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Framing Region: The Modernist's New England

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"Doubling": Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs as Artistic Bildungsroman

By JAMES P. ELLIOTT

Presently the wind began to blow, and we struck out seaward to double the long sheltering headland of the cape, and when I looked back again, the islands and the headland had run together and Dunnet Landing and all its coasts were lost to sight.

—*The Country of the Pointed Firs* (133)

IN THE LAST SENTENCE of the concluding chapter of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, entitled "The Backward View," Sarah Orne Jewett's narrator is casting a long gaze back toward the small Maine sea-coast village in which she has spent a bucolic summer vacation. A "little coastwise steamer" is transporting her back to civilization—Boston, presumably. Since the work's publication in 1896, many commentators have implied that this gaze is filled with melancholy nostalgia for a lost world. Initially the work was considered a series of sketches yearning for the stable values of a New England rural past; more recently, feminist critics have called attention to Jewett's celebration of the nurturance, homeopathy, and women's voices relegated to a feminine utopia devoid of mastering patriarchal influence. But the novel speaks to me because it prefigures my concerns about the place of the artist and thinker in an unstable, postmodern, media-saturated world of international corporate culture in which value is grounded in desperate attempts to cling to binarial difference.

The Jewett I have in mind, while preparing the *Atlantic* serial installments of 1896 for book publication, consolidated and refined the sense of vision, responsibility, and opportunity she saw for a woman writer poised at the edge of a new century. Amid the welter of colonialism, rampant industrialization, immigration, new technology, and cultural variety that marked the end of the nineteenth century, she creates an American Scholar for that historical moment, foregrounding, unlike that ancestor, issues of gender construction as well as identity—personal *and* national. I argue that Jewett's portrayal of the anonymous narrator of *Country* situates that figure firmly within a space of activist artistic production: *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, far from being plotless, as commentators from 1896 to the 1960s avowed, traces the evolution of Jewett's artistic vision; it is an artistic bildungsroman, a *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman*, a dramatization of her preparation to return to the world having acquired an aesthetic focused on social change.

The final figure of the novel—her “doubling” of the “sheltering headland”—as well as the chapter’s title, I read as a richly complex metonymy of her life and career. Within the frame of a pleasant summer sojourn of work and rest in her childhood environment—she grew up in South Berwick, Maine—the novel doubles back to rehearse the development of her writing sensibility. And the concluding chapter, apparently written *after* the serialization had appeared, doubles back on the progression of the book itself, situating her on a fault line poised between rural and urban, past and future, male and female, sketch and novel. She is emerging from the “shelter” of female mentoring, chiefly provided by Almira Todd, fully cognizant that it has provided her skills with which to face the world to which she is returning. Mrs. Todd and the sojourn in Dunnet Landing have educated her in compassion, nurturance, identification, and a feminine “empathic voice,” but she recognizes that Mrs. Todd herself, for all her stature as a matriarch-in-waiting, has “grown sluggish for lack of proper surroundings” (105). The Jewett artist-figure needs a wider arena than the restricted scope of this feminine utopia to put into action her newly found, full identity as a woman artist facing a new century.

What constitutes that identity? Here, recent feminist commentaries are extremely helpful, but they do not address all the complexities of that identity. For I see an artistic vision/identity that in its conscious breadth encompasses, confronts, and problematizes not only women’s issues but issues of race and class as well. As *The Country of the Pointed Firs* unfolds, Jewett’s is a multi-axis vision, one which cannot rest content in a univocal stance toward the bucolic world she is describing, nor, by implication, the violent world to which she is returning, but which must examine the nexes, the interstices, of gender, ethnicism, and technology.

Some years ago, when I reacquainted myself with *The Country of the Pointed Firs* in order to teach it, one of the first things that struck me was the vast difference between the opening chapter, “The Return,” and the closing one, “The Backward View” (1-2, 128-33). I felt that there was significant improvement in the writing, as examined through as traditional a lens as stylistic analysis. True, “The Return” sounds the first notes of themes that will see their developments in the rest of the text, much as a Baroque toccata and fugue returns to its opening musical statements with ever increasing complexity. The “high windows,” “like knowing eyes,” direct the reader towards the narrator’s penchant for observation, eventually, we learn, to coalesce into her efforts to write—a theme that opens into what Marcia McClintock Folsom calls Jewett’s “Empathic Style.” The comment that “the growth of true friendship may be a lifelong affair” is juxtaposed to the sentiment that “love at first sight” is final: this contrast signals the tension between the nurturing emotional connections among many of the women of the novel and the crippling cultural definitions of love and marriage. The chapter’s title, along with the narrator’s focus on the “background of spruces and balsam firs,” inform us of the “return” from some unlocated, more cosmopolitan arena to the simplicities and rejuvenation of nature. And the introduction of the narrator in the

third person—"a single passenger landed upon the steamboat wharf"—predicts her anonymity and thus her representative aspect. As well, the third person, which transmutes to second in the next chapter before settling into first-person a few paragraphs later, suggests a distance from that opening persona, implying movement and change in order for it to become the retrospective narrating voice.

But for all the care and craft evinced by these foreshadowings, there remained for me something derivative about this first chapter. The personification of the "few houses," which "made the most of the seaward view," seemed tired; and for all the crispness of the Homeric hyphen in the houses being "tree-nailed," the observation that "there was a gayety and determined floweriness in their bits of garden ground" was unconvincing. There was a significant absence of the complex, interlocking evocation of the senses we have come to expect in aesthetically effective writing; the imagery seemed threadbare. In fact, I came to read her reference to Dunnet Landing having "all that mixture of remoteness, and childish certainty of being the centre of civilization of which her affectionate dreams had told" as descriptive of the narrator's naive and childish optimism; the narrator seems to anticipate a bucolic escape which might provide material for a few quick sketches.

The final chapter, besides being much longer, is much better written. In the long quotation below, consider the improvement in the evocation of the senses, the imbedded figures of speech, as well as the subtle physical details and the sophisticated use of personification located in her descriptions of the gulls and the fish. This scene is in motion, all action, turmoil, and chaos before settling into the solitary gaze of the last paragraph; and we are ensconced in the narrator's first-person vision as never before:

As I came away on the little coastwise steamer, there was an old sea running, which made the surf leap high on all the rocky shores. I stood on deck, looking back, and watched the busy gulls agree and turn, and sway together down the long slopes of air, then separate hastily and plunge into the waves. The tide was setting in, and plenty of small fish were coming with it, unconscious of the silver flashing of the great birds overhead and the quickness of their fierce beaks. The sea was full of life and spirit, the tops of the waves flew back as if they were winged like the gulls themselves, and like them had the freedom of the wind. Out in the main channel we passed a bent-shouldered old fisherman bound for the evening round among his lobster traps. He was toiling along with short oars, and the dory tossed and sank and tossed again with the steamer's waves. I saw that it was old Elijah Tilley, and though we had so long been strangers we had come to be warm friends, and I wished that he had waited for one of his mates, it was such hard work to row along shore through rough seas and tend the traps alone. As we passed I waved my hand and tried to call to him, and he looked up and answered my farewells by a solemn nod. The little town, with the tall masts of its disabled schooners in the inner bay, stood high above the flat sea for a few minutes, then it sank back into the uniformity of the coast, and became indistinguishable from the other towns that looked as it they were crumbled on the fuzzy-green stoniness of the shore.

Wow, I thought as I juxtaposed these two chapters, what in the world has happened? This is not the childishly naive narrator/persona of "The Return." There is sweep and power in this language, as well as knowledge of life on

the sea, its duties and dangers (the woman disembarking on the wharf would not know the technical precision of “short oars,” for example), and a deep empathy of which the earlier persona seems incapable. And why should the last figure she sees be Elijah Tilley, who appears to offer her a benediction and blessing, not Almira Todd, her feminist mentor, who, in her penultimate conversation with the narrator, has just dismissed the old fisherman as a “ploddin’ man?”

The first effect of pondering these questions was to make me determined to accept the book as a novel; I identified a coherent wholeness about it that not only belied its categorization as a series of sketches and stories, but made me rely on the 1896 edition, which does not include “A Dunnet Shepherdess,” “William’s Wedding” (both added in 1910, after Jewett’s death), and “The Queen’s Twin” (added in 1919); I agree with Alison Easton, the editor of the Penguin Edition (1995), that “the expanded version spoils the integrity of [Jewett’s] text. . .,” but for different reasons. She prefers the original because the expansions make it “increasingly a more conventional novel in form and thus [make it] los[e] the delicate suggestiveness and web-like effect of the sketch structure” (xxiii). I found that the expansions interrupted the narrative integrity of the developing artist-figure. These three stories, which are interpolated prior to the last two chapters in the revised, expanded version, are the fruits of Jewett’s imaginative journey, not part of it.

So I am convinced that the summer at Dunnet Landing is the record of the artistic maturation of the narrator. To refigure the novel biographically, it is Jewett’s metaphorical, encapsulated rehearsal of the development of her own writing career. Recently I was made aware of the fact that the installments appearing in the *Atlantic Monthly* in January, March, July, and September 1896 ended with the Bowden reunion, the chapter entitled “The Feast’s End.” “Along Shore,” consisting of the long conversation with Elijah Tilley and concluding with Mrs. Todd’s dismissive words, appeared as a separate piece in a December 1896 issue of *Littel’s Living Age*, an obscure Boston weekly. The final chapter accompanied the book publication only, suggesting to me that Jewett had come to some additional awareness of the importance of her narrative, perhaps sparked by proofing the tearsheets of her *Atlantic* installments for their appearance between covers. These additions implied that Jewett *had* to be aware of the self-referential nature of her narrative; the naivete of the opening chapter had to be conscious in order to record how far she felt she had come; the *Atlantic* articles had brought her to the brink of recognition of her full artistic power, and the last two chapters, the first of which she composed to offer a qualification for the unbounded feminist utopia that is the Bowden reunion, the second of which becomes a metonym for her career, were the expression of this power.

GENDER IS, perhaps, the primary axis along which Jewett explores the growth of this vision, as the wealth of recent feminist commentaries demonstrates. But these commentaries are by no means uniform. In the 1980s, feminist crit-

ics “responded to the limited and disempowering view of Jewett constructed by their predecessors” by placing her “principally in a domestic or ‘feminine’ world” (6), notes Kilcup and Edwards in their 1999 introduction to an anthology of Jewett criticism. But the nineties brought “greater detachment,” in an attempt to deconstruct this single-axis Utopian interpretation by calling attention to the “racial-ethnic politics embedded in her work. [Several writers] would take Jewett to task for her limited, even exclusionary nationalist vision” (8-9). Kilcup and Edwards present these views as sequential, suggesting that the nineties comments could be seen as “correctives” to the eighties impulse to “sentimentalize, to see the writer ‘subjectively’...” (9), but I argue both are necessary approaches to the total range of Jewett’s vision. Consider two examples: Marcia McClintock Folsom’s “‘Tact Is a Kind of Mind-Reading’: Empathic Style in [*Country*]...” (1982) and Elizabeth Ammons’s “Material Culture, Empire and Jewett’s *Country*...” (1994).

Folsom takes her cue from the narrator’s praise of Mr. Todd’s mother, Mrs. Blackett: “Tact is after all a kind of mind-reading, and my hostess held the golden gift. Sympathy is of the mind as well as the heart.” She focuses on two episodes—the conclusion of the narrator’s visit to Shell-Heap Island, the isolated home of the hermit “poor Joanna” and the chapter “Along Shore,” the narrator’s visit and conversation with Elijah Tilley. She contends that the narrator cultivates an “impulse to see into and beyond casual conversation, gesture, and expression, or details of houses, weather, and landscape, to identify the larger human significance of each small outer sign” (77). She locates this sympathy in Mrs. Todd as well, in fact suggesting that it is she who instructs the narrator in the art of empathy. The paragraph that concludes the chapter “On Shell-Heap Island” is pivotal for Folsom’s argument:

But as I stood alone on the island, in the sea-breeze, suddenly there came a sound of distant voices; gay voices and laughter from a pleasure-boat that was going seaward full of boys and girls. I knew, as if she had told me, that poor Joanna must have heard the like on many and many a summer afternoon, and must have welcomed the good cheer in spite of hopelessness and winter weather, and all the sorrow and disappointment in the world.

“... the narrator experiences Joanna’s life from inside Joanna’s perspective,” Folsom suggests, “for her imagination fully penetrates the heart of the solitary, and she realizes that Joanna could hear, receive, and welcome distant voices which reminded her of her unrenounceable fellowship in the human world” (82). It is this style, Folsom says, that makes the book achieve “a poignant elegiac quality while preserving a social and natural world which Jewett plainly felt was lost to her, as certainly we feel it is lost to us” (76).

I am convinced that Folsom has located a component of Jewett’s vision. But I find more in this passage than the narrator’s conclusion that Shell-Heap Island evokes “the same impulse for all the pilgrims and the Indians before [Joanna]. . . , a common human longing for a place of solitude, a detached vantage point from which to look at ordinary life” (82). Rather than seeing the narrator simply empathize with an elegaic, “detached” positioning, I see her recognizing, in addition, that Joanna’s situation—extreme self-exile because

she was jilted at the altar by a reprobate—is doomed to be repeated, as signified by the pleasure-boat; that Joanna's role as "anchorite" will be more and more ignored in the hurly-burly of sexual relations. Though, in the opinion of the narrator, Joanna "must have welcomed the good cheer," this gaiety, to me, poignantly signifies the fact that Joanna's hermit-like existence makes no difference; it will not erase "all the sorrow and disappointment in the world." Though sympathetic with Joanna's plight, the narrator cannot accept her choice; her mission must take her back into that world after being "the unaccompanied hermit and recluse of an hour or a day..."

On the other hand, Elizabeth Ammons's historicized view that the text is "... heavily inscribed with the glories, privileges and purity of the white race" is also convincing. "The fact is," Ammons concludes,

that Dunnet as represented in Jewett's text is built on the ruins of American Indian civilization (no live Indians appear in the book), and it is decorated by the trophies of empire: baskets from the Caribbean, tea from China, mugs from South America. All those tiny, tidy, white, fenced, tree-nailed and wedged houses staring up and down the coast do articulate a vision of preindustrial matrifocal harmony, health, and happiness. But they also stand for white colonial settlement and dominance. When we take communion with Mrs. Todd and the narrator, we are swallowing not just the former but the latter. (97)

But I argue that both Folsom and Ammons deny the Jewett figure the breadth and profundity of her vision. Could not Jewett, at this moment of doubling back on her career, have become aware of all these issues? Cannot this newly experienced vision accept these apparently contradictory positions as necessary but limited influences on her imaginative education? There is attraction and value in the nostalgic return to "preindustrial matrifocal" rural society, but it is a sterile escape from the modern world (Mrs. Todd is, after all, last described as "mateless"). "Matrifocal harmony, health and happiness" are necessary to challenge the ravages of an industrialized, colonializing, capitalistic modern world, but they contain their own totalizing and exclusionary emphases. A return to community, as figured by the Bowden reunion, is desirable, but it can also be too exclusionary. Blind acceptance of such cultural constructs as marriage and masculine/feminine binary definitions—as exhibited negatively in Joanna—is debilitating and needs to be reconstituted, but they are so embedded in our social identities that they cannot be easily rooted out and often deceivingly present themselves as "good cheer." In the face of all these constraints, what does the artist, contemplating the heady rush of her matured imagination, do?

IN TERMS OF gender politics, the roles of the three inadequate males in the novel—Captain Littlepage, William and Elijah Tilley—seem clear. The first, appearing early in the novel, is the epitome of isolated, lost masculinity, putting himself above community, prideful and learned, but now somewhat pathetic in his dotage. "'Oh, he used to be a beautiful man!'" (29) says Mrs. Todd, but, for all the narrator's sympathetic listening to his tales, he impresses us as the technician and capitalist, lost in fantasies of colonial

exploration and masculine control over nature. William, the second male, appearing in the middle of the novel during a transformative episode on Green Island with his mother, Mrs. Blackett, and his sister, Mrs. Todd, seems eunuch-like in his predominantly feminine characteristics of shyness, sympathy, and devotion to his mother and recalls a castrato with his high but firm tenor voice. And Elijah, the third, appearing at the end of the novel, exhibits such overwrought, delicate perpetual mourning for his deceased wife that he has assumed all her domestic chores and integrated them into his masculine, professional life as a fisherman and seems hermaphroditic. In short, Jewett presents the completely masculine male, the feminized male, and the combinant male, only the last of which she seems to validate with his benediction to the narrator as the latter departs.

Yet they are all three distinct story-tellers, illustrating to the narrator varieties of narratives that her maturing skills come both to encompass and exceed. "Some o' them tales hangs together toler'ble well" (29), says Mrs. Todd of Captain Littlepage's "great narratives." And his tale of "The Waiting Place" is replete with detail, driving action, and excitement: "'T'will be a great exploit some o' these days'" (27), he tells the narrator. But the narrator seems to realize that his fascination with the shadow-people of the ghostly waiting place and his contention that "certainty" about what lies after death "is what we desire" (18) reveal his isolated fear of his own impending death; despite the excitement and scope of his narrative, and his obvious acquaintance with literary masters, particularly Milton, his tale has little to say to her. William tells his stories through his singing. "It was the silent man's real and only means of expression," dealing with "more and more songs of old Scotch and English inheritance and the best that have lived from the ballad music of the war" (53). William, then, is the folk narrator, working in traditional popular forms like the ballad. However moving these tales are—and they come to signal for the narrator the presence of Mrs. Green, "that heart which had made the most of everything that needed love!" (54)—they are not enough by themselves. Elijah's tale is autobiography, a kind of retrospective memoir: as he talks softly of his eight-year-departed wife as if she were in the room with them, he reveals compassion, sympathy, regret, and guilt. "'I used to make light of her timid notions. She used to be fearful when I was out in bad weather or baffled about gittin' ashore.... I used to be dreadful thoughtless when I was a young and the fish was bitin' well. I'd stay out late some o' them days, an' I expect she'd watch an' watch an' lost heart a-waitin'" (123). Obviously, some of Elijah's autobiographical mode of narration informs Jewett's novel—thus his blessing to her on her outward passage, but regret and guilt are not for her: she does not feel obliged to use story-telling as a means of mooring herself permanently in the past.

When I return to the last chapter with these suppositions in mind, it assumes even more significance. If, as I am arguing, the book metonymically rehearses Jewett's writing career, the last chapter is another "doubling" of the process described by the book: a portrait in miniature of the female artist

coming into her imaginative power. But the operative concept here is “coming into”; what we discover in this last chapter is not an ending, not a closure but a narrativization of dying leading to rebirth on a grander scale. Jewett’s final paragraphs are replete with images of loss and death as the narrator contemplates her leave-taking and enacts her “return” to the world.

Her mood is at first elegiac, and she acknowledges her fears, doubting her ability to profit from her sojourn:

At last I had to say goodbye to all my Dunnet Landing friends, and my homelike place in the little house, and return to the world in which I feared to find myself a foreigner. There may be restrictions to such a summer’s happiness, but the ease that belongs to simplicity is charming enough to make up for whatever a simple life may lack, and the gifts of peace are not for those who live in the thick of battle.

Perhaps a “restricted” vision is enough; certainly such “simplicity” has its own attractions. But she soon realizes that the “gifts of peace” are, on the contrary, *necessary* for those who, like herself, “live in the thick of battle.” It is the last lesson she must learn, the final element of imaginative vision she must acquire from her mentor/mentee experience, a gift that will enable her to return to metropolitan, industrial Boston with a vision politicized to bring social change.

She encounters Mrs. Todd a last time, who abruptly leaves her, refusing to prolong the farewell. “So we die before our own eyes; so we see some chapters of our lives come to their natural end,” she muses, ostensibly about Mrs. Todd’s return home to find her person and belongings “died out” of the house, but she could also be referring to the end of this “chapter” in her own quest. And she discovers Mrs. Todd’s parting gifts: a “quaint West Indian basket,” perhaps imaging her acknowledgment of colonial appropriation that have gone into constructing this society; she finds food for her voyage, tied with “southernwood and a sprig of bay,” signaling a pledge of love and curative powers, respectively, and she picks up a coral pin originally brought from overseas to be given to “poor Joanna.” Thus Mrs. Todd’s last implicit instruction is to maintain the empathic vision encountered on Shell-Heap Island—that Joanna embodies the isolation, the fears, the courage, the waste of which all of us are capable. But the Jewett figure will carry it to her new venue, to aid in her work to cure the destructive ethnic and gender rigidities of the world to which she is returning. Mrs. Todd seems to recognize that this activism is not hers; and the narrator, gazing down on her distant retreating figure, agrees; Mrs. Todd disappears and the narrator departs.

Jewett is returning to the chaos of the modern world—back to Boston, we might suppose—but she has come through her apprenticeship in living and writing whole and powerful. She may miss the pleasantries of her summer sojourn, but hers is not teary nostalgia. Consider the “fruits” of her new positioning. “William’s Wedding” is the narrative of courtship and marriage of that nontraditional male we have already encountered, a story which refigures that institution into a delicate communion. “The Foreigner” returns us to Mrs. Todd and explicitly tells us that she appropriated her herbal skills not only

from her Indian predecessors but from a French woman from Jamaica, a fact that points to Mrs. Todd's vocation as one that could reference white colonial exploitation. The recently published *Irish Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett*, edited by Louis Renze and Jack Morgan (1996), suggests her concern with racial tension in conditions with which she was familiar during her long residence in Boston. And *The Tory Lover*, her last novel and, as a historical narrative (even if written for a young audience), a radical departure from her previous work, takes us to the American Revolution, with Jewett meditating on the origins of the American national identity, a move that Henry James, enmeshed in his modernist concerns, misread as a miscalculation on Jewett's part (Nagel 3).

I RETURN TO the last image of the novel: "... we struck out seaward to double the long sheltering headland of the cape...." If the last chapter has "doubled" the novel, the book "doubles" her artistic development, which has grown beyond the "sheltering" of the place. "[T]he islands and the headland had run together," reads the final line, "and Dunnet Landing and all its coasts were lost to sight." But not to mind, memory, heart, imagination, or artistic vision, I am careful to note.

So Sarah Orne Jewett, precocious daughter of a country doctor, successful writer of stories, sketches, and novels for all ages, correspondent with many if not most of the American *literati* of her time, companion, and perhaps lover to the widow of the most well-connected nineteenth-century American publisher, having access to social and literary elites, does not feel content to rest on these well-earned privileges. Nor does she accept the conventional definitions of gender, ethnicity, and capitalistic production as unalterable truths. But the Jewett I have in mind did not stop at the formulation of critiques of major issues of her historical moment. After the explosive understanding that accompanied the end of *Country of the Pointed Firs*, her art journeyed even further to pursue alternatives to the violence and "knowledges" grounded in binarial opposition and conquest. That is what speaks to me, on the cusp of yet another century. Would that we all could follow a similar journey.

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