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TO CALM AND UPLIFT 'AGAINST THE DARK':
SARAH ORNE JEWETT'S LYRIC NARRATIVES

By BERT BENDER

Although Sara Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is frequently recognized as a "masterpiece of its kind," it is little read today, largely, I suspect, because literary histories have no neat generic category for it. And since many of her shorter pieces outside of that book were and still are regarded as being unlike ordinary stories, they, too, receive less attention than they are due. One indication of our current neglect of Sarah Orne Jewett is that the latest anthology of American literature — one that, printed in two volumes totaling nearly four thousand pages, surely aspires to become a standard college text — leaves her completely unrepresented.¹

During her own time, and to some extent even today, two critical expectations have prevented many readers from sensing and appreciating what is perhaps the deepest quality of her short fiction — a quality which derives from a lyric impulse that at once gives rise to and organizes the stories. But this dimension in fiction was not entirely welcome toward the end of the nineteenth century in America, for a short story was expected to resemble either the kind of magazine story that culminated finally in O. Henry's stories, or another kind of story that then enjoyed wide popularity, the "local color" story. Both kinds of stories were related to what had become the rise of realism in American literature. The typical magazine story of the day, with its emphasis on plot, brevity, dénouement, inventiveness, and gracefulness of language, was particularly suited to the genteel realists' tastes for light social comedy. Frank Stockton's "The Lady or the Tiger?" was a prototype of this kind of story which was later practiced and supported by such other influential editors as Thomas B. Aldrich, H. C. Bunner, and Brander Matthews. In "The Philosophy of the Short-Story,"

Matthews gave the form a special name (the hyphenated term, "Short-story") and set down its formal characteristics, thus contributing greatly to the growing short story industry that ultimately produced O. Henry. It is clear today that editorial expectations of "Short-stories" at around the turn of the century resulted in the neglect of many good stories that violated the formula. Some of Sarah Jewett's fictions suffered in this way; a more famous example is Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle," which went unpublished until James collected it in his *The Better Sort* (1903).

If the genteel realists' desire for urbane social comedy found a congenial form in the "Short-story," then, another demand was met concurrently by the local color story—a demand made by the growing urban population for stories set in rural America. Such stories were sometimes nostalgic or elegiac responses to the increasingly rapid and disorienting growth of American industrialism. Often, however, American local color writing seems to have shared with much other writing in the pastoral mode the city dweller's inclination to look with comic irony on quaint backwoods types whose exotic dialects, especially, were amusing.

Sarah Jewett's forte was neither the formulaic magazine story nor the humorous local color story. Yet, capitalizing on a widespread interest in regional realism, she did enjoy considerable success, and she earned the respect of such writers as Henry James, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and William Dean Howells. Today, American tastes long having tired of the O. Henry formula, Sarah Jewett's writing seems to be less obscured than it was in her own day by critical expectations and editorial demands for plotted stories; but her writing is still obscured by a tendency to think of her as merely a local colorist or, to use a slightly less pejorative term, a regionalist. True, her stories are set in her country of the pointed firs, but that they are limits them no more than does the regional focus in the stories, say,

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by Sherwood Anderson or William Faulkner. She is far more attentive to the depths of thought and feeling in her characters than to the surface peculiarities that are usually implied by the terms "local color" or "regional." She seeks to understand the subtlest kinds of relationships between people and place, like that suggested by her comment on the land in her Maine: "The stories of strange lives have been whispered to the earth, their thoughts have burned themselves into the cold rocks."3 The felt mystical note of this remark helps to bring into focus the lyric quality that is most deeply characteristic of Sarah Orne Jewett's work — a quality that is further suggested in the maxim by Gustave Flaubert which Sarah Jewett kept pinned above her writing table: "C'est ne pas de faire rire, ni de faire pleurer, ni de vous mettre a fureur, mais d'agir à la façon de la nature, c'est à dire de faire rêver."4 Many of her stories seem intended to make us dream, for in them she empathetically dreams of consolations for her lonely characters — consolations which take the form of lyrical celebrations or lamentations. These stories are informed by what one of America's contemporary "regionalists," Eudora Welty, has called the writer's "lyrical impulse" — "the impulse to praise, to love, to call up, to prophesy."5 Critics have been slow to recognize the existence and viability of lyrical fiction. Only in the 1920's did people like Conrad Aiken begin to talk about lyrical stories; and Ralph Freedman's landmark, The Lyrical Novel, did not appear until 1963. Yet, while lyrical fiction was certainly uncommon and largely unrecognized during Sarah Jewett's career at around the turn of the century, it was practiced by some few serious writers like Henry James and Stephen Crane, whose tragic sense and stylistic energies also resisted the demands made by formulaic short fiction. And the lyric mode was practiced by other serious regionalists of the day. Kate Chopin and Paul Laurence

Dunbar, for instance, sometimes found lyrical expression in short fiction for the consoling dreams of their characters who, as women in a masculine society or Blacks in a white society, were victims of social oppression.

The lyrical quality of Sarah Orne Jewett’s fiction has not gone entirely unrecognized by those who have taken her seriously. F. W. Pattee, for example, has remarked in *The Development of the American Short Story* that her “genius was lyric and not epic.” Her fiction, from the early sketches to her highest achievement in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, is markedly unstorylike; there are no formulaic plots among her works. As Richard Cary has noted, her “conception of a story was not acceptable in all quarters. ‘A more positive story,’ pleaded Horace Scudder, who hoped she would cultivate the power of invention, ‘a more positive story.’” She once remarked that her contemporary, Charles Egbert Craddock (Mary Murfree), could write “a good big *Harper’s* story,” but “not S.O.J., whose French ancestry comes to the fore and makes her nibble all around her stories like a mouse. They used to be as long as yardsticks, they now are as long as spools, and they will soon be the size of old-fashioned peppermints, and have neither beginning nor end, but shape and flavor may still be left them.”

She lamented in these “idylls in prose,” then, what she called “the destroying left hand of progress,” but she found stability by associating nature with the rural social order of her past. The predominant mood of consoled acceptance in her works

8 Quoted in Pattee, p. 262.
9 F. O. Matthiessen, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (Cambridge, 1929), p. 89, quoting James Russell Lowell’s letter to Sarah Jewett’s London publisher: delighted to know that her stories were to be published in England, he wrote that “They are probably idylls in prose and the life they commemorate is as simple in its main elements, if not so picturesque in its setting, as that which survived for us in Theocritus.”
10 Sarah Jewett used this phrase in an early sketch, “River Driftwood” (1881), in which she expresses a confidence that “in some way our present state ministeres to the higher condition to which we are coming.” The title of this piece and its mystical optimism, qualified by a sense of social and spiritual fragmentation under the pressure of time and progress, recall Whitman’s “Sea-Drift” and “This Compost.”
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derives from her firm sense of place. Like her characters in *Deephaven* and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, each of whom finally has his place either in the sea or in the town burying-ground, she knew where she belonged: long before her death she had said that “I was born here and I hope to die here, leaving the lilac bushes still green and growing, and all the chairs in their places.”¹¹ In Sarah Jewett’s world, a consoling calm prevails, in which people, natural objects, and, by custom, domestic objects, have their places in an order.

The depth of her sense of place is reflected in her use of dialect. Her characters speak with more realistic simplicity than, say, the rustics in Wordsworth’s idylls, but with a similar, confident, low-key quality that suggests their underlying unity with the landscape. Thus her use of dialect is different from local colorists who, as the term implies, are interested in idiosyncrasies of speech for the sake of surface color. James Russell Lowell commented on this quality in Sarah Jewett: “Above all she is discreet in dialect, using it for flavor but not, as is the wont of so many, so oppressively as to suggest garlic. She has a gift of quiet pathos and its correlative, equally subdued humor.”¹² And Richard Bridgman has brought her use of dialect into sharp perspective by describing the role of dialect in the development of the colloquial style in America. This style, which culminates in Hemingway, resulted from a change in American prose style, between 1825 and 1925, “toward greater concreteness of diction and simplicity in syntax.”¹³ This simplification of language is in some ways like that rendered by Wordsworth upon the conventional poetic diction that he felt was unsuited to his lyrical ballads. The change in American prose style of this period helped render the language freer to accommodate the lyrical fiction of such writers, for example, as Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and

¹¹ Quoted in Matthiessen, p. 132.
¹² Quoted, ibid., p. 90.

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Kate Chopin — even though the urge toward simple, lyrical ex­pression was not, as it was for Wordsworth, an immediate cause of the American change in diction.

The change in American prose style, as Bridgman concludes, “was initiated primarily in dialect pieces and in fictional dia­logue.” Noting that the first thrust in dialect came through realistic humor, Bridgman remarks that “the earlier humorists had presented dialect figures whose activities were consistently broad and violent: they hunted bears, kicked dogs, gulped whiskey, and danced gals off their feet”; but writers like Hamlin Garland and Sarah Jewett “emphasized the calmer existence of farming and housekeeping, a life valued in itself rather than ex­hibited as a source of crude amusement... The main energy turned from idiosyncratic speech toward the sound of the ordi­nary man in the middle of things” (p. 62). Though they often speak in a dialect, then, Sarah Jewett’s characters speak with natural simplicity, like that of “ordinary men in the middle of things”; and, as Lowell remarked, her characters’ speech con­veys her “gift of quiet pathos.”

The prevailing calm in Sarah Jewett’s fiction is evinced by the natural simplicity of her characters’ speech, but it is most memorably symbolized by the fir trees in “The Country of the Pointed Firs”; for, stretching down to the shore and even pro­viding masts for the fleet, they unite the land and the sea and the people of Dunnet Landing. To a surface colorist, perhaps, the trees would be merely green, but as Jewett sees them pen­etra­tingly, they are dark; they represent not only natural fertility and man’s closeness with nature, but nature’s death-struggle with man and man’s with nature. The forests shall be cut and the men shall die; thus the trees are imaged in such tones as these: “We were standing where there was a fine view of the harbor and its long stretches of shore all covered by the great army of the pointed firs, darkly cloaked and standing as if they waited to embark. As we looked far seaward among the outer islands, the trees seemed to march seaward still, going steadily
over the heights and down to the water's edge."14 But, as the
trees are evergreens, a majestic natural order prevails, and in
her idyllic moods Jewett peoples this landscape with rustic girls
like the shepherdess in "A Dunnet Shepherdess" or, more fa­
mously, Sylvia in "A White Heron." Sylvia was a refugee from
"a crowded manufacturing town," and her parents — it is
strongly implied are in the processes of nature, not in civiliza­
tion; for she brightened with birdlike and childish innocence
when she moved to the country with her grandmother. The
consoling mystery of Sylvia, who is finally alone, is that she is
a transcendental innocent, a child of nature. Sarah Jewett often
spoke of herself as a child,15 and through characters like Sylvia
she returns to her childhood. As Cynthy in "Aunt Cynthy Dal­
lett" says, "‘There’s nothin’ so beautiful as to have a bright
childhood to look back to. . . . ’T was happier in the old days,
when the fathers an’ mothers done the rulin’.'"16

The mood of Sarah Jewett’s fiction is not always idyllic, how­
ever, and in the more realistic selections from The Country of
the Pointed Firs as well as in her later pieces about Dunnet
Landing, we see — in the person of Mrs. Todd — that adults,
too, can maintain a consoling, childlike sense of security by
living in a community in nature. When rowing out to see her
mother on Green Island, Mrs. Todd says, "‘There, you never
get over bein’ a child long’s you have a mother to go to,’ " we
can infer that her greater mother is nature. Mrs. Todd’s im­
mediate link with nature is through her herb collecting, and the
mystique of this relationship is pointed up by the urban narra­
tor (herself “incompetent at herb-gathering,”) who often images
Mrs. Todd among her herbs or trailing "the scents of primeval
herbs." Mrs. Todd frequently refreshes herself and her guests
with her spruce beer and other herb-flavored delicacies, and she

14 The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896, rpt. Boston and New York,
1900), pp. 44-45.
15 See Cary, p. 19, for a summary of the way in which Miss Jewett felt
throughout her life as she did on her forty-eighth birthday: "I am always
nine years old."
16 In The Queen’s Twin and Other Stories, p. 217.
finally sends the narrator off with gifts of "southernwood and a twig of bay." When the narrator tells us how she became acquainted "with Mrs. Todd as landlady, herb-gatherer, rustic philosopher . . . and mariner," we sense how thoroughly Mrs. Todd presides over the place. She is the landlady in a larger sense; herself a child of nature, she is the embodied *genius loci* in the world of Dunnet Landing.

The natural children of Dunnet Landing are characteristically lonely, but their loneliness is usually assuaged by their reliance on such past values as simplicity, honesty, and hard work — all of which are a part of the place. It is no wonder, then, that recalling her preparations to return to her urban home — in a country fraught both with industrial ills and with the confusion of shifting its center to the west — the narrator remarks, "I feared to find myself a foreigner." The idea of being a foreigner, of being uprooted and cut off from one's origins, provides the note upon which Sarah Jewett builds one of her finest stories. "The Foreigner" (1900) is about the death of "Mis' Cap'n Tolland," whose relatives were dead and whose husband had died on Kingston when their efforts to get back to their home in France had failed. Captain Tolland had brought her back to Dunnet Landing, had married her, and had given her a home before he was lost at sea. Mrs. Todd's words — which act as the story's refrain — describe Mrs. Tolland's consequent loneliness: "she came a foreigner and she went a foreigner, and never was anything but a stranger among our folks." Mrs. Tolland, too, is childlike: "You often felt as if you was dealin' with a child's mind, for all she had so much information that other folks hadn't." Having "lived right out in the country" in France, she was a child of nature; and having been "well acquainted with the virtues of plants," it is she who taught Mrs. Todd "a sight o'things about herbs." But in Dunnet Landing, she was an uprooted foreigner, a "poor lonesome creatur". Finally, though, both women are provided mysterious consolation for Mrs. Tol-

land's years of loneliness; for, at the moment of her death, with outstretched arms she sees the welcoming ghost of her mother. Mrs. Todd assures her that she had seen the figure, too: "Yes, dear, I did; you ain't never goin' to feel strange an' lonesome no more." And, recalling this incident, Mrs. Todd says later: "I felt calm then an' lifted to somethin' different as I never was since."

"The Foreigner," then, is like a ballad, the theme of which is struck repeatedly, as a refrain, to sustain the unifying tone which is contained in the title. Certainly, the story of Mrs. Tolland's lonely life and death has lingered in Mrs. Todd's mind, and it is transmitted to us — as in one reiterated chord — through her dramatized voice: watching Mrs. Tolland's funeral as it "crawled along all in one piece," on a "dull an' gray" day, she "wondered how it ever come to the Lord's mind to let her begin down among them gay islands, all heat and sun, and end up here among the rocks with a north wind blowin'. 'T was a gale that begun the afternoon before she died, and had kept blowin' off an' on ever since. I'd thought more than once how glad I should be to get home an' out o' sound o' them black spruces a-beatin' an' scratchin' at the front windows."

"The Foreigner" is built on the repeated chord of Mrs. Tolland's loneliness, and its resulting lyrical organization can be grasped quickly when repeated notes in the story are extracted and set down together in order:

The first cold northeasterly storm of the season was blowing hard outside.
"There's a roaring high overhead, and a roaring in the deep sea."
"This makes me think o' the night Mis' Cap'n Tolland died."
"... this is like the night Mis' Cap'n Tolland died."

18 Willa Cather has remarked on the ballad-like quality of Sarah Jewett's fiction, noting that "Pater said that every truly great drama must, in the end, linger in the reader's mind as a sort of ballad. Probably the same thing might be said of every great story. It must leave in the mind of the sensitive reader an intangible residuum of pleasure; a cadence, a quality of voice, that is exclusively the writer's own, individual, unique. A quality that one can remember without the volume at hand, can experience over and over again in the mind but can never absolutely define, as one can experience in memory a melody, or the summer perfume of a garden." From "Preface" to The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett (1925); rpt. as The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories (New York: Anchor, 1956), n.p.
... they heard somebody singin’ very pretty to a guitar.
"She was a foreigner, an’ he met with her out in the island of Jamaica."
"They saw the woman that had the guitar..."
[The captain and his two friends were] “three sheets in the wind.”
"... they was three sheets in the wind."
"... three sheets in the wind..."
"Cap’n John [handed] the lady into his bo’t, guitar and all."
"An’ the others thought they heard music of the guitar."
"... summer evenings, when the windows was open she’d set an’ drum on her guitar, but I don’t know as I ever heard her sing but once after the cap’n went away."
"... they heard the guitar a-goin’, an’ she was singin’."
[After Captain Tolland’s death] “she began to fail, and ’t was Friday night she died.”
"I begun to hear some long notes o’ dronin’ music from upstairs..."
“she’d always kept her guitar hangin’... in her room... The strings was jarrin’ yet” in the wind.
“’T was such a gale as this the night Mis’ Tolland died.”
“We had the window open to give her air, an’ now an’ then a gust would strike that guitar..."
“And she reached out both her arms toward the door, an’ I looked the way she was lookin’, an’ I see some one was standin’ there against the dark.”
“’You saw her didn’t you?’"
“’T is my mother...”
“I felt calm then, an’ lifted to somethin’ different as I ever was since.”
“’You saw her, didn’t you?”
“’Yes, dear, I did; you ain’t never goin’ to feel strange an’ lonesome no more.”
“I never called it beyond reason I should see the other watcher.”
“’T was just such a night as this Mis’ Tolland died...”
“’T was just such a night as this,...”
“... but I don’t call it beyond reason.”
“I do hate to hear the poor steamers callin’...; they’ll find it rough at sea, but the storm’s all over.”

The consoling vision that calms and uplifts Mrs. Todd is, of course, beyond reason, despite her urgent denial. At least it is beyond the kind of reason expected in normal prose fiction, whose conventions are rooted in the writer’s efforts to understand the logic and the chronology of his or her fictional material. In “The Foreigner,” the sounds of the wind, the sea, and the guitar linger with the thought of Mrs. Tolland’s loneliness...
to give the story a lasting quality. It is more than a ghost story, which it is sometimes called. The ghostly figure appears only after the main note of loneliness has been repeatedly struck; and when death comes with the ghost-mother, the lyric reaches a characteristic New England resolution that echoes from Walden through the pointed firs of Dunnet Landing and on through Wallace Stevens’s black hemlocks to the calm knowledge of his “Sunday Morning” that “Death is the mother of Beauty.”

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