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Nature and the Circles of Initiation in The Country of the Pointed Firs

by RICHARD G. CARSON

IN *New England Indian Summer*, Van Wyck Brooks notes that, by the 1880's, the more rustic regions of New England were infested during the summer with visiting urbanites who had come in search of plant, animal, and even human curiosities. For some, such a sojourn was the rediscovery of a past they had forgotten, if indeed they ever knew it at all: "Numbers had forgotten their rustic antecedents, others had no forbears in the country, and the villagers were as strange to them as the roaming Indians who sold their sweetgrass baskets in the hotel parlours."¹ In *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Sarah Orne Jewett presents one such summer visitor. The narrator of the book travels to the Maine coastal town of Dunnet Landing and, in a most profound sense, discovers her "rustic antecedents." As she studies the curious folk of the village and the natural surroundings they inhabit, the narrator achieves a "mystical communion" of sorts with the tiny community's present secrets and mythological past. The natural surroundings she observes unfold into five distinct circular enclosures which the narrator, carefully guided, must pass through to reach the "secret center" she desires to transcend. Like Theresa of Avila's seven mansions of the soul, these five circles provide *The Country of the Pointed Firs* with a subtle organization as they show the reader the progress of Jewett's pilgrim into the sacred sanctuaries of Dunnet Landing.²

The first circle the narrator must penetrate is the coastline that contains the harbour of Dunnet Landing, the outer islands, and the village itself. Nature in this circle is both ominous and mysterious; the shores are rocky and its woods are dark, conditions which would prohibit any easy entrance. "Securely wedged" within this circle is the village itself. Dunnet Landing seems curiously alive, not only in the gaiety of its "determined bits of floweriness," but with an independent personality that animates the houses which lie within its grasp. Their gables gaze out with "knowing

1. Van Wyck Brooks, *New England: Indian Summer* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1965), p. 352.

2. Hyatt H. Waggoner proposes a thematic organization of the book in his article "The Unity of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," reprinted in *Appreciation of Sarah Orne Jewett*, edited with a foreword by Richard Cary (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1973). Waggoner's organization includes the three sketches "A Dunnet Shepherdess," "The Queen's Twin," and "William's Wedding," which were added by Willa Cather in her 1925 edition of the book. This paper however relies upon the 1896 edition of *Pointed Firs* with the belief that a natural conclusion is reached when the narrator accepts the coral pin, and thus the subsequent sketches inserted between chapters XX ("Along Shore") and XXI ("The Backward View") are anti-climactic. For further discussion about the arrangement of Jewett's chapters see Marco A. Portales, "History of a Text: Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," *New England Quarterly*, December, 1982, pp. 586-92.

eyes,” and the imagery is that of hypnosis and control. Indeed, the narrator appears to be caught in a kind of trance. She returns to Dunnet Landing because she has “fallen in love” with it. In her visit, the narrator hopes for the “growth of true friendship.” In order to achieve that friendship however, the narrator and this wide-eyed stranger require an intermediary.

The narrator identifies herself as a writer, and, symbolically, rents a schoolhouse as a lodging for her summer’s stay. From here, as chronicler and initiate, the narrator will be guided under the mystical tutelage of Mrs. Almira Todd. This “huge sybil” begins the narrator’s association between Dunnet Landing and a mythological and ancient past. Mrs. Todd is “an historic soul,” who “could belong to any age.” Her house is a curious kind of sanctuary with its back to the street as if to ward off unwanted strangers. Her garden contains the herbs she sells for medicine. But even they provide an association with mystery cults, for the plants arouse “a dim sense of and remembrance of something in the forgotten past.” The mysterious aspect of nature is again emphasized, as the plants could have belonged “to sacred and mystic rites.” The sense of allure is heightened. From the penetrating gaze of the houses to the hypnotic aroma of the herbs, the reader is prepared for the “spell” which will bring the narrator to the next circle of her journey.

To emphasize through contrast, Jewett places three figures within the progress of that journey who are, literally, eccentric. These characters are outside of the circle of the community, and, instead, are fixed at the center of their own circles. Each is caught within a world whose natural surroundings are described in terms of barrenness and sterility. The first of these figures is Captain Littlepage who lives within the circle of his own words. Appropriately, the narrator meets him after attending a funeral. Littlepage is dead to the community as he clings to his white vision of horror and hidden knowledge. Described as a “grasshopper” (a parasitic insect that lives off, rather than contributes to, the communal good), Littlepage constantly “chirps” about his past adventure in the Arctic and spins stories of “fog shaped men.” Unlike Mrs. Todd, whose knowledge is for communal use, Littlepage’s knowledge alienates him from the rest of the community. As he says, “those who have laughed at me little know how much reason my ideas are based upon. . . . In that handful of houses, they fancy they comprehend the universe” (p. 58).³ He is blinded by his white vision of the north. Like his cyclical recitation of poetry after his shipwreck, Littlepage spins his web of words around him and gazes from its center either at the Arctic on the map or the world he condemns: “I see a change for the worse even in our own town here; full of loafers now, small and poor as t’is” (p. 60). Nature in his world is the barrenness

3. Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of The Pointed Firs*, contained in *Short Fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman*, edited and with an introduction by Barbara H. Solomon (New York City: New American Library, 1979). All quotations from *Pointed Firs* are from this edition.

of his arctic memories. The foundering of his ship "Minerva" (the Roman goddess of Wisdom) is symbolic of his frozen quest for knowledge. Even his name is an appropriate appellation for a man whose life is just that: a limited story bound by the enclosure of terror and bewilderment.

To return to the narrator, however, her next circle involves a potion and a spell which bring her to an enchanted kingdom where she must undergo an endurance trial in order to receive the secrets of the family of her guide. The circle is that of the pointed firs on Green Island, and nature once again provides a sense of ominous protection and mysterious attraction. As she stares at the bay, the narrator sees the coast surrounding it, and the island she will journey to as "The great army of the pointed firs, darkly cloaked and standing as if they waited to embark" (p. 68). As she watches more closely, Green Island, as if by magic, is pointed out, and to prepare for it, the narrator submits to a vigil ceremony on the eve of her trial.

As in the previous circle, the narrator is brought to its successor under a kind of "spell." On the night before the journey, Mrs. Todd gives the narrator a drink of beer laced with camomile and some other indistinguishable herb. The drink is a sign of selection for the guest, as Mrs. Todd tells the narrator, "I don't give this to just anybody" (p. 69). While the narrator is marked as a favorite of Mrs. Todd, the older woman in turn becomes for her young guest an "enchantress" whose words become a "spell."

The imagery of captivity continues as the narrator approaches the island and sees it as a "prison" in the sun. Once on the island, the narrator has entered an enchanted kingdom which exists as if suspended in time. Mrs. Todd seems to become young again as she tells the narrator: "There you never get over bein' a child long's you have a mother to go to" (p. 72). Mrs. Todd's mother, Mrs. Blackett, is also a woman that time seems to have passed by in her ability to maintain a pace of life unusual to one of eighty-six years. But it is Mrs. Todd's brother William who becomes the "Prince Charming" in the drama that is about to take place.⁴

Once on Green Island, the narrator submits to a miniature endurance trial like that of medieval legend. Nature is again a dangerous guardian. Accompanied by William, the narrator passes through hidden swamps and wasps' nests. As a kind of talisman for the ordeal, William presents his young guest with a spring of *linnaea* which links the narrator more closely to the mythological past which Mrs. Todd, and her family, represent. Thus armed, the narrator passes the dragon of the story, "a huge shape of stone like the great backbone of an enormous creature." Having endured the trial, the narrator and William reach the circle of the pointed

4. Marjorie Pryse notes that the celibate William is also the "priest" at this "rustic shrine." Ms. Pryse briefly cites the cultic and mystical dimensions of the book in her "Introduction to the Norton Edition" of *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*, selected and introduced by Mary Ellen Chase (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), p. xv.

firs and freedom: The view "gave a sudden sense of space, for nothing stopped the eye or hedged one in" (p. 81). In re-enacting the old chivalric myth, the narrator has created one of her own. She is now a part of the mythology of Green Island (as Mrs. Blackett will later tell her), and so is prepared to be ritually introduced to the inner secrets of the custodians of those myths.

The rituals of Green Island combine Christian and pagan elements, and so become a kind of introduction to the Bowden family reunion which will also draw from both of those traditions. Nature links the family with an ancient past. The herbs associated with Mrs. Todd's cultic garden become a garland in her herb bag for the daguerreotypes, the sacred images of the family's history. That connection is developed further when Mrs. Todd, in "confessional tones," describes her marriage to her late husband, and seems to the narrator "like the renewal of some historic soul" (p. 85). The lore of the family is even woven into a chant of sorts, as Mrs. Blackett and William sing old family favourites, "Home, Sweet Home" and "Cupid and the Bee." The narrator exhibits a growing sensitivity to the mythological world she has entered when she associates the singing with the daguerreotypes, which in turn have previously been associated with a still more ancient past.

The quest romance of the circle of the pointed firs is concluded with an investiture which symbolizes the narrator's entrance into the inner world of the family. The narrator is led into the inner sanctuary of Mrs. Blackett's room and shown the sacred objects there: the veil (the quilt), the throne (the rocking chair), the book (the Bible), and the vesture (William's shirt). In the trial she previously completed, the narrator, as stated before, has become a part of the mythology of the enchanted kingdom. That place is ratified in the imagination of Mrs. Blackett, who enthrones the narrator and tells her, "I shall like to think of your settin' here today." The narrator's place in the family legend is thus secured. Her place within the larger family circle will be sacramentalized in the circle of the Bowden reunion yet to come.

Before she reaches those circles, however, the narrator encounters the next eccentric when she receives one more bit of family lore in the story of Joanna Todd. Joanna's circle is the waste of Shell Heap Island to which she has exiled herself. Nature here is represented by the sterility of the accumulated shells around her and the woven mats made from dried reeds. Joanna's death is the rejection of her family in her self-condemnation for her "unforgiveable sin." That rejection is symbolized in her refusal to accept Mrs. Todd's coral pin. In that refusal, Joanna appropriates one meaning of the pin to herself, for, like the accumulation of tiny petrified forms, Joanna's life is hardened into a kind of spiritual death. From the center of her circle she watches the townspeople bring food to her, but cannot break through her barrier to rejoin them.

Joanna's story inverts certain elements of the Job myth. In doing so,

Joanna receives her own mythological antecedent, and the inversion motif of the next two circles is introduced as well. Joanna fulfilled the sin which Job did not; she has cursed God and died. Like her Old Testament ancestor, she rejected her counselors: the well-meaning Mrs. Todd, the self-righteous Rev. Dimmick, and, by extension, the curious Mrs. Fosdick. Joanna, like Job, has heard the voice of God, "out of the whirlwind," and she too does penance on a kind of ash heap, but, in her self-imposed exile, it is only in physical death that Joanna is redeemed. Her home and burial place become a shrine for the community, and Joanna becomes a part of its heritage. Her funeral becomes her final link with the biblical myth, as the sparrows alight on her coffin and proclaim Joanna's election. Their singing drowns out the voice of Rev. Dimmick, and the birds, like the ancient voice of God, overrule the righteous counselor and claim Joanna for their own.

The next circle in the romance is that of the graves of the Bowden ancestors. Nature in this circle stands as a witness that watches over the present and links it with an ancient past. In this "looking backwards" the natural order of things is reversed, and the world of Dunnet Landing undergoes an inversion as well. Trees have personalities that capture the durability of the Bowden clan: "They'll put right to it and strike their roots off into new ground and start all over again with real good courage" (p. 120). The reversal is extended even further when a tree grows from a rock, fed like humans from a hidden, life-giving stream: "Every such tree has got its own livin' spring; there's folks to match 'em" (p. 120). Sensitized to this hidden current, the narrator is ready for the world of this third circle where, having reached a certain spiritual maturity, she will discover this "livin' spring" by herself.

The circle of the graves involves an inversion on two levels. In size, it is the smallest that the narrator has encountered, yet it extends beyond the mystical triad of Mrs. Todd and her mother and brother to embrace a larger segment of the Bowden family. By coming in contact with that segment through the reminiscences of Mrs. Blackett, the dead in a sense come back to life. Military imagery is again used to describe the circle: "And presently, Mrs. Blackett showed me the stonewalled burying ground that stood like a little fort on a knoll overlooking the bay" (p. 124). Once again, the wall is penetrated, and the narrator moves to a deeper dimension of understanding.

The transition from this circle to the next becomes the occasion for the expression of that understanding. It too is an inversion of sorts, for the procession across the meadow becomes, in the narrator's imagination, a step back into history. "We might have been a company of ancient Greeks going to celebrate a victory or to worship the god of harvests in the grove above" (p. 126).⁵ The participants do celebrate a victory over time and the

5. Other inversions take place at the reunion: Mrs. Todd is intent, not on gathering herbs, but on

elements. This is a harvest feast in a sacred grove. The marchers are therefore "the inheritance of all such households" who "possessed the instincts of a far forgotten childhood." The narrator is independent of a guide here. She recognizes her place within the celebration and the hidden, life-giving stream of its mythological past. In a further application of the inversion motif, the narrator sacramentalizes her place within the larger family circle as she transcends a still smaller one, namely, the family pie at the reunion feast.

The huge pie decorated with the words, "Bowden Family," becomes a eucharist of sorts. A spiritual communion takes place between the narrator and Mrs. Todd where the latter becomes a redeemer figure: "We who were her neighbors were full of gaiety which was but the reflected light of her beaming countenance" (p. 131). Mrs. Todd has elected the narrator to be a member of this company of visible, and invisible, saints. The narrator now imitates the older woman's discriminating sense when she likens herself to a "Botanist" who "wonders at the wastefulness" of the "seeds" of human ability. That communion is sacramentalized when Mrs. Todd gives the narrator a piece of the pie labeled "Bowden" and herself a slice with the word "Family." The bond between the two women is the fulfillment of the "Word(s) made Flesh." Nature once again becomes the means of association. The "early apple pie" links the narrator with the green imagery used throughout the preceding circles: the "army" of the pointed firs, the "enchanted forest" of Green Island, the meadow and its resonances of Greek festivals, and the entire eternal summer of Dunnet Landing which is now fixed in the narrator's imagination.

The center of the circles awaits, and one last eccentric introduces it. Elijah Tilley's circle is the "sea" he sits within to mourn his dead wife. On the one hand, this sea is paradoxically the rocky field marked off by buoys which show where the irremovable rocks are. The actual sea is also associated with Elijah's knitting done with blue yarn which he holds "as if it were a cod line." The reversal of roles is again the case here, and Elijah, like Joanna, has a mythological forbear, in his case the story of Hercules and Omphale. Like Hercules, Elijah knits in servitude, held in captivity to his "poor dear" dead wife. Elijah is not freed after three years service however, and preserves his house as a shrine to the memory of his beloved Sarah. Elijah's is a circle of clustered activity and association: earth and sea, past and present, are all brought together under the rubric of work. In this respect, Elijah's circle prepares the reader for the final circle, which is a microcosmic cluster of all that has preceded it.

At her departure, the narrator reaches the center. She discovers a basket left by Mrs. Todd which contains a snack for the journey, some southernwood and a twig of bay, and the coral pin once refused by Joan-

"seen' folks"; the mentally deficient Santin becomes the leader of the march; and, in this predominantly female environment, it is a male chorus that provides the singing.

na. The snack symbolizes the hospitality of Mrs. Todd, Mrs. Blackett, and the sacramental feast of the Bowden family. The herbs provide the connection with that mythological past of which the narrator herself has become a part. As she accepts the coral pin, the narrator reaches the sacred center of her journey. The pin expresses the deepest emotions of Mrs. Todd who reveres the object because of its association with her late husband. The pin now becomes the token of the older woman's love and the badge of the younger woman's election. The pin, as a cluster of tiny sea animals, joins the narrator forever to the cluster of love, legend, nature, and population that is Dunnet Landing. Finally, it symbolizes the level of understanding which the narrator has attained in reaching that circle. As Evelyn Underhill the great authority of mysticism writes: "The fully developed and completely conscious soul can open as an anemone does, and know the ocean in which she is bathed."⁶

Thus, the journey is complete and the fusion is sealed. The narrator sails away from Dunnet Landing and the village becomes "indistinguishable from the other towns that looked as if they were crumbled on the furzy green stoniness of the shore" (p. 151). The narrator no longer sees a barrier on the rocky shore, but instead finds in her imagination the memory of the entire experience, fixed "like the beginning of summer." The narrator's journey again recalls the words of St. Theresa: "The happiness of life is in its recognition."⁷

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6. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, quoted in William Branswell, *Melville's Religious Thought* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1943), p. 22.

7. Quoted in Waggoner, p. 167.