September 1973

The Sculptor and the Spinster: Jewett's "Influence" on Cather

Richard Cary

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

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 10, no.3, September 1973, p.168-178

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
cance, than the struggle which preceded the victory. And, too often, Willa Cather observed the victories to be empty and meaningless to the victors, for with attainment came an attendant lack of creativeness, exploitation by hangers-on, and subsequent materialistic debilitation. Thus the regret which Miss Cather expressed that the pioneer's story should be finished, and thus, no doubt, her return after her disenchantment of the early 1920s to pioneer material for the important novels of her later years.

Materialism, then, in its attendant ramifications was to Willa Cather the blight of her own age. As a cultural and chronological primitivist, she indicted her own time and place in severe terms but with an underlying hopefulness of richer tomorrows.

---

THE SCULPTOR AND THE SPINSTER: JEWETT'S "INFLUENCE" ON CATHER

By Richard Cary

No informed biographer or critic of Willa Cather fails to mention the seminal encounter she had with Sarah Orne Jewett in February 1908 at the home of Annie Felds in Boston. Nor, in due course, does he fail to quote from Miss Jewett's sententious letter to Miss Cather on the art of writing, and from Miss Cather's preface to *Alexander's Bridge* (1922), her introduction to *The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett* (1925) or its extension in *Not Under Forty* (1936). An umbilical connection is usually established thereupon.

This tendency to ascribe one writer's artistic maturation to the "influence" of an acknowledged predecessor, in simpler times a parlor game of glib parallels, has more recently yielded to subtler psychologies and deeper ego-assessment. Thus in 1929 C. Hartley Grattan could hyperbolize "without fear of contradiction that [Jewett] exercised a profound influence on Willa Cather. Miss Cather's style undoubtedly stems from that of Miss Jewett"; whereas a quarter-century later A. M. Buchan cautiously propounds that "It is much more plausible that Miss
Jewett's advice and encouragement . . . clarified for the younger writer the goal towards which her own art was moving."

The friendship of Cather and Jewett was instinctive and intense, based upon instantaneous recognition of shared ideals. Though short-lived (only sixteen months elapsed before Jewett died), it elicited a remarkably compact statement of literary principles from the older noted woman to the yet unfulfilled aspirant. On December 13, 1908 Jewett ranked "The Sculptor's Funeral" "a head higher than the rest" of the stories in Cather's *The Troll Garden*. She went on to cite Cather's backgrounds in Nebraska, Virginia, and in newspaper and magazine offices as "uncommon equipment" which she was not utilizing in full measure because "you stand right in the middle of each of them when you write, without having the standpoint of the looker-on." She counseled Cather to "find your own quiet centre of life, and write from that to the world." "You must write to the human heart, the great consciousness that all humanity goes to make up," she admonished. "Otherwise what might be strength in a writer is only crudeness, and what might be insight is only observation; sentiment falls into sentimentality—you can write about life, but never write lie itself." A writer must be himself, but his best self. There are other valuable directives about art versus life in this Jewett letter to Cather, but these comprise the core and relate directly to the matter of this essay.

Cather additionally reports Jewett exhorting her to "write about your own country" (preface to *Alexander's Bridge*); she tells Latrobe Carroll that Jewett urged her to recapture "in memory people and places I had believed forgotten" (*Bookman*, May 1921); she lauds the "pithy bits of local speech, of native idiom which enrich and enliven" Jewett's pages (*Not Under Forty*); and she repeats Jewett's saw, acquired from her father, to "write it as it is, don't try to make it like this or that."

Jewett's acumen unquestionably affected Cather. Although already thirty-five years old and a published writer over half of that span, she was still toiling indeterminately through thematic and stylistic brambles. She knew that she had fallen in love with "writing for writing's sake," and that her early stories were "perfectly honest" but "bald, clumsy, and emotional." She had tagged after Flaubert and Henry James for the wrong reasons. As a child, she played the game of
“Authors” in which Jewett’s youthful picture impressed her. While growing, Cather doubtless read some of Jewett’s inimitable vignettes of Maine life, two of which appeared in McClure’s not long before Cather’s advent there. Now she turned with heightened awareness to Jewett’s procreant suggestions and revealed methods.

What Cather learned as new from these “really helpful” sources and what at last she liberated from her unconscious, she tried to summarize for Carroll or express in the writings named above. Gradually she gravitated toward her “own country,” significantly dedicating O Pioneers!, her first long work in this genre, to Sarah Orne Jewett. Cather decided “to make ‘writing’ count for less and less and the people for more . . . to make things and people tell their own story simply by juxtaposition, without any persuasion or explanation on my part.” Where she had chosen to “write well” in The Troll Garden, she now chose “not to ‘write’ at all,” giving herself up to the pleasures of la recherche du temps perdu. Shapes and scenes, mannerisms and turns of phrase she strove to get down on paper exactly as she recalled them, “not in conventional poses.” If the quality of feeling was to rise “inevitably out of the theme itself,” then language, even syntax, must be “imposed upon the writer by the special mood of the piece.” It is clear that Cather had listened — and listened well — to Jewett’s divulgations.

The main question, however, persists. To what extent can it be said that Cather was “influenced” by Jewett in her subsequent practice? Did she play the sedulous ape broadly and consistently? Cather, so many friends have attested, was her own woman. Subservience was not her portion as a person or an artist, and the pattern of her writing in the wake of Jewett’s impetus in 1908-1909 demonstrates her freedom from any absolute clientage. While ruminating on the idea that “it is not always easy for the inexperienced writer to distinguish between his own material and that which he would like to make his own,” she jigsawed sharply from ersatz James in Alexander’s Bridge (1912) to Nebraska and nostalgia in O Pioneers! (1913), to contemporary city-country in The Song of the Lark (1915) where the Jewett-luminous style comes on conclusively, then back to Nebraska pioneers in My Antonia (1918), here stabilizing her direction as America’s prime pursuer of the
lovely provincial past. The short stories she produced during this period deal chiefly with singers and cities, the requiem-for-the-land theme emerging briefly by flashback to her protagonists' youth in the Midwest.

Through *A Lost Lady*, *The Professor's House*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *Shadows on the Rock*, and finally *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather sought to refurbish the lost glow of simpler, stronger times and places in a manner describable as Jewett *cum* sinew. And yet Cather never entirely relinquished some aspects of her original bent. "I think that most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen," she told Carroll. Perhaps out of allegiance to this inculpable past, perhaps out of rush or neglect, perhaps out of pure furious pride, Cather retained roughhewn elements in her fiction long after Jewett's precepts had helped illumine her vision and cleanse her mode of expression. Collating Cather's three published versions of "The Sculptor's Funeral," and ringing it against Jewett's prototypical elegy "Miss Tempy's Watchers," verifies that Cather stubbornly clung to early aesthetic defects she was no longer capable of committing.

Cather wrote "The Sculptor's Funeral" in 1903, five years before she chanced upon Jewett. It appeared first in *McClure's*, January 1905, and later that year in *The Troll Garden*, again in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* in 1920, and ultimately in volume 6 of *The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather*, Autograph Edition, 1937. Thus, Cather had two opportunities after meeting Jewett to infuse this rudimental story with finer perceptivities of character, scene, tone, tempo, diction, dialogue, and theme more in tune with the growing virtuosity and control she had shown after the factitious *Alexander's Bridge*. This she failed signally to do.

Most readers will find it difficult to reconcile Jewett's esteem of "The Sculptor's Funeral" with its actual merit as art. The story has in fact inspired drastically different reactions, from Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's "as fine as anything" Cather had done by 1927, to Howard Mumford Jones's "'prentice work," "a sketch not much beyond the range of a bright literary undergraduate." On Cather's total record, one has to lean toward the latter rather than Jewett's critique, remembering that she also praised "On the Gulls' Road," another of Cather's less happy inventions. Jewett was exercising a mentor's indul-
gence toward a promising novice, for even Cather in later years came to see the piece as "exaggerated in feeling and carelessly executed," and declared a moratorium on it being further anthologized. Although she did carry the story over from *The Troll Garden* (where it holds second place in the order of contents) to *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (where it is relegated to seventh of eight) and to the collected-works volume (last), her progressive demotion of it suggests lessening respect. More the mystery, then, why she did not thoroughly reconstruct it when these occasions occurred, or drop it altogether, if dissatisfied.

What Cather says about *Alexander's Bridge* applies equally to "The Sculptor's Funeral": it is "external and young." Echoes of her idols, Flaubert and James, dominate the theme of a lyric soul repelled by the grubby standards of neighbors and family in an atmosphere of cultural sterility. Cather offers this warfare between Mammon and the Muse on a scale of escalating stridor which collapses in melodramatic irony. Characters move punctiliously, as in first rehearsal with a fearsome director. Most are stereotypes, presented by way of synecdoche (the G.A.R. suit), sentimentalized (the black servant), reduced to a single plane (the mother, the father), or to impenetrable veneer (Steavens). Dialogue, aimed at being realistic-revealing, is merely nasal, and seldom alights from the page. Images, metaphors, and emotions, tend to overshoot their mark. And Cather looms foursquare between reader and happening, a position Jewett had warned her against. In all, a distinctly inferior construct, so lacking in finesse as to make one itch for want of a blue pencil.

It is unlikely that Cather had not read "Miss Tempy's Watchers" (1888) by 1920 when she reproduced "The Sculptor's Funeral" in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*. Certainly she had read it discerningly by 1925 when she selected it for her edition of Jewett's *Best Stories*. It could not have escaped her at either time that "The Sculptor's Funeral" evolves out of the same situation: a corpse in a coffin and its effect upon the watchers. No matter that the stories reach diametric resolutions — Jewett works toward symbiosis, Cather towards anomie — the vast disparity in the caliber of their means should have shaken the Nebraskan to her soles. Jewett's rendition is by contrast a small masterpiece of pace, focus, and mood. Aucto-
rial statement is limited to needful description and exposition. Characterization of Tempy Dent and her two former cronies unfolds naturally through conversation between the living. In consonance with the engrossing solemnity of death, their voices float at whisper level, their movements minimal and noiseless. The dialect is identifiably local and physical details convey more than observable surfaces. Jewett's style is a model of Gallic clarity, Flaubert truly ingested. The drama of "Miss Tempy's Watchers" is muted and wholly psychological; there is nothing comparable to the mother's hysterics or Jim Laird's besotted harangue in "The Sculptor's Funeral." As Cather says, Jewett "had the eye and the ear." In this story she utilized both with marvelous dimension and forbearance. F. O. Matthiessen contends that "it possesses an inevitability," so well do all the factors fit together.

After all is told, the function of the corpse emerges as the most significant differential between these two stories. Cather's dead sculptor lies in irreversible rigor mortis within the bounds of his casket; Jewett's dead spinster rises transparently and mingles with her watchers, a positive personality. Harvey Merrick is an immobile hulk that provokes fresh rancor over old alienations; Tempy Dent the creative force in an abstruse triple relationship which reunites her disjoined companions. Harvey's escape to art is not persuasive; his return a questionable fulfillment. In death, he degrades and divides. Tempy's art is life itself, her return a triumph of humanity. In death, she lives and unifies. The watchers in "The Sculptor's Funeral" do nothing but execrate the dead; in "Miss Tempy's Watchers" they resurrect their old friend. Jewett was writing "to the human heart." Cather was not.

Contrary to James Woodress' assertion that she "reprinted the story unchanged in Youth and the Bright Medusa," Cather effectuated some fifty changes in this transfer of "The Sculptor's Funeral" from The Troll Garden. Twenty-one of these may be dismissed as merely mechanical—inserting or deleting commas; substituting commas for semicolons or vice versa, an exclamation point for a semicolon, and a question mark for a period; hyphenating or dehyphenating words; replacing "he" with "Jim Laird" to avoid ambiguity. She made six replacements in diction: "rejoined" for "shuffled back to" (p. 250); "others" for "group" (p. 252); "sure" for "sure-footed" (p. 261); "The
company laughed discreetly" for “Everyone chuckled” (p. 265); “nonsense” for “trapseing to Paris and all such folly” (p. 266); “and Stark” for “old Stark” (p. 270). There had indeed been too much shuffling and chuckling in the original. These variants, and “group,” she rings in to relieve blunt repetition of terms. The curtailment to “sure” rescues a stumbling compound, and “nonsense” deflates a mouth-filling inanity. In this category the only meaningful gain comes in denying Stark his intimate, amiable connotation, thereby sustaining Laird’s punitive attitude.

Conscious that in straining to “write well” she had only succeeded in overwriting, Cather strikes out locutions in twenty-three places. Some, as before, are grossly repetitious or prolix: “shuffled,” “spare,” “He remembered that,” “oncommon,” “holy,” “true.” In other cases she reduces the fervency of her prose by eliminating such modifiers as “horrible,” “painfully,” “gleefully,” “ever,” and her role as director by removing “doubtless,” “gently,” Jim Laird’s attribution of “demonstrative piety and ingenious cruelty” to Harvey’s mother, and the lawyer’s “red face . . . convulsed with anger” (TTG, pp. 79, 70). She also drops a number of plain superfluities, along with some feathery rhetoric never quite at home in the Kansas frontier: “like the Arabian prince who fought the enchantress spell for spell” (p. 72), and Harvey’s theatric “the wings of Victory . . . will not shelter me” (p. 78). Cather makes just one insertion in this post-Jewett version: “to become” before “an exhaustless gallery” (YBM, p. 261).

When her second opportunity to upgrade this story presented itself seventeen years later, Cather again confined herself to little more than cosmetic dabbing. In volume 6 of The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather (1937) she effects fifty changes in “The Sculptor’s Funeral,” almost exactly the sum as in Youth and the Bright Medusa (1920). Once more a strong majority (33) of these occur in the punctuation, spelling, and editorial style — having no noticeable impact on the quintessence of the story. Hyphenation occupies an overplus of attention (“semi-circle,” “mourning-comb,” “dung-heap,” “half-hour,” et al), and she revokes as many as she introduces, sometimes witlessly reverting to the original usage in The Troll Garden. Other futile manipulations include forging two words into one (“baggageman,” “sowaway”) or splitting one word into two (“cattle
Colby Library Quarterly 175

farms”), capitalizing “Mother,” adding “e” to “whiskey,” and converting “inquired” to “enquired.” She redeems two persisting typographical lapses: “hard coal-burner” to “hard-coal burner” and “Ruben” to “Reuben.” The vigilant copy editor, not the artist in her, was at work here.

Switching “in his boyhood” from end to interior of sentence (p. 267), Cather definitely improves comprehension and rhythm. Most of her eight modifications of diction also ameliorate: “stranger” for “Bostonian” (p. 269) to conform with “stranger” on p. 270; “coffin” for “casket” (p. 270) to conform with “coffin” on p. 271; “unkept” for “unkempt” hair (p. 273); “behaviour” for “orgy of grief” (p. 273); “just” for “ever” (p. 274); “at the sculptor’s face” for “into the master’s face” (p. 276); “woman’s face” for “thin, tired face” (p. 278); “a man like Harvey” for “a genius” (p. 288). In the last five Cather appreciably lowers the emotional decibel and retreats further from management of reader response.

Cather’s most telling solution for the ills of “The Sculptor’s Funeral” in this final version is surgery, simply excising words, phrases, clauses, or whole passages which now appeal to her as surplus furniture:

After “vibrant scream.” (p. 267) she omits “the world-wide call for men.”

After “her hands,” (p. 272) she omits “conspicuous for their large knuckles.”

After “Harvey Merrick.” (p. 277) she omits “Oh, he comprehended well enough now the quiet bitterness of the smile that he had seen so often on his master’s lips.”

After “holiest secret.” (p. 279) she omits “liberated it from enchantment and restored it to its pristine loveliness. Upon whatever he had come in contact with, he had left a beautiful record of the experience—a sort of ethereal signature; a scent, a sound, a colour that was his own.”

After “wine when it was red,” (p. 284) she omits “also variegated.”

After “show for it?” (p. 288) she omits “Harvey Merrick wouldn’t have given one sunset over your marshes for all you’ve got put together, and you know it.”

Who is to deny that she sliced off a sheaf of occlusive “fine writing” here, sophistication foreign to the timbre of this setting,
echoes of motifs already firmed or better not to have been broached at all? Pity she was not more ruthless. Matching her previous revision, Cather makes precisely one addition: after “overcoats open” (p. 265) she interjects “(they never buttoned them),” a contestable advance.

In the years following Jewett’s tutelage Cather veers increasingly toward landmarks long outstanding in Jewett’s best work. She forsakes the hothouse of Alexander’s Bridge for the outland of O Pioneers!, and successively for places nearer the heart in her arching series of novels from My Antonia to Sapphira and the Slave Girl. She seeds her stories with characters of earth like Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg in Moonstone, and Antonia Shimerda, recalling Jewett’s archetypes Doris Owen, little Sylvy, and Almira Todd. She learns “to melt them into the land and the life of the land” with consummate sympathy. And by degrees she effaces most of the “analysis, observation, description, even the picture-making quality, in order to make things and people tell their own story simply by juxtaposition, without any persuasion or explanation on my part.” She invokes strength through subtlety, eloquence through repose, to take her place rightfully among the foremost stylists and delineators of character and ambience in our literature.

Still, it cannot be overlooked that in at least this instance of primary resemblance — “The Sculptor’s Funeral” and “Miss Tempy’s Watchers” — Cather twice skirted the chance to bring her story up to her prevailing standards, presumed so easily by so many to have been inculcated by Sarah Jewett. Although Cather introduced more than a hundred mutations into her two revisions, she incongruously evaded the cardinal Jewett pre­scripts that she was fruitfully applying in her current compositions. To compound this dereliction, Cather had not only assimilated these instrumentalities, she had also taken space along the way to corroborate them vigorously.

In “The Novel Demeuble” she claims high literary quality for “the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed,” yet she allowed “The Sculptor’s Funeral” to remain a nexus of bald and immediate statement, a victory of observation over insight. After one sets down this story, it quivers on the retina as a stark, ungainly image. In Not Under Forty she notes Jew-
ett's predilection for "everyday people who grew out of the soil, not . . . exceptional individuals at war with their environment," yet she reserved the heart of her story for an outright exile and for a returned native whose recoil from the vulgarity and venality of Sand City surpasses that of the dead artist. In the same essay, "Miss Jewett," Cather honors the "sayings" of a community as "its characteristic comment upon life; they imply its history, suggest its attitude towards the world and its way of accepting life," yet her chorus of mean-spirited ruralists does not stipple its talk with such implication or suggestion. Its coarse effusions are indistinguishable from those of an envious and avaricious urban clique.

Cather wrote about her own country in "The Sculptor's Funeral" (for Sand City, Kansas, read Red Cloud, Nebraska) though not in the mood of memory specified by Jewett: "The thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper." Cather adopted the circumstances of this story not from recollections of youth in Nebraska but from an experience during her newspaper days in Pittsburgh. She needed a broader contrast than was provided by the city alone. So she grafted the two bodily together, more in service of her thesis — _l'art pour l'art_ — than in fidelity to her germinal past. Consequently the characters are mouthpieces, notably the alcoholic lawyer, and the climax his long-winded excoriation rather than a revelation of the sculptor's crisis. Cather did not attempt to reshape his role ascendantly, in the way Jewett had drawn Tempy Dent's, so Harvey ends up subordinate to Jim Laird, a fault in the proportion. "Élegy," says Coleridge, "presents every thing as lost and gone, or absent or future." Jewett understood and complied. Cather kneaded the genre to her own ulterior aim, condemnation of a crass society. She never reprieved the story from its chore as tract.

Cather did more in the matter of language than in other areas of revision. She proceeded principally through elimination of repetitions, obtruding modifiers, and despotic descriptive terms, here and there dispensing with redundant guidelines through the shallow innards of her characters. All this to the good, for the initial version is awkwardly overwritten, and these verbal refinements also help to moderate the tone and enhance the rhythm of the prose. However, Cather was remiss in the affirmative course of substituting apter words and more richly
connotative phrasing. She supplemented the earliest text by exactly two expressions, one utilitarian, the other of little visible import. That constitutes the most vexing riddle in this study: why Cather, now famed for charm and economy of style "that is almost French," would settle for such inadequacies in this bumptious, callow effort.

Who can plumb the unlit abysses of id? "It takes a great deal of experience to become natural . . . . A painter or writer must learn to distinguish what is his own from that which he admires," said Cather to Latrobe Carroll as late as 1921. Did she not ever come to a clear definition between her propensities and her adulations? "The Sculptor's Funeral" leaves us straddling. It was first written in homage to two old masters, Henry James and his concern with tensions between the artist and his world, Flaubert and his abomination of the bourgeoisie. Surely, Jewett steered Cather into deeper channels of inherent competency. Nevertheless, how authenticate or measure this helpful nudge as "profound influence" on Cather's eventual esthetic voyage? On the evidence of this story (and others not so closely analogous) Cather manifestly bypassed vital improvements in line with Jewett's dicta on psychic distance, mood, characterization, theme, and idiom. She may not, in retrospect, have wished to distort what she was in that early point in her evolution. She may have rejected radical alteration as a kind of ghoulish ventriloquism which would not have been "perfectly honest." She may have been blind to flaws dredged from the common maw of her sensibilities. She may have deliberately left this story "bald, clumsy, and emotional," to stand as a touchstone against her later fulfillment.

Suppositions aside, Willa Cather persevered in her own voice. Jewett notwithstanding. A nameless critic in the Nation cunningly dubbed the collection *Youth and the Bright Medusa* "the triumph of mind over Nebraska," and that seems to pry at the lock of Cather's commitment. She was a woman of tender properties and robust will. She certified several mutualities of taste, feeling, and apperception with Jewett, but she did not admit of being led by the nose into vacant imitation. She partook of Jewett's fare when it suited her. When it did not, she remained unimpeachably Cather, for better or worse.