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FROM STOWE'S EAGLE ISLAND TO
JEWETT'S "A WHITE HERON"

By KATHARINE T. JOBES

Sarah Orne Jewett pointed out the influence of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Maine novel *The Pearl of Orr's Island* (1862) on her own writing and provided what has become the standard explanation of that influence. In her 1893 Preface to *Deephaven*, she acknowledges graciously that *The Pearl of Orr's Island* was the first work to show her how materials which she had known and loved from birth — Maine character, custom, landscape — could be used effectively in literature.

It was, happily, in the writer's childhood that Mrs. Stowe had written of those who dwell along the wooded seacoast and by the decaying, shipless harbors of Maine. The first chapter of *The Pearl of Orr's Island* gave the young author of *Deephaven* to see with new eyes, and to follow eagerly the old shore paths from one gray, weather-beaten house to another where Genius pointed her the way.¹

Jewett's explanation has generally been echoed without substantial change by critics and biographers concerned with literary influences upon her writing.

I wish to point out another way in which *The Pearl of Orr's Island* seems to have influenced Jewett's developing art, which she and her critics have not noted: besides showing her the general material which would prove congenial to her, it provided — in the Eagle Island episode of Chapter 16 — specific material which she would use in working out her self-definition as an artist. The Eagle Island episode expresses Stowe's conception of the nature of the artist. It does so through a brief narrative in which a sensitive girl demurs at a boy's plundering a birds' nest at the top of a tall tree and in an authorial explanation of the narrative. Evidently stirred by the episode to express her own conception of the nature of the artist, Jewett rewrote it twice — in "The Eagle Trees" (1882) and "A White Heron" (1886)—discovering in the process her own increasingly clearly defined artistic nature.

In her Eagle Island episode, Stowe conceives of the artist as

1 Sarah Orne Jewett, Preface to *Deephaven* (Boston, 1894), 3-4. See also *Sarah Orne Jewett Letters*, ed. Richard Cary, enlarged and rev. ed. (Waterville, Maine, 1967), 40-41, 84-85.

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one of a class of beings of unusual spiritual sensitivity who serve an essentially ministerial function as "priests and priestesses of the spiritual life, ordained of God to keep the balance between the rude but absolute necessities of physical life and the higher sphere to which that must at length give place."² Their spiritual giftedness is innate:

But there are, both of men and women, beings born into this world in whom from childhood the spiritual and the reflective predominate over the physical. In relation to other human beings, they seem to be organized much as birds are in relation to other animals. They are the artists, the poets, the unconscious seers, to whom the purer truths of spiritual instruction are open.

Stowe precedes her explanation with an exemplum, structured upon theological dialectic, in which she develops the spiritual artistic tendencies by contrast with the physical or "natural" tendency of those of more worldly calling. (In those editions of *The Pearl of Orr's Island* with chapter titles, Chapter 16 is entitled "The Natural and the Spiritual.") Stowe embodies the contrasting tendencies in Mara Lincoln and Moses Pennel. Mara is a gentle, idealistic, reflective creature of the spirit, the type of the artist/poet/seer; her playmate Moses is a vigorous, practical, active adventurer, the type of the natural man. They reveal their contrasting characters in a brief incident in which Moses climbs far up into a rugged old hemlock and plunders an eagles' nest, bringing its eggs down in his pocket. ("I played their nest was a city and I spoiled it.") Much as she loves and admires Moses, Mara is troubled by the eagles' distress and protests the spoiling. Though she is silenced by Moses' boyish bravado and belligerent rebuttal ("I wish I had a gun now, I'd stop those old eagles' screeching"; "I am older than you, and when I tell you a thing's right, you ought to believe it"), she will continue, Stowe predicts, to reflect upon the matter and will ultimately make Moses tremble before her sense of the right. Mara does indeed by the end of the novel exercise her spiritual suasion on Moses.

Stowe's own artistry in this Eagle Island episode is consistent with the conception she presents in it of the ministerial artist. She assumes the right to preach, taking her form — exemplum/

² *The Pearl of Orr's Island: A Story of the Coast of Maine*, 28th ed. (Boston, 1887), 179. Subsequent quotations are from pp. 178 and 177 of this edition.

explication — from the sermon and her dialectic structure from Christian theology. Her ministerial bent is not surprising, considering that she was daughter, sister, and wife to Congregational ministers and steeped in Calvinist theology.

In her two versions of Stowe's Eagle Island episode, Jewett retains the artist figure's sensitivity of spirit, but without theological formulation. The heart of the episode for Jewett is the instinctive sensitivity of the artist/poet/seer represented in the gentle Mara; Jewett stresses it in both her versions and uses the plot elements of the exemplum in order to do so. But Stowe's dialectic and didacticism were not natural to Jewett, who had not been bred, as Stowe had been, in Calvinism. Jewett's versions move away from the doctrinal and didactic toward the personal and lyric, seeking in the natural world familiar to Jewett the spiritual truths Stowe found in theology.

Jewett's first version, "The Eagle Trees: To J[ohn] G[reenleaf] W[hittier]," reveals Jewett reshaping Stowe's Eagle Island materials in several ways crucial to the success of the superior later version, "A White Heron." First, she casts an historical poet whom she greatly admired, Whittier, in Mara's role of artist/poet/seer. In so doing, she retains Mara's qualities of gentleness and sensitivity but eliminates her theological connections. Whittier, as Jewett depicts him, does not take his poetic inspiration directly from God, like Stowe's artists ("ordained of God"), but rather from nature, which instructs him and has a metaphorical kinship with him:

Was it the birds who early told
 The dreaming boy that he would win
 A poet's crown instead of gold?
 That he would fight a nation's sin,
 On eagle wings of song would gain
 A place that few might enter in,
 And keep his life without a stain

 Through many years, yet not grow old?
 And he shall be what few men are,
 Said all the pine trees, whispering low;
 His thought shall find an unseen star,
 He shall our treasured legends know;
 His words will give the way-worn rest
 Like this cool shade our branches throw,
 He, lifted like our loftiest crest,
 Shall watch his country near and far.⁸

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Second, by personifying the great pines and the eagles and by making them the principal seers and the sources of poetic inspiration, Jewett has nature assume the leading role in this version of the narrative. Stowe's trees and eagles, in contrast, are merely props to illustrate her thesis about human nature. Jewett's animation of nature, like her image of the poet, modifies Stowe's contention that inspiration comes directly from God; moreover, it breaks down Stowe's physical/spiritual or natural/spiritual dialectic. The changes are important, because they help Jewett expand the province of regional materials from being merely local color to becoming an integral part of her aesthetic, as expressed in "A White Heron" and other New England stories.

Third, she recharacterizes another aspect of Stowe's dialectic — the equation of boy/girl in the narrative with active/passive, door/reflector — by making the poet a "dreaming *boy*" and by having her persona consider (but reject) Moses' active role of storming the eagles' nest (stanzas 3 and 4):

High in the branches clings the nest
The great birds build from year to year
And though they fly from east to west,
Some instinct keeps this eyrie dear
To their fierce hearts; and now their eyes
Glare down at me with rage and fear,
They stare at me with wild surprise
Where high in air they strong-winged rest.

I will not trespass in this place
Nor storm the eagles' castle-walls,
Where winds have rocked the royal race
And taught the note the young bird calls
Rejoicing as he seeks the cloud,
And spreads his wings and never falls
Like weaker birds; but soaring proud
A king at heart, he conquers space.

In stanza 4 lies the germ of the girl-poet who assumes some of Moses' active and decisive role in "A White Heron."

Finally, Jewett shifts the form of the Eagle Island material from exemplary prose narrative to lyric poetry. She is not a

³ The concluding stanzas (6 and 7) of the 1882 text of "The Eagle Trees: To J. G. W.," quoted by Carl J. Weber in "Whittier and Sarah Orne Jewett," *New England Quarterly*, XVIII (September 1945), 404. Stanzas 3 and 4 below are from the same source, p. 403.

master of poetic form and diction, and she does not use Stowe's narrative elements coherently in "The Eagle Trees." In order to treat the Eagle Island material successfully, she returns to prose narrative in the form of the short story. But the poetic version serves the functions of shifting the tone from didactic to lyric and of reinforcing the emphatic role of nature in the narrative.

Having made these preparatory revisions, Jewett is then able to make Stowe's material fully her own in "A White Heron." The poet figure, Sylvia, is again a girl child, an "unconscious seer," much like Mara in her gentle spirituality and lonely reflectiveness, but Sylvia is able to assume, too, Moses' active role of making the heroic climb up the tall tree and of deciding the fate of the bird, in this version a rare white heron. (The hunter who seeks the heron, though he is on the whole sympathetically portrayed, retains Moses' possessive and destructive qualities; he seems to Sylvy at first acquaintance to be "the enemy.") Sylvy decides to save the heron instead of revealing him to her hunter friend and acknowledges in so doing her special kinship with nature. Her decision resolves a conflict which is not, as in Stowe's version, primarily dramatic and dialectic, but rather essentially private (in that Sylvy is seeking to define her own nature through her choice of allegiance) and lyric (in that Sylvy is reaching intuitively toward a highly personal and emotional union with nature).

Sylvy's nature points to a general conception of the artist quite different from Stowe's ministerial conception. Jewett's artist is not one of a class of passive spiritual mediums through whom God's truths flow to enlighten others; she is an active individual seeking to discover her own nature and its relationship to the world around her. Jewett images the discovery process in the difficult climb Sylvy makes up the tall tree "like a great main-mast to the voyaging earth"⁴ whereby she becomes a seer of "this wonderful sight and pageant of the world" and finally of the spiritual essence of the natural world, as it is represented in the rare and beautiful white heron. The transcendent effort of seeing nature and of determining to preserve it in-

4 "A White Heron." in *The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Willa Cather. Mayflower Ed. (Gloucester, Mass., 1965), II, 16. Subsequent quotations are from II, 18, and II, 21, in this edition.

In Stowe's *Pearl*, Moses is an actual sea voyager.

violate rewards the seer, Jewett hopes, with spiritual sustenance: "Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been, — who can tell? Whatever treasures were lost to her, woodlands and summer-time, remember! Bring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country child!"

Jewett's solicitude for the lonely country child is deeply felt. She is much closer personally to her image of the artist than Stowe is to hers. Sylvy is not, like Mara, an imagined type of the artistic spirit described with authorial detachment; she is a surrogate self for Jewett, a portrait of the artist as a young girl, whom the author describes and sometimes even addresses feelingly. Jewett depicts Sylvy as thriving in the country after her early years of wilting in a manufacturing town. Jewett herself had received similar sustenance from the New England countryside as a child; her doctor-father had taken her with him on his rounds so that her health might benefit from the fresh air. She continued to receive sustenance — now imaginative and spiritual — in her adulthood from the countryside she had loved as a child, and she notes wistfully changes brought about by time and by outsiders.⁵ (The hunter in "A White Heron" is a city dweller who comes to the country with money and gun to try to possess and destroy its natural life.) And yet, like Sylvy, Jewett evidently found troubling the decision to commit herself fully — in her case in the form of her literary vocation — to preserving the New England countryside. In 1884, two years before "A White Heron," she wrote the semi-autobiographical novel *A Country Doctor*, in which the heroine's conflict consists of whether to choose marriage or vocation. (She chooses vocation.) Still in the process of self-discovery, Jewett concludes her portrait of the artist not with an assertion, but with a question and a hope. The seer, the voyager on Jewett's great main-mast rooted firmly in New England, continuously looks

⁵ See, for example, the 1893 Preface to *Deephaven*, p. 4:

"It was easy to be much disturbed by the sad discovery that certain phases of provincial life were fast waning in New England. Small and old-fashioned towns . . . were no longer almost self-subsistent, as in earlier times; and while it was impossible to estimate the value of that wider life that was flowing in from the great springs, many a mournful villager felt the anxiety that came with these years of change. . . . The new riches of the country were seldom very well spent in those days; the money that the tourist or summer citizen left behind him was apt to be used to sweep away the quaint houses, the roadside thicket, the shady woodland, that had lured him first." Jewett speaks here of her youthful anxieties; she professes to be more sanguine in 1893 about the survival of New England individuality. (Preface, p. 5.)

out and questions and seeks.⁶

The successive versions of the Eagle Island episode record the growth of an independent artistic spirit away from her mentor. Retaining their common belief in the artist's sensitive spirit and their common use of New England materials, Jewett develops independently a quality of gentle questing in place of Stowe's earnest dogmatizing. She seeks in nature what Stowe finds in God. She speaks in lyric, poetic prose, while Stowe speaks in sermons. She envisions a wild, light, slender white heron instead of Stowe's protesting eagles.

6 In "The Child in Sarah Orne Jewett," *Colby Library Quarterly*, VII (September 1967), reprinted in *Appreciation of Sarah Orne Jewett*, ed. Richard Cary (Waterville, Maine, 1973), Eugene Hillhouse Pool also reads "A White Heron" biographically, although somewhat differently. He argues that Jewett "chooses, psychologically, to remain a child with Sylvia," because she clings so intensely to her memory of her father and his love and thus "repudiates the offer of mature, passionate love that would be inherent in any acceptance of herself as a mature woman." (*Appreciation*, p. 225.)



MRS. STOWE'S NEGRO: GEORGE HARRIS'
NEGRITUDE IN *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*

By RANDALL M. MILLER

Given the climate of opinion that obtained in the 1850s when she wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's generally sympathetic, even maudlin, treatment of the American Negro slave startled, if it did not shock, readers. Indeed, the Southern response was denial and ban. The book, however, endured, and it remains today often the sole prism through which students assess the nature of the Negro and slavery. This need not be harmful, if we recognize the limitations of the book as sociology and its strengths as a mirror of nineteenth century antislavery attitudes and conceptions of the Negro. For all of her literary failings and paternalism, the well-intentioned Mrs. Stowe at least recognized that Negroes were not all of the acquiescing Sambo variety. Rather, she presented a variety of slave types from the stumbling, ignorant, even childlike "darkie" so long associated