whirlpools and passionate women. Symbolized by the wedding ring, marriage and its attendant "domestic geography" (204) represents a circumscribed life mapped into "the sameness of days lived out inside the blueprint of artificially heated rooms from pre-planned, rigidly timed events" (143). The novel privileges the experience of the single woman who risks social opprobrium in order to escape this unceasing round of futile, domestic duties. In choosing life over Patrick's "vacuum" (222) and David's dream of Laura (86), Fleda forges her own path, recognizing that in order to describe her own borders, she must act on her own initiative: "it wasn't the message that was important. It was the walk. The journey. Setting forth" (219). Fleda escapes the prospect of a home and the trappings of a conventional life and releases herself, enacting a journey of self-discovery, exploring her own potential: "Perhaps the knowledge comes at the moment of departure" (176). Urquhart does not, however, suggest how Fleda will survive once she embarks on her walk through the woods. Trapped in Urquhart's web, readers wander through the labyrinth of the text and, unlike Maud and Fleda, cannot escape the frame.

By examining Fleda's identification with the whirlpool, Urquhart inspires a re-thinking of mythological images of women, symbolized in the novel by whirlpool and weaver. She also suggests that the glass bubble of social barriers and imprisoning obsessions is not shatter-proof. An in-depth examination of Kristeva's theory of abjection would raise further questions about Urquhart's transposition of the abject, conventionally associated with the archaic monstrous-feminine, and Charles and Patrick as denizens of the web. In deploying the pattern of the ideal woman as envisaged by Patmore, Urquhart demonstrates the tendency to cast female protagonists within two extreme molds—angels or demons. She emphasizes the injustice in this objectification, and thus parodies Patrick's antithetical vision of Fleda as idealized goddess and horrifying Medusa. The grounding of identity in architecture, illustrated in the construction and demolition of Fleda's dream house and Maud's wall (cf. note 1), informs a search for postcolonial identity which shuns fixed social positions and privileges

departure from the dominating central authority. Resisting enclosed lives within the home, Maud and Fleda succeed in becoming authoritative, autonomous individuals. Refusing to ride passively the carousel of arrested potential, they manage to transcend societal limitations, rid themselves of their obsessions and exorcise romantic fantasies inherent in demon lovers.

NOTES

[1] Maud's linking of fairground and death also accords with the vicarious response of spectators on both sides of the Canada/ United States border, who watch the "circus" exploits of stuntpeople as an attempt to exorcise "their own daredevil" (132).

[2] Maud's and Browning's parallel fantasies of the perfect drowning victim (183, 236-7), demonstrate the psychological impact of British Romanticism on Canadian culture. Shelley's elegiac poem "Adonais," commemorating the death of Keats, offers a transcendent vision in which the transported spirit of the decaying corpse, having escaped the mortal threat of worms, ascends to "dazzling immortality" (409). Protesting against the Romantic image of the dying poet regenerated through his verse, Urquhart reduces "Adonais" to an emblematic toy boat confined to the whirlpool (60).

[3] Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, in *The Empire Writes Back*, note that "the construction or demolition of houses or buildings in post-colonial locations is a recurring and evocative figure for the problematic of post-colonial identity" (28). Maud's recognition and interest in her own identity as well as that of her child unfolds at the moment when the collection is demolished (215).

[4] The single instance of feminine embroidery raised to the status of art occurs in a military museum and is associated with the uncanny. Noticing an appliquéd quilt hanging in the needlework section, Fleda remarks on the embroidered coffins which await transportation to a velvet graveyard. David remarks that the artist was possessed with occult power; Fleda responds that she was merely recording military events (173). Thus, Urquhart debunks the myth that associates feminine art with Circean witchcraft, the punishment of Arachne, and recuperates feminine production.

[5] Rejecting the cliché of the drowned poet, Urquhart posits Maud as an alternative subject who breaks the frame of the passive object of love in Tennyson's famous poem. The Maud of this novel is not a coveted passion flower rooted in death. She is a creative woman who manages to pick herself up and run a thriving business.

[6] For a historical insight into the characterization of women as spiders, scorpions and other potentially lethal creatures, see Margaret Hallissy's *Venomous Woman*. The connection between women and poison in *The Whirlpool* is foregrounded in the prologue ("mistress? A draught of poison" [11], "love's poisoned potions" [12]). See also Nancy Miller's article, "Arachnologies," in *The Poetics of Gender*.

[7] Rozsika Parker, in *The Subversive Stitch*, explicates the historical role of women in the cloth industry. The ancient association linking women and needlework is evidenced in Greek mythology (the three Fates, Arachne, Circe, Philomela, and Penelope). Literary characters include Dickens' Madame Defarge and Tennyson's Lady of Shalott, "who weaves by night and day/ a magic web with colours gay" (II.37-8); the latter is a particularly important symbol in *The Whirlpool*. Urquhart, weaver of this narrative, deploys the association between the Lady of Shalott and her web to emphasize the theme of entrapment engendered by endless domestic routines. As well, she also suggests that domestic feminine production has been undervalued and ignored. Both poets in the novel empathize with the domestic drudgery which impinges on their own lives. In the prologue, Browning bemoans a life reflecting "the regularity of a copy clerk" (11) and Patrick, whose employment as a copy clerk condemns him to "verticals of lists and columns," sympathizes with female domestic duties: "The dull, turgid repetition of everything reproduced in the click of his wife's knitting needles" (185).

[8] See Genesis 2.24: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh."

[9] Maud's debris includes Charles' memories, a recollection of his personal experiences, which signifies a gap within her own life. In a cloistered world where women are denied adventures, Maud has no memories of her own to recount. The image of Maud as keeper "of her dead husband's memories" (95), suggests an empty vessel existing to contain a system of patriarchal beliefs and traditions from which she is excluded.

[10] The doubled ring is a complex symbol which alludes to the double lens of Patrick's fieldglasses. Miller, in "Ariadne's Thread," discussing Arachne's connection to the ring, points out that Arachne, or *erion* in Greek, means "devouring phallic mother, weaver of a web" (68). Miller also notes that the conflation of Dionysus and Ariadne's narratives, symbolized by a "double ring, marriage ring and crown of stars, is in fact a spiral, coil-shaped, labyrinth-shaped" (66). The doubled rings also symbolize the gyratory action of the "maelstrom" (80, 176), which in turn allude to both the whirlpool in the novel and the "Moskoe-tröm" in Poe's short story, "A Descent into the Maelström."

[11] Angus Fletcher, in *The Prophetic Moment*, explicating Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, defines transformations in symbolic value pertaining to landscape, similar to those deployed in *The Whirlpool*, in terms of a "parodic change," in which "the defining principle is freedom to enter and leave. The demonic parody of the temple, that is, the sinister form of the labyrinth, is thus always a prison" (36). Fletcher explains that temples and labyrinths "both imply special layout and a typical activity within that layout. Furthermore, while both images suggest man-made structures . . . they each have a set of natural equivalents. Temples may rise out of the earth in the form of

sacred groves, while labyrinths may grow up as a tangle of vegetation" (12). Fletcher states that "in essence the temple is the image of gratified desire, the labyrinth the image of terror and panic" (13), that "ideally," the temple "is round" (14), and "experientially the temple provides the perfect model for the creation of a home . . . The hieratic center of this central place is the hearth fire" (17)—"she breathed whirlpool and kept her place there and her fire" (*Whirlpool* 142). Fletcher states that "the temple is the still point of the turning world" (22). Fleda's image of the circular whirlpool-house which grows out of the acre and permits freedom of "entry and exit" (142), accords with Fletcher's formula of a natural temple and, its antithesis, the prison house in which Fleda is whirled about like an automaton, thus represents "the sinister form of the labyrinth" (36).

[12] In *Woman and the Demon*, Nina Auerbach states that "the Pre-Raphaelites painted her [The Lady of Shalott] with obsessive, virtually incantatory repetition."

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