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In these words, among the last she ever wrote, Celia Thaxter accurately stated the law of her being as an artist. She existed to create beauty. Doubtlessly she recognized, too, that her own writings, especially her prose, were as natural and inevitable growths as were the flowers she grew in her garden. Her best writing grew from two necessities: that of expressing her experience of life and that of fascinated visitors to the Shoals to learn of the impact of this strange environment on another human being. All art rises from these two necessities. An author needs not only sensitivity and talent but also an audience receptive and eager to hear him. Given these conditions, artistic creation becomes inevitable. In Celia Thaxter's case these conditions were signally present. She had an outstanding talent and she had the nation's intellectual elite as an eager and appreciative audience. After seventy-five years the audience has shrunk but it has by no means vanished. Visitors still throng to the Shoals each summer — writers, artists, ministers, teachers — as in Celia Thaxter's lifetime. They too must feel the enchantment of the islands and must wish to read the most eloquent interpreter of it. But the potential readership is much larger than this. In the current surge of paperback publishing *Among the Isles of Shoals* will surely be reissued and its vivid, pensive pages will not go unread.

THE MULTICOLORED SPIRIT OF CELIA THAXTER

*By Richard Cary*

Attitudes of authors towards the letters they write vary as distinctly as the shades and shapes of segments in a kaleidoscope. Some writers resent correspondence as an intrusive onus which robs them of precious working time, thus turn out brief and usually peevish missives of small value to future biographers or critics. Others, with an eye to posterity and publication, lavish hours upon well-wrought, self-conscious compositions which are fundamentally quite as useless. Still others find in letter-writing a respite from the intensity of creative effort.
and a release from enforced isolation of spirit. The last category is of course the most readable as well as revelatory. The necessary cosmetic assumed by the author drains away and, to differing degrees, the true complexion emerges.

Of such a kind was Celia Thaxter (1835-1894). Subjectivity is a notable strain in her poems and prose which began to appear in the 1860s. However, like most of her female contemporaries, she observed a proper Victorian restraint. One can draw a plausible image of sweetness, sincerity, sensitivity, and reverence from these public manifestations and perhaps be satisfied that he knows the soul behind the print. On this seventieth anniversary of her death it is fitting to present a number of Mrs. Thaxter's letters hitherto unpublished or published only in part.\(^1\) The depth of penetration they permit into her personality becomes immediately apparent. Written to family and intimate friends, they show an expanse of content and ebullience unmatched in her general writings or even in the collected *Letters of Celia Thaxter* (Boston, 1897), edited by Annie Fields and Rose Lamb.

Mrs. Thaxter was a devoted letter writer long before she had any intimations of authorship. Her earliest recorded letters to Mrs. Elizabeth Curzon Hoxie, another young matron, overflow with autobiography and chitchat about the children, with now and again the mention of a book. In 1861 occurred the most influential experience of her life: the publication of her first poem in a periodical, and the *Atlantic Monthly* at that. Its effect was to distend the horizon of her interests and friendships far beyond the stringent circle of domestic necessity which had confined her to the Isles of Shoals in her childhood and to Newburyport and Newtonville, Massachusetts, in her ten years of marriage. The first letter offered here carols the old concerns while striking a bold new note of confidence, for she has recently learned of her literary ten-strike. It magnifies her jubilation over the party she describes so gaily and graphically in hold-over, seriatim form—before, during, and after. She bandies quips on even terms with the junior Oliver Wendell Holmes.

\(^1\) All the letters reproduced in this article are now at Colby College through the generosity of her granddaughter Miss Rosamond Thaxter of Kittery Point, Maine. Miss Thaxter wishes to acknowledge the aid of Mrs. Cedric Powers, Sr., of Berlin, Connecticut, who discovered the first of these letters in a book and sent it to her.
and daringly pronounces "absurd" one of her formidable husband's ideas. Before she signs at the close, she has dabbled in the several traditional roles of woman — daughter, sister, wife, mother, coquette — and is reaching out for unaccustomed ones newly presenting themselves. In that sense this is her opening epistle to the world.

It is a corporate letter, addressed to her mother Mrs. Eliza ("Dominy") Laighton but shuttling frequently to direct jibes at her brothers Cedric and Oscar ("Bocky"). Levi Lincoln Thaxter is her husband; Karl, John, and Roland ("Lony") her children; Mr. and Mrs. Edward Bangs her neighbors. Mr. F. is George M. Folsom, a crony of Levi and great friend to the boys. Mrs. Thaxter uses informal punctuation which has been modified only to secure ease of meaning.

Newton, Feb. 25th [1861]

Monday night:
This has been a pleasant day out of doors, save that now & then the wind rose in sudden gusts to shake the windows & pipe dolefully in cracks and keyholes. I believe I am fairly out of my benumbed state of mind, & have felt quite high again — singing Stig's sentimental songs, & "Hey dorolor, Uncle Cedy" over and over for the children who call for it continually — only a Mother Goose song, Cedy dear, with your & Bockys names introduced by your fatuous sister. What has happened today — At noon Levi & John went to Roxbury to spend the night, & Karly & Lony & I are all alone — it seems very queer to have them gone. I have just locked up all the doors, piled the furnace full of coal, after finishing five games of back-gammon with Karl, who has taken himself to his solitary apartment — no John to quarrel with tonight. It is half past eight, a long time for the small boy to sit up, but it was a blue occasion, so I gave him an extra half hours grace — & we had a good time, Karly & I — & he recited the "Battle of Otterburn" & made me laugh loud & long — queer little old fashioned absurdity that he is. "Sir Andrew Barton" & the "Battle of Otterburn" are two delightful ballads. I thought I hated ballads of battles, but these seem to me beyond praise.

A note came today from Mr Bangs saying: "May I call for you tomorrow at 9½? — and I will drive you back again." Of course I said

2 Georg Stiegle (1815-1868), a German tenor and composer of songs who sang under the professional name of Giorgio Stigelli, performed in America during the opera season of 1864-5.

3 Mrs. Thaxter often referred to Karl as "my unfortunate boy." He 'must have suffered some injury at birth. Throughout his life Karl walked with a slight limp, his health was never very good and, although of a mild and gentle disposition, as he grew older attacks of violent temper were followed by great mental depression.' Rosamond Thaxter, Sandpiper, The Life & Letters of Celia Thaxter (Francestown, N. H., 1963), 39.
“Yes,” gladly. Tomorrow is lecture day, you know, & I go to Boston — "To get another headache," you'll say, dear Mother, I can see. But I shall not have any more, I hope.

Isn't the Bangs an angel? But she isn't quite so handsome as I thought she was. I'm sorry to confess, not quite so near perfection. Wednesday (that's day after tomorrow, you know) night, is Susy Jackson's festivity — a kind of musical party — the "Sophs" (I think Mr. F. will be able to enlighten you as to what kind of a thing a Soph is) are to sing extensively, & Mrs. Louisa Slade is also to sing. — "Adelaida," a lovely song of Beethoven's, being one of the things she is to sing. And your little sister is going. I must find a little pink rose bud out of the greenhouse, to wear. Not a thing except a rose bud in the way of adornment, not even sleeve-buttons, for my lovely lace sleeves do not require them, nor a pin, Mother dear. Theres a little blue velvet fastening for the collar, such as the dress is trimmed with. I shall go to Mrs. Bigelows — spend the night, you know, dress there & go to Susy's with Adie — that will be very nice. I shall write to tell you about it, & try to send this letter off before Saturday that you may get a more cheerful idea of the sister of yours than yesterday's epistle will give.

Lony is such a comfort, Mother! He told me the other night I "mustnt eat him all up," but that I might bite a piece off to send to Dominy Laighty! Really insisted upon it, I must do it! He says such cunning little things. When you asked him whom he loved, after saying all our names & then yours he says "Fossom" & "George" (because we call Mr. Folsom, George) & he is mightily amused at making two people of him. He comes to me & when my eyes are open tells me to shut them "because Lony wants to kiss them" & sometimes when I lay my head back against the chair I sit in, with shut eyes, he comes & says "whats matter Mama?" — little exquisite, tender voice. I feel two little dewy kisses on the lids, like blossoms, dropping softly down upon them. It is like a benediction.

Wednesday night. Yesterday morning came a note by express from Susy saying they had changed the party from Wednesday to Tuesday, so we had it yesterday evening, or better, "last night" & splendid times we had! I was so glad I got the note in time to pack my various duds to take in with me. She begged me to spend the night with them, so I got let off at Mrs Bigelows (it made so much more compact an arrangement of it, you see) Mrs Bangs had said half past-nine. I had every earthly thing ready, had been to the greenhouse & got a large box of flowers (plenty of lovely rose-buds of various kinds & colors among them) & had stood at the gate, the picture of despair, full fifteen minutes before I saw the grey horse's head above the brow of the hill — then it was past ten! Unpunctual Days! But she thought she was in wonderful season. You may be sure I didn't undeceive her, & we talked like two steam engines all the way into town. It's my impression I wasted most breath of the two. Oh my friends! We were five minutes late! The solemn conclave was interrupted by the sweeping of our garments as we found our way among the labyrinth of crinoline to

4 This was characteristic. Few portraits or snapshots show her without the single rose pinned to her bodice.
After it (I ought to tell you how splendid it was — but can't stop. Old Mrs Tomkee sat opposite Mr W, & sobbed & wept plentifully, even ininterrupting his still male voice with her sobbing) I went home with Susy. Angelica Bangs sent my carpet bag to Hamilton place for me. Then I had to go to Mrs. Bigelow's, & then to Barbara's. Barbara I found highly excited on the subject of the little poem, "Land-Locked." She said she considered herself the godmother, & she was very kind & jolly. Back to Susy's to dinner. After dinner we had piles of flowers to arrange & I did enjoy it very much. After we were done Mrs Jackson called out to us, "Now girls, put yourselves down for fifteen minutes, you'll be perfectly pale tonight, if you don't." So Susy & I obediently "put ourselves down" in my room, but as for sleeping, we couldn't, though we lay very still, with one of Susy's heavy long braids coiled around my arm — splendid hair she has. Presently I said, "It's sunset." "Why, how do you know?" said she, for we were completely walled in by brick houses on every side, I said, "By the quality of the light," which sounded very impressive, you know! At an absurdly early hour she vanished to dress, & could not believe I could get ready in fifteen minutes — which I did — & helped both Mary & herself to dress & put the flowers in hers & her Mother's hair, after I was ready. I wore the meek-colored silk gown, Mother dear, with the light blue trimming, plain lace sleeves, no bows or ribbons, little lace collar, blue velvet belt & little knot at the throat, & little blue net. I had a lovely spray of white roses, half opened buds & one delicious salmon colored rose, in my hair. I wasn't content with "one little pink rose-bud," because I couldn't find exactly the one I wanted. The flowers looked very nice & my friends approved of me — there is nothing so lovely as real flowers to wear. Susy wore a lovely light crimson silk & her sister Mary a green one.

Thursday morning, 28th Feb. I had to stop writing last night because my hand trembled so I could not write. I must curtail my account of the party — it was very successful & brilliant, there were between sixty & seventy people, the Sophs sang with great applause & Mrs Slade sang lovely things & looked like an angel. The youthful O. W. Holmes was my especial cavalier — asked if he might take me out to supper very soon after he came, but when supper time came, the mountain came to Mahomet, or rather the supper came to us & after he had brought me some ice & seated himself by me again, he amused me very much by asking me if he mightn't set his plate of salad in his chair while he "scooted" across the room to speak to a lady opposite. When the dancing began he asked me to dance but I never do, & I told him. "Then I won't," said he. "Oh but you must," said I. "But I'd rather stay here & talk," he replied, but I made him go. After the Lancers (you remember that dance Bocky, surely, & Miss Dora Willard's sweeping curtsies) they danced "the German," which afforded me such entertainment that I must tell you about it — it is partly a galop — a kind of polka you

5 Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. (1841-1935), distinguished son of a distinguished father, was a Justice of the U. S. Supreme Court from 1902 to 1932. To his last days he retained his liveliness and interest in pretty girls. Less than two months after this party he withdrew from the senior class at Harvard and enlisted as a private in the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia. He was commissioned a lieutenant in July and severely wounded in October.
know. But the fun of it was, the ladies stood at one end of the room & the gentlemen at the other — always one gentlemen too many & at a signal by the music, the “fellows” rushed for the girls, & of course one had to retire crestfallen & disappointed, the least nimble, or most modest individual. It did so immensely amuse me to see them moderate their movements as they approached the stately, beautiful girls, to clasp those waists “sae jimp & slender”* (it requires great management not to be rude & hasty after such a rush at the beginning) & then each happy Soph whirled off with his partner, only a little gloved hand between his shoulder & the lovely head — you only saw a pair of brilliant eyes & the top of each girls head over the gentlemans shoulder and oh such pretty girls! Such exquisite, delicate figures, such grace & freshness. I am thinking of some of the youngest ones when I say “freshness” — the elders were certainly graceful, hardly fresh. I said to Charles Jackson, “Who is that splendid girl with the coal black hair & rich color in the dark green dress?” He told me her name — I forget it. “Yes,” said he, “she is splendid. She smashes about two fellows every party she goes to!” He said it so expressively, I was killed with laughter. But my friend Oliver Wendell was very unmanageable. I couldn’t get him to admire any body. One girl with lovely blonde hair especially excited me. “There goes friendly golden-hair,” said I, as she went out. “Tow-hair, I think you mean,” said he. Wasn’t that audacious? It was two o’clock before we went to bed & it was all over. We bade each other good morning instead of good night. I was not tired then. I could not believe it was myself when I went to the glass to begin to take off my things. I hated to take the roses out of my hair, & think there was an end of this brilliant evening. But I wouldn’t have such an one more than twice a year at the most, for it uses up one’s vital energy tremendously. Levi went to Boston before I came out yesterday but I found all the chicks well & happy when I got here. I found a most delightful letter from Mr. Folsom mailed for me — (do tell him how I thank him & how I enjoyed it & how I have saved the musical part of the party to tell him when I answer his letter which I mean to do directly) & also one directed to Mrs Celia Thaxter in an unfamiliar man’s hand. What can this be, thought I, opening it. I unfolded & read the following extraordinary document: “Feb. 25th” Mrs C. T. Watertown Mass. We enclose our c’k for $10. in payment for your poem, “Land-Locked,” in the Atlantic Monthly for the ensuing month. Yours Respectfully Ticknor & Fields, per J.S. Clark!” I burst into a shout of laughter, & for a minute felt somewhat as I did when Miss Revere, last summer, said she supposed I wouldn’t be paid for making a necklace of shells. When L. came home I showed it to him (the first mention of the existence of the “pome” which we have made to each other). “Well,” said he, “didn’t you expect it?” “It never occurred to me,” I replied — & that was all. But he called to me after I had gone into the bedroom to say that a lady had congratulated him on the subject that day. I know very well what he would say if I asked him

* Mrs. Thaxter is evidently misquoting from memory the fourteenth line of Robert Burns’s “O, Were I on Parnassus Hill,” which reads: “Thy waist sae jimp, thy limbs sae clean.”
if he liked it. Yet I think he is pleased. I would rather so much that he would like it than anybody else—but if nothing else prevented, the fact of his Landlocking me himself would prevent. He wouldn’t go to Susy’s party. He is funny, he feels as if often he were invited because I am—a sort of an “appendage.” Such an absurd idea! The other day I brought him several messages from different people when I came out of Boston. “Oh,” said he, “I’m getting quite into notice!” Mr. Dixwell & Esther—Esther looking so lovely!—came up from Cambridge last night to ask us to tea, & Levi has consented to go & I finish this letter hurriedly this morning so that I may take it along with me & drop it into the P.O. as I go down to Cambridge. I am feeling very well save for the exhaustion of night before last which I feel more today than I did yesterday. It is a great effort to write, & I am almost sorry I promised Esther I would come tonight—thought I should be quite strong today. But I have my spirits back & am full of rapture at those two heavenly days—a foretaste of summer—How lovely they must be at Appledore!—the Northern Lights last night were perfectly beautiful. Goodbye, dear people. Much love to Mr. F. Pray write to me Bocky & Cedy, please. In haste

Yours truly
Sister

The foregoing letter contains Mrs. Thaxter’s first written report about her first published poem. There exists a slight difference of opinion as to how it got into the hands of James Russell Lowell, then editor of the Atlantic Monthly. Mrs. Thaxter’s statement that this was “the first mention of the existence of the ‘pome’ which we have made to each other” refutes the version that Levi had personally passed the poem on. Lowell “christened” the untitled piece and included it in the March 1861 issue of the magazine without signature, as was then the custom.

Mrs. Thaxter makes no secret of the strain in her marital relations. Levi Thaxter, Harvard graduate, was in the mold of Hawthorne’s morose scholar-idealists. He consorted with men of eminence in literature, art, and the sciences, and achieved

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7 In The Heavenly Guest, edited by Oscar Laighton (Andover, Mass., 1935), 150, Mrs. Thaxter’s son John declares unequivocally that his father made the transfer, and Miss Rosamond Thaxter tells me that family tradition accords with this view of the event. However, in her introduction to the Letters of Celia Thaxter (Boston, 1897), xiii, Annie Fields says that “Landlocked” was delivered “by the hand of a friend,” which must be construed as the height of evasion if she meant the writer’s husband. George F. Whicher agrees that the verses reached Lowell “through the mediation of a friend,” Dictionary of American Biography (New York, 1936), XVIII, 397.

Levi was a cousin to Maria White, Lowell’s first wife. In Mrs. Thaxter’s library is a copy of DeQuincey’s Biographical Essays inscribed by “James and Maria Lowell.”
such an impressive reputation as a reader of Browning that the poet wrote an eight-line epitaph which marks Levi’s stone in the Congregational Cemetery at Kittery Point. Levi was eleven years older than Celia, had been her tutor, and had married her when she barely turned sixteen. His chronic bad health, which necessitated periodic trips to warmer climates, and his aversion to riding a boat from the mainland to the Isles brought about many separations between them. His sardonic temperament was incompatible with her euphoric outlook, and he was impatient of any time she took off from household chores. A curious ambivalence of pride and envy warps his view of her success. His feeling of superior intellect and his lack of solid accomplishment on his own rankled over the instant, effortless attention she attracted. He never shared her “proud astonishment” nor generously praised her endeavors.

Mrs. Thaxter’s outranging hopes for a larger life than that circumscribed by a minute community and an importunate family become evident in the cadence of her remarks here, the fledgling trying out her voice and fluttering her tiny wings. Conversely, her disproportionate delight over the trivia of this social affair demonstrates a yearning to return to adolescent days uncurbed by the responsibility of a husband and three children. Indeed she may secretly have wished to regress farther back— to the welcome fantasies of childhood. At age 23 she wrote to Mrs. Hoxie: “I want to hang up my stocking too, dreadfully; except that I feel it in my bones St. Nicholas would overlook it.”8 This wistful affinity with youth she never lost. She wrote sheaves of poems for children, as well as numerous letters in appropriate key to the little Hoxies. Her ability to recapture the juvenile level of consciousness is nowhere better displayed than in this note to her son Roland, who was with his father and brother John on an excursion in Florida. She maintains with touching whimsy the point of view of a beloved dog, attaching a tuft of its blondish hair above the salutation.

Appledore
March 6th 1869.

My dear little Master,

I miss you very much. I was very seasick coming over in the boat & didnt know what was going to be done to me. I watched my chance

8 Letters of Celia Thaxter, 13.
Sil & scrabbled up out of the cabin thinking I should feel better if I could get out, but bow-wow-wow! o-o-o-o! it was dreadful up on deck, I couldn't keep my feet, though I had four to stand on, the wind blew & horrible cold water dashed over me. I managed to crawl to your Uncle Cedric & got as close as I could to him, but it wouldn't do, the water was too dreadful & I scuttled down again & was a miserable dog till I got on shore. When we got to the house they gave me a good bone, but I didn't have much appetite. I scratched at the pump till they gave me some water of which I drank a great deal & went & lay down behind the stove.

I have a pretty good time but I miss you and John very much. I am round a good deal in the day time & bark at the cows & the horse. They have a most improper way of coming up & standing round the back door, & my sense of the impropriety of it is so great that I nearly bark myself into fits on the doorstep, but they don't move a jot for all my noise. It wouldn't be allowed for a moment in Newtonville! A man from Star island came here the other day & I dutifully rushed at him & fixed my tooth in the heel of his boot. His name was John Cook & he made such a noise that your mother came out & called me in. Another one named Jud came day before yesterday & I flew at him & bit his trousers through & through, whereupon he & your two uncles set up such a roar of laughter that they had to sit down and rest themselves. I couldn't see anything to laugh at for my part. I had the pleasure of shaking the life out of a rat the other day & heard his back bone snap with satisfaction & everybody patted me & said I was a good dog, which made me feel very proud, so that I winked & blinked more foolishly than usual, with my hair all over my eyes. In the evenings, while your mother is reading aloud, one or other of your uncles always holds me on his lap, altogether I'm very much petted indeed. They leave me here in the parlor for the night & when they go away, I'm always lying very innocently behind the stove, but the minute they go, up I hop on the sofa & then I pass a pleasant night till Jenny comes & puts me out of doors at half past five o'clock in the morning. There I run around & snarl & bark & cough a little & then come & scratch at the door till they let me in, & I go and lie down behind the stove where its nice & warm.

I want to see you very much. How I'll bark when you come! I send you a lock of my hair. I've been washed over, but I go round among the coal & in the mud & dust after rats, & its of no manner of use, washing me! I never did see any use in it! Bow, wow, wow! I am your affectionate little dog

Sil

Mrs. Thaxter's maternal solicitude continued strong long after the boys had become men. Karl was of course dependent on her especial care and she constantly plied John with advice about running his farm on Cutts Island. John had attained his majority and was supervising an estate in West Virginia when he received the most vivid depiction of a wreck on the Isles of
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Shoals that his mother ever wrote. The unholy destructive power of the ocean fascinated Mrs. Thaxter and she often limned its lethal consequences in loving detail.\(^9\) In 1881 Whit­tier told her: “Thy graphic description of the storm at Apple­dore made me sorry I was not there to see it.”\(^10\)

From her fourth year onward Celia’s sensibilities were totally engrossed by her habitation of these islands, first at the lighthouse on White Island kept by her father, then at the hotel on Appledore run by her brothers. Nine miles off the coast at the line where Maine and New Hampshire conjoin, this group was the subject of her most widely known book, *Among the Isles of Shoals* (Boston, 1873).\(^11\) At the outset she provides this geographic layout, helpful here because it elucidates many of her references in subsequent letters.

As you approach . . . you perceive that there are six islands if the tide is low; but if it is high, there are eight, and would be nine, but that a breakwater connects two of them. Appledore, called for many years Hog Island . . . is the largest and most regular in shape . . . Next, almost within a stone’s throw, is Haley’s Island, or “Smutty-nose,” . . . At low tide, Cedar and Malaga are both connected with it, . . . Star Island . . . lies a quarter of a mile southwest of Smutty-nose . . . Not quite a mile southwest from Star, White Island lifts a lighthouse for a warning . . . and forms, with Seavey’s Island, at low water, a double island, . . . Most westerly lies Londoner’s, an irregular rock with a bit of beach . . . Two miles northeast from Appledore, Duck Island thrusts out its lurking ledges on all sides beneath the water, one of them running half a mile to the northwest . . . at the east and south [lie] Shag and Mingo Rocks . . . A very round rock west of Londoner’s, perserveringly called “Square,” and Anderson’s Rock, off the southeast end of Smutty-nose, complete the catalogue. (9-11)

The following letter to John Thaxter, published in *The Heavenly Guest*, 175-177, is presented here with restorations and emendations, including the correct date. A demonic storm destroyed the lighthouse at Minot’s Ledge in 1849. The *Lone Star* was the Laightons’ passenger sailboat.

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\(^9\) For variant versions of the following letter to John, see her accounts of the storm to Annie Fields and Anna Eichberg in *Letters of Celia Thaxter*, 70-78.


\(^11\) Whittier reports Horace Greeley as saying, “Well, the best prose writing I have seen for a long time is Mrs. Thaxter’s ‘Isles of Shoals’ in the *Atlantic.*” Pickard, II. 965.
My darling boy:

I was rejoiced to get your brief note, but "wot wubbish" it is for you to say you hadn't one minute in which to write to your only mother, in the course of a whole month! My son, allow me to mildly state that I don't believe a word of it — tho' you may flatter yourself that is true. I had a letter from father this morning, but of course you did too. All seems to go well with them. They are off from Apalach, by this time.

O John, my dear, we have had the fiend's own month of March! Such a disastrous four weeks never was known in our experience at the Shoals. The storm of last week has never been approached in violence since the great tempest that carried away Minot's Ledge Light twenty-five years ago & more. It was indescribably furious. The poor Lone Star sank at her moorings & she is probably gone, poor proud old faithful craft! Night before last came another fearful tempest. Dom & I could hardly sleep for the thunder of it, & it shook us so in our beds.

Yesterday morning at eight o'clock, broad daylight, it being foggy & a heavy sea still running, a Hermaphrodite brig struck on the outer rocks of White island, a breaker carried away a portion of her stern & drowned five men then & there. Then the breakers pitched her upon Londoners, drove her fairly over & over, smashed her all up, broke her in two halves, drowned three more men & there left her. The mate alone escaped of a crew of nine. He says he knows not how he came ashore, he found himself lying there on the beach, banged & pounded & bruised, the brig a mass of bristling timbers, the masts clean vanished out of sight, the sails beaten into pulp for the paper mill, his comrades all gone; poor fellow, what a fearful plight! You know there is a deserted shanty on the island — he crept to that, found a stove & fuel within & lit a fire. All this time the fog was so thick no one here knew of the disaster: at noon it lifted & from Star the people saw the smoke & went over. The great vessel was so thoroughly destroyed as not to be visible from any distance. Two leaves from her logbook floated over here, they were written last summer when she was on a voyage from Annapolis N.S. to Barbadoes. One of her great mast hoops came over too. I am afraid of the beaches! There are eight dead men floating about these melancholy rocks. Pip & Charlie went over to Londoners last night at sunset — we did not discover it till then. All Poore's gang of men from Star were there, & the mate of the vessel, giving directions to save all he could, cables, anchors, iron &c., & looking for his dead mates among the rocks & weeds. The brig was forty days out from Liverpool loaded with salt, for Boston. Of course, her cargo has helped to flavor the brine anew.

I wish so much to go over to Londoners & look at the wreck, but there is too much man over there. I must wait till the excitement has subsided & the rock is deserted, then the gulls & I will have it all to ourselves. I can't tell you how shocked & solemnized we were with it all, last night. It was too hideously near. Poor Dom was so distressed. Just think, the brig had weathered the whole storm of the fearful night, & in broad daylight, while we were peacefully eating our breakfasts,
went ashore, right under the lighthouse. Talk about mountains! I tell you the mountains of water were stupendous & they roared like a million devils. Dom & I, waking & listening in the night said “Isn’t it just like some terrible spite & rage, longing to kill & destroy?” And it was. I really thought the wind would thrust us off into the middle of the mere & there would be an end of us.

I think “bless Bob” would like to hear about the wreck — you might give him my note, if you like & lots & lots of love beside.

Uncle Oscar is going ashore in the Molly when she comes in from the fishing-grounds whither she has gone to draw her trawls. He takes the sails of the Pilgrim, who must fill the place of the lost Lone Star, but she isn’t half the craft the Star was.

What do you mean by “Fossum’s super visor ship?” Do you think I am a clairvoyant, my dear? Or are you “running away with the idea” that you have written to me all about it! I would you had. Write again dear, do, very soon, to your loving Mother.

All send love. The song sparrows are singing & I am so glad, so happy to hear them! And the warm rain has washed off all, or nearly all the hideous snow. It will be summer before we know it.

The hotel on Appledore developed into a vacation magnet for men and women of some fame as writers, musicians, and artists. Among these were Hawthorne, Emerson, Holmes, Whittier, Lowell, James Whitcomb Riley, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Annie and James T. Fields, Sarah Orne Jewett, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, John Fiske, Edmund Clarence Stedman, Ole Bull, John K. Paine, Edwin Booth, Childs Hassam, William Morris Hunt, Ross Turner, and Appleton Brown. Another regular sojourner was Lucy Larcom (1824-1893), an editor of Young Folks, ardent abolitionist, and author of homely nature and children’s poems. She and Mrs. Thaxter responded instantly and deeply to each other. “One cannot read or write very much of either of them without involving in some happy way a mention of the other,” said Justin H. Shaw. The hour is late and Mrs. Thaxter intends merely to pen an assurance that she has completed a long-promised shell bracelet for Miss Larcom’s friend and frequent correspondent. In spite of herself Celia is drawn into two of their mutual interests — nature and

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12 Boston Transcript, March 8, 1924. See Miss Larcom’s letter to Mrs. Thaxter in Daniel Dulany Addison (ed.), Lucy Larcom: Life, Letters, and Diary (Boston, 1894), 163-165; also pages 166-167 for her comments on the Isles of Shoals. To Whittier Mrs. Thaxter expressed her feeling about Miss Larcom: “I do think she is a heavenly body! A true woman.” Letters of Celia Thaxter, 33.
children. It eventuates that she writes another of her “wonderfully hospitable letters,” as Whittier dubbed them. A truncated version appears in Sandpiper, 76-78.

Appledore
Sunday, Sept. 6, 1863

My dear Miss Larcom,

I dare say you think I have forgotten all my promises to you, but you see I haven’t. I wouldn’t write to you till I had despatched Mrs Spalding’s bracelet, & I couldn’t make that for various reasons— one was I hadn’t time, another, it was impossible to obtain the machine to bore the shells, for all the relatives of Thomas, Richard & Henry continually quarrelled among themselves for the possession thereof. Now almost everybody is gone & I do nothing but bore shells for my sanitary work. Now the mail that carries this, carries to Mrs Spalding her bracelet, so let your mind be set at rest on that point. I hope you got the paper-cutter safely. Ellen sent it while she was here.

It is very late & I oughtn’t to be writing at all, so my letter will only be a shabby one, but perhaps you will like it better than none. I must tell you of the present state of things at Appledore. There are only about thirty people, those thinning daily, & it is as lovely as it can be, as you may imagine. I enjoy every minute of the time. Last week, or rather week before last week, my husband came & Wednesday went home, carrying with him Roland & John, & leaving me only Karl. I begged for one week more. I have had such a hard time this summer, so different from the splendid time I generally have— losing strength & flesh & spirits instead of gaining all, which is what people come for, you know. So I have had the loveliest week, rowing & sailing with Cedric, taking blissful, lovely walks, lying close by the soft, sweet-sounding waves by the half hour together, only listening & resting, sometimes peeping out of the corner of my eye at a dreamy sail afar off, or a floating gull, fair & white in the sunshine, or watching the play of color on the changing water, or a flitting peep piping its sweet, plaintive note, flying hither & thither. Dear me, what a good time I have had, gathering driftwood & sketching & picking up shells & seaweed & things, & hunting mushrooms & being deliciously lazy & carefree generally! I wish you could have been here too! We had some splendid surf a week or two ago— one of my “grandchildren,” Millie Swett (perhaps you remember her, the brown-eyed one) was yet with me & we had such fun down on the eastern rocks, watching the cold plunging seas roll in & thunder against the rocks & rise in clouds of spray, to fall in numberless little foamy white cascades down the irregular surfaces. In one or two places it was churned into creamy masses of trembling foam, which the wind tore apart & sent flying over our heads like flocks of frightened birds— the children played with it taking up great flakes in their hands. The coloring was so curious & misty I wish you could have seen it, so many cold, slaty blues & purples about. A man-of-war, the “Marion,” beating about the bay, looked like a tall column of black canvas, her weather-beaten sails perfectly black, being wet through & all her spars & hull & masts marked in ink. She
was quite a solemn spectacle. But the emerald breakers were a feast to one's eyes — such a living crystal green!

This morning Cedric took me to White island & there it was heavenly. It was the fairest, bluest morning that ever rose, I believe — everything so light & bright in the ever-new sunshine. We spread our little sprit sail & flitted across — it was so beautiful, the water so cool & clear, the faint wind so perfectly delicious with its sea-scents. Every sail on the horizon filled me with a kind of inexpressible joy. I'm sure I don't know why — but they always do. We stayed there all the morning & went to all our dear old haunts & I wished I could go back & live there forever. I found the wild pink morning-glory still growing & blossoming profusely, though everywhere the golden rod waved & nodded & the sweet asters bloomed. The seasons get so strangely mixed here. The housatonia is blossoming thickly all over the island now, though the rose-haws have turned scarlet & sumach bushes flame with the touch of autumn.

Miss Larcom, I hope you found things better than you thought, if you went to the west, as I suppose you did, & that your sister was not so sick as you feared. I have thought of you a great deal since you went away, & I'm sorry I haven't written before for the sake of the salt-air I might fold up in a letter to send to you.

I am going home in a day or two — two days more probably. Do write to me will you not? Care of L. L. Thaxter, Watertown, Mass. Please do.

I'm sorry to send you such a shabby note. I do wish I were going to stay a month longer, then I would write a better one. Dear me, how can I go back & look at those "happy autumn fields!" They are so still. Well, goodnight. I won't be tempted off again!

Ever most afftely yours
Celia Thaxter

Another littérateur of Mrs. Thaxter's acquaintance was Mary Abigail Dodge (1833-1896), co-editor of Young Folks with Miss Larcom and J. T. Trowbridge. She adopted the pen name Gail Hamilton and, with provocative originality, agitated against woman suffrage. It is an irony that Mrs. Thaxter always felt more secure in poetry although her most effectual performances are in prose. This letter is partially reproduced in Sandpiper, 83.

Newtonville. Jan 14th 1867

My dear friend,
Do you want this very minute literary effort for the Young Folks? Or are you over-run with things of the sort? I have many little stories of this sort to tell of various birds & beasts, & if you like I will send them. Please let me know & will you not do me the favor to point out any great infelicities which may afflict my production, for I'm entirely unused to writing prose, & feel as if I didn't know how to use the king's English.
I had, a few days ago, a charming note from Mr. Whittier, who says he has been having a respite from neuralgia & has taken advantage of it to write a "little poem." I hope to go to see him next week — can I take any message for you? I hope you are still at Beverly & that my note will reach you. Do let me hear from you directly, please, & believe me ever affectionately & unforgetfully yrs Celia Thaxter.

Mrs. Thaxter’s invocation of Whittier’s name is not the ploy of a new-sprung writer blatantly allying herself with an established reputation. She came to know him in Newburyport during the first winters of her marriage. The relationship ripened to full flower after he began visiting Appledore in the early 1860s and it lasted the thirty remaining years of his life. He talked hour upon hour with her, and there “Whittier could be heard at his best, sympathetic, stimulating, uplifting, as he alone could be, and yet as he, with his Quaker training to silence, was so seldom moved to prove himself.” He declared that, without her, the island would be “a mere pile of rocks . . . dead as the moon’s old volcanic mountains.” And she in turn was profoundly grateful “for the inestimable boon of his beautiful friendship.” Within a week of his death he expressed the desire “to go once more to the Shoals,” and Mrs. Thaxter had hopefully prepared for his arrival.

Their affection for each other as persons spilled over into esteem for each other as artists. “I have always regarded him as New England’s greatest lyric poet,” she said to C. E. L. Win­gate. She contributed a poem to the tributary symposium in the Literary World on his seventieth birthday, composed another for his seventy-fifth, and a sonnet on his immortality.

The first poem Whittier published that year was “To Eli and Sibyl Jones,” in Friends’ Review, April 20, 1867.

Letters of Celia Thaxter, xviii-xix.

Pickard, II, 595-596.

Ibid., II, 521.

Letters of Celia Thaxter, 193. For an extended account of the Thaxter-Whittier friendship see Sandpiper, 202-224.

November 22, 1891, Letters of Celia Thaxter, 186.

Literary World, December 1, 1877; Sarah Orne Jewett (ed.), The Poems of Celia Thaxter (Boston, 1896), 192-193; The Heavenly Guest, 25.
About a dozen of the books he inscribed and presented to her have survived (see the Vaughan calendar following this article). In one of them — Mabel Martin, 1876 — he indited a nine-line verse which remained unpublished until Miss Thaxter extracted it for Sandpiper (p. 217). For Celia’s narrative poem “Lars” Whittier supplied two introductory stanzas that deftly localized the story, and in 1870 he paid her the supreme compliment of asking her to criticize the manuscript of “Marguerite.”26 About his ballad “The Wreck of Rivermouth,” which specifies the Isles of Shoals, Appledore and White islands, he confessed: “By the way, thee ought to like that poem, for it would scarcely have been written but for thee. The thought of thee and thy sea stories and pictures prompted it.”21

To infinitely greater extent inspiration flowed in the opposite direction. It was through his unrelenting insistence that she produced her magnum opus. “I wish thee would write out for the Atlantic some of the good things thee knows of the Shoals and the Shoalers. I have never heard anything equal in dramatic effect to thy stories,” he assured her.22 Acting upon his impulsion, she produced her essays originally in four installments for the Atlantic Monthly of August 1869, January, February, and May 1870, under the covering title Among the Isles of Shoals. When Whittier died she publicly reaffirmed the vastness of her debt to him. “His sympathy and interest in all I did were invaluable to me. He never gave me any peace till I wrote the book about the Shoals. ‘It is thy kismet,’ he said; ‘thee must do it!’ ”23

This letter to Whittier appears without date and with several omissions and errors in transmittal in the Letters of Celia Thaxter, 42-43. Above the salutation is a slender sketch of a blue bird, witness of Mrs. Thaxter’s skill as a painter in watercolor.

Dear friend,

I wonder if you care to know how the great Beethoven looked! Even if you don’t, I think the picture is interesting as a fine type of humanity, & I crave permission to add it to your collection of photographs. How strange it is that the greatest musician the world has seen should have

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26 Pickard, II, 589; Ibid., II, 549.
27 Ibid., II, 534.
28 February 15, 1867, Ibid., II, 520.
29 Ibid.
been deaf to his own marvellous work & shut out from all sounds! Doesn't he look like a splendid old German lion, with a north-east hurricane in his hair! I haven't words to tell how I admire him & his up-lifting music.

I had such a happy time at Amesbury! And I thank you with all my heart.

I haven't yet heard from the Fields'. Will let you know about their going to the Shoals. Only five more days of waiting for me, if nothing happens, & Saturday will see me—off Po Hill!

Yours ever

Celia Thaxter

Newtonville, Sunday. June 23rd

1872

Mrs. Thaxter's passion for Beethoven was boundless. "A single movement of Beethoven's is better than a whole world of Liszt's transcriptions!" she exclaimed to Bradford Torrey.24 In the parlor of her cottage on Appledore, designed primarily for the performance of music, she sat day after day listening to composer John Knowles Paine play her favorite sonatas on the piano—the "Appassionata," and Op. 109, 110. "It seemed as if the new awakening of her spirit to a conscious sense of its own independent, disengaged existence came while listening to the music of Beethoven."25 Four of her sonnets on Beethoven are incorporated in the collected poems; three in a sequence, the last of which echoes her concern over his inability to hear his own grand creations.

Mrs. Thaxter's congenial kinship with James T. Fields (1817-1881) and Annie Fields (1834-1915), both poets, began when Fields assumed editorship of the Atlantic Monthly in 1861 and endured through their lifetimes. The Fieldses came frequently to the Isles of Shoals and Mrs. Thaxter was as frequently their house guest in Boston. Mrs. Fields's eulogistic survey of Celia's life and works saw light first in the Atlantic Monthly, LXXV (February 1895), 254-266, reappeared as preface to the Letters of Celia Thaxter, again in Authors and Friends (Boston, 1897), 227-262, and in The Heavenly Guest, 86-114, each time with small changes to suit the context.

Po Hill, formerly Powwow Hill, was the site of Whittier's home for over half a century. A landmark for vessels entering

24 Letters of Celia Thaxter, 171.
25 Editors' comment, Ibid., 138-139.
Newburyport harbor, the crest became for Mrs. Thaxter an inciting symbol which she adduced several times in ecstatic terms. Whittier memorialized the hill in “Abram Morrison,” “Miriam,” “Cobbler Keezar’s Vision,” and it was under its benevolent shadow that he wrote “Snowbound.”

Mrs. Thaxter’s favored status with Whittier left her open to solicitations for his signature. Although he deplored autograph-hunting, he obliged whenever she interceded, and went beyond that to indite a few impromptu stanzas when the petitioner-by-proxy was young (Pickard, II, 542). Here is another instance in which he graciously accommodated a child. Unfortunately, the verses were detached from the letter.

Little Alice, Mr. Whittier wrote these verses especially for you! I asked him (instead of waiting till I returned to Newtonville, to look up among my papers there some signature of his to send you) & at once he sends me these dear verses, especially for you. Are they not lovely? I am so glad to send them to you!

Affectionately your friend
Celia Thaxter

148 Charles St.
Friday, April 17, 1878.

Another facet in the brilliant prism of Mrs. Thaxter’s life was her shifting religious allegiance. Regardless of professed labels, she moved from undogmatic Christianity to virtual pagan nature worship and back to loose orthodoxy. Between the last two occurred an interlude wholly devoted to theosophic visions as promulgated by Madame Blavatsky and her persuasive disciples. As early as 1852 Hawthorne espied on a table in the parlor at Appledore House a tract on spiritual mediums, but it was not until after her mother died in 1877 that Mrs. Thaxter’s interest in mysticism, metempsychosis, and myriad psychic phenomena grew to an absorption. She read numerous books on immortality, attended seances in which she presided at the ouija board or the tipping table, held “spiritual jam-jams” with her son Roland, and otherwise exploited possibilities of communicating with the dead. During this period she derived greater joy from

26 Nathaniel Hawthorne, Passages from the American Note-Books (Boston, 1896), 415.

27 “The ‘consolations of religion’ I cannot bear,” she wrote then to Annie Fields, Letters of Celia Thaxter, 88 (see also 139f, 178); and she wrote a poignant poem of loss, “Impatience,” Poems, 199-200.
funerals than from weddings, but her enthusiasm waned in the later 80s. In less than two decades she lost faith over the crudities and cruelties of dishonest mediums. Belief had imbued her with peace and hope during her inconsolable bereavement. Having served its purpose, says her granddaughter, “she put it aside like an old garment.”

Two letters to Joshua Blake typify the contending intensity and skepticism of her involvement with spiritualism. The envelope of the first note is addressed to Blake at Winthrop House on Bowdoin Street in Boston, a quiet, inexpensive family hotel where Mrs. Thaxter also lived for a number of winters, and it is evident from the context that Blake was in the habit of visiting Appledore. *Esoteric Buddhism,* to which she refers, was written by Alfred P. Sinnett, published in London, 1883.

Kittery Point, Maine
Sept 25th '83

My dear Mr. Blake:
Will you go to no. 30, Worcester Square & see a Mr Phillips there, who sits in a room with the sunshine streaming in & touches neither you nor the slate which you hold & upon which is written the answer to any mental question you may ask? So I am told. Will you please go alone, & try it? I have just been told of this person. It is the first thing I have heard on the subject since you left last May. I wish you would go & see if it is a humbug! Say nothing to any one, but just go quietly & see for yourself, & go soon, for he is in town only for awhile, I am informed.

We were sorry not to see you this summer. I hope you had a pleasant journey. Karl sends love & wants me to ask you to read “Esoteric Buddhism,” which interested us both deeply. We expect to be at the Winthrop next month & shall see you there.

Yours truly
C. Thaxter

Please let me know the results of your investigation!

The article to which Mrs. Thaxter objects in the next letter is an unsigned review of Samuel Johnson’s *Oriental Religions* in the *Nation,* XL (January 8, 1885), 40. The reviewer takes the author to task for being too ambitious in “seeking that philosopher’s stone, a universal solvent of the development and relations of man’s complex and irreconcilable theories of the Unknown,” complains about the excess of esoteric meanings and mystical phrases, and denies “personal will in the worship of cosmical substance.”
Colby Quarterly

Dear friend:

I have sent you the Nation this morning. I am sure you will find it interesting. The man risks his reputation, his whole worldly welfare on this which he deliberately & dispassionately asserts.

I can hardly wait for you to come! I have so much to say. You shall see, if you wish, the beautiful creature who has been forced thus against her will to open the doors of heaven for us. She is a lady of exquisite refinement, culture & beauty & to hear her quietly & simply tell of what has befallen her is worth anything to hear. You cannot doubt her truth—Truth! What need—when, as perhaps I told you, we have seen her borne in the air like St Catherine by the angels,—she saw them take her, we could not see them, but saw her go up into the air & it took all the strength of two of us, myself being one, to drag her down till at last her feet reluctantly touched the floor.

I think I will send you the little narrative I made of the occasion of which Mrs Fields spoke to you, but please send it back to me when you have read it, as I want it to refer to in a narrative I am trying to make of all this autumn & winter's wondrous experiences.

With dearest love
Every yours
C.T.

The circumference of Mrs. Thaxter's cultural circle was significantly dilated by her close friendship with Annie Fields and her husband James, one of the most influential publishers during the noontime of New England's flowering. Their Charles Street home was the mecca of prominent people in all of the arts, particularly British and American authors. Here Celia spent many delectable holidays communing with Annie; here she sat at table with the brightest luminaries of contemporary literature. Here on January 5, 1868, she had Sunday dinner with Dickens and Longfellow, and again on April 6, when the company included Dickens, Longfellow and his daughter Alice, Emerson and his daughter Ellen, Oliver Wendell Holmes, William Morris Hunt, and Levi Thaxter. Of the first occasion she exclaimed to her host, "It was a real delight to see Mr. Dickens and to have one's ideal of an individual so completely realized." To an unidentified friend in Newtonville she conveyed the vivacity of these affairs.

28 Letters of Celia Thaxter, 29. In his turn Dickens wrote to Fields on January 14, 1870, that he thought Mrs. Thaxter's prose "very admirable." James T. Fields, Yesterdays With Authors (Boston, 1882), 246.
But we have been into town rather oftener than usual, there has been so much going on. One evening we dined with Mr Dickens at Mr Fields’ house & sat down to dinner at six o’clock & didn’t rise from the table till eleven at night! I stayed in town, but Mr Thaxter missed his last train, as did Mr Longfellow, & they walked out to Cambridge together, & then Mr. Thaxter walked on to Newtonville & got home about two o’clock in the morning.

In Mrs. Thaxter’s writings one finds no lengthy introspective examinations of her esthetic creed or principles of composition. Two excerpts from her unpublished letters exhibit the frank amplitude of her sensibilities. In the first, to Elizabeth Hoxie, she is airily pragmatic; in the second, to John Albee, she exudes solemn integrity. There can be little question that she was simultaneously moved by both considerations in the beginning and that, as time went by, the idealistic stimulus outran the mercenary.

In the Letters (p. 13) she pictures herself reading Dante and peeling squash “à la Elizabeth Bronté,” and it is a fact that few days in her life passed without some sacrifice to the Lares. The little dun cow — which may be the same one cited in Sandpiper, 12, and Among the Isles oj Shoals, 132-133 — appears in one of her poems for children, “Milking,” where she recollects her vanished girlhood and the invaluable lessons of beauty nature taught her then.29

... As for literature Lizzie, I heap ashes upon my head to think I ever was such a gumphead, coot, loon, gull, noddy, (how funnily appropriate all these sea names are!) as to dabble in it at all, & would like to crawl into the smallest crack & hide my diminished head, I am so ashamed. I only did it for filthy lucre which was offered to me in such piles as e’en a most took away my breath to contemplate,—& I am properly punished. For that little dun cow I had twenty dollars, Lizzie—did you ever hear anything so preposterous? Its awful tempting when you want cloaks, & shoes, & stockings, & gowns, & gloves, & the de’l knows what beside, to scribble some rhymes &. Presto! there’s your hard cash to be turned into whatever you like — just like a fairy story. Especially as you can cook & sweep & darn & mend & pickle & preserve & make verses all the time, together, so one kills a many birds with one stone.

29 Poems (New York, 1872), 84-86.
Writing to a housewife, Mrs. Thaxter kept her feet in the kitchen; writing to a poet of fine discernment, she scaled the side of Parnassus — another disclosure of her polygonal nature. John Albee (1833-1915) lived at nearby New Castle, a small island just inside the mouth of the Piscataqua River which forms part of the border between New Hampshire and Maine. He had prepared himself for the ministry at Harvard Divinity School but discovered deeper aptitudes for teaching and writing after he received his degree. With his avocation of gardening he was in perfect affinity with Mrs. Thaxter. Their families frequently inter-visited and exchanged books; she wrote a poem, “Footprints in the Sand,” for his children, and he reciprocated with a memorial essay. A scholar of ascetic inclination, he preferred association with professors and authors. In his time he published eight books of poems, biography, autobiography, local history, and essays on art.

He read Mrs. Thaxter’s work assiduously. With a critical eye, leveled from his own vantage point over the ocean, he probed her perspectives and challenged her perceptions. In this paragraph from her February 24, 1870, letter to him, Mrs. Thaxter is as serious about her artistic probity as she is playful about her monetary incentive with Mrs. Hoxie.

About the “purple seas” — they are oftenest seen at sunset, but what I particularly referred to was the deepening of the blue into violet during the sparkling autumn days. You will see it in October if you look for it. — when the water is darkened by “catspaws” or the “tide rip,” it is absolutely purple, a living color, not like the sad dying splendor of sunset. We see it here, but perhaps nearer the shore the water may not take this glowing hue & you may look in vain — but what I say is true, & the only merit I claim is simple straightforward truthfulness in my efforts to set forth what I see, that others may see also.

Albee demurred at her chromatic license in this passage from the third installment of Among the Isles of Shoals which had just appeared in the Atlantic Monthly, XXV (February 1870), 205: “The sky deepens its blue, beneath it the brilliant sun glows into violet, and flashes into splendid purple where the ‘tide-rip,’ or eddying winds, make long streaks across its surface, — poets are not wrong who talk of ‘purple seas.’” Albee’s dubiety failed to shake her conviction. She repeated the
sentence without verbal change in the book (p. 93) three years later.

To the literary judgments of Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909) Mrs. Thaxter was far more attentive. They had met through Annie Fields, often traced the route between Kittery Point and South Berwick to see each other, and traded comments on their work, published or in progress. After Mrs. Thaxter died, Miss Jewett was entrusted with the editing of two volumes of her poems. In the last year of her life Mrs. Thaxter appealed to Miss Jewett for advice about the book which was to be her swan song, *An Island Garden* (Boston, 1894). It is a sustained panegyric to the beauties and revelations of nature, but behind the scenes Mrs. Thaxter’s mood was one of premonitory despair: “the shadows are so long, and it grows so lonesome on this earth.” She observes that her Shoals book had practically written itself and that now she is “the tiredest bird that ever scratched for worms.” Miss Jewett was happy to do anything in her power to aid her ailing friend.

“Pinny” was Mrs. Thaxter’s private name for Miss Jewett, who called her “Sandpiper” after her renowned poem. On the flyleaf of *An Island Garden* appear these lines: *To / Mrs. Mary Hemenway / ‘Whose largeness of heart is even as the / sand on the seashore’ / this volume / is affectionately inscribed.* The “little Prelude” materialized as a four-page Prefatory which concludes with the nine-quatrain “Dust,” wherein Mrs. Thaxter propounds the riddle of existence by way of a paradoxical metaphor of lifeless soil and radiant flowers.

Ports[mouth. N.H.],
9th Feb. [1893]

Kindest Pinny, I feel as if you were just over the way, certainly not farther off than just around the corner! How good you are to help this old bird! All your suggestions I deeply prize & will most gratefully accept. Bye & bye when I have got Ms fixed, may I send rest of it to you for some more friendly “smirch?” That wont be till I have got to the Shoals, I think. I am going up to Mrs. Hemenway with my papers next week, D. V., but I shall not leave them with her, because I have got so much work to do on them (except the little Prelude, per-

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30 *Letters of Celia Thaxter*, 198-200. See also *Sandpiper*, 237-238.
haps) — they can work on the illustrations without the Ms. & it is going to take them a year to get them done.

The sandpiper signature is a typical valediction to Miss Jewett. It is a lighthearted parody of Mrs. Thaxter's genuine gift as an artist. She specialized in minutely detailed watercolors of birds, butterflies, wild grasses, flowers, and sylph-like ladies, all in an exquisite, exotic style verging on the Japanese. She adorned tiles, porcelain cups and saucers, plates, bowls, small pitchers, and vases. Sometimes she illustrated individual copies of her books with floral and marine scenes appropriate to the subject of page or chapter. Her personally embellished copies of Drift-Weed (Boston, 1879) are among the rarer collectors' items. Specimens of her decorative handiwork are in plentiful evidence at Champagnowne Farm and there is some painted china in the Jewett Memorial House at South Berwick.

Flowers were (pardonable pun) second nature to Mrs. Thaxter. She cultivated them with the zeal of a neophyte, addressed poems and paeans to them, and recorded them in shimmering tints. She saw in them positive souls; to her the scarlet pimpernel "was like a human being." When people asked her the secret of her flourishing gardens, she answered one word, "Love." The rose reigned above all others, speaking an intelligible language to her. In Among the Isles of Shoals (p. 100) she handed it the ultimate accolade. "A whole conservatory, flushed with azaleas, and brilliant with forests of camellias and every precious exotic that blooms, could not impart so much delight as I have known a single rose to give." Whenever available — and she managed it almost every day — she plucked a fresh bloom and pinned it to her dress. To Miss Jewett's sister Mary she sent, on April 6, 1886, a rose cutting and this sen-
ment: “We had these little red roses out at the lighthouse island, when I was a child, & we always loved them deeply. My bush has three buds on a stalk this morning, & more coming. May the little offshoot thrive & bloom its best for you!” In her mind it was as though she had granted the spinster a lovely child to warm her heart and keep the passing hours bright.

The depth and diversity of Mrs. Thaxter’s response to the world are barely suggested by the foregoing letters, extensive as they are. Her resources were vital, flexible, and seemingly fathomless. In any situation she could call upon the fittest means of human communication. And her veracity was not strained by her versatility — she reacted artlessly, intuitively. John Albee most acutely revealed the roots of her endowment: “she knew how to play all the parts belonging to woman. She could make a musician play his best, the poets and scholars say their best — bring forward the modest, shut the door on the vulgar, and disengage one talent from another and give to each its opportunity . . . . a poet with poets, an artist with artists . . . [she was] equally at home in the kitchen, . . . or with spade and trowel in her island gardens, or with fishermen and their wives and children, or as a nurse to the sick.”

Celia Thaxter was by any informed standard a multicolored spirit.


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CElia ThaxTER’S LIBRARY

Compiled by DOROTHY M. VAUGHAN

[Editor’s Note: The books listed below are now at Champernowne Farm, home of Celia Thaxter’s granddaughter, Miss Rosamond Thaxter. These and others were formerly in several bookcases in the Thaxter Cottage on Appledore Island, not all acquired by Mrs. Thaxter but eventually a part of her insatiable program of reading. At the time of her death they were divided equally between her sons John and Roland. Roland’s half of the bequest was burned in a warehouse fire in Portsmouth, where they had been temporarily stored. The following indexed volumes are survivors of the depredations of time, the forgetfulness of borrowers, and the eliminations for space. Notwithstanding these regrettable depletions, they provide an excellent graph of Mrs. Thaxter’s favorites and friendships.]