March 1983

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 19, no.1, March 1983, p.37-44

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The Language of Transcendence in Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron"

by GAYLE L. SMITH

While virtually every modern critic of Sarah Orne Jewett's work is moved to comment on the close connection she depicts between man and nature, few have investigated just how this connection is forged in her language and how it informs the overall effectiveness of her fiction. In "A White Heron" it is especially clear that this connection is but part of a larger, truly transcendental vision uniting man not only with green nature but with animal life as well, the past with the present, and one human sensibility with another.

Richard Cary, speaking of Jewett's work in general, observes her thematic use of nature, her use of analogy and symbol, and adds that she "does not hesitate to commit the pathetic fallacy when she wishes to emphasize the oneness of man and nature." 1 Robin Magowan, speaking primarily about The Country of the Pointed Firs, sees a strong link between Jewett's work and the pastoral tradition in which nature figures as "a transparent medium, a psychic mirror reflecting a one-to-one correspondence between the person and the setting in which he is imaged." 2 This critic goes on to observe Jewett’s "knack of placing, situating her objects in relation to the total background or world that they evoke in such a manner that their situation will carry a maximum of symbolic suggestion within the narrative frame." 3 Robert Rhode goes further still, stating that "man and environment merge," the people becoming "immersed into" landscape and the settings becoming "vitalized by a vague sense of humanity." He notes too that this personification is "often exercised at the subliminal level." 4 He defends her use of personification as more than the product of "figurative speech" and cites references in "A Winter Drive" to "Hylozoism, which appeals to my far from Pagan sympathies . . . the doctrine that life and matter are inseparable." 5 While Rhode fails to distinguish clearly between the voice of the writer herself and of her created persona and seems not to note

the qualification in the passage itself, he is accurate in observing that such expressions are indeed part of a world view and not mere accidents or embellishments. In a fine article on *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Michael Vella connects such unions with the theme of the work, showing how "a unity of vision . . . reached through simile, allusion, and descriptive detail bordering on the inherently metaphoric" functions as a kind of index to the narrator's growing ability to comprehend the profound unity of life revealed by Dunnet Landing culture. Vella too defends the narrator's habit of seeing correspondences between individuals and various plants as more than "quaint literary technique," as part of the transcendental vision the narrator gains during her summer stay.

Jewett's transcendental, even mystical, vision of reality is at least as important to the theme of "A White Heron" as it is to the theme of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, and it is crucially important to the structure of the story. A closer look at Jewett's linguistic choices reveals an underlying strategy for the rich variety of ways in which she projects her vision. The surprising correspondences and unities she forges between plant, animal, and human life, between past and present, and between the consciousnesses of different human beings, are basic to the dilemma of the tale. Briefly, Sylvia, the nine-year-old heroine who lives in the country with her grandmother and an assortment of wild and tame animals, is tempted by an engaging young man to tell him where the white heron nests that he might shoot and stuff the bird, a particularly coveted specimen. When the time comes to tell the secret she has worked hard to learn, "Sylvia cannot speak; she cannot tell the heron's secret and give its life away." Jewett's narrator refrains from explicitly applauding or criticizing the girl's decision and makes it clear that long afterward Sylvia misses the handsome young man; perhaps she has lost her one opportunity to experience love in the wider world.

Do most of us feel that Sylvia has done the right thing simply because of our preconceptions? Richard Brenzo argues that between being a "free heron" and a "dead sparrow," which is what Sylvia would symbolically become, "allow[ing] herself to be caught, raped, killed, stuffed, and put on display in a man's house," Sylvia makes the only choice that can preserve her independence and integrity. In addition to this, however, Jewett's linguistic choices, even before the entrance of the young hunter, who is also described as "most kind and sympathetic," argue a great oneness between human and non-human

8. *A White Heron and Other Stories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1886), p. 21. Subsequent references to "A White Heron" are to this edition and are cited in the text by page numbers.
life that powerfully affirms the girl’s choice, whatever sacrifices we may suspect it involves (p. 12). Jewett’s position is radical, as radical as Emerson’s when he declares in *Nature*, “The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me and I to them.”

Were she to make such a bold assertion early in the story, she would probably lose any reader demanding a sense of realism. In fact, there are several statements entirely comparable to Emerson’s in the story, statements such as “the tree stood still and frowned away the winds,” but Jewett builds up to them with a subtlety that deserves our attention (p. 17).

Jewett begins to build her world of equals in the very first paragraph of the story as we are urged to consider animals our equals. It is no surprise to find a cow described as a “plodding, dilatory, provoking creature in her behavior,” but it may come as a small surprise to find her called “a valued companion for all that,” since “companion” usually refers to another human being (p. 1). The gulf narrows again, in the very next sentence, when the narrator says, “They were going away from whatever light there was,” and refers to “their eyes” and “their feet” (p. 1). While the plural pronouns cannot be said to be deviant, they do encourage the reader to think of the girl and the cow as a pair now. Our linguistic awareness that the sentence could just as easily refer to a pair of equals probably helps us to impute some of that equality to these two. Such instances, taken collectively, create the “subliminal” effect observed but unexplained by Rhode.

In the next paragraph we learn that it is the cow’s “greatest pleasure to hide herself away among the huckleberry bushes,” displaying a sense of play we usually associate primarily with human intelligence (p. 1). At this point we learn the girl’s emblematic name, Sylvia. We learn the cow’s name, Mistress Mooly, just before we learn Sylvia’s grandmother’s, Mrs. Tilley, and the similarity between their names makes for a humorous connection between them. Perhaps it is precisely because the reader need not take the connection too seriously at this point that it does indeed register. Nor is it long before we learn of Sylvia’s attachment to green nature. It seems to Sylvia “as if she never had been alive at all before she came to live at the farm. She thought often with wistful compassion of a wretched geranium that belonged to a town neighbor” (p. 3). Jewett’s simple juxtaposition of the girl’s thoughts suggests the deeper connection between human and plant life as does the word “compassion,” normally reserved for human or animal objects. In these opening paragraphs we are gently led to accept the idea that there is more that unites human and non-human sensibilities than divides them.

We have yet to learn what this means in terms of choices and loyalties. Sylvia and the cow are now simply “the companions,” a phrase that might have seemed considerably stranger had we not been prepared for it by less forthright assertions (p. 4). Having brought one union to this degree of stability and simplicity, it is as though Jewett steps back and begins to work on effecting another, even more crucial to the plot of the story. In beginning over, she assumes a more tentative and therefore acceptable voice. When she speaks of “little birds and beasts that seemed to be wide awake, and going about their world, or else saying good-night to each other in sleepy twitters,” she qualifies their human behavior with a cautious “seemed” (p. 4). The connection is enough for Sylvia, who “herself felt sleepy as she walked along” and is made to “feel as if she were a part of the gray shadows and the moving leaves” (pp. 4-5). The subjunctive mood here keeps the statement plausible and unobtrusive while it hints at a harmony that will prove basic to the tale. A few paragraphs later, not knowing how to respond to the young hunter’s questions, she hangs her head “as if the stem of it were broken” (p. 6). Here the subjunctive in no way mutes the fact that here she is indeed spoken of as a plant, a step nearer identification than was her own compassionate thought for the dying geranium.

As the ornithologist takes his place in the story, he too participates in this pattern, though to a lesser degree than Sylvia. We are told that he hopes to find that the white heron is one of Sylvia’s “acquaintances,” a word that makes his hope sound positively murderous (p. 10). The union enlarges as Sylvia thinks of the sea, “whose great voice could sometimes be heard above the noise of the woods on stormy nights” (p. 11). The choice of the relative clause construction, requiring the use of “whose,” normally restricted to use with animate subjects, helps us accept the “voice” of the sea as more than a casual figure of speech, as one more claim that the entire universe possesses what are conventionally regarded as solely “human” characteristics. Before the first section of the action concludes, we learn that the intruder himself fits into this scheme. He is identified with the very creatures he studies and kills as we are told that he “hovered about the woods” (p. 12). He and Sylvia are joined and joined again with the entire animal world when they are referred to as “those young creatures,” just after we hear how Sylvy is afraid of him only when he brings down “some unsuspecting singing creature from its bough” (p. 13, p. 12). The fact that Jewett’s language links the hunter himself with all of nature is crucial. Were Sylvy alone so described, we could see her as a rare case; as it is, we must admit a much broader vision to be implied by her linguistic pattern.

In the second section of the story, Sylvy searches for the heron’s nest, half eager to give the man the information he seeks, and finally keeps that knowledge to herself. The narrator seems to pose the choice in starkly contrary terms: “Alas, if the great wave of human interest which
flooded for the first time this dull little life should sweep away the satisfactions of an existence heart to heart with nature and the dumb life of the forest!” (p. 15). At this point, however, the polarization between human values and nature is already proving to be an over-simplification. We have already met “the great pine-tree” Sylvy will climb to locate the heron’s nest and learned that it is “the last of its generation” and that its “mates” have been felled long ago (p. 14). The tree is “asleep yet” when Sylvy begins to climb the tree next to it with feet and fingers “that pinched and held like bird’s claws” (p. 16). The tree’s twigs “caught and held her and scratched her like angry talons,” suggesting now that both she and the tree are bird-like (pp. 16-17). This similarity will outweigh all others.

Jewett now takes her thesis a step further and has her narrator speak of the tree itself in decidedly human terms. Within a rather remarkable paragraph in which the tree is the focusing sensibility, we see Jewett making progressively more surprising statements. She tempers the agent status assigned to the tree with a “seemed” that reminds us that we are reading of Sylvy’s impression when she describes how the tree “seemed to lengthen itself out as she went up, and to reach farther and farther upward” (p. 17). It is a different voice, more insistent and irreducible, that we hear in the observation that the tree “must truly have been amazed that morning through all its ponderous frame as it felt this determined spark of human spirit wending its way from higher branch to branch” (p. 17). The tree’s role becomes more active, at least by implication, when the narrator asks, “Who knows how steadily the least twigs held themselves to advantage this light, weak creature on her way!” (p. 17). As the tree takes on more and more human characteristics, once again Sylvy is called a “creature.” Most surprising perhaps, “The old pine must have loved his new dependent” (p. 17). And in a superhuman effort, the tree “stood still and frowned away the winds” (p. 17). It is testimony to the consistency of the transcendental vision Jewett unfolds throughout the story and the care with which she does so that these passages seem far more reasonable in the context of “A White Heron” than they may here.

Nor has she neglected the dimensions of Sylvy’s being through this passage: “More than all the hawks, and bats, and even the sweet voiced thrushes, was the brave, beating heart of the solitary gray-eyed child” (p. 17). While she is distinguished from the creatures named, the basis of comparison assumed and in part created by such a statement is vitally important here. And the evaluation, of course, is that of the amazed, loving, helpful tree. When Sylvia climbs high, she feels “as if she too could go flying away among the clouds” (p. 18). When she spies the heron, the narrator urges her to make no move “for the heron has perched on a pine bough not far beyond yours, and cries back to his mate on the nest and plumes his feathers for the new day!” (p. 19). The
economical use of pronouns here reminds us that Sylvia is perching on her bough, a kind of mirror image of the endangered heron. Finally, though urged, tempted, even bribed, Sylvia “remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and the morning together,” and cannot give away the secret (p. 21). Their watching “together” can be so simply mentioned, and seems so natural yet poignant, because it is but a dramatically enriched version of the companionship established earlier with the cow, the sea, the forest, and all the birds of the forest.

An awareness of how this fusing impulse pervades the story helps us to recognize as further manifestations of her transcendental vision structural features sometimes dismissed as flaws. Cary, for instance, questions Jewett’s “manipulation of point of view,” observing that she “plays several tricks with perspective and violates the detachment of her stance too frequently.” As she systematically transcends the usual distinctions between orders of life and sensibility, so she reflects Emerson’s assertion that the soul “abolishes time and space.” Her use of mixed narrative perspectives and tenses, rather than fragmenting the story, argues the radical oneness she perceives binding persons, feelings, and events together, making a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The first shift, from past to present tense narration, is appropriate in more ways than one:

She was just thinking how long it seemed since she first came to the farm a year ago, and wondering if everything went on in the noisy town just the same as when she was there; the thought of the great red-faced boy who used to chase and frighten her made her hurry along the path to escape from the shadow of the trees.

Suddenly this little woods-girl is horror-stricken to hear a clear whistle not very far away. Not a bird’s whistle, which would have a sort of friendliness, but a boy’s whistle, determined, and somewhat aggressive. (p. 5)

In addition to being appropriate to the subject of Sylvy’s musing, the passage of time and how it feels to her, this shift to the dramatic present tense can be seen as mimetic, surprising the reader as Sylvy herself is surprised. Moreover, the shift argues the oneness of, or at least the absence of a distinct boundary between, past and present, as does the action, the sudden reappearance of the somewhat threatening figure. The “past” experience is still very present in Sylvy’s consciousness and continues to influence this “present” experience.

The narrative continues in the past tense until near the conclusion, where past and present intermingle rather freely. In addition, the narrator turns from a detached and omniscient observer-creator addressing the reader to an involved party, accompanying and even advising Sylvy as she searches for the elusive heron. She leads up to this direct address

as she has led up to other departures from our expectations. “Where was the white heron’s nest in the sea of green branches, and was this wonderful sight and pageant of the world the only reward for having climbed to such a giddy height?” the narrator asks, leaving open the possibility that she no longer knows what will happen (pp. 18-19). If the tense were merely changed to the present, it could be Sylvy herself asking this question; this question serves as a kind of bridge between the sensibility of the girl and that of the narrator.

Immediately after, as though answering Sylvy’s would-be question, the narrator speaks directly to her: “Now look down again, Sylvia . . .” (p. 19). The entire revelation from the treetop continues in the present tense, and even Sylvy’s return home, in possession of her secret, is narrated in the present. She concludes this incident with the only fragment of its kind in the story, a form that focuses intensely on Sylvy’s mental state: “Wondering over and over again what the stranger would say to her, and what he would think when she told him how to find his way straight to the heron’s nest” (p. 20). To say that Sylvy “wonders” or even that she “is wondering” would put stricter bounds on her activity; the participal fragment suggests the indeterminate nature of her wondering, the fact that it is associated with more than one action, more than one time in the narrative.

After a brief return to the past tense to describe the reactions of her puzzled grandmother and the man who intends to extract the answer from Sylvia: “Here she comes now, paler than ever, and her worn old frock is torn and tattered, and smeared with pine pitch. The grandmother and the sportsman stand in the door together and question her, and the splendid moment has come to speak of the dead hemlock-tree by the green marsh” (p. 20). It is in this “splendid moment” that all culminates, and the present tense conveys its drama and fragility at the same time that, along with the impersonal sounding definite articles modifying “grandmother” and “sportsman,” it suggests its eternal, archetypal significance. It is of course memory, memory of experience that is still alive and with her, that prevents Sylvy from accommodating the young man’s wishes: “The murmur of the pine’s green branches is in her ears, she remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and the morning together, and Sylvia cannot speak; she cannot tell the heron’s secret and give its life away” (p. 21). Both the presence of the “past” and the “human” qualities of the heron prevent her from doing so.

Finally, nature is addressed as just another character or sensibility in the story: “Whatever treasures were lost to her, woodlands and summertime, remember! Bring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country child!” (p. 22). The fact that it has been unfashionable for a long time to address woodlands and summer-time, and ask favors of them, ought not prevent us from recognizing the philosophical
and even aesthetic appropriateness of such an apostrophe here. In the context of a story in which persons, sensibilities, and times have been permuted and blended again and again, an address to the forces of nature has a logic and coherence of its own.

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