Sappho: Fragments
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The Country of the Pointed Firs

Sarah Orne Jewett has been comfortably and entirely located in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s “female world of love and ritual,” a placement confirmed by her more than three decades’ long Boston Marriage with Annie Fields.¹ Laurie Shannon, in “The Country of Our Friendship: Jewett’s Intimist Art,” an essay on which I build, locates Jewett within these erotic parameters and is willing to translate them into a reason to call Jewett “lesbian.” She builds her argument on Jewett’s trope of “the country of our friendship;” this is the terrain of her love for Alice Meynell that Jewett found had widened after a summer spent reading her poetry. Shannon expands on the erotics of Jewett’s Country of the Pointed Firs through contextualizations that include Edouard Vuillard’s intimist art, Swedenborgian philosophy, and Shaker notions of community. Jewett’s work, an exercise in local color and small-scale narrative, I venture, may be understood as a version of pastoral by way of its central assumption as William Empson formulated it: “[T]hat you can say everything about

complex people by a complete consideration of simple people.” Willa Cather suggested something like this in “Miss Jewett,” in Not Under Forty, a sketch derived in part from the preface she wrote for a collection of Jewett’s writing she gathered in 1925. Shannon ends her essay with Jewett and Cather’s relation; that’s where my discussion ends as well. Like her, I aim to widen the framework for understanding Jewett’s art; I do so under the name of Sappho. Cather pointed in this direction when she concluded her preface by placing Jewett beside Theocritus, finding in her writing “the beauty for which the Greek writers strove” (11).

Greek allusions are frequent in The Country of the Pointed Firs, almost always attached to Mrs. Todd, the narrator’s landlady, as she is called early and late (15, 130). (Jewett’s nameless “I,” identified well into the text as a “young lady” (122), is presumably single; Shannon notes that this couple composed of a “spinster and a widow” had to be “biographically resonant” [242].) Mrs. Todd, whose garden’s odors “roused a dim sense and remembrance of something in the forgotten past” (14), gathers the herbs needed to minister to needs physical and spiritual. She is called a sibyl at the beginning and again at the end of the book (17, 152), an enchantress with her brews (34), Medea (113, 152); “she might have been Antigone” in her “archaic grief” (49). She is a “caryatide” (34), like the Victory of Samothrace (41). Cather’s comparison of Jewett to Greek pastoral was fetched from Jewett: “She might belong to any age, like an idyl of Theocritus” (56).

I glanced at the resolute, confident face of my companion. Life was very strong in her, as if some force of Nature were personified in this simple-hearted woman and gave her cousinship to the ancient deities. She might have walked the primeval field of Sicily; her strong gingham

3 I will be citing from Sarah Orne Jewett, The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories, Preface by Willa Cather (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1954).
skirts might at that very moment bend the slender stalks of asphodel and be fragrant with trodden thyme, instead of the brown wind-brushed grass of New England and frost-bitten goldenrod. She was a great soul, was Mrs. Todd, and I her humble follower. (137)

This recurrent set of classical allusions climaxes at the Bowden Reunion over which Mrs. Todd’s mother, Mrs. Blackett, another widow, reigns, “always the queen” (89):

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. It was strangely moving to see this and to make part of it. The sky, the sea, have watched poor humanity at its rites so long; we were no more a New England family celebrating its own existence and simple progress; we carried the tokens and inheritance of all such households from which this had descended, and were only the latest of our line. We possessed the instincts of a far, forgotten childhood; I found myself thinking that we ought to be carrying green branches and singing as we went. So we came to the thick shaded grove still silent, and were set in our places by the straight trees that swayed together and let sunshine through here and there like a single golden leaf that flickered down, vanishing in the cool shade. (90)

These conjurings of ancient Greek rites and ceremonies celebrating heroic enterprises resonate with Sappho’s lyrics; they frequently allude to the Homeric past. Fragment 17, apparently a prayer to Hera for safe arrival on a sea journey, recalls the prayers of the sons of Atreus. Jewett’s Maine coast, with its difficult currents, its long-separated seafaring people, some of whom can be visited only at intervals of years, provides a similarly precarious geography. Helen’s journey is often on Sappho’s mind when she writes about her lovers. Mrs. Todd takes the narrator to visit her mother, sequestered on Green Island, whom she venerates. Sappho invokes her mother and daughter, both apparently named Kleis (Fragments 98, 132).
Mrs. Todd has a brother, William (he lives with their mother); Sappho’s world includes a brother. And, of course, her lyrics are filled with gardens, spring flowers, and breezes (Fragment 2), lovers crowned with flowers (94). Its ceremonial centers are the weddings alluded to in numerous fragments (27, 30, 103, 111, 112, 113, 115, 116, 117, 141, 161, 169). William’s marriage ends

_The Country of the Pointed Firs._

That country is the country of friendship, of “the undecidability of love and friendship,” as Shannon says (242). Each vignette inhabits this territory. Mrs. Todd, always the narrator’s landlady and hostess, becomes her friend. When they part, she glances at her “friend’s face, and sees a look that touched me to the heart” (158). That look carries her to imagine Mrs. Todd returning home to find “her lodger gone. So we die before our own eyes; so we see some chapters of our lives come to their natural end” (159). These ends coincide with allusions to a time out of time shared by these friends, indeed by all the friends in this text. The narrator entertains Captain Littlepage (he brings with him Milton’s happy rural seat as a place in his imagination and memory); “we parted the best of friends,” “as if” (the phrase recurs throughout) she “were a fellow shipmaster” (32). She is immediately a friend to Mrs. Blackett (39), to William too despite his shy reticence. With both she communicates heart to heart; without words they know each other’s thoughts (52, 117–9). But so too do the men on the dock share a “secret companionship” (102). Male–male; male–female; female–female, living and dead, near and far; these friendly relations end nowhere. Almost all the women in the book are widows, the men widowers, almost all are solitary, yet they form a country without borders. Mr. Tilley, befriended by the narrator, is eight years into mourning his wife; her presence is felt in his housekeeping (107) just as his mother is in his knitting (109).

Becoming “like the best of friends” (111), the narrator enters into these relations. She arrived in Dunnet Landing as a third person from whom an “I” emerges who only belatedly acquires a gender and never has a name. A writer who says of herself “I really did not belong to Dunnet Landing” (21), she ends by returning “to the world in which I feared to find myself a foreigner” (158). This not belonging is a form of a
wider belonging, as when Mrs. Morton, who imagines herself a twin to Queen Victoria, gives evidence, the “surprising proof of intimacy” between worlds apart (134) that is typical of “the unchanged shores of the pointed firs” (13) or of any “quiet island in the sea, solidly fixed in the still foundations of the world” (120).

* * *

In a December 13, 1908, letter from Jewett to Cather, she urged the young writer: “[Y]ou must find your own quiet centre of life and write from that to the world that holds offices, and all society…in short, you must write to the human heart, the great consciousness that all humanity goes to make up.” I cite the passage as Edith Lewis does in Willa Cather Living; Lewis goes on to say, “I am sure Willa Cather never forgot this letter…I think it became a permanent inhabitant of her thoughts.”

Jewett’s advice is somewhat at odds with what she had written Cather a couple of weeks before, after reading “On the Gulls’ Road,” a story of Cather’s just appearing in McClure’s (Cather also enclosed “The Enchanted Bluff” in her October 24 letter to Jewett). Confessing how close to Cather she felt reading “On the Gulls’ Road,” Jewett urged Cather to forgo the “masquerade” of writing as a male persona in this story of the narrator’s love for Mrs. Ebbling, a northern European woman whose “father was a doctor” (like Jewett’s) and “uncle a skipper” (like Jewett’s grandfather) (237). Jewett makes no mention of Cather’s story of the Sandtown boys (its narrator is one of the boys), their “romance of the lone red rock and the extinct people” (259) that constitutes the world of the friends in that story. It is arguably a story in which Cather found just what Jewett advised her

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5 Parenthetical citations are from Willa Cather, 24 Stories, edited by Sharon O’Brien (New York: Meridien, 1988).
to find; indeed, Cather could have had a sense of such possibilities of identification in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*; its world barely depends upon its narrator’s tenuous gender, nor is it a place of exclusively female–female relationships, although undoubtedly those lie at the center of the text.

Jewett may have been drawn to “On the Gulls’ Road” thanks to a letter of Cather’s written from Italy in May 1908. Cather was staying in a hotel on the Gulf of Salerno where Jewett had stayed. “Our hotel” (hers and Isabelle McClung’s) is also hers and Jewett’s; from the window they look out at “the sea of legend” that “Puvis de Chavannes painted” (111; his misty evocations of Greek pastoral could be adduced as a shared point of ekphrasis). “When I was little I knew a funny old lady in Nebraska who had some water from the Mediterranean corked up in a bottle,” Cather tells Jewett (111); Mrs. Ebbling in the story likewise recalls “a curious old woman” in her village who had returned from Italy with “a thin flask of water from the Mediterranean. When I was a little girl she used to show me things and tell me about the South…I suppose the water in her flask was like any other, but it never seemed so to me. It looked so elastic and alive” (237); “this was the way it looked,” she tells Jewett, “a color and a remoteness that exists in legends and nowhere else” (111). “The sea before us was the blue of legend, simply; the color that satisfies the soul like sleep” (237).

The water in the bottle figures the domain of the work of art. Its routes also shape Cather’s letter to Jewett, which proceeds by describing a ceremony celebrating the delivery of St. Andrew’s skull to the Amalfi coast 700 years earlier; she joins in. She then tells Jewett that she is reading the essays by Alice Meynell that Jewett had recommended (“how beautifully truthful she is about this pale-colored lovely earth” [112]), and reciprocates by sharing a poem by A.E. Housman with Jewett that “somehow rose out of the limbo of forgotten things and smote me full in the face” (112); she closes by assuring Jewett that her stories “abide with me always” (113).

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In *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, the Greek allusions that surround Mrs. Todd also extend to Esther, the woman who marries Mrs. Todd’s brother William after Esther’s mother dies; Esther is called a shepherdess. The narrator communes wordlessly with Esther in that inarticulate language of friendship, of things forgotten and recalled in literature’s soil. Mrs. Todd describes William as “kind of poetical” (113). “Poetical” echoes a text by another William: “Truly, I would the gods had made thee poetical,” Touchstone says to Audrey, beloved by the rustic William, in *As You Like It* (3.3.12). The tongue-tied William is replaced by a courtly clown; his desire for the poetical “implies,” as Empson notes about this exchange, “that the most refined desires are inherent in the plainest” (138). The name “William” had to have had a special appeal to Cather; it was how she named herself when young. To the end of her life, she signed herself “Willie” in letters to her beloved brother Roscoe, to old friends like Irene Miner Weisz and Carrie Miner Sherwood, to her nieces Helen Louise, Virginia, Margaret, and Elizabeth, and finally to Roscoe’s widow Meta.