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"Tact Is a Kind of Mind-Reading": Empathic Style in Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs

by MARCIA McCLINTOCK FOLSOM

A CHIEF source of the enduring appeal of Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs is its presentation of a world which seems to us touchingly coherent. Unlike the fragmented, incongruous worlds we find in modern literature (and in our own experience), in this work Jewett presents a world which seems mythic in its stability, integration, and consequent warmth. However, the book does not seem sentimental, because of Jewett's unflinching presentation of decay, loss, and imminent death in the coastal Maine town she calls Dunnet Landing. Numerous characters remark that things have been going down-hill there in recent years; Captain Littlepage calls it "a low-water mark here in Dunnet" since the port lost its commercial significance. Irritation, thwarted potential, unresolved grief, eccentricity bordering on madness, are all explicitly part of the book's emotional atmosphere. Nonetheless, the book achieves a poignant elegiac quality while preserving a social and natural world which Jewett plainly felt was lost to her, as certainly we feel it is lost to us.

What is it in Jewett's writing that enables her to offer so convincing a celebration of the coherence of this world, and yet to avoid treating it condescendingly, as quaint, simple, byegone? A pattern in Jewett's management of narrative and dialogue, which can be called "empathic style," partly accounts for her singular achievement of unsentimental celebration of the country of the pointed firs.

The two main characters in The Country of the Pointed Firs are women who are able to read nature, the physical world, and the minds of other people. Mrs. Todd and the narrator are both acute observers who habitually penetrate and interpret external facts, and both are able to reconstruct the whole through active interpretation of details. Different in their knowledge of Dunnet Landing, the two women are alike in their impulse to see into and beyond casual conversation, gesture, and expression, or details of houses, weather, and landscape, to identify the larger human significance of each small outer sign.

In her preface to the 1925 edition of Jewett's Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories, Willa Cather claimed that "sympathy" was the source of Jewett's greatness. If the artist achieves "anything noble, 1

1. Although Cather and Jewett both use the word "sympathy" to designate the power of entering into the feelings of another, the word "empathy" has greater usefulness because it not only suggests

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anything enduring," she wrote, "it must be by giving himself absolutely to his material. And this gift of sympathy is his great gift. . . . He fades 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 . . . ." This is very perceptive praise of Jewett, despite the masculine pronouns. Cather's idea of the artist "giving himself absolutely to his material" implies that the artist relinquishes a personal point of view in order to enter into the spirit of other people or even of objects. The clearest illustration of the artist's "fading away into the land and people of his heart" is the way Jewett's anonymous narrator remains nearly invisible while she observes and sees into the world of Dunnet Landing.

In terms similar to Cather's, the narrator of The Country of the Pointed Firs describes and praises Mrs. Todd's mother, Mrs. Blackett: "Tact is after all a kind of mind-reading, and my hostess held the golden gift. Sympathy is of the mind as well as the heart. . . . Besides, she had that final, that highest gift of heaven, a perfect self-forgetfulness." This capacity to anticipate and grasp another's feelings which the narrator values in Mrs. Blackett is exactly what distinguishes her own style and approach to Dunnet Landing. Mind-reading requires intelligent curiosity, mental activity, specific knowledge; sympathy depends on thinking as well as feeling. "Self-forgetfulness" allows the narrator freedom to enter other lives even as it denies her full fictional presence in the book.

The counterpart of the narrator's "tact" is Cather's idea that the objects which an artist loves actively "haunt him." This implies a reciprocity of feeling between the artist and a congenial landscape or society, which is repeatedly demonstrated in Pointed Firs by the accessibility of the natural and social world to reliable interpretation. The narrator's extraordinary responsiveness to what she sees and hears is the corollary of the expressiveness of the world in Jewett's work. Empathic style is what creates the atmosphere of trust, familiarity, and coherence in this book, as intelligent observers—mainly women—move in a comprehensible world.

In the section called "Green Island," the narrator accompanies Mrs. Todd on a sail to one of the outer islands to visit Mrs. Todd's eighty-six year old mother, Mrs. Blackett. In this trip to Green Island, as in many
of the visiting scenes in *Pointed Firs*, isolated people seem to be connected across water and countryside not only because of the web of visits and messages sent and delivered, but because of the tremendous power of empathy which binds distant people to each other and informs them of particulars in lives they do not see.

The chapter opens with the narrator remarking that “One morning, very early, I heard Mrs. Todd in the garden outside my window” (p. 34). Noting the “unusual loudness” of Mrs. Todd’s remarks to a passer-by, the narrator “knew that she wished I would wake up and come and speak to her” (p. 35). The trip to Green Island is thus set in motion by the narrator’s perception that Mrs. Todd’s loud talking is a signal to her sleeping lodger. “In a few minutes she responded to a morning voice from behind the blinds.” The “morning voice” is all the presence the narrator grants to her own sleepy mumble, but it nonetheless represents a fully conscious tactfulness, an awareness of Mrs. Todd’s unspoken request.

Without explaining herself, Mrs. Todd remarks despairingly that probably the narrator will be busy all day. Attempting to fathom the purpose behind Mrs. Todd’s indirectness, the narrator replies with kindly indecision, parenthetically explaining her hunch about Mrs. Todd’s intentions:

“Perhaps not,” said I. “Why, what’s going to be the matter with you, Mrs. Todd?” For I supposed that she was tempted by the fine weather to take one of her favorite expeditions along shore pastures to gather herbs and simples, and would like to have me keep house.

“No, I don’t want to go nowhere by land,” she answered gayly,—“no, not by land; but I don’t knows we shall have a better day all the rest of the summer to go out to Green Island an’ see mother.” (p. 35)

The reader may easily fail to notice here that Mrs. Todd replies to the narrator’s thought, to her presumably unstated guess that Mrs. Todd intended to go herb-gathering. But Mrs. Todd reads the narrator’s mind—“No, I don’t want to go nowhere by land,” she says, as if contradicting the narrator’s mistaken surmise.

This kind of attention to hints and unspoken conversation is also reflected in both women’s facility in reading other signals. As they sail together out to the island, from far off they can see its landscape, and slight details can be interpreted from a distance.

A long time before we landed at Green Island we could see the small white house, standing high like a beacon. . . . There were crops in the fields, which we presently distinguished from one another. Mrs. Todd examined them while we were still far at sea. “Mother’s late potatoes looks backward; ain’t had rain enough so far,” she pronounced her opinion. “They look weedier than what they call Front Street down to Cowper Centre. I expect brother William is so occupied with his herrin’ weirs an’ servin’ out bait to the schooners that he don’t think once a day of the land.” (pp. 37-38)

The image of the beacon calls attention to the house’s distinct outline and sharp whiteness against the green, which make it an aid to naviga-
tion as well as a house. When the passengers can discern crops growing in the lower field, Mrs. Todd’s acute observation proceeds to particulars. She readily distinguishes between potato crops, knows how mature each should be by mid-July, and why the late crop is not as far along as it should be. She also pointedly observes that the potatoes need weeding, and immediately surmises why. Her distant reading of the ragweed in the garden is thus weighted with her usual criticism of what she considers her brother’s lack of ambition or “snap.”

These prompt translations demonstrate Mrs. Todd’s grasp of the human meaning of details of the landscape. The importance of potatoes as a staple to Mrs. Blackett and William comes clear a few pages later, when the narrator is sent out to dig some for lunch. She cannot tarry over the enjoyable job, however, for even as she works she imagines her hostess awaiting her return: “I was sure Mrs. Blackett must be waiting impatiently to slice the potatoes into the chowder, layer after layer, with the fish” (p. 44). The unexpected guests fortunately have foreseen the need and brought along a fresh-caught haddock and an onion.

In this way, Jewett succinctly indicates the power of empathic imagination, in a world without telephones, when families are separated by water as well as distance. Mrs. Todd’s bringing along an onion and a fish, and the narrator’s concrete image of how the potatoes will be layered into the chowder with the haddock, demonstrate both women’s uncanny accuracy in imagining the needs, feelings, and intentions of an absent person. This accuracy is the result of the familiarity of the other’s routines, and of an affectionate desire to know and visualize someone else’s life, however islanded and far from ordinary communication it may be.

Following Mrs. Todd’s reading of the garden from at sea, the narrator notices a pennant waving on Green Island. “What’s the flag for, up above the spruces there behind the house?” she asks eagerly (p. 38). Mrs. Todd explains that when her brother has caught enough herring in the weirs to warrant a stop by the larger fishing vessels, he flies the flag. When the catch is poor, the signal is lowered, and then only the small “bo’ts” come in to get bait for their trawls. Dwellers on isolated islands and sea-farers, Jewett shows, must accustom themselves to reading signals from afar and to providing such signals.

Mrs. Todd, who certainly has the sea-farer’s keen sensitivity to distant signals, now notices another kind of flag, one whose meaning is less idiosyncratic than William’s signal to the fishing boats, but still nearly obscure to the narrator:

“There, look! there she is; mother sees us; she’s wavin’ somethin’ out o’ the fore door! She’ll be to the landin’ place quicks we are.”

I looked, and could see a tiny flutter in the doorway, but a quicker signal had made its way from the heart on shore to the heart on the sea.

“How do you suppose she knows it’s me?” said Mrs. Todd with a tender smile on her
broad face. . . . "Look at the chimney, now; she's gone right in an' brightened up the fire. Well, there, I'm glad mother's well; you'll enjoy seein' her very much." (p. 38)

A "tiny flutter in the doorway" is all we or the narrator can see, but a "quicker signal" is telegraphed between the "heart on shore" and the "heart on the sea." Mrs. Todd's quick discernment and almost telepathic reading of her mother's activity around the distant house informs her that Mrs. Blackett sees the approaching dory, knows who is coming, and will reach the dock as soon as the boat does. When the flutter disappears, Mrs. Todd can interpret its absence as well: Mrs. Blackett will be inside brightening up the fire. Relishing her clairvoyance, Mrs. Todd instructs the narrator to watch the chimney: in a moment, evidence that the fire has been freshened will curl out of the chimney and into the air above the house. These little signs—the flutter at the door, the fresh smoke at the chimney—are open to further interpretation: they prove that "mother's well." Mrs. Todd's ability to grasp a whole situation through intense and active interpretation of a glimpse or a detail indicates her complete familiarity with her world, and also the unbroken wholeness and integrated expressiveness of that world.

The brief chapter "Shell-heap Island" offers a rich instance of the narrator's reconstructing someone else's feelings by actively interpreting a few outer facts. Practically nothing happens in this chapter except the narrator's landing on an empty island where she walks to an old house site. Yet her ability to read the meaning of a visible path and a distant view of the mainland affords her a complete and imaginative understanding of a woman who died nearly twenty-two years before.

In the two chapters just preceding this one, the narrator hears Mrs. Todd and her friend Mrs. Fosdick recount the story of "poor Joanna" who exiled herself to Shell-heap Island after being disappointed in love. These two women work through the story in the narrator's presence, as if trying to sort out together the meaning of Joanna's apparently sad, eccentric life. Mrs. Todd likens Joanna to "one of the saints of the desert," and this image finally organizes the narrator's understanding of Joanna's story. Mrs. Fosdick mentions that Shell-heap Island had a history as a sacred place from before Joanna's exile: "'T was 'counted a great place in old Indian times; you can pick up their stone tools 'most any time if you hunt about. There's a beautiful spring o' water, too. Yes, I remember when they used to tell queer stories about Shell-heap Island. Some said 't was a great bangeing place for the Indians, and an old chief resided there once that ruled the winds" (p. 59).

Out sailing one day, the narrator decides to visit this noted place. Without difficulty, she locates the path to Joanna's grave, and she immediately grasps the significance of its evident use. "I found the path; it was touching to discover that this lonely spot was not without its pil-
grims. Later generations will know less and less of Joanna herself, but there are paths trodden to the shrines of solitude the world over,—the world cannot forget them, try as it may: the feet of the young find them out because of curiosity and dim foreboding, while the old bring hearts full of remembrance” (p. 75). The worn path testifies that “pilgrims” still visit this “shrine,” and the religious diction connects the recent and remote past with a distant future; “later generations” will still visit this island even if they know little of Joanna.

The narrator walks through the fields, making tame birds flutter up out of the grass, to the place where Joanna’s house had stood, finding there only foundation stones and scant trace of the old flower garden. Still, an Edenic atmosphere of undamaged goodwill pervades the hot afternoon. “I drank at the spring, and thought that now and then someone would follow me from the busy, hard-worked, and simple-thoughted countryside of the mainland, which lay dim and dream-like in the August haze, as Joanna must have watched it many a day” (p. 75).

This superbly evocative sentence epitomizes Jewett’s empathic style. It begins with concrete action, drinking at the famous spring, an action which is sacramental and also demonstrates the enduring benignity of the island. The narrator’s thought moves naturally to other people, future pilgrims who will now and then follow her to this island. She deftly summarizes the contrasting existence most people live over in the “countryside of the mainland”: “busy, hard-worked, and simple-thoughted.” Theirs are lives of farming, fishing, raising families, falling into bed sleepy and unreflective at night, and the narrator’s sympathy fully extends to such lives. Yet she describes them as they appear in the eye of eternity, from the vantage point of the saint in the desert. She glances across the bay to the mainland which seems “dim and dream-like in the August haze,” as though from Joanna’s hermitage the real world itself seems hazy and unreal. The narrator sees the distant shore “as Joanna must have watched it many a day,” and her use of the word “watched” indicates how fully she imagines Joanna’s isolation and continuing interest in the world she had left.

Shell-heap Island, like Green Island, like the ghostly northern town in Captain Littlepage’s story, like Dunnet Landing itself in some ways, is a “kind of waiting place between this world and the next,” a place of melancholy isolation, which yet provides a permanent outlook on ordinary life. Joanna’s persistence in living alone with her “poor insistent human nature and the calms and passions of the sea and sky” made her a kind of sentinelle perdue, a distant watcher of human life from a transitional place between this world and the next. As the narrator puts it, “there was the world, and here was she with eternity well begun,” for eternity began for Joanna years before she died.

The narrator expresses her insight into all the pilgrims to Shell-heap Island in a sentence saturated with memories of Melville’s prose: “In the
life of each of us, I said to myself, there is a place remote and islanded, and given to endless regret or secret happiness: we are each the unaccompanied hermit and recluse of an hour or a day; we understand our fellows of the cell to whatever age of history they may belong” (p. 75). The empathic perception that in every life there is a “place remote and islanded” places Joanna firmly within the human community, from which she seemed to have been isolated. Confirming this shift in understanding, sounds of distant voices now reach the solitary listener, and instantly she knows how Joanna felt when she heard the same.

But as I stood alone on the island, in the sea-breeze, suddenly there came a sound of distant voices; gay voices and laughter from a pleasure-boat that was going sea-ward full of boys and girls. I knew, as if she had told me, that poor Joanna must have heard the like on many and many a summer afternoon, and must have welcomed the good cheer in spite of hopelessness and winter weather, and all the sorrow and disappointment in the world. (p. 75)

Alone on the island as Joanna had been, the narrator experiences Joanna’s life from inside Joanna’s perspective, for her imagination fully penetrates the heart of the solitary, and she realizes that Joanna could hear, receive, and welcome distant voices which reminded her of her unrenounceable fellowship in the human world. The impulse which drove Joanna to Shell-heap Island is akin to the impulse which brings the narrator there, the same impulse for all the pilgrims and the Indians before them; Shell-heap Island satisfies a common human longing for a place of solitude, a detached vantage point from which to look at ordinary life.

The Chapter “Along Shore” offers the richest and most compounded instances of empathic dialogue and narration in *Pointed Firs*. The chapter concerns the narrator’s discovery of the emotional self of an apparently wooden old fisherman, a coastal Maine “character,” whose silent preoccupation with boats and nets and fish makes him appear inaccessible, inexpressive. Yet this very appearance of woodenness and elemental silence has made the narrator speculate about what human feelings might lie within: “I often wondered a great deal about the inner life and thought of these self-contained old fishermen.”

Her chance to find out comes when she walks along shore one day, and one of the ancient fishermen, Mr. Elijah Tilley, emerges “softly out of his dark fish house, as if it were a burrow.”

Elijah Tilley was such an evasive, discouraged-looking person, heavy-headed, and stooping so that one could never look him in the face, that even after his friendly exclamation . . . I did not venture at once to speak again. Mr. Tilley was carrying a small haddock in one hand, and presently shifted it to the other hand lest it might touch my skirt. I knew that my company was accepted, and we walked together a little way. (p. 103)

The fisherman’s adjustment of moving the haddock from one hand to the other suggests that he wishes to make it easy for the two to walk
together, and the narrator, ever sensitive to such hints, finds that she has suddenly “come into a smooth little harbor of friendship.” Tilley invites the narrator to visit him, she accepts, and then looks keenly at the old fisherman, whom she knows to be a widower. “There was a new patch high on the shoulder of his old waistcoat, . . . and I wondered if his own fingers, clumsy with much deep-sea fishing, had set it in” (p. 103).

The habit of precise observation and active interpretation yields remarkable insight here. The narrator seems to see through the patch on the fisherman’s jacket into an imaginative creation of the scene when his work-worn fingers fumble with needle and thread by lamplight. Her desire to penetrate the fisherman’s brusqueness and leathery exterior leads the narrator to seize upon a detail of his appearance which must have a history of effort and activity. Later in this same day, she visits Tilley’s house, and she finds him knitting a sock—almost as though her mental image of the man at home sewing on a patch is corroborated by finding him at home knitting.

The narrator’s visit with Elijah Tilley is punctuated by his elegiac speeches about his much-loved wife, “poor dear,” who died eight years before, and this conversation surpasses all others in the book in its delicacy of mind-reading and empathic listening. The narrator finds a conversational opening by commenting on Tilley’s comfortable kitchen: “I ventured to say that somebody must be a very good housekeeper” (p. 105). The old fisherman replies, “that’s me,” and explains that he keeps everything looking just as “poor dear left ’em.” Since he knows so well how she liked things to be, he does all the housekeeping rather than have anyone help him and disturb the order she created. As a result, the kitchen reminds him so much of her that “I get so some days it feels as if poor dear might step right back into this kitchen. I keep a-watchin’ them doors as if she might step in to any one. . . . I can’t get over losin’ of her no way nor no how” (p. 106).

The old fisherman’s grief, his colorful images of his life before and after poor dear’s death, begin to work upon the narrator’s imagination:

The visible tribute of his careful housekeeping, and the clean bright room which had once enshrined his wife, and now enshrined her memory, was very moving to me; he had no thought for any one else or for any other place. I began to see her myself in her home,—a delicate-looking, faded little woman, who leaned upon his rough strength and affectionate heart, who was always watching for his boat out of this very window, and who always opened the door and welcomed him when he came home. (p. 107)

The narrator correctly reads the careful housekeeping as a “visible tribute,” and so active is her reading that she actually begins to see the “delicate-looking, faded little woman.” Well can the narrator imagine what it would have been like for such a woman to watch for the boat “out of this very window,” for she so fully identifies with the waiting wife that she experiences the interior of the house, the window’s outlook
on the water, and the path winding through the field where the fisherman would walk home, as it must have felt to the anxious woman making supper and standing by the door.

"I used to laugh at her, poor dear," said Elijah, as if he read my thought. "I used to make light of her timid notions. She used to be fearful when I was out in bad weather or baffled about gettin' ashore. She used to say the time seemed long to her, but I've found out all about it now." (p. 107)

The narrator's empathic grasp of Mrs. Tilley's point of view is communicated to Elijah, who also experiences the interior from his wife's vantage point of lonely waiting and anxiety as she stood "right there watchin' from the door." As if "he read my thought," Tilley turns his talk to the emotions of the young woman, at whom he used to laugh for her "timid notions." His poignant statement, "I've found out all about it now," suggests that their places have been reversed now that he keeps watching the doors "as if she might step in to ary one": now he knows what it is to wait for a beloved footstep, to look wistfully to sea for a boat that doesn't come. Through empathic imagination, the narrator and Elijah are taking part in the inner life of a person who is long gone, the young Mrs. Tilley.

The kitchen seems almost saturated with this reciprocal reading of feelings between Elijah, the narrator and the absent Mrs. Tilley, when the fisherman takes the narrator to see the "best room," yet another moment when the mute details of the domestic interior—and these details are particularly inert—manage to express a richly emotional human meaning.

The best room seemed to me a much sadder and more empty place than the kitchen; its conventionalities lacked the simple perfection of the humbler room and failed on the side of poor ambition; it was only when one remembered what patient saving, and what high respect for society in the abstract go to such furnishing that the little parlor was interesting at all. I could imagine the great day of certain purchases, the bewildering shops of the next large town, the aspiring anxious woman, the clumsy sea-tanned man in his best clothes, so eager to be pleased, but at ease only when they were safe back in the sailboat again, going down the bay with their precious freight, the hoarded money all spent and nothing to think of but tiller and sail. I looked at the unworn carpet, the glass vases on the mantle piece with their prim bunches of bleached swamp grass and dusty marsh rosemary, and I could read the history of Mrs. Tilley's best room from its very beginning. (pp. 107-8)

The store-bought impersonality of this furniture, the surfaces lacking in patches or hand-work, the "parlor suite" veneer, would seem to defy the narrator's capacity to find a pathway or crack into the meaning behind its appearance. Yet this very quality of dumb, catalogue perfection reminds her of the "patient saving" necessary to make such a purchase. From this reminder springs the richly developed tale of buying such furnishings, complete with a vision of the uncomfortably dressed-up couple sailing to the next large town with their hoarded money and back with their "precious freight." The prim bunches of native grass
and wildflower tell all: in them "I could read the history of Mrs. Tilley's best room from its very beginning."

Like the narrator, Elijah finds imperfection easier to read than perfection: in the best room he comes to a shelf which had held a hidden accident. For years, he tells the narrator, he and Mrs. Tilley liked to boast that the set of china he bought in the port of Bordeaux had never had a piece broken, but when women were arranging supper things for Mrs. Tilley's funeral they found a broken cup wrapped in paper and pushed back in a corner of the shelf.

"Poor dear! I had to put right out o' the house when I see that. I knewed in one minute how 't was. We'd got so used to sayin' 't was all there just's I fetched it home, an' so when she broke that cup somehow or 'nother, she couldn't frame no words to come an' tell me. She couldn't think 't would vex me, 't was her own hurt pride. I guess there wa'n't no other secret ever lay between us." (p. 108)

The poignancy of this interpretation lies in Elijah's complete understanding of his wife's feelings, so the broken china wrapped in paper occasions an instantaneous revelation to him of his wife's unshared regret.

This chapter begins in the outdoors, along the shore, and moves into a richly presented domestic interior; and it begins viewing Elijah Tilley from the outside, whence he appears mute and inexpressive, and moves into a discovery of his inner self, which is surprisingly tender and articulate about his own feelings and those of his wife. Without belaboring the point, Jewett shows that the narrator's habitual empathic curiosity about what lies beneath a mute exterior sometimes yields a world of Vermeer-like color, light, and feeling.

The chapter closes with an effective reversal of mood; after all Elijah's speeches of mourning, Mrs. Todd offers a tart aspersion which allows the reader to admit that he is a bit long-winded. But Mrs. Todd's comments offer another instance of accurate prediction, another version of empathic style. Upon hearing that the narrator has been "visitin' with 'Lijah,"' she immediately perceives as far as the narrator's initial perception of Tilley: "I expect you had kind of a dull session; he ain't the talkin' kind; dwellin' so much long o' fish seems to make 'em lose the gift o' speech." With typical succinctness, Mrs. Todd sums up the narrator's first impression of Elijah. However, when Mrs. Todd finds out that Tilley "had been talking," she instantly knows what the conversation was about:

"'Then 't was all about his wife, an' he can't say nothin' too pleasant neither [can't exaggerate her goodness]. She was modest with strangers, but there ain't one o' her old friends can ever make up the loss . . . there ain't hardly a day I don't think o' dear Sarah Tilley. She was always right there; yes, you knew just where to find her like a plain flower. 'Lijah's worthy enough: I do esteem 'Lijah, but he's a ploddin' man.'" (p. 111)

The visit to Elijah's house is an intense instance of empathic style, of experiencing the feelings of apparently mute people (the silent Elijah
and his dead wife), and of finding meaning invested in scenes, images, clothing, furniture, windows, doorways, rooms, everyday life. The mournfulness in this episode is the result of the scrapbook quality of the visit, of Elijah’s and the narrator’s impulse to make the most of every detail, so each fact is an avenue to images of human activity and to memory. The tenderness toward objects and emphasis on the power of imagination, more than the fact of Mrs. Tilley’s death, give the chapter its poignancy, for certainly it is possible to imagine treating this kind of scene differently.

A contrary example from a novel by Jane Austen may clarify this point and help illustrate both the strengths of Jewett’s empathic style and its natural limitations. Austen’s novels are a relevant point of comparison, because she too wrote about knowable, coherent, tightly-knit communities, and because Jewett particularly admired Austen’s writing. In a letter to Annie Fields, for example, Jewett wrote, “Yesterday afternoon I amused myself with Miss Austen’s ‘Persuasion.’ Dear me, how like her people are to the people we knew years ago! It is just as much New England before the war—that is, in provincial towns—as it ever was old England.” 4 Persuasion, with its respect for the Navy and seafarers, and its setting in provincial towns like Lyme and Bath, must have seemed especially congenial to Jewett, and it contains a scene which Jewett may have remembered as she wrote “Along Shore.”

In Persuasion, Anne Elliot finds herself “placed rather apart” in the company of the bereaved Captain Benwick, whose fiancée, Fanny Harville, died while he was at sea. 5 So placed, “a very good impulse of her nature obliged her to begin an acquaintance with him,” for from her own unhappiness she can empathize with his. Here, as in the scene in Pointed Firs, a sensitive woman listens to the outpourings of a grieving man (in both cases a mariner). The scenes have some inherent differences: Captain Benwick is a young man, he lost his beloved before they married, and he is eventually reconciled to another wife. Captain Tilley, on the other hand, was married many years and is still inconsolable eight years after his wife’s death. Still, the differences in style between these scenes are instructive.

Unlike the apparently uncommunicative Elijah Tilley, Captain Benwick appears from the first ready to speak: “he shewed himself so intimately acquainted with all the tenderest songs of the one poet, and all the impassioned descriptions of hopeless agony of the other; he repeated, with such tremulous feeling, the various lines which imaged a broken heart, or a mind destroyed by wretchedness, and looked so entirely as if he meant to be understood, that she ventured to hope that he did not

always read only poetry.” It is impossible here not to see Jane Austen smile, indeed, not to hear her laugh.

Instead of giving Benwick’s talk in direct discourse, so his suffering would be experienced first-hand, or in plaintive dialect as in the case of Elijah Tilley, Austen describes Benwick’s speeches, his significant indirection, his lavish quotation from the poetry of hopeless agony. Austen’s amusement is directed at his naked ploy for sympathy, at the excesses in the poetry he reads, and probably at the social procedures which keep Benwick from openly mentioning his grief. Her amusement is also directed at Anne Elliot, whose solution to the problem posed by Benwick’s affliction (and to the accumulating force of so many incomplete comparisons in one sentence) is to recommend some change in reading matter: “she ventured to hope that he did not always read only poetry.” Further, “she ventured to recommend a larger allowance of prose in his daily study.”

In *Persuasion*, the narrator is a third party, a spectator to the interaction between Anne Elliot and Captain Benwick, and therefore able to see differences between them, the blind spots of each, and the irony of their similarities. Anne is aware of the irony of her attempt to fortify Benwick against his pain—she “could not but be amused at the idea of her coming to Lyme to preach patience and resignation,” and she reflects that she may have been “eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination”—but she is certainly unaware of the narrator’s and reader’s amusement at her recommendation that prose be substituted for poetry for effective consolation. The narrator’s removal from the action, her position as observer, not only distances her from the characters but also distances the characters from each other.

In Jewett, the narrator is part of the scene, and her impulse to see into Elijah’s words, to grasp his feelings and the relationship he is describing, makes her nearly disappear, melt into the two Tilleys and their kitchen. In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot’s attempt to help Benwick grapple with his grief makes the two characters more distinct, more separate. They do not melt together, for they represent two struggling points of view—Anne trying to help Benwick find consolation, and Benwick trying to make her sympathize with him. In this way, empathic style is the opposite of dramatic or ironic style, for the distances between characters are reduced in Jewett when the narrator effaces herself to enter the spirit of other characters.

Two further differences between these scenes emerge, which help define Jewett’s achievement. The first is that Austen’s construction of the scene where the grief-stricken man is comforted by a perceptive woman implies and indeed assures that future change is possible. The two characters—however slightly—push against each other, represent different

points of view, feel each other's pressure. Out of such pressure, action may come, and it does come when another young woman accepts Benwick’s melancholy temperament and situation, allowing him to fall in love again. Benwick recovers, and his recovery is instrumental in freeing Frederick Wentworth to propose again to Anne Elliot, retrieving the lost opportunity for which they have paid so dearly. In Jewett, no change is contemplated or even possible. “He had no thought for any one else or any other place.” The very completeness of the narrator’s identification with Elijah Tilley and his wife precludes any possibility that she may serve as a catalyst for change—she would consider it a travesty to suggest that he change his housekeeping habits or seek a new wife. Empathic style allows full expression to what is, but implies stasis. Ironic style makes future action possible.

But a strength of Jewett’s mode is that it allows her to show Tilley and the narrator in the process of recreating Sarah Tilley, bringing her back to life. Fanny Harville is utterly absent from Benwick’s grief and Anne’s sympathy—she is completely dead and gone. But Sarah Tilley seems to come alive, to haunt her own familiar kitchen, to sail once again to buy new furnishings, to feel pained regret at breaking a piece of the Bordeaux china, to fret by the door for her young husband. You still know just where to find her like a plain flower. Thus Jewett’s empathic style, though it tends away from action, change, and the future, through the power of imagination can bring the dead to life, preserve forever moments of deep and comprehensible feeling, and make powerful connections across water and time, between the present and a past which only seemed to be irretrievably lost.

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