June 1964

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 6, no.10, June 1964, p.418-424

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THE OUTER ISLAND SEQUENCE IN *POINTED FIRS*

By ROBIN MAGOWAN

The juxtaposed histories of Captain Littlepage, Joanna Todd, and the Blacketts (chapters V-XV) form in themselves a cohesive unit: namely, each man's search for an island able to embody his highest ideals. For Littlepage this is the strange terrestrial Limbo that Gaffett had talked to him about and which in his imagination took on the shape of "a kind of waiting-place between this world an' the next." For Joanna it is the worldly renunciation of Shell-heap Island. And for the Blacketts it is the pastoral haven that is Green Island, a place where the good life is maintained with an appearance of innocence and youthful joy. To the extent that it succeeds, that the vision is realized, it becomes a counterpart of the Christian paradise, which is, after all, an Eden transfigured. And in these outer island chapters both notions, pastoral and Christian, are brought into close conjunction. Jewett has accomplished this by centering the quest in the other world of the Outer Islands and by taking as people characters so ancient that death and the next world must seem to them but an island away, a gleam on the near horizon. By making this other existence thus immediate Jewett creates for her narrator a situation in which she must confront her own destiny and make a choice of worlds.

I

The immediate occasion for Captain Littlepage's narrative is Mrs. Begg's funeral. As an event it has given the narrator her first sense of not entirely fitting into Dunnet Landing. Her initial reaction is to retire to the schoolhouse on the hill which she has rented in a wish for personal privacy. It is from this vantage point that she takes in the grotesque anomaly that Captain Littlepage's appearance in the funeral procession presents. With his pale features and queer hopping gait he seems like "an aged grasshopper of some strange human variety" (*PF*, 20). Yet when next he appears, as if in ironic answer to the narrator's wish for "a companion and for news from the outer..."
world” (PF, 21), his physical appearance suggests the “same ‘cant to leeward’ as the windbent trees on the height above” (PF, 20). One senses that the history of his sad metamorphosis is linked to that of the region as a whole, an instance in that larger tragedy which was itself the result of the Embargo Act of 1807.

The effect of Littlepage’s narrative rests heavily on the convention of its frames: the story within a story, and against it, defining the perspective out of which it arises, the contrast of events preceding Captain Littlepage’s appearance on the hilltop. The first is spatial and consists in the contrast of the “bay-sheltered islands and the great sea beyond” stretching away “southward and eastward” (PF, 20) towards Green Island with that of the “petty funeral” disappearing below “as if it had gone into a cave” (PF, 21). Also opposed to the funeral are the song-sparrows “who sang and sang, as if with joyous knowledge of immortality and contempt for those who could so pettily concern themselves with death” (PF, 21). Finally, as the narrative is beginning, the reader is made aware of the threatening pounding of the sea on the beach below and, against it, a “late golden robin . . . singing close by in a thicket of wild roses” (PF, 26). To these aural and visual frames may be added a plane of literary allusion, apparent from the moment Littlepage announces himself with a line from Paradise Lost. It is as if he were invoking Milton’s aid in telling his story of Gaffett’s lost island — an aid granted in the great cadences with which his tale reaches its climax. But the device is more than merely comic; for the Captain’s preference of Milton to Shakespeare, “it’s all lofty, all lofty” (PF, 22), his resentment of Shakespeare’s “low talk,” define the snobbery that lies at the root of his appeal to the narrator who is herself a writer.

The introduction of these several overlapping frames has the effect of raising Captain Littlepage’s narrative to a plane where questions of truth or falseness become in themselves irrelevant. The only truth is that of art — whether the story is convincingly told. The story is not judged on its factual merits, but in terms of what it tells us about Littlepage and his talents as a story-teller. It is precisely this point that Almiry Todd adopts in her fine summing up:

2 The same figure recurs in a somewhat parallel situation during the scene of Joanna’s burial. See PF, 72.
Some o' them tales hangs together toler'ble well. . . . An' he's been a great reader all his seafarin' days. Some thinks he overdid, and affected his head, but for a man o' his years he's amazin' now when he's at his best. Oh, he used to be a beautiful man! (PF, 33)

Even the word "beautiful" helps indicate the shift in attitude; emphasis is on the man as artist. At the same time the truth of Captain Littlepage's narrative takes on an oblique quality, one that characterizes him in the telling more than any single event in his own life or even in that section of Dunnet Landing for which he is in these pages the historical spokesman.

In terms of pastoral convention Captain Littlepage typifies the aspiring or ambition-directed mind not content with the limited perspectives conditioning the pastoral way of life. His distemper, like that of Dante's Ulysses, comes of having sought to exceed the natural limits imposed on man's knowledge. Despite the wreck of his ship — significantly the Minerva — Littlepage does achieve a measure of knowledge of the world beyond. But this has the effect of disqualifying him from all further action. He is thenceforth condemned to a life of waiting, to that posture in which the reader last comes upon him, "sitting behind his closed window . . . watching for some one who never came" (PF, 80).

One may wish, with Almiry Todd, to consider Captain Littlepage's history as literature and thus set it aside in a convenient esthetic niche. Yet, once invoked, these presences of "fog and cobweb" (PF, 32) will continue to hover over much of the remainder of Pointed Firs, imparting to the events therein related a kind of gray authority. The continuity this gives is either that of character — i.e., people like the old eccentric "general" Sant Bowden whose circumstances link them with Captain Littlepage — or of narrative atmosphere in which Littlepage's story conveys the reserve force of society grows more and more amazing to one's thought" (PF, 95). But the irony fails, and Jewett is obliged to resort to the language of the naturalists to denounce the imprisoning environment, "only opportunity and stimulus were lacking — a narrow set of circumstances had caged a fine able character and held it captive" (PF, 95). The further Jewett penetrated into the mystery of Dunnet Landing the more she felt herself being drawn towards this misunderstood captain and the regional truth that his warped figure so sadly asserted. At any rate her next work, The Tory Lover, was an attempt to give value to the largeness of mind and vanished way of life that she associated with Captain Littlepage, his quaintness and "careful precision of dress" (PF, 22).
of an island in the far north must be set against the subsequent histories of Green and Shell-heap Islands. Thus a half-page from where Littlepage's history ends one comes upon the following passage as the narrator heads out towards Green Island:

Suddenly, as we looked, a gleam of golden sunshine struck the outer islands, and one of them shone out clear in the light, and revealed itself in a compelling way to our eyes. . . . The sunburst upon that outermost island made it seem like a sudden revelation of the world beyond this which some believe to be so near. (PF, 33)

The phrasing, particularly that of the last sentence, makes it plain Green Island is to her what Gaffett's island had been to Captain Littlepage. Yet if in both instances the reader is aware of a kind of transcendent reality, he cannot help but be struck by the difference between the ambiguous mist-enshrouded grays of Littlepage's description and the Green Island light which shines here with an almost mystical fervor.

II

In the Green Island chapters (VII-XI) Jewett poses the twin ideals of the contented mind and that simple country life which in pastoral is associated with a vanished Golden Age. As presented here it is seen in its final senescence, no less venerable for all its remoteness, and having about it that youthful naivety which only the very old possess. This presentation of the afterglow of the Golden Age achieves for these very reasons a certain tension: because the chief challenge to a pastoral existence is time and old age (though here one may add that the Blackettts meet this challenge merely by appearing unaware of it — by continuing to remain throughout everything "lighthearted"). If the Golden Age represents a matriarchal, pre-Olympian world, then it is fitting that the presiding spirit of Green Island should be Mrs. Blackett, still at 86 "one of them spry, light-footed little women" (PF, 33). Even William preserves a taciturn shyness, a kind of lingering innocence belying his 62 years.

The Blackettts reside in a constantly green world of pointed firs and turf, and raise sheep. William fishes for their sustenance, and on the side conducts a minor business supplying the larger ocean-going vessels with bait. Poor and humble, he
represents in contrast to Captain Littlepage a man of the mean estate content with his limited lot. Like a male dancer in a classic ballet his role in these chapters is chiefly a supporting one, his main utterances being designed to express a somewhat unmasculine contentment with home, as seen in his remarks on the view, “There ain’t no such view in the world, I expect” (PF, 46), and his being singled out to sing “Home, Sweet Home” (PF, 51). At his best, his most instinctive, he may be said to represent an ideal of silence perfectly attuned to the natural sense-perceived world.

Of Mrs. Blackett the narrator remarks, “She must have existed to keep the balance true” (PF, 47). Yet she has also more positive attributes and is, in fact, characterized by her light-giving qualities, by the radiancy and cheer that she emits, seen in the already noted epithets, “lighthearted,” “light-footed,” and the way she is able to convey her sense of “delight.” Moreover, in the ideals she combines of “perfect self-forgetfulness” and neighborly concern, she marks a turning-point in the narrator’s development, thus preparing her for that more comprehensive communal view expressed in the Bowden Reunion chapters and the concluding sections of Pointed Firs.

Finally it should be noted that the economic self-sufficiency that the Blacketts possess is directly related to the sea. As Mrs. Todd says in explaining Joanna Todd’s ability to survive in the northern desolation of Shell-heap Island: “You can always live well in any wild place by the sea when you’d starve to death up country, except ’t was berry time.” Given the over-riding piscatorial framework of Pointed Firs the scales are heavily tilted against the back-country or what Mrs. Todd calls the “land-locked” (PF, 66) portion of humanity.  

III

In the island geography of Pointed Firs Shell-heap Island stands three miles northeast of Green Island and directly across
from sinister Black Island. These facts are important not only for the moral map that they supply, but also in that they indicate the relation between Shell-heap and the island Gaffett discovered near the North Pole.

The legend of Joanna is retrospective in mood, set in a past some twenty-seven years earlier, and the pathos it means to evoke is that of Vergil’s Dido and elegiac pastoral in general. If it is told in mid-August, yet its “chilly night of cold north-easterly rain” (PF, 58) summons up an atmosphere more suggestive of November. The retrospective setting, the unseasonal weather, and the general air of foreboding, combine to give the story of “Poor Joanna” the quality of a legend out of Irving and the topos of the haunted locale. It is something one senses in the various Indian associations, and in the supposed presence of a ghost of whom it is related that “sharp-sighted folks could see him and lose him like one o’ them citizens Cap’n Littlepage was acquainted with up to the north pole” (PF, 60).

Mrs. Todd’s above comparison implies that “Poor Joanna” is linked with Captain Littlepage in rejecting those pastoral values associated with the Green Island modus vivendi. Their histories may be said to represent the twin sources of pastoral discontent — unrequited love and excessive ambition — the discontent of the heart and of the mind. In each case the result is the social isolation of the person thus afflicted. Joanna’s isolation takes the form of a quasi-religious retreat in the course of which she delivers the ultimate pastoral rebuke — that of driving out the sheep. After this she subsists in somewhat legendary fashion on the products of her chickens and the charity of the fishermen. But hers is a retreat which by pastoral lights must seem misguided since the very ends she seeks are those that the pastoral state exists to maintain. Not only is her penance excessive but it is self-consuming — a heroism in direct contrast to the easy laissez-faire of the somewhat parallel pastoral retreat.

5 Black Island is the Sodom of the Outer Island world. When people from the island turn up at William’s wedding (to cast a momentary pall over the occasion), Mrs. Todd declares: “They’re great butter-makers down to Black Island, ’tis excellent pasturage, but they use no milk themselves, and their butter is heavy laden with salt to make weight, so that you’d think all their ideas come down from Sodom” (PF, 153).
Technically, the most interesting element is the introduction of a second narrator, the worldly, seasoned traveler, Mrs. Fosdick, a person of almost opposite temperament to Joanna Todd. The discrepancy between the two has the effect of compelling the narrator to identify sympathetically with Joanna, and even make a special pilgrimage to Shell-heap Island. It is as if the story of Joanna has become for her a moral lesson of the dangers implicit in the wish for seclusion— the wish which had drawn her to rent the schoolhouse on the hill and which was the primary impulse behind her acceptance of the bucolic invitation to spend the summer in Dunnet Landing.

The introduction of Mrs. Fosdick at this point thus comes as a shock. To the narrator it brings both self-awareness and consciousness of the isolation in which certain people are condemned (or condemn themselves) to live. At the same time it disrupts the general peace that was hers before the arrival of Mrs. Fosdick:

I had been living in the quaint little house with as much comfort and unconsciousness as if it were a larger body, or a double shell, in whose simple convolutions Mrs. Todd and I had secreted ourselves, until some wandering hermit crab of a visitor marked the little spare room for her own. (PF, 53)

Hers and Mrs. Todd's is an idyll— an ideal companionship in a womb-like state— not at all unlike that of Huck and Jim on their raft before the coming of the King and the Duke, or of Ishmael and Queequeg at the Speuter Inn. But as Mrs. Fosdick intrudes, questioning their relationship, so does this ideal companionship imaged in the metaphor of a "double shell" become itself transformed. The narrator catches herself listening to the story of Joanna "like a shell on the mantelpiece" (PF, 56), and realizes that her present shell-like state merely makes it possible for her to become another event on some other Shell-heap Island of the world.