September 1979

Sarah Orne Jewett and Temporal Continuity

Mary C. Kraus

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 15, no.3, September 1979, p.157-174

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
Sarah Orne Jewett and Temporal Continuity

by MARY C. KRAUS

Sarah Orne Jewett views time as a continuum, rather than as disjunctive moments of past and present. Time, in her view, is simply permanence incomplete, still in the process of achievement. She sees the past as dependent upon the present for its significance and meaning, since only in retrospect can the past be understood and interpreted. She sees the present as dependent upon the past insofar as it is enriched and stabilized by past values which must not be repudiated. Her view of the interdependence and continuity between past and present time dictates the characterization, themes and techniques of her entire work. This view of temporal continuity differs substantially from the twentieth-century view which sees time as a series of disjunctive moments without interconnection or direction. The fortune-teller in Thornton Wilder’s Skin of Our Teeth, for example, says: “Think! Think! Split your heads. I can’t tell you the past and neither can you. If anybody tries to tell you the past, take my word for it, they’re charlatans.” Bergson sees duration as man’s conscious creation, instant by instant. Man creates his own actions, himself, and the world around him by choosing, each instant, to do so. Space and time, as Kant describes them, are mere creations of the imagination.

This subjective view of time necessarily precludes the idea of stability and direction imposed from without by a Creator who establishes and sustains all becoming and duration. The notion of “journey” through life or through history, so common in the literature of past centuries including Miss Jewett’s, is notably absent in much twentieth-century literature, for such a notion assumes the existence of a journey’s end or goal. “Its absence seems symptomatic of a general dissolution of meaning,” argues W. T. Noon. Yeats illustrates the view:

Turning and turning the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Miss Jewett's view, on the other hand, is similar to Augustine's conviction that it is only eternity that can provide the necessary clue to the enigma of time, for time, for him, is the moving image of eternity. He sees memory as a key to its structure: "St. Augustine attempts always to give to memory, to time as a measuring activity of the soul in its quest for continuity and unity, an objective basis in the succession of physical motion, what goes on in the changing outside world." Miss Jewett, too, in her preoccupation with the past and her consistent reference to specific places and things, roots the past in an objective outside world, giving to memory an objective basis. Both Miss Jewett and Augustine, then, would have repudiated Spengler's view: "We ourselves are time," or Proust's definition of time as "a simple plurality of isolated moments remote from each other."

Although Miss Jewett was too realistic to ignore the constant movement of time and the inevitability of transiency and change, she, nevertheless, consistently tended toward, and sought to evoke, a state of permanence in which distinctions between past and present dissolve and are subsumed by certain humanistic and religious values in light of which such distinctions are irrelevant. Her predilection for harmony, and her aversion for any restless change that repudiates the past, flow from her belief in a benevolent Providence who has created a world of order and who intends for man a condition of harmony with his social and natural settings. Temporal continuity, Miss Jewett clearly believed, is necessary for such harmony. Her humanistic religion is most evident in the conduct and attitude of her characters. They often voice their belief and consistently act as if they were responsible for the fulfillment of a Will higher than their own. Martha Hale Shackford argues persuasively that many of Miss Jewett's best stories "are interpretations of the 'human predicament' when decisions must be made which involve surrender of personal desires for the sake of some faith in the larger values of life. Through those records of cases of courageous patience and magnanimity, Miss Jewett has indicated that in all the fluctuations of selfishness, something exists more stable than self."

In commenting upon history, Miss Jewett clearly reveals her belief in such stability outside the self, while suggesting something about time as well: "In criticizing and resenting such a reign as William the Norman's over England, we must avoid a danger of not seeing the hand of God in it and the evidences of an overriding Providence, which works in and through the works of men and sees the end of things from the beginning.

5. Quoted by Noon, p. 580.
Here, the view of chronological time as peculiar to the human condition but not the eternal, is suggested by the concluding phrase, "Providence ... sees the end of things from the beginning as men cannot." Providence, Miss Jewett suggests, sees everything simultaneously from a permanent and unchanging perspective. There is no unknown future in this view. The world, however ordered and purposeful, undergoes constant change that cannot always be anticipated or controlled, and despite her love for it, she sensed that in its temporality and transiency the world is defective. Time, in her view is permanence incomplete, but destined for ultimate completion. Thomas Aquinas defines the difference between time and eternity to which Miss Jewett was so sensitive: "Time is the numbering of movement by before and after. ... Now in a thing bereft of movement, which is always the same, there is no before and after. As therefore the idea of time consists in the numbering of before and after in movement; so likewise in the apprehension of the uniformity of what is outside of movement, consists the idea of eternity." He then explains that the only way to approach a timeless condition in this life is through the act of the pure contemplation of truth. In this act the human soul is brought to a fulness and completion of its being and is released from time. It is "brought to perfection in an instant which transcends time and which, as long as it lasts, lasts within a duration that is permanent." There is a clear correspondence between the timelessness of spiritual values and the intuitive understanding of those values in the act of contemplation.

Miss Jewett herself frequently experienced what Updike calls "moments of intrinsic blessing," when she felt herself a part of her surroundings as the contemplator is united to the object of his contemplation. "She found that any spot of country where there was a large still sky and plenty of trees had a way of waiting quietly around her until she suddenly realized that she had become a piece of it." Moments like these which became kairos or redeemed, eschatological time for her and released her from kronos or chronological time, strengthened her awareness of activities and values existing outside of movement, always the same and so transcending time. She writes: "The great laws of truth and justice and kindness remain, while the years come and go; the promises of God endure, but while there is, as one may say a common law of heavenly ordering, there are also the various statute laws that vary with time and place, and these forever change as men change." Insofar as Miss Jewett's characters share in "the great laws of truth, justice and kindness," they also endure. Her aged characters, for example, not only

display a youthful enthusiasm for life and a capacity for deep love, loyalty and self-forgetfulness, but actually embody realities that transcend time and that illustrate their belief in "something . . . more stable than the self." The quality of youthfulness that Miss Jewett so consistently attributes to her elderly characters suggests such transcendence and sanctions their altruistic values.

Dr. Leslie, Miss Jewett's hero in *A Country Doctor*, epitomizes this dependence on Providence from which her idea of temporal harmony flows. As he examines some jade-stone gods, he remarks:

We can't get used to the fact that whatever truly belongs to the next world is not visible in this, and that there is idol-making and worshipping forever going on. When we let ourselves forget to educate our faith and our spiritual intellects, and lose sight of our relation and dependence upon the highest informing strength, we are trying to move our machinery by some inferior motive power. We worship our tools and beg success of them instead of remembering that we are all apprentices to the great Master of our own and every man's craft. It is the great ideas of our work that we need, and the laws of its truths. We shall be more intelligent by and about making the best of ourselves; our possibilities are infinitely beyond what most people even dream. . . . We don't amount to anything, simply because we won't understand that we must receive the strength of Heaven into our souls; that it depends upon our degree of receptivity, and our using the added power that comes in that way; . . . it is our souls that make our bodies worth anything, and the life of the soul doesn't come from its activity, or any performance of its own. Those things are only the results and the signs of life, not the causes of it. 13

These convictions, not explicitly stated but more subtly and artistically dramatized in Miss Jewett's best work, form her view of temporal continuity. Such continuity also extends beyond death. By investing her characters and their values with immortality, Miss Jewett affirms their ultimate and enduring worth and dignity.

Miss Jewett's profound desire for harmony and her aversion for disjunction prompted her "attempt to explain the past and present to each other." 14 Her fascination with the past was not simply a philosophical interest in abstract concepts of time, but rather an intuitive tendency toward harmony in the concrete. She wished to see a mutual appreciation between elderly and young people. She wanted to see old buildings, representing past generations, preserved. When she saw an old house or an old person neglected or ridiculed, she sought to uncover its worth for the present to see and admire. Instances of disjunction and opposition between youth and age, new and old values, city and country were plentiful in nineteenth-century America, but Jewett, in accord with her view of an orderly, purposeful world, believed that differences between past and present were superficial, and that unchanging values, common to all time, were meant to act as binding forces between representatives of

past and present ways of life. The act of writing itself was, for her, a way of keeping the past alive in the memories and attitudes of her readers. After completing her historical novel, *The Tory Lover*, she wrote to Horace Scudder, her publisher: "I can't help hoping that you will like this last one, 'The Tory Lover,' which has taken more than a solid year's hard work and the dreams and hopes of many a year beside. I have always meant to do what I could about keeping some of the old Berwick flowers in bloom, and some of the names and places alive in memory, for with many changes in the old town they might be soon forgotten."  

Her writing, both technically and thematically, reflects this predilection for continuity in time.

The narrative method of some of her best work reflects most noticeably her view of temporal continuity. Instead of using a narrator who transcends time and space to report infallibly on human thought and action, her narrator is often a reporter limited to the particular time of the story or sketch. She performs several roles: representing present time, the narrator, rather than telling any stories herself, simply reports stories that are told to her, and these are often reminiscences of the past. These stories within stories are links in the temporal chain, while the narrator is, in a sense, the present listening to the past. In addition, the narrator herself forms another link between the time of the story's creation and the reader's time, whenever that may be. Finally, she stands in place of a listening and observing reader.

"The Foreigner" illustrates Miss Jewett's narrative method as it links past with present. The story opens by establishing the time, the place, the narrator/listener and the storyteller: "One evening, at the end of August, in Dunnet Landing, I heard Mrs. Todd's firm footstep crossing the small front entry outside my door.... 'Oh, please come in!' I cried." Miss Jewett further emphasizes present time by a detailed description of the storm which prompts Mrs. Todd to seek the narrator's company. The storm is also a first link with the past as it reminds Mrs. Todd of her tale: "This makes me think o' the night Mis' Cap'n Tolland died" (p. 308). The narrator then reports verbatim Mrs. Todd's reminiscence of the lonely girl from Jamaica, brought to Dunnet Landing by Captain Tolland, her strangeness and isolation from the people of the community, her gratitude to Mrs. Todd and her mother for their kindness to her, and finally her death with the mysterious appearance of her dead mother. Even death does not break the interpenetration of past and present; for the appearance of the dying woman's mother, representative of a more distant past, brings her into her daughter's present time, as if there were no past, but only present existence after death, and only one kingdom to which both the living and the dead belong.

Past and present time weave symmetrically throughout the tale to form a well-knit, temporally continuous work. The first and last sections of the seven-part story use present time. The storm, which introduces Mrs. Todd's tale, establishes the setting. Her remark in the last section unifies the conclusion with the beginning: "'Twas just such a night as this Mis' Tolland died" (p. 323). The intervening sections (II through VI) consist of Mrs. Todd's reminiscence of Captain Tolland and his Jamaican wife. But her tale is repeatedly interrupted by a shift in time. Each section begins by citing realistic details of the present setting before plunging back into the tale and the past. Section II opens with the following: "There was so long a pause, and Mrs. Todd still looked so absent-minded, that I was afraid she and the cat were growing drowsy together before the fire, and I should have no reminiscence at all" (p. 309). The cozy details of cat and fire contrast with the storm to create a specific atmosphere in which the narrator and reader hear the tale. Clearly, Miss Jewett wishes to maintain temporal perspective by inserting, at regular intervals, reminders of present time. Section III begins: "At this moment, with a sudden flaw of the wind, some wet twigs outside blew against the window panes. . . . I started with sudden fear, and so did the cat, but Mrs. Todd knitted away and did not even look over her shoulder" (p. 313). Again, Miss Jewett interrupts the tale, not only to provide suspense, but to keep present and past time in perspective. Although the storyteller is too engrossed to attend to the storm, the narrator and the reader are aware of the details of present setting throughout the tale. Section III ends with Mrs. Todd's leaving to get more wood for the fire, while the narrator's curiosity mounts. The next section opens: "I was ready with a question as soon as Mrs. Todd came in and had well settled the fire and herself and the cat again" (p. 315). The cat and fire again represent present time to the narrator and the reader, lest they forget that they are listening to a tale of past events. As Mrs. Todd becomes increasingly involved in her tale, the narrator's attention is focused more exclusively on her. Section V begins: "Suddenly Mrs. Todd gave an energetic shrug of her shoulders and a quick look at me, and I saw that the sails of her narrative were filled with a fresh breeze" (p. 317).

By inserting the narrator's impression of the storyteller midway through the tale, Miss Jewett clearly indicates that she does not want the past nor the present to be forgotten. Section VI, which contains the climactic appearance of Mrs. Tolland's dead mother, opens with an atmosphere of mystery as well as suspense:

Mrs. Todd drew her chair closer to mine; she held the cat and her knitting with one hand as she moved, but the cat was so warm and so sound asleep that she only stretched a lazy paw in spite of what must have felt like a slight earthquake. Mrs. Todd began to speak almost in a whisper.

"I ain't told you all," she continued; "no, I haven't spoken of all to but very few. The
way it came was this," she said solemnly, and then stopped to listen to the wind. . . .  
"There, that's the last struggle o' the gale," said Mrs. Todd, nodding her head with impressive certainty and still looking into the bright embers of the fire. (p. 321)

Here, Miss Jewett deliberately focuses attention on the cat and the storm to establish, once again, the temporal perspective she wishes to maintain. Even Mrs. Todd, the storyteller, is fully conscious of the present storm as she continues her recollection of the strange past events she has witnessed. The final section concludes with Mrs. Todd's observation, "The storm's all over" (p. 324). So, of course, is her tale and the narrator's own story. All three end simultaneously in present time and complete the circle.

This interweaving of present with past throughout the story brings the reader, the narrator, and the storyteller into close relationship. In addition, the narrator's first person point of view creates the greatest immediacy among the three. The reader imaginatively joins the two before the fire and listens to the same tale the narrator hears; thus temporal distance is spanned. Both narrator and storyteller observe the storm and tend the fire during the tale, so that the past events composing the reminiscence are brought clearly into relationship with the present conditions under which the story is being told and heard. Mrs. Todd's speculative remarks at the end of the tale bring into further relationship the past with the present. By recalling Mrs. Tolland's death many years before, she has learned something about how to live in the present: "There's somethin' of us that must still live on; we've got to join both worlds together an' live in one but for the other" (p. 323). The present depends upon the past for some of its significance. The past, in turn, takes on greater meaning and significance through the act of memory which interprets it. This interdependence gives significance as well as continuity to both.

Miss Jewett's practice of reporting reminiscences of old people in order to reveal the deepest positive realities of the human condition—love, loyalty, duty, self-forgetfulness, usefulness—acknowledges that the act of remembering is a natural method of illuminating the present. For Augustine and Kierkegaard, memory is the basis for identity. To know the meaning of experience, one must comprehend it in retrospect. To be without memory is to be chained only to the flux of the present. Kierkegaard explains that we live life forward, but can only understand it backward. The act of remembering, then, seeks the origins of all activity instead of engaging in unreflective and purposeless activity for its own sake. The reminiscer reviews, evaluates, and interprets the past with a natural curiosity to know the meaning, significance and worth of his life activities, past and present. "Memory is the basic text for the self-teacher. . . . It serves our sense of identity: it provides continuity, wisdom, and serenity. . . . The act of recall can renew our awareness of
the present and restore our sense of wonder."17 Graham Greene, justifying his autobiographical writing, asks rhetorically: "The motive for recording these scraps of the past? It is much the same motive that has made me a novelist: a desire to reduce a chaos of experience to some sort of order, and a hungry curiosity. We cannot love others, so the theologians teach, unless in some degree we can love ourselves, and curiosity, too, begins at home."18

Remembering is a natural and necessary way of perceiving the meaning and significance of one's life. It was, for Miss Jewett, an effective way of revealing the meaning and significance of the past to her contemporaries and future readers, and so linking past with present. The majority of Miss Jewett's stories, like "The Foreigner," are composed of someone's recollection of the past and reported to the narrator, but the reminiscence is always couched within present setting and circumstances. "The Courting of Sister Wisby," for example, devotes only the last third of its space to the event referred to by the title. The first two thirds of the story consist in Mrs. Goodsoe's lessons on herb gathering which are interspersed with her reminiscences of Jim Heron, the fiddler, and her opinions on preaching, travel and modern communication. Her recollection of Sister Wisby here, is even more deeply imbedded in present events than is Mrs. Todd's reminiscence in "The Foreigner." The significance of the past events increases as temporal perspective is maintained, for the past is then interpreted with the objectivity which the passage of time affords. Mrs. Goodsoe's and Mrs. Todd's recollections, therefore, take on greater validity because they are clearly presented as carefully considered evaluations of events long past. "Law Lane," the story of two families' haggling over a few feet of land between them, is one more of many tales that takes on greater significance precisely because, being a narration of past events, it can include the storyteller's retrospective interpretation and insight. Mrs. Barnet, who, after a slight fall, believed (with the persuasive help of Mrs. Powder) that she was dying, made peace with her neighbors. "It was Christmas Day, whether anybody in Law Lane remembered it or not. . . . The wars of Law Lane were ended,"19 says the storyteller. Miss Jewett seeks temporal continuity, not by obliterating either past or present here, but rather by clearly displaying the interdependence between them: the past depends upon present interpretation and evaluation for much of its significance, and the present depends upon the past for insights into its own time. As Mrs. Powder tells the story in retrospect, she clearly recognizes and exposes the absurdity of the petty "wars of Law Lane." Her remembering and mentioning that the reconciliation occurred on Christmas Day suggests her sense of the harmony between time and event. Because she is

18. Butler, p. 89.
temporally removed from the event, she can most easily and naturally include her own evaluation of it which gives her narration a greater subjectivity. Miss Jewett's storytellers consistently reveal themselves in this way so that the reader and storyteller are brought into close relationship.

Miss Jewett's use of setting also reflects her view of temporal continuity. Place often exerts so strong a power of association for her characters or for her narrator, that time is collapsed in their memories, and the original emotion they first experienced in a particular place is reexperienced at their return. In "A Spring Sunday," the Halletts relive their past in this way, and are renewed by their experience of temporal continuity, when they return to their first country home:

The pasture path again became the path of life, and all their thoughts and memories were so clear that they hardly missed the children themselves from the bit of rustic landscape. There was the old pine stump behind which Oliver used to hide, to spring out like an Indian at his younger brothers. . . . Today was almost like having all the children young again and all walking by her side. She turned and looked back at Alonzo, who was coming steadily along in the foot-path behind her, and they smiled at each other as they used to smile a very long time ago, when life was all before them and such spring days as these were brimful of hard work and hopeful happiness.20

The place where the Halletts lived as a young couple "became" for them the place of hope and of youth, "the path of life." This elderly couple, accustomed to looking back on their past life, imaginatively experience again the anticipation of their youth. Spring is, of course, the appropriate season for such a reexperience. Natural setting, which normally changes so little, is an appropriate image of temporal continuity, and so can easily evoke, in the couple, vivid memories of their past.

Old places, homes and fishing houses exude for Miss Jewett a fascinating way of life that she instinctively wishes to preserve through her writing. Her capturing these "best things that their village held," as she comments in her preface to Deephaven, is a plea for preservation. She writes: "It will remain for later generations to make amends for the sad use of riches after the war, for our injury of what we inherited, for the irreparable loss of certain ancient buildings which would have been twice as interesting in the next century as we are just beginning to be wise enough to think them in this."21 It is most often their association with people and manners of the past which she finds so fascinating: "The oldest houses are, with one or two exceptions, by far the finest ones, and the one of which I have spoken still keeps up as well as it can the pride as well as the name of its first owner. One cannot help being interested in this man."22 Miss Jewett then continues her speculations on the past inhabitants and their activities. In a letter written from Eu-

rope to Mrs. Whitman, she reveals her desire for a kind of unity with people of the past that arises from understanding and appreciation: "Never mind people who tell you there is nothing to see in the place where people lived who interest you. You always find something of what made them the souls they were, and at any rate you see their sky and their earth." 23

The autobiographical sketches, "River Driftwood," "An October Ride," "From a Mournful Villager," "An Autumn Holiday," "A Winter Drive," are full of reflections on the people associated with abandoned houses, grass-covered cellars where farmhouses once stood, old shipyards and forgotten graves. In her sketch, "An October Ride," Miss Jewett waits out a rainstorm in an abandoned parsonage and reflects on the country minister who used to inhabit it:

I thought as I stood in the study, how many times he must have looked out of the small-paned western windows across the fields, and how in his later days he must have had a treasure of memories of the people who had gone out of that room the better for his advice and consolation, the people whom he had helped and taught and ruled. . . .

I was very glad to see the old house, and I told myself a great many stories there, as one cannot help doing in such a place. . . . The rooms which had looked empty at first were filled again with the old clergymen, who met together with important looks and complacent dignity, and eager talk . . . the awkward, smiling couples, who came to be married . . . the little children who, under all their shyness, remembered the sugarplums in the old parson's pockets,—all these, and even the tall cane that must have stood in the entry, were visible to my mind's eye. And I even heard a sermon from the old preacher who died so long ago, on the beauty of a life well spent. 24

Here, Miss Jewett imaginatively finds the minister himself in his old study, and discovers there, something of what made him the soul he was.

The sight of a small child's grave near a grass-covered cellar where a farmhouse once stood, evokes a great deal of the past for Miss Jewett:

It must have been a great many years ago that the house had stood there; and the small slate headstone was worn away by the rain and wind, so there was nothing to be read. . . . The sight of the little grave at first touched me strangely, and I tried to picture to myself the procession that came out from the house the day of the funeral, and I thought of the mother in the evening after all the people had gone home, and how she missed the baby, and kept seeing the new grave out here in the twilight as she went about her work. I suppose the family moved away, and so all the rest were buried elsewhere. . . .

The little grave is forgotten by everybody but me, I think: the mother must have found the child again in heaven a very long time ago. . . . God knows what use that life was, the grave is such a short one, and nobody knows whose little child it was; but perhaps a thousand people in the world today are better because it brought a little love into the world that was not there before. 25

The grave, like the parson's study, evokes in Miss Jewett positive reflections on the people who were formerly associated with these places, as if

she wishes to reach beyond temporal distance and contact them. Like the Halletts, who are imaginatively swept from their present, back to the past by the evocative power of setting, Miss Jewett herself is imaginatively transported across time, back to the past, through contact with old places and things. The destinations of her imaginative trips, however, are always the people connected with these settings, never the settings themselves in isolation. She writes: "I do not know why it is these silent, forgotten places are so delightful to me; there is one which I always call my farm, and it was a long time after I knew it well before I could find out to whom it had once belonged. In some strange way the place has become a part of my world and to belong to my thoughts and life." Although Miss Jewett does not say "why these silent, forgotten places are so delightful" to her, her entire work indicates that her delight is another manifestation of her unifying vision, her desire to bridge, through imagination, temporal distance and experience kinship with those who came before; and this sense of kinship, this imaginative reconciliation, is always rooted in specific places and things.

Because it is least subject to change, Miss Jewett uses natural setting to represent temporal continuity. For Miss Jewett, the river was, as it was for Twain, Wolfe, and many others, a natural symbol of time, so continuous, fluid, and mobile that it is impossible to distinguish separate drops of its water. Yesterday's current was identical with today's, though the water is not the same water; still the river endures, unchanged through past and present. Miss Jewett's observation of this condition in "River Driftwood" is a wistful desire for this kind of permanence, stability and continuity. She sees the smooth flow of time and the river, and perhaps wishes that the affairs of men would reflect this reassuring symbol of stability and permanence. She writes:

How many men have lived and died on its banks, but the river is always young. . . . A harbor, even if it is a little harbor, is a good thing, since adventurers come into it as well as go out, and the life in it grows strong, because it takes something from the world, and has something to give in return. . . . One sees the likeness between a harborless heart and a harborless country, where no ships go and come; and since no treasure is carried away no treasure is brought in. From this inland town of mine there is no sea-faring any more, and the shipwrights' hammers are never heard now. It is only a station on the railways, and it has, after all these years grown so little that it is hardly worth while for all the trains to stop. It is busy and it earns its living and enjoys itself, but it seems to me that its old days were its better days. It builds cheaper houses and is more like other places than it used to be. . . .

The river itself never grows old; though it rushes and rises high in the spring, it never dries up in the autumn; the little white sails flit over it in pleasant weather, like fluttering moths round the track of sunlight on the water; one troop of children after another steals eagerly down to its forbidden shores to play. 27

Even this passage, which laments the changes in her own community, gives evidence of her belief in continuity. She cannot help noting at the

end of the sketch, that, like the river whose water changes, but whose current and banks remain, generations of similar but not identical children replace each other at its shores. Here, river and children constitute a reassuring bit of permanence and stability in her society whose rising technology threatens to obliterate all dependence upon the past. For her, such disjunction and obliteration would mean the loss of social memory and a perspective that comes only with a sense of temporal continuity and interdependence.

In Miss Jewett’s writings, the ever-renewing death-life cycle of the seasons and vegetation frequently analogizes time. Those aspects of natural setting which are always present and always changing, embrace past and present in a way that Poulet in *Studies in Human Time* calls, “A double continuity: the permanent continuity of substantial form, and the successive continuity of change.”

In light of her predilection for continuity rather than disjunction, it is no wonder that Miss Jewett, in her stories and sketches, relies so heavily on stable natural settings for imaging temporal continuity. In “An October Ride,” a visit to a ruined farm occasions one of her many reflections on time. She examines the grass-covered cellar and the clearing where the yard had once been, before the encroaching trees had begun to reclaim it:

> The world goes on year after year. We can use its forces, and shape and mould them, and perfect this thing or that, but we cannot make new forces; we only use the tools we find to carve the wood we find. . . .

> As I looked about me that day I saw the difference that men had made slowly fading out of sight. . . . Yet there cannot be such a thing as life that is lost. The tree falls and decays, in the dampness of the woods, and is part of the earth under foot, but another tree is growing out of it; perhaps it is part of its own life that is springing again from the part of it that died. God must always be putting again to some use the life that is withdrawn; it must live, because it is Life. . . . the people who lived and died . . . The world was made for them, and God keeps them yet; somewhere in his kingdom they are in their places,—they are not lost; while the trees they left grow older, and the young trees spring up, and the fields they cleared are being covered over and turned into wild land again.

Here, the natural economy of the world represents an ongoing continuity in which there is no distinction between past and present. Nature repossesses herself again and again of what man has claimed. Nothing is lost, and though individuals die, even they are not obliterated while life continues to renew itself over and over again. Nature’s time seems to consist in an eternal present rather than disjunctive moments of past and present.

In “An Autumn Holiday,” Miss Jewett even more strikingly describes her sense of temporal continuity by again using natural setting to illustrate stability:

> There will almost always be a bird’s nest in the old apple tree, and it is most likely to be a robin’s nest. The prehistoric robins must have been cave-dwellers, for they still make their

nests as much like cellars as they can. . . . One always has a thought of spring at the sight of a robin's nest. It is so little while ago that it was spring, and we were so glad to have the birds come back, and the life of the new year was just showing itself; we were looking forward to so much growth and to the realization and perfection of so many things. I think the sadness of autumn, or the pathos of it, is like that of elderly people. We have seen how the flowers looked when they bloomed and have eaten the fruit when it was ripe; the questions have had their answer, the days we waited for have come and gone. Everything has stopped growing. And so the children have grown to be men and women, their lives have been lived, the autumn has come. We have seen what our lives would be like when we were older; success or disappointment, it is all over at any rate. Yet it only makes one sad to think it is autumn with the flowers or with one's own life, when one forgets that always and always there will be the spring again. 30

Using the ever-renewing seasonal image, Miss Jewett here affirms her belief in the ongoing continuity of life and growth, even in the face of temporal change, aging, and imminent death. The changing progress of seasons from spring through summer and autumn clearly analogizes the stages of human life. But her concluding statement carries the analogy beyond temporal existence, and suggests a larger scheme of which the recurrent seasonal cycle is a reflection and an intimation. In “The Confession of a House-Breaker,” Miss Jewett speaks of sleep and one’s repeated awakenings from it as a prefigurement of that final sleep from which one awakens to “the brightest of all mornings.” 31 Here, the winter of human death is always followed by a spring of new life. She sees the natural seasonal cycle then, as a reminder of a more stable temporal continuity in a larger world of which the temporal world is only a part. She takes refuge from the transiency so apparent all around her, by looking to the stability and continuity of natural setting which embraces past, present and future as a continuum. In light of this view, there is no more finality to human aging and death than there is to the seasons of autumn and winter, and time then becomes for Miss Jewett as it was for Augustine, but “the moving image of eternity.”

Miss Jewett often represents past and present time by using the city and the country to embody them. She brings the two together most frequently through an appreciative visitor from the city who comes to the country; sometimes a return of the native motif brings city and country into relationship, but the two are often presented as complementary rather than opposed. To say that Miss Jewett always presents the country as superior to the city—as she does in some instances—is to ignore several of her stories in which the kind urbanite brings good things of the city to her country friends or family. In “A Guest at Home,” Annie Hollis determines to share her goods of education and cultivation with her family who live in a dull farming town and struggle with drudgery and fatigue. Annie succeeds in becoming a kind of savior to her parents:

"Somehow the work did not seem all drudgery any more to her father and mother (who had begun to feel like horses in a treadmill), because she lent them a hand so kindly and tried to make the best of everything."

In the end, neither city nor country is superior: "Whether Annie Hollis’s life is to be spent in town or country . . . who can tell? But . . . a girl who makes the best of things in one place, will do it in every place" (p. 58). Miss Jewett’s focus is clearly not on location as determining character, but rather on the ways in which character and nature undergird and determine all else. In this she resembles Thoreau, who writes, "From the desperate city you go into the desperate country," though here, Miss Jewett is, of course, more affirmative than Thoreau. Her effort to unite present and past by reconciling city and country is clearly evident in her preface to Deephaven: "Human nature is the same the world over, provincial and rustic influences must ever produce much the same effects upon character, and town life will ever have in its gift the spirit of the present, while it may take again from the quiet of hills and fields and the conservatism of country hearts a gift from the spirit of the past" (p. 6). Here she locates again her ideal of mutual appreciation and dependence between representatives of present and past.

In addition to narrative method and use of setting, Miss Jewett’s recurring characterization of the old as representatives of the past provides a third juncture of past and present, and reflects her vision of temporal continuity. Past and present are repeatedly counterposed in the persons of old and young. Most frequently, but not always, the relationship is harmonious and reflects Miss Jewett’s vision of an orderly and harmonious world. Her first book, Deephaven, like many later ones, consists of narrations and descriptions given by a young city visitor come to visit the old country villagers. Miss Jewett’s best work, The Country of the Pointed Firs, perfects this technique of joining past and present through characterization. Miss Jewett’s narrator in Deephaven, a young outsider, perceives with intelligent sensitivity, and therefore delight, the charm and strength of the elderly representatives of the past: "Knowing Mrs. Kew was one of the pleasantest things which happened to us . . . she used to do so much for our pleasure and was so good to us. . . . Her comparisons were most striking and amusing and her comments upon the books she read—for she was a great reader—were very shrewd and clever, and always to the point. She was never out of temper. . . . And she was such a wise woman" (p. 20). Miss Jewett, in effect, insists that the simple grandeur of the past embodies virtues which may be, and must be, learned.

Miss Jewett’s esteem for age is undoubtedly one of her most striking
hallmarks, and probably originated in her earliest childhood when she listened eagerly to elderly captains and relatives discuss exciting tales of the sea and of the history of Berwick. When she was only twenty-four, she wrote a bit of self-criticism that reveals her esteem: "Mr. Scudder, I think my chief fault is my being too young and knowing so little." For Miss Jewett, appreciation for the old clearly becomes a first important advance toward knowledge or wisdom.

Miss Jewett's linking of youth and age to represent temporal continuity is not indicative of mere optimistic idealism or wishful thinking, but is evidence, rather, of realistic psychological insight. Children instinctively view the elderly as warm and helpful; they associate "niceness" with old age. Miss Jewett, too, portrays the very young and the old in most positive terms. Like Faulkner, who, as Malcolm Cowley observes, creates his most sympathetic characters before the age of twenty and after the age of forty, Miss Jewett is "better with children . . . and incomparably good with older people who preserve the standards that have come down to them 'out of the old time, the old days.' " She repeatedly portrays harmonious relationships between old and young. Through language, she allies representatives of the past with those of present and future time in the mutually appreciative continuum she envisions. An authorial comment in one of her children's stories is typical: "I wish every boy and girl had just such a wise, dear old lady to tell them charming stories about old times, and to be just as much interested beside in their own new times." On occasion, Miss Jewett realistically portrays misunderstanding and antagonism between old and young, as in "A Landless Farmer" and "Fair Day," for example, but harmony between the two receives, by far, the greater emphasis.

Miss Jewett blends past and present within her elderly characters themselves: they illustrate Erik Erikson's description of a healthy personality, one that maintains "inner sameness and continuity [and] is matched by the sameness and continuity of one's meaning for others." The great majority of Miss Jewett's elderly characters embody youthfulness as well as age, and her descriptions of them repeatedly collapse time. Grandma Prime in "The Honey Tree" is "pleased as a girl" at the prospect of finding the tree. "You look well an' young as ever you did," says her daughter. The young narrator in "Paper Roses" notices the same youthfulness in age: "At last there stopped to talk with us such a pleasant looking little old woman, with everything about her so quaint and out of date except her kind face, and sweet bright smile. . . . It is

always so pleasant to see a woman like this whose childlikeness and youthfulness have been kept in spite of all the graver life and prosaic thought of later years."  

Miss Jewett’s characters seldom think of themselves as old if that term means that they are different from the way they have been all their lives. They experience and sustain an inner continuity. Occasionally, when they are treated differently by others, they instinctively rebel. In “Fair Day” when Widow Bascom is left behind by her children she mutters to herself: “I s’pose I be an old woman an’ past goin’ to cattle shows an’ junketings, but folks needn’t take it so for granted.” But while her family is gone, she decides to visit her old home across the fields. “I ain’t felt so like a jaunt this five year . . . an’ if Tobias was here an’ Ann, they’d take all the fun out fussin’ and talkin’ an’ bein’ afeard I’d tire myself, or wantin’ me to ride over. I do like to be my own master once in a while” (p. 126). By the end of the story, Widow Bascom’s “inner sameness and continuity” is fully restored. “I feel most as young as ever I did, and I ain’t agoin’ to play helpless, not for nobody. . . . I’ve been favoring myself till I’m as soft as an old hoss that’s right out of pasture an’ can’t pull two wheels without wheezin’” (p. 130). Time, for characters as healthy as these, is not disjunctive but continuous, as past and present blend together within their personalities.

Chronological age is irrelevant in matters of the heart, and Miss Jewett portrays a good number of courtships and marriages among her old characters. “The Quest of Mr. Teaby” is the tale of a friendly interest but an unsuccessful proposal. “A Winter Courtship” occurs on one short journey when the mail carrier, Mr. Briley, gallantly proposes and is accepted by Fanny Tobin. William and Esther’s courtship in “William’s Wedding” goes on for many years, and when finally they marry, time seems to have been completely subsumed by their enduring love. Past and present, in light of their relationship, seems irrelevant. Both William and Esther remain in their homes caring for their elderly mothers, though over the years, William never neglects his annual trout-fishing trip, his pretext for visiting his beloved Esther. The love between them sustains them in their separation, and when old Mrs. Hight dies, and Esther joins William and his mother in their home on Green Island, their belated physical union seems only a culmination of a union of hearts that has long before bridged temporal and spatial limitations. Time, for them, is of little consequence: “I never saw a young bride half so touching in her happiness as Esther was that day of her wedding,” observes the narrator. When young Lizzie, in “A Stage Tavern,” falls in love with Jack Norton, her father’s old friend, their age difference is

obliterated by love. "You don’t seem a bit old to me," she says to him. 43

This kind of harmony between youth and age, present and past, apparently impressed and delighted Miss Jewett. In a letter to Sarah Whitman she comments on a conversation she heard between her eighty year old uncle, Dr. William Perry, and her young nephew, Theodore, a medical student: "They talk about college and the medical profession as if they were exactly the same." 44 Exposing the relative unimportance of age differences in human relationships is clearly one of Miss Jewett’s effective techniques for revealing temporal continuity, and for extolling character traits and values that subsume time distinctions.

Aging, as with so much else in Miss Jewett’s work, is consistently more dependent upon character than upon chronology. Miss Peet, in “The Spur of the Moment,” had been called “old Miss Peet” since her fiftieth year because of her faultfinding disposition. She “was one of those sad, unhappy souls who cannot help looking upon the prosperity of others except as some injustice to themselves.” 45 When love, enthusiasm, or romance wanes, the individual ages more quickly for life without purpose cannot be sustained. Miss Horatia in “A Lost Lover,” learning that her lover had not died at sea, faithful to her, but was merely a tramp who had forgotten her, became within a year, an old woman. “Her romance was all over with . . . the flowers are out of bloom for her now.” 46 Clearly, Miss Jewett’s focus is not on chronological time but rather on kairos or creative time; for the symptoms of aging and the qualities of youthfulness in her characters are not closely connected with their chronological ages.

Miss Jewett’s natural instinct and that of her characters is for continuity and permanence, not for disjunction and change. Abbey Hender, after warmly receiving her old childhood friend, Senator Laneway, as if no time had elapsed since she left Winby, is still saddened by the fact of transiency. “’Tain’t pleasant to be grown old, that’s all. I couldn’t help noticin’ his age as he rode away. I’ve always been lookin’ forward to sein’ him again, an’ now it’s all over.” 47 Abbey’s natural desire is for permanence, not transiency, even though she cannot escape the latter. Nevertheless, as a young author, Miss Jewett, in her first book, allies age with stability. In her description of Miss Brandon in Deephaven, she writes:

It seems to me that it is a great privilege to have an elderly person in one’s neighborhood . . . who is proud and conservative, and who lives in stately fashion; who is intolerant of

sham and of useless novelties, and clings to the old ways of living and behaving as if they were part of her religion. There is something immensely respectable about such gentlewomen of the old school. They ignore all bustle and flashiness. . . . Their position in modern society is much like that of the King’s Chapel in its busy street in Boston; they stand for something assured and permanent. (p. 49)

Miss Jewett’s instinct for permanence clearly dictates her view of time as a single continuum. The conjunction of past with present time is a major aspect of her orderly, harmonious world.

*Viterbo College*
La Crosse, Wisconsin