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JEWETT'S LITERARY CANONS

By RICHARD CARY

UNLIKE Emerson and Whitman on poetry or James and Howells on fiction, Sarah Orne Jewett never set down in ordered, compact form her precepts on the theory and practice of the art of writing. Conditioned by a placid upbringing, she took her life and career as a casual amble across pleasant pastures, skirting the wooded edges of experience and the stony beaches of speculative didacticism. She was content to present the world as she encountered it in her unruffled jaunts and let her male contemporaries tackle the anfractuosités.

This is not to say that she remained silent on her beliefs in regard to the origins and effects of the literary act.¹ If abortively, she did on occasion deliver herself pithily — in effusive revelations to her early editors,² and with weightier implications to emergent or aspirant writers. To the latter she dispensed glimmering abstractions as well as tips on techniques, spanning in her remarks the metaphysical to the baldly practical. From Miss Jewett's letters to Willa Cather, Andrew Floyd, and John Thaxter³ may be extracted enough tenets of either variety to construct a viable credo. She discoursed unpedantically upon matters of the artistic conscience, the elemental aim of literary effort, the quality of human communion to be sought by a writer, the need of esthetic tranquility; upon character delineation, transfiguration of background, guidance of plot, importance of point of view, the texture of realism, optimum tone; also upon how to choose subject matter, how to mold it to a proper medium, how to gauge the predilections of editors.

¹ In a letter to Mrs. Scott, now in the Alderman Library of the University of Virginia, Miss Jewett said rather pettishly: "I find it very hard to think of writing a sort of essay about my own habits of work and the conception and development of the characters in my stories. As for my 'literary conscience' I quail before even the thought of answering questions about that, for every writer works so much from instinct. I can write, but when you ask me to write about my writing it does not seem quite worth while."

² See, for instance, her letter to Horace E. Scudder in Richard Cary (ed.), *Sarah Orne Jewett Letters* (Waterville, Me., 1956), 27-29.

³ They may be found, respectively, in Annie Fields (ed.), *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett* (Boston, 1911), 245-250; Cary, *op. cit.*, 67-71; Richard Cary, "Jewett on Writing Short Stories," *Colby Library Quarterly* (June 1964), 425-440. Interestingly, Miss Jewett paraphrases her father's dictum to Floyd and Thaxter, and invokes a Matthew Arnold aphorism for Miss Cather, as she does in her letter to Laura Bellamy, reproduced in this article.

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Many of Miss Jewett's comrades exhibited symptoms of *furor scribendi*, an affliction from which few New England females of the Victorian era seemed exempt. Often she was called upon to share her secret of transmutation, that is, how to turn a fiery, insatiable desire to write into luminous and marketable creations. She might balk out of pique with an impertinent stranger or evade out of modesty or fundamental inarticulateness. But she could never resist an appeal from a friend, and strove each time to denote some helpful landmarks by which her correspondent might chart a seemly course. Another such instance comes to light in a hitherto unpublished letter to Laura E. Bellamy of Kittery Point, Maine.⁴

Miss Bellamy (1847-1897) was born in the famous William Pepperrell Mansion at the junction of the Piscataqua River and the sea, part of an estate which had once stretched thirty miles along the Maine coast. Within the spacious paneled colonial halls and rooms, with splendidly ornamented cornices, mantels, and balusters, tastefully spaced portraits and accouterments, Miss Bellamy lived the quiet life of a maiden lady, concerned with the fortunes of her neighbors, consumed with civic and charitable enterprises. Daughter of State Senator Charles G. Bellamy, a man of "Websterian dignity" who moved in the circle of James G. Blaine and Hannibal Hamlin, Laura was — perhaps more importantly — the sister of John Haley Bellamy, America's foremost carver of ships' figureheads. Internationally renowned for the great golden eagle he executed for the prow of the *U.S.S. Lancaster*, Bellamy created for himself an auxiliary reputation as rustic philosopher and wit. His carving shop overlooking Pepperrell Cove was for years the favorite haunt of such men as Charles Eliot Norton, William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, F. Marion Crawford, Winslow Homer, and Edwin Booth. A prolific inventor, he had some thirty patents registered in his name. And to cap his versatility, Bellamy indited swarms of verses which were published as broadsides and in local newspapers, for the most part spirited bits of doggerel, rhymed letters to the editor, or even metrical ads for Preston's Pills, a vegetable cathartic.

Laura Bellamy could not match his polygonal energy, but she did pursue the Muse — with perhaps more serious intent

⁴ Given to Colby College by Mr. Joseph W. P. Frost, who also supplied biographical and regional data for this paper.

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of snaring it somewhere near the peak of Parnassus. A scrapbook of the Bellamy family contains a sheaf of her poems in manuscript and a dozen published in the weekly [Biddeford] *Maine Sentinel* and the *Portsmouth Daily Evening Times*. Dates appended by hand in the margins of the printed poems indicate that most of them appeared between April and September 1884.

This modicum of success may have provoked dreams of genius in Miss Bellamy's bosom. Having scrambled past the foothills, could she attempt the giddier heights without catastrophe? From the evidence of her achieved poesy a modern reader would suggest that, in presuming to a higher niche, her reach was exceeding her grasp. The imagery, essentially derived from nature, nevertheless abounds with clichés and suffers from overblown analogies. The metrics are unimaginative, most often jiggling to the accents of folk balladry. Familiar rhymes recur with punctilious inevitability, and motivate some atrocious inversions ("The stars me cover"). There is surplus of personification and apostrophe, the least attractive in this vein being a hortatory rose. Diction reaches into dim corners for the just word (oris leaf and eglantine "transude" sweet aromas), and strays incautiously into euphuism (an elf in the garden becomes "a rainbow cierge, a mystic ouphe"). The thrust of her poems is pietistic and sentimental.

An inextinguishable hankering for loftier levels, however, incited Miss Bellamy to query Miss Jewett on how to facilitate the trek upward. It is not recorded when the friendly relationship between Laura and Sarah commenced. They may well have been introduced by James T. Fields, Miss Jewett's publisher who brought Longfellow and other notables to the Pepperrell Mansion, or it is possible that the two ladies' fathers were known professionally to each other. Whatever the genesis, Miss Jewett — seldom loath to edify eager young authors — graciously obliged with these characteristically disunified injunctions.

South Berwick Maine
31st of August 1885

My dear Miss Bellamy

I am sorry that I have not been able to answer your letter sooner, but I was glad I had not written you when I found this little essay

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yesterday in the *Sunday Herald*.⁵ It says many things, which you will appreciate, much better than I could say them, and, I think, gives us a simple straightforward explanation of the fact that some books are for a time and some for no time and some for all time. It isn't for me to decide whether you must keep on writing; that belongs to your own heart and conscience, but I know one thing — that you will not be left in the dark about it. Do not be misled either by a difficulty or a facility of expression, if you have something to say it will and must say itself, and the people will listen to whom the message is sent. — I often think that the literary work which takes the least prominent place nowadays is that belonging in the middle ground. Scholars and so-called intellectual persons have the wealth of literature in the splendid accumulation, of books that belong to all times — and now and then a new volume is added to the great list. Then there is the lowest level of literature, the trashy newspapers and sensational novels, but how seldom a book comes that stirs the minds and hearts of the good men and women of such a village as this for instance. One might say that they are not readers by nature or that they do not get their learning in this way, but the truth must be recognized that few books are written for and from their standpoint. That they have read certain books proves that they would read others if they had them. And whoever adds to this department of literature will do an inestimable good; will see that a simple, helpful way of looking at life and speaking the truth about it — “To see life steadily, and see it whole” — as Matthew Arnold says — in what we are pleased to call its *everyday* aspects must bring out the best sort of writing. My dear father used to say to me very often, “Tell things *just as they are!*”⁶ and used to show me what he meant in *A Sentimental Journey!* The great messages and discoveries of literature come to us — they *write us*, and we do not control them in a certain sense. From what I know of your wishes in regard to your work, I am sure you will not neglect any chance of forwarding it, and if it proves that you must make something else first, and put the great gift and pleasure of writing second in your life, you will live none the less helpfully and heartily, and try to find God's meaning and purpose for your work and give it to the world again in whatever you do. — I try to remember very often a bit from a criticism upon one of Miss Thackeray's novels which I saw in Harper's long ago: “It is, after all, Miss Thackeray herself in Old Kensington who gives the book its charm.”⁷ — I fear that I cannot help you much, but I hope and be-

⁵ “Tests in Literature,” Boston *Sunday Herald* (August 30, 1885), 12; an unsigned discussion of the successful versus the unsuccessful book, using for illustration the works of Shakespeare, Carlyle, Wordsworth, Keats, Dana, Ticknor, Browning, Tennyson, and Whitman.

⁶ This maxim Miss Jewett offered informally on several occasions and in usually variant form. Her published version, in “Looking Back on Girlhood,” *Youth's Companion*, LXV (January 7, 1892), 6, is in all probability closest to his exact words.

⁷ Reference is to a review of Anne Thackeray Ritchie's novel *Old Kensington* in the “Editor's Literary Record,” *Harper's*, XLVII (June 1873), 131. Henry Mills Alden, then editor, classified the book as “a story of love without passion, and of pathos without tragedy. . . . Its interest lies partly in the successive picture, partly in the development of character, partly in the tale of inner life unfolded, but chiefly in the contagious sympathy of Miss

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lieve that you are equal to helping yourself, for it is what we ourselves put into our own lives that really counts. Thank you for letting me see Mr. Ward's⁸ letter which pleased me very much. I only wish that I could be as kind a friend to younger writers as those friends whom I found when I was beginning. But they all said, "Work away!"

With best wishes, believe me

Yours sincerely,
Sarah O Jewett

By August 1885 Miss Jewett had published seven volumes, comprising three novels (*Deephaven*, *A Country Doctor*, *A Marsh Island*), and four compilations of short stories, sketches, and juveniles. She was moreover on the verge of unveiling "A White Heron," "Marsh Rosemary," and "The Dulham Ladies," three of her most durable regional portraits. She was therefore qualified to make pronouncements of some authenticity on the mystery of the creative process. None of her statements here are startlingly original: everything she says had been said before and more eloquently. The value lies in the fact that this is a synthesis peculiar to her and that it helps to explain her own esthetic urge.

Central to her undogmatic creed is the reiterated conviction that creativity issues from a divine, mystical springhead too deeply concealed to seek with any chance of discovery. We are God's acquiescent instruments in the accomplishment of art and we intuitively work toward the moral betterment of mankind, whose natural sympathies we enlist through natural expression. To this gossamer neoplatonism Miss Jewett shrewdly yokes a Down East pragmatism, an Emersonian advocacy of self-reliance. We must exert ourselves to verify in tangible ways our inherent excellences.

Three other commandments that governed her own writing, and which she regularly passed along to assiduous tyros, are recapitulated for Miss Bellamy. 1) Exploit the common ideal; stay within the conservative swath of middle ground hallowed by the great Anglo-Saxon tradition. 2) The personal element,

Thackeray's warm heart." The particular passage Miss Jewett quotes from memory actually reads: "The story . . . touches us deeply, because it has touched the writer first. . . . In short, the tenderness of a loving, womanly heart suffuses the whole book. It is Miss Thackeray in *Old Kensington* which makes it so delightful a story."

⁸ William Hayes Ward (1835-1916), an early Berwick friend of the Jewetts, held successively higher editorial posts on *The Independent* from 1868 to his death. Miss Jewett's work began appearing therein as far back as 1871.

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the well-wishing show of love is what imparts to literature its ultimate merit; style, in short, is paramount. 3) The goal is "imaginative realism," a simple embodiment of everyday experience which disaffirms the sordid, the sensational, the grandiose. In her strong sanction of Matthew Arnold, apostle of the obvious, she is casting as strong a vote for her valued colleague William Dean Howells.

Whether Miss Bellamy benefitted measurably by these earnest directives must be judged mainly on her failure to emerge from the doldrums of mediocrity. Her single surviving datum published subsequent to Miss Jewett's ministry is "The First Dandelion," seven quatrains of pedestrian verse in which "the first wee dandelion" outshines "the golden sun." There is no sign that she ever transcended the darkling plane between temporal flesh and celestial spirit. More to the point is the reminder that no conclusive examination has yet been made of Miss Jewett's philosophy of composition. A chrestomathy of relevant excerpts from her letters, published and unpublished, should lay bare the complex of sensibilities which established her indisputably as the Millet of Maine.

