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Jewett and Marin: The Inner Vision

Barton L. St. Armand

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James Russell Lowell long ago originated a comparison which has become fairly common in criticizing the limited scope and cameo achievement of Sarah Orne Jewett's work. In what was perhaps his last letter, Lowell wrote to her London publisher that:

I remember once, at a dinner of the Royal Academy, wishing there might be a toast in honor of the Little Masters such as Tenniel, Du Maurier, and their fellows. The tiny woodcuts traced by those who gave rise to the name attract an affectionate partiality which the spacious compositions of more famous contemporaries fail to win. They are artists in the best sense, who could make small means suffice for great ends. It is with them that I should class Miss Jewett, since she both possesses and practices this precious art.¹

Although one is sure that Lowell did not consciously intend it, this is damning with faint praise, or at the very least circumscribing Jewett's complex technique. What she does is more than precious, for it is as if the shifting surface of her sketch-style, filled with virtuoso washes of color and line, still reveal the shadowy forms of some great fresco or canvas showing through. Thus in the characteristic description of Almira Todd which appears in "The Foreigner," we read that:

Mrs. Todd looked like an old prophetess as she sat there with the firelight shining on her strong face; she was posed for some great painter. The woman with the cat was as unconscious and as mysterious as any sibyl of the Sistine Chapel.²

Quite naturally, however, it is not an Old Master with whom Jewett's name has been linked, but rather a native American Master, and a fellow local colorist of the Maine provinces, Winslow Homer. Surely there is much to compare in the work of Jewett and Homer, for not only is the locale of their art the same, but many of their approaches and techniques seem to be, at first glance, remarkably similar. Homer's statement that "When I have selected the thing carefully, I paint it exactly as

¹ Quoted in Francis Otto Matthiessen, Sarah Orne Jewett (Boston, 1929), 90.
it appears" finds a corollary in Flaubert's injunction "to write about ordinary life as one would write history" which Jewett pinned on her writing desk as a reminder to herself that she was above all a realist. And quite simply, many of Jewett's literary descriptions would seem to be perfect parallels of Homer scenes. Here, for example, is a typical fragment which has the unmistakable aura of Homer's "Prout's Neck" canvases:

as I sat waiting by my window I saw the last red glow of autumn sunshine flare along the gray rocks of the shore and leave them cold again, and touch the far sails of some coastwise schooners so that they stood like golden houses on the sea.

Robin Magowan has noted that "Jewett's style in Pointed Firs is, primarily, a pictorial one, closely allied to the 'American' impressionism of her Maine contemporary, Winslow Homer," and has elaborated that "By American I mean an impressionism concerned more with contrasts of light and dark than with the pure color contrasts of French impressionism." The temptation to launch into an extended comparison of Homer and Jewett is a strong one, but must be ultimately, I think, misleading, since we would be comparing surface with surface rather than depth with depth. Homer's strong and stark realism, nurtured by his experience at the English port of Tynemouth, puts him into a camp which is actually closer to Jack London of The Sea Wolf or Stephen Crane of "The Open Boat." The elemental clash of land and sea with which he was preoccupied allows him little or no margin to portray the human factor: his fisherman and sailors and shore wives may stand statuesque and sibyl-like, but they never become much more than parts of an overriding design, a naturalist diagram too often verging on Frost's design of "darkness to appall."

The fluidity of Jewett's technique, on the other hand, allows her to move back and forth from the specifically human to the grandly mythic, and to tinge her background with the enduring green of the pointed firs, hinting at struggle and the dominance of force, while her scale remains still man-centered and appreciable. Too often people are absent altogether from Homer's work for the perceiving consciousness has faded completely

from the scene, and all that is left is a landscape of brutal struggle, with man an insignificant dot on a hillside or an irrelevant presence on a ship far out to sea. Lloyd Goodrich emphasizes the deepening shadow of this Naturalist tendency in his book on Homer, when he notes:

As years passed at Prout's Neck, Homer's solitary life face-to-face with the ocean brought further changes in his art. Humanity appeared less frequently, and his dominant theme became the set itself. The drama of man's struggle against it was replaced by the drama of the ocean and its never-ending battle against the land. It was the sea at its stormiest that he loved. Halcyon days of sunshine and blue water, favorite mood of the Impressionists, did not interest him; one such day he spoke of the ocean contemptuously as "that duck pond down there."

Even in the Homeresque description which we have quoted, Jewett takes pains to show us the narrator looking out through a window at a particular scene, so that the seascape is in fact framed and focused by a personal angle of vision. This "framing device" removes her from Homer's Naturalistic universe, filled with "the sheer physical force of the wave, the solidity of the rock, the shock of their collision," as it firmly anneals her to the art of a more modern impressionist, John Marin.

Marin was a master watercolorist, and it is this medium which seems to provide right and proper analogies to Jewett's art, rather than the heavier glazes and impastos of Homer's canvases. Homer, too, was a magnificent watercolor artist, originating and in some cases even exhausting the possibilities of the mode, but the brilliancy of his designs, in sharp contrast to the plastic tactility of his oils separates him even further from Jewett's realm of muted values which are composed mostly of earthy umbers and deep sea-greens. As Magowan suggests in a note, a few of Jewett's fictional highlights "may remind some [readers] of Homer's final watercolors," but the similarity is once again random and somewhat tenuous. Rather than the dark impressionism of Homer's oils or the fluid luminism of his watercolors, Jewett practices an art which is, significantly, "in between" the two categories, as it is also in between (as behooves a master of the sketchbook style) graphic substance and painterly shadow. The anonymous biographer of Charles Dudley Warner's *Library of the World's Greatest Literature* long

ago noted these qualities when he commented:

If artist may be compared with artist, Miss Jewett may be described as a watercolorist; her sketches resting for their value not upon dramatic qualities or strong color, but upon the pure tone and singleness of effect. And she is not sensibly in her story, any more than a painter is in his picture. It is in this that her engaging modesty and admirable self-restraint lie.6

“Pure tone and singleness of effect” are also perfect terms to describe the art of John Marin, who talked of his watercolors as a form of “writing” just as Jewett occasionally referred to her fiction as a form of “painting.” And of course Marin is no more obtrusively in his watercolors than Jewett, through her acute but retiring narrator, is in The Country of the Pointed Firs, and yet both artists make the presence of a human scale felt, unlike Homer with his fierce waste lands of sea and shore. The landscapes which Marin paints include physically the same motifs which Jewett and Homer explored before him—the Maine Coast and its backcountry wilderness. Marin humanizes this subject, however, in much the same way that Jewett makes Mrs. Blackett’s bedroom on Green Island, with its window on the surrounding sea, the absolute center of her world, by similarly “framing” his views with what Frederick S. Wight has called “sash bars” and “panes.” Part of Jewett’s fictional technique remains her alternations in perspective, from microscopic to macroscopic and from interior to exterior, with attendant sharpening and blurring of focus. In this light, Wight’s analysis of Marin’s “broken window effect” seems uncommonly revealing:

This much geometry over-suggests calculation, but Marin was a most intuitive person, working at speed, brooding later on what he had done and so growing wiser. His paintings have a kaleidoscopic, shattered and shattering effect, as of glass broken. One can entertain the notion—perhaps childhood fantasy retained—that the image is in the window glass itself, each frame a picture, the image there. Marin, who is so insistent that the image is on the plane surface—quite literally broke through to the outer world—he breaks outdoors.7

In Marin, too, there are double worlds—the world of the

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perceiving consciousness of the artist, the beholder of the image, and the image itself, which is instinct with primal and sometimes violent force. The problem is Jewett's one of balance—as Marin himself says, "Within the frames there must be a balance, a controlling of these warring, pushing, pulling forces. This is what I am trying to realize. But we are all human." The human thing in Marin eventually managed to keep the balance by the use of these controlling frames, which channeled the eye of the beholder to specific targets within the picture plane, while there remained a pervading consciousness of subliminal form, and of control by the artist himself.

Marin's technique, which verges on a kind of analytical Cubism, seems very modern to us today even though it was evolved in the early decades of this century, and yet the kaleidoscopic effect of which Wight speaks could also be applied to the effect of The Country of the Pointed Firs—an apparently random collection of incidents and images, with an underlying symbolic network which makes for skillful balance and powerful direction. Marin's statement that "we are all human" places him definitely within the folds of Jewett's cult of sympathy, just as his rhetorical question "Shall I copy facts photographically?" counters Homer's dictum on painting a thing "exactly as it appears." As Lloyd Goodrich remarks, "Of course [Homer] did not really do this, since it is impossible for the human hand to paint anything 'exactly as it appears' without the human mind making some kind of modification," but the point is that Jewett and Marin were always conscious of the human hand, and of the human heart that felt and measured, incorporating this evidence of sympathy into their art. As if replying specifically to a Naturalist statement of the facts of life, Marin joined Jewett in emphasizing a transfiguration through the perspective of human consciousness itself. "I don't paint rocks, trees, houses, and all things seen," Marin wrote, "I paint an inner vision."

If you have an intense love and feeling toward these things, you'll try your damndest to put on paper or canvas, that thing. You can transpose, you can play with and on your material, but when you are finished that's got to have the roots of that thing in it and no other thing. That's the trouble with all the lesser men. And an inner vision of yours has got to be transposed onto your medium, a picture of that version.

8 Marin, quoted by Wight, 42.  
9 Goodrich, 26.
Otherwise there’s no use, no excuse, for basically you’re not different from any other living thing, other than in intensity, other than direction of vision.10

The Genteel side of Jewett would hardly have agreed with Marin’s salty choice of language, but surely her sensibility could not quarrel with his aesthetics. Indeed, the opening words of his manifesto seem almost like a paraphrase of the words Jewett wrote to Willa Cather concerning her own art, her observation that “The thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper—whether little or great, it belongs to Literature.”11 And in such Marin watercolors as “Maine Islands,” “Pertaining to Stonington Harbor,” and “Quoddy Head,” and the Deer Isle series, Jewett surely would have recognized the “crumbled towns” and “furzy-green stoniness” of her native grounds. The murky transparency of these seascapes and inlet scenes, with their opaque grays, and brown, and blues, with dark lines of force and the pointed firs like emerald teeth in the distance, are proof enough of not merely a circumstantial correlation but a shared vision of reality, which is also an “inner vision.” Something hovers on the edge of expression in these pictures in the same way that Jewett’s Dunnet Landing hangs between two worlds, worlds sometimes seen by critics of the local color school as remaining either dead, or, even worse, powerless to be born. Yet although there is no real birth in Jewett’s country, neither is there real death either but rather whisperings, glimpses, and intimations, as a funeral procession winds over a distant hill or the report of an unexpected passing is received from afar. Time does not obtrude here any more than it does in Marin’s studies, framed by the eternal closing of an eyelid, for the only change is interior, and the only metamorphosis is invisibly within. As Jewett writes through the persona of her departing narrator:

When I went in again the little house had suddenly grown lonely, and my room looked empty as it had the day I came. I and all my belongings had died out of it, and I knew how it would seem when Mrs. Todd came back and found her lodger gone. So we die before our own eyes; so we see some chapters of our lives come to their natural end.12

10 Wight, 35-37.
11 Quoted by Willa Cather in her preface to The Country of the Pointed Firs (New York, 1956), 6.
As I have tried to show, Jewett’s is far from being a little art but, like Marin’s watercolors it remains an unfinished art, filled with things and people which are cherished in sympathy, in anticipation, and in reflection, yet which never really respond fully to this outreaching, and so which never really touch. Often it is precisely what is not seen, not spoken, not done which becomes most important. Transposition takes the place of transformation, and the classical balance, relationship, and correspondence which preserve a “singleness of effect,” also sacrifice the disturbing and volatile element of love as a passion. When Jewett tried to embody this element in fiction, her art, as evidenced by her 1901 romance *The Tory Lover*, which Louis Auchincloss somewhat unfairly calls, “the old maid at her most palpitating without the anchor of daily life,” becomes facile and unconvincing, because it belonged totally to another world, outside the world of her immediate experience. That experience would seem to have been almost wholly of an inner nature, but it was also dependent on the outside world of force and primitive contact for its vitality. As John Marin wrote of the fruits of this confrontation, as seen in one of his mountainscapes:

Seems to me the true artist must perforce go from time to time to the elemental big forms—Sky, Sea, Mountain, Plain—and these things pertaining thereto, to sort of re-true himself up, to recharge the battery. For these big forms have everything. But to express these, you have to love these, to be part of these in sympathy. One doesn’t get very far without this love, this love to enfold too the relatively little things that grow on the mountain’s back. Which if you don’t recognize, you don’t recognize the mountain.

These “elemental big forms” almost transmute Jewett’s art into an epic art, but the very singleness of her inner vision and her cognizance of the “relatively little things” of the world keep a full synthesis in check. Rather what we have is the studied impression, the recollection in tranquillity, the “mix and float of things” which Whitman noticed, fleetingly but transcendentally, while crossing Brooklyn Ferry. The true medium of Marin and Jewett is decidedly a watery one which sacrifices a fiery fusion of elements, but at the same time yields an oceanic sense of the hidden significance of all things. Eternity is portrayed by a

14 Wight, 41.
moment, and a world beyond by the evidence of the ordinary—the glance of an eye, the turn of a head, the tilt of a landscape. Jewett was always arguing for a return to the roots of the land and the heart, but her felt-vision of life would have degenerated into mere sentimentality had she not kept the balance true by relying equally on the sharpness of her eye and the depth of her quietly transcendental sensibility. Just as Marin was famous for leaving portions of his renderings untouched by tint or pigment, so that the raw blankness of the paper itself showed through and contributed to the sweep of the total design, so do Jewett’s landscapes blur, decompose, disappear entirely, and then reassert themselves through a sudden glimpse of the strong color of the pines or a spur of distant headland. But this only means that the reader, or the viewer, has to bring his own perceptivity to the work of art; he, too, must have some kind of inner vision which accepts these details, or even a lack of them, as evidence of things not seen, yet potently present. Willa Cather has said of Sarah Orne Jewett as a representative local colorist that the true artist of the familiar:

fares away into the land and people of his heart, he dies of love only to be born again. The artist spends a life-time in loving the things that haunt him, in having his mind “teased” by them, in trying to get these conceptions down on paper exactly as they are to him and not in conventional poses supposed to reveal their character; trying this method and that, as a painter tries different lightings and different attitudes with his subject to catch the one that presents it more suggestively than any other. (Cather, 7-8)

However, it is not the writer but rather also the reader in Jewett’s case who is “teased” by the process of suggestion and experimentation, for Cather makes of Jewett a supreme portrait painter rather than a master of impressionistic effects such as we have seen. It is also true that the fade-out technique is present, but not a fading of the artist into the land and the people. Rather what we gain is a fading out of the land and people themselves into something numinous, and transcendental. The very last lines of The Country of the Pointed Firs emphasize this kind of fading away, as the narrator dreamily tells us “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 to-
together and Dunnet Landing and all its coasts were lost to sight” (Green, 213). This process of losing sight of some fixed horizon or the running together of faraway details is one which is present at all levels in Jewett’s art, and Cather’s own portrait of Jewett as a perfect realist and preserver of the New England scene only helps to blur further the subtle mythopoetic technique which actually makes her work so rich and suggestive. No matter how “real” the world of Dunnet Landing looks, there is something slightly off-focus, something vaguely portentous about it, which points to its secret or double nature as a shadow-land of myth and symbol. Jewett uses the picturesque genre of local color only in order to transmute it into a metaphor for something beyond a mere setting down of time and place, or an historically correct rendering of Maine parish life.

It is strange, in fact, that so much has been written about Jewett’s “local color” proficiency, when there is so little which is really colorful in her work. The very name “Dunnet” itself connotes the drab and the unremarkable as well as the small and the insignificant, while, as with her landscapes, Jewett never actually sharpens her descriptive talent enough to allow the reader to form a definite picture of either the town or its locale. Everything remains rather vague, fuzzy, offhand, seen either far away or else as through a glass, darkly and dreamily. For her sense of place and her sense of people are gradually supplemented by another sense, which might be called the “sense of symbol” or the “sense of myth.” Surely “local character” is a better term for Jewett’s approach and technique rather than “local color,” but “character” perhaps even more in its meaning as a quality which points to something beyond concrete outline or figure, much the same way that Emily Dickinson employed her runic word “physiognomy” to indicate spiritual as well as physical features.

Here we return to Jewett as artist, for surely she could not have succeeded so well in producing such resonances had she not had a sense of inner correspondences, a spiritual vision of the relationship between the landscape, and those who lived in it, and perceived it. Her vision was not as determinedly coherent or even as strong as those of the Naturalists, her contemporaries, because their view was a clear and unmodified one of force in contention with force. She could never pit hungry
crows against a solitary fox on a dreary winter snowscape as Winslow Homer did in his "The Fox Hunt," because she was sure that there was more to life than a mere struggle for existence. She relied on Nature—those "elemental big forms" of Sky, Sea, Mountain, and Plain that John Marin also claimed—for her strength, and while she loved it, she also recognized that there was more to its power than met the eye. Nature could, in fact, become overwhelming. Thus the narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* finds a far different landscape from the huddled but human shore of Dunnet Landing when she strays with Mrs. Todd in search of "The Queen's Twin." Here we suddenly enter that territory "North of Boston" with its deserted black cottages and ghost houses which was the chosen kingdom of Robert Frost and Edwin Arlington Robinson. Here is the real waste land, its strange woods filled with lingering miasmas of old witchcraft and Indian magic, where whole berrying parties get lost and "bewildered" and "overset" to the point of madness and frenzy. Here the standing armies of the pointed firs, which always mark Jewett's landscapes like ancient Roman legions, become almost malevolent, when so far removed from the ameliorating influence of the settled and the human. "I tell you those little trees means business" Mrs. Todd remarks, after noting both the barrenness and the hunger of this open land. "I looked down the slope," the narrator tells us,

and felt as if we ourselves were likely to be surrounded and overcome if we lingered too long. There was a vigor of growth, a persistence and savagery about the sturdy little trees that put human nature at complete defiance. One felt a sudden pity for the men and women who had been worsted after a long fight in that lonely place; one felt a certain fear of the unconquerable, immediate forces of Nature, as in the irresistible moment of a thunder-storm. (Green, 307-308)

The problem, as always, was one of balance. Ultimately, then, Jewett's impressionism is an impressionism of the soul and heart as well as one of the eye, and she is just as concerned with human meanings as with artistic mediums, with the inside as much as the outside. Her sketch-style is a perfect expression of this interior point of view, for just as the elemental forms shift their meaning, so do they shift in her mind's eye, and in their picturing in her art. Sometimes they are there, and sometimes they are not—what remains important, as in the watercolors of
John Marin, is the angle of vision, the perspective, the framing of the perceiving consciousness, which is teased by Nature’s protean significance even as it endeavors to tease others into experiencing a shifting apprehension of things. If we speak of the fully tragic or comic in Jewett, of the deepest facts of life and death, we must also use that phrase which Marin used so often in the titles of his seascapes: “pertaining to.” Like his, her art is an art of reference, of lines and dashes and snatches of people, places, voices, and views held constant only by the frame of the self which beholds, and the buried dream of another world of myth and archetype. “The view of a landscape, broad, unaccented, lying under a summer sky” was the way in which a contemporary critic summed up Jewett’s descriptive technique, a technique which makes her art as open and firm as the granite of the Maine shore, yet as elusive as its moody and inconstant waters.

Mrs. Almira Todd, Herbalist-Conjurer

By Sylvia Gray Noyes

For all their attraction, other stories by Sarah Orne Jewett seemed dimmed beside the excellence of The Country of the Pointed Firs. Central to it is Mrs. Almira Todd, herbalist and conjurer, whose simplicity is subtle, whose knowledge of the essence and power of herbs is almost mystical. Throughout Mrs. Todd is a country woman, placid and self-contained. She possesses a uniquely affirmative intelligence and rebuts negativism as if her life depends upon it, and, perhaps it does. Herbs are life-giving and Mrs. Todd has committed herself to an alliance with their powers.

The narrator introduces her landlady, Mrs. Almira Todd, in a “rustic pharmacopoeia,” rather than in her “tiny house,” at Dunnet Landing, Maine. She is up and working in the “queer little garden” before the writer awakens in the morning. In setting the mystical tone of the story, it is necessary to sense the significance of the “strange and pungent odors” rising from