1999

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The Narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and Author-Reader Relations at the End of the Nineteenth Century

Melissa Homestead

“Practically, there is no author; that is for us to deal with. There are all the immortal people—in the work; but there is nobody else.”

“Yes,” said the young man—“that’s what it comes to. There should really, to clear the matter up, be no such Person.”

“As you say,” Gedge returned, “it’s what it comes to. There is no such Person.”

—Henry James, “The Birthplace” (1903)¹

. . . the trouble with most realism is that it isn’t seen from any point of view at all, and so its shadows fall in every direction and it fails of being art.

—Letter of Sarah Orne Jewett to Thomas Bailey Aldrich (1890)²

The narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is an elusive figure. A narrator who is also a character in the fiction, she nevertheless reveals very little about herself as a character in the course of her narration. She is the unnamed speaking “I,” and she is “you” to Mrs. Todd and other characters. Although the narrator apparently travels to Dunnet Landing from a city, we don’t know where she lives the rest of the year; and we can only assume from her time spent in the schoolhouse engaged in “literary employments” that she writes for pay. But critics (and I happily include myself) find the narrator as a character irresistible, and they expend much effort on constructing her from scant internal evidence and on reading *Pointed Firs* as a story of her personal development. To name just a few examples, critics have highlighted the narrator’s apprenticeship to Almira Todd in the healing arts, the primal female love between the narrator and Mrs. Todd, the narrator’s relearning female-identified relational living and returning to teach living to an emotionally starved male-identified culture, the story’s ritual enactment of the Demeter-Perse-
phone myth (with the narrator taking the role of the daughter Persephone to Mrs. Todd's motherly Demeter), and, least flatteringly, the narrator's role as tourist, traveling to the country to write about the quaint folk to amuse her cosmopolitan audience and to reinforce its hegemonic power.  

My own analysis focuses on the narrator's most clearly defined characteristic: her profession. In the context of the literary field in the American 1890s, why did Sarah Orne Jewett choose to tell the stories of The Country of the Pointed Firs through a first-person narrator who happens to be a female author? What does Jewett's literary practice tell us about her construction of herself as an author and of her relationship to the marketplace and her readers through that authorial persona? Although the practitioners of high realism in Jewett's own time, and the New Critics following their example, counseled that we should not look for authors and authors' intentions in literary texts, nineteenth-century American readers clearly did read for the author in literary texts. Exactly what did they expect to find? That is, for a nineteenth-century American reader, what was an author, and what was an author supposed to do?  

These meanings and expectations did not remain constant over the course of the century, and I want to map out here two different cultures of authorship, one on the wane and the other on the rise, in order better to describe the position Jewett takes in relation to both with The Country of the Pointed Firs. The 1890s literary field represented, in many ways, a radical break from the past as the literary market grew exponentially and as authors increasingly became national celebrities. Daniel Borus has argued that as authors became powerful, wealthy public figures, realism paradoxically advocated a withdrawal of the author's personal presence in the literary text. Before this withdrawal, however, fiction writers, and particularly popular women writers of the 1850s through the 1870s, used literary strategies that actively encouraged readers to imagine novel reading as an immediate, personal communication with the author. These two cultures of authorship produced markedly different literary texts, which also embody radically different visions of the nature of author-reader relations; while realist practices have the effect of representing the author as powerful, distant, and independent, the earlier literary practices represent the author as present in personal service to the reader.  

Before I explicate where Jewett’s practices in Pointed Firs fall on the
continuum between these two poles, I want to outline the very different terrains of these two cultures of authorship. Novels by the “literary domestics,” to use Mary Kelley’s apt name for the popular women novelists of mid-century, encode both thematically and formally expectations that books are personal communication both produced and consumed within domestic space. On a formal level, the novelists often use what Robyn Warhol has labeled an “engaging narrator,” a narrator who uses direct address to the reader (“dear reader” or simply “you”) to engage the reader’s sympathy. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s engaging narrator of Uncle Tom’s Cabin is a classic example, with her many direct pleas to her readers to sympathize with the plight of the slaves. Arguing from the evidence of book reviews, Nina Baym has made a persuasive case that nineteenth-century readers routinely identified the narrator with the author and approached “the novel as an expression of authorial voice as well as the recital of story.” That is, the narrator herself, whom nineteenth-century readers would have closely identified with the author, becomes a kind of character in the novel, even though she does not take part in the action.

Thematically, many of these novels take on the question of author-reader relations directly by creating sympathetic heroines who are authors and who work valiantly to serve their readers despite the often conflicting demands of domestic responsibility. Indeed, the primary subject of these novels featuring author-heroines is this conflict between authorship and domesticity, and the resolution of this conflict determines the resolution of the plot. In Fanny Fern’s Ruth Hall, Ruth takes up writing after her husband’s death leaves her penniless. Combining authorship and domesticity is both an absolute necessity for Ruth and a nearly impossible task, especially in the face of opposition from family members who give her no financial support yet who find her writing for pay indecorous. Out of necessity, she writes in the thick of her very small domestic space, with her child sleeping beside her and “her mother’s heart... goading her on.” Her twin motivations are to earn a better home for her children and to improve the home lives of her readers through her writing. When she receives a fan letter from a man who says he is “a better brother, a better husband, and a better father, than I was before I commenced reading your articles” (183), Ruth breaks down in grateful tears. Eventually she manages to balance all of her obligations, writing morally instructive sketches that both please and instruct her readers.
In Marion Harland's *The Hidden Path* (1853), one of the two heroines, Isabel Oakley, faces a conflict between authorship and domesticity that is not financially determined like Ruth's, but that nevertheless drives the plot of the novel. Isabel writes from within a financially secure domestic space; as the unmarried daughter of a wealthy Philadelphia man who supports her intellectual pursuits, she claims as her space for writing “a small room in the rear of the family parlor,” separated from the main room only by a curtain rather than a door. The narrator lovingly lingers on the “neatness” and good taste of the room, “a pleasant boudoir, its light convenient furniture; pictures and books kept in perfect order” (232). Significantly, Harland chooses to represent a moment when the desk “wheeled directly in front of the [open] door” is “piled with letters,” the answers to which “engaged Isabel’s nimble fingers” (222), much as if she were sitting in the family parlor doing needlework. As in a similar scene in which Ruth Hall sorts through her fan letters, those that most engage Isabel are not those from the famous or letters of the “inquisitive and mercenary” classes. Instead, the letters that “warm the heart and kindle the eye” are “far more humble tributes from obscure or unknown readers—her ‘friends’ she loved to style them; blessings and thanks from the sick, the weary, the oppressed to whom the touch of her flowery sceptre had brought ease and strength and rest” (223).

From *within* that domestic authorial sanctuary, however, she witnesses her own undoing, as she unintentionally observes the man she loves proposing to another woman, a woman whom she urged him to entertain because her authorial duties kept her too busy. In an elaborately worked out continuing metaphor, Isabel becomes a figure of the female author as Christ, suffering an emotional crucifixion when her devotion to her readers causes her to lose the man she loves (“She wears the prickly Cavalry crown of Fame; / And praises follow all her steps, but sobbing, / Through the blank night, she breathes one hoarded name” [297]). Eventually, her beloved recognizes his mistake, and Isabel manages to combine marriage with authorship (although actually representing this balancing act seems to be beyond Harland’s own authorial talents, despite her ability to represent at *great* length Isabel’s experience of the conflict between the two). But before that reconciliation takes place, once again a letter from a humble reader consoles and sustains Isabel. The reader, a
female invalid, writes to Isabel describing Isabel's authorship in language vaguely echoing the Twenty-third Psalm's description of the protective, parental benevolence of a loving God:

I was weary, and you have rested me;—suffering, and you have soothed;—hopeless, and you have taught me hope;—and so, in my loneliness, I come to you in gratitude. Books are my friends now. Once they were a study, and a passion and a pride; but in ceasing to be these, they are more—constant and sympathizing companions. . . . [O]verwrought nerves shrink from spoken words of counsel and hope, and yet find them gratefully upon the printed page. And so, your book came to my couch a stranger, and lies beside me now—a friend, seeming, as every true book must—but a part of its author.

(319)

Out from Isabel's parlor study went her book, which this reader takes as a metonym for Isabel's body, entering the reader's home and lying on her couch with her. In Isabel's moment of need, this reader returns the favor, providing Isabel with consolation.

I hope these brief examples make clear the congruence between the imagined scenes of production and of reception in these fictions of female authorship, with literature flowing from the author's home to the reader's home and improving the lives of both. In other fictions of female authorship of the period, the same tropes of author-reader relations appear repeatedly: the author as teacher, mother, or sister to her readers in need of guidance, the work of writing as sewing, cooking, or other forms of nurturing domestic labor which takes place within the home in service to the family.

As literacy rose and the variety of reading materials proliferated, an entire genre of advice literature arose to guide reader consumers in their selection and consumption of books, to help them choose, as it were, which books to take in as friends to lie on their couches with them. As these advice books make clear, however, readers did not see themselves as selecting books or texts—independent, abstract objects separated from their creators—but as selecting the personal companionship of the people who wrote the books. In his Books and Reading; or What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them? the published version of his popular lectures on the topic, Noah Porter, president of Yale University, tells readers that they should ask authors who "solicit our attention" whether
they will gain anything from the authors: “If he can neither teach us anything which we do not know, nor convince us of anything of which we are in doubt, nor strengthen our faith in what we already receive, nor set old truths in new lights, nor warm our feeling into noble earnestness, nor entertain us with wholesome jokes, nor excite us to honest laughter, then he is not the man and his is not the book for us. Whatever he and his book may be to others, they have no claim upon us, and we should be quite ready to show both the door.”\(^{15}\) Porter here envisions an author as a person knocking on the doors of houses with his book in hand, asking to be let in to entertain their inhabitants. In Porter’s vision of reading, “We place ourselves in communication with a living man,” and if we don’t like what he has to say, we, as readers, can cut off communication by showing him the door. Once again, the focus is on reading taking place within domestic space, and on the author being present and in dialogue with the reader during reading.

On the reverse side of the same coin, magazine articles and books presenting sketches of “authors at home” encouraged readers to imagine visits to the author’s home for an inside glimpse of the domestic space where works of literature were produced.\(^{16}\) In 1895, the year before the serialization of *Pointed Firs* in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Jewett herself became the object of such an extended “author at home” portrait, written for syndicated publication in the Sunday newspaper supplements, and she (and even her dog and cat) made many briefer appearances in book and periodical accounts giving readers access to authors’ domestic lives and spaces. The writer of the syndicated article, her journey made arduous by rainy weather and the lack of a South Berwick train station, is immediately put at ease by “the face of the woman who stood in the broad paneled hall with its great doors at each end,” a face she finds “cheery enough to make up for any imaginable lack of sunshine” (the image of a female figure standing in “The Old Hall” next to the staircase with an open door behind her accompanies the piece, along with a conventional portrait of Jewett, a sketch showing the entire house, and another of a corner of the dining room).\(^{17}\) The writer repeatedly draws attention to Jewett’s claims to elevated social standing (because of both her authorship and her impeccable New England ancestry, embodied in the house and its furnishings), and she apologizes for the unseemliness of describing Jewett’s private residence and the writer’s private conversation with her. However, she also describes Jewett as graciously and willingly tell-
ing her about her house, her family, and the relationship of her writings to both, without being asked.

She goes on to describe Jewett’s daily production in numbers of words, her writing of some works in a single sitting and others across days and weeks, and the periods between of rest and contemplation. Having prepared her newspaper audience with a full tour of the house and this description of Jewett’s work habits, the writer finally leads readers into Jewett’s “den,” a scene marked by its scattered papers as the place where Jewett writes: “it is the most delightful I’ve ever seen. It is in the upper hall, with a wide window looking down upon the tree-shaded village street. A desk strewn with papers is on the one side and on the other a case of books and a table. Pictures, flowers, and books are everywhere.” After a tour of the library and a leisurely conversation with Jewett about books, modern literature, and “the new woman” (a conversation that somehow seems enabled by the writer’s access to Jewett’s writing desk), the journalist leaves, ending the piece with a second set-piece of Jewett standing in the doorway of her house. As the writer tells us, she will always remember the whole visit, but particularly “the strong, reviving personality of the slender, dark-haired, dark-eyed woman who looked out on a wet world so cheerily as she stood in the doorway in her simple summer dress to bid me goodbye.”

The high realist aesthetic was a world away from such scenes of authorial domesticity as that of Jewett in her doorway bidding adieu to her reader-visitor; the realist aesthetic instead insisted on authorial absence and distance rather than presence and personal engagement. As Borus argues, realist authors were sometimes suspicious and resentful of the increasing commodification of literature and authors in the expanding literary marketplace. The realists’ decision to break with the literary tradition of engaging narrators and thus to withdraw themselves (or at least figures of themselves) as personal, easily identifiable presences from their texts was a response to these market pressures. The narrator in the new Jamesian model of fiction became an omniscient but unobtrusively literary presence who focused the reader’s attention on the represented social “reality” of the text and on the psychological complexity of its fictional characters rather than on the author (at least according to the realists’ own self-justifications). However, as Nancy Glazener argues, such authorial distancing and withdrawal was also a part of a strategy to “professionalize” realist authorship by simultaneously constructing the
sentimental and sensational modes of authorship as unprofessional. As Glazener notes, sentimental fiction by writers like Stowe relied on an author-reader relation that Richard Brodhead has labeled "disciplinary intimacy," a relation "modeled on the loving counsel of a parent that a child internalized because of her identification with the parent," with the author taking the role of the mother and the reader the role of the child. Because "disciplinary intimacy was the function of mothers," argues Glazener, "in becoming professionals who withheld their personalities rather than quasi-parental counselors, authors distanced themselves from this feminine coding" of sentimental authorship (111). Claiming the authority of detached professionals, realists accused authors who continued to use strategies of narrative familiarity of "unprofessional laxness" in their artistic practices.

Despite the disappearance of the author from the realist text, many readers apparently continued to seek authors in those texts, and readers violating realist standards of decorum in their reading practices also came under attack. Henry James's story "The Birthplace," part of the epigraph for this essay, subtly mocks the typical nineteenth-century-style reader looking for the author in the author's works. The main character, Morris Gedge, is a failed schoolmaster and librarian, fleeing a librarianship at the town of "Blackmore-on-Dwindle," where, much to his horror, most of his patrons are young women who read nothing but popular fiction by women writers (a circumstance that identifies the "wrong" style of reading with woman readers reading woman writers). He is hired with his wife as caretaker of the cottage where a famous author was born, and although everyone refers to the author only as "He" or "Him," the cottage is clearly Shakespeare's cottage. Gedge suffers a crisis of conscience when he comes to realize that all of the stories he and his wife tell tourists about Shakespeare's childhood in the house are false, merely "the Show" put on for "Them," the people who come to see it all because their tourist guidebooks tell them to. In an unguarded moment, he proclaims to a sympathetic visitor that "there is no such Person" as Shakespeare, "there is no author... There are all the immortal people—in the work; but there's nobody else" (521). When Gedge's conscience leads him to hedge and qualify his statements when giving tours, the public won't have it. They want "Him" (Shakespeare), and if Gedge won't give Him to them, Gedge will lose his job. He finally resolves his dilemma by learning to lie, by carrying on the Show so well
that the board of overseers doubles his salary. The Author is not at home, but Gedge learns to conjure up a bogus vision of Him anyway.

James scorned direct address to readers as breaking the illusion of naturalness in fiction by introducing just such an authorial presence into the consecrated space of the fictional text. In his influential essay “The Art of Fiction,” he complains of Anthony Trollope’s “want of discretion” in speaking to his readers directly in digressions, parentheses, and asides because “such betrayal of a sacred office seems to [James] a terrible crime” which “shocks” him. Trollope is an author at home in his novels, and James wishes he would disappear, like the false specter of Shakespeare in “The Birthplace.” In a review of a published collection of Gustave Flaubert’s letters, James explicitly connects impersonal narration with resistance to demands for authorial presence in the marketplace. James praises Flaubert’s insistence on the “impersonality” of the literary text: “His constant refrain in his letters is the impersonality, as he calls it, of the artist, whose work should consist exclusively of his subject.” In light of this drive for impersonality, James deplores the publication of Flaubert’s private letters and the revelation of that personality that Flaubert deliberately chose not to reveal through his works: “He kept clear all his life of vulgarity and publicity and newspaperism only to be dragged after death into the middle of the marketplace, where the electric light beats the fiercest.”

In an unsigned Atlantic Monthly review of Jewett’s story collection Old Friends and New published sixteen years before the publication of Pointed Firs in the Atlantic, editor Horace Scudder explicitly urges Jewett to imitate Henry James’s narrative techniques, precisely because of the unseemliness of her personal presence in the stories through the voice of the engaging narrator:

[She should make] her characters act for themselves. At present they cling to her skirts, and she leads them about with her. . . . In Deephaven and these later sketches, the author has not yet felt the confidence which would enable her to withdraw her direct support from her characters. She cautiously holds, for the most part, to the form of the story which permits her to be present during most of the action. We suggest, as a practice experiment in story-telling, that she avail herself of the method which is sometimes used in Mr. James’s stories, where one of the characters, not identified with the
We can see here precisely how, as Glazener argues, an older style of narrative familiarity becomes identified with an unprofessional laxness coded as maternal and feminine. By being “present” as a narrating voice in her stories, argues Scudder, Jewett is like a mother with her children hanging about her skirts. Simultaneously, she is herself a literary child, immature and cautiously holding on to the prop of first-person narration to get her through her stories, much as her characters hang on to her maternal skirts to walk. Scudder here accuses Jewett of the same sort of literary transgression for which James would soon chide Trollope—being a personal authorial presence in her text.

As Daniel Borus argues, James's influential critiques of earlier fiction aside, the device of the engaging narrator “did function to establish the novel as a direct and personal communication between narrator and individual reader” (100). In contrast, readers of high realist narrative, “unable to pinpoint precisely the source of the narrative . . . find their interpretive space constricted and their role at times akin to that of a dazed spectator” (101). James's quotation of one formulation of Flaubert's aesthetics in his review captures nicely the paradoxical power of this authorial absence: “It is one of my principles that one must never write down one’s self: The artist must be present in his work like God in Creation, invisible and almighty, everywhere felt but nowhere seen” (332). Extending the metaphor backwards to Fern, Harland, and their contemporaries, one might say that the personal author present in the prerealist text through the engaging narrator or the figure of the author-heroine is like Christ, the personal, fully human presence of God, who enters the homes of ordinary people to serve them, rather than like James's author as God the Father, whose creation contains and imagines the reader by presenting a fully formed “objective” world open to neither an “author's” nor a reader's intervention.

In the 189os, a time of contention and transition in narrative method, what would Jewett's original readers have done with the figure of the author-narrator of Pointed Firs? As heirs to the realists, modern critics have often felt compelled to take pains to distinguish the narrator from
Jewett and to remind us, as Jewett herself did, that *Pointed Firs* is fiction and Dunnet Landing a fictional place. However, most of Jewett’s readers in the 1890s, schooled to read for authors, would not have felt the same compulsion to draw such distinctions, and even professional critics slipped easily into conflating Jewett with the figure of the narrator in their reviews of *Pointed Firs* after its publication in book form. An anonymous reviewer in *The Critic*, for example, observes: “The author tells the story of a seaside summer on the coast of Maine. She lives with a fine old countrywoman . . . she talks to a sea-captain . . . she sails out to the island” (emphasis added). While finding the subject of the tales to be slight, the reviewer attributes the appeal of the book to “the writer’s fine and constant appreciation of whatever is individual and excellent and nature and humanity as it lies about her. We do not see that Dennet [sic] is absorbing, but that Miss Jewett is absorbed. Her interest is unfailing and she invests each incident for the reader with the same gentle glamour which it obviously has for herself.” If pressed to state whether the book was memoir or fiction, this reviewer might have drawn a distinction between the narrator and Jewett; but the reviewer does not make this distinction clear, leaving open the possibility that “the writer’s” appreciation is so clear to the reader because “the writer” is a character in the book who clearly demonstrates her appreciation through words and actions. In a similarly unstable formulation, an anonymous reviewer in *The Nation* remarks, “The casual observer could see little of interest here, the average writer could make little of what he sees; but the acute and sympathetic observer, the exceptional writer, comes on the scene, looks about, thinks, writes, and behold! a fascinating story.” But is that observer and writer coming on the scene Jewett herself in a figurative sense, or has the reviewer conflated Jewett with the narrator as a character “coming on” Dunnet Landing as a visitor? Or both simultaneously?

We as modern readers are accustomed to pick up a paperback edition of *Pointed Firs* that is clearly labeled “fiction” (even if the text’s status as a “novel” always remains in doubt), but readers of *Pointed Firs* in its serialized version in the *Atlantic Monthly* faced no obvious or even subtle cues or clues that would have prompted them to draw a distinction between the narrating “I” and Sarah Orne Jewett. The first installment in the January 1896 *Atlantic* begins in the third person, describing an unnamed traveler and “lover of Dunnet Landing” returning to the Maine coast for a second visit. Several paragraphs into section 2 of the install-
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...ment, the narrating voice abruptly shifts to the first person, and the narrator reveals herself to be the traveler and also discloses that she is a writer. For the rest of the sketches, the narrator remains unnamed and relatively unspecified. We know more about the facts of Almira Todd's life history than we do hers. The two facts that she discloses about herself, that she writes and that she spends most of the year living in some other place that is more populous than Dunnet Landing, would also not have prompted an *Atlantic* reader to draw distinctions. Most readers of the magazine would have recognized Jewett as a regular contributor of both tales of country life narrated by an omniscient narrator and of first-person accounts of country excursions; and because Jewett was a literary celebrity, most readers would have known Jewett both as a Maine native and as a sometime resident of Boston and a participant in its literary life. For *Atlantic* readers, these known facts of Jewett's life and literary career would not have distinguished her from the narrator.

The *Atlantic* did not clearly label or segregate "fiction" and "non-fiction" in its issues or in its index, and the first installment of *Pointed Firs* shares the January issue with other prose pieces whose fictional status is similarly indeterminate. "A Farm in Marne" by Mary Hartwell Catherwood features a similar unnamed first-person narrator who is both a traveler and a writer; she describes a visit to a French convent and its farm, detailing the domestic economy of French peasants. Agnes Repplier, also writing as an unnamed "I," describes French peasants celebrating the Catholic "Fete de Gayant." In such a context, a reader could have easily read any of these pieces either as nonfictional narratives by authors directly describing their experiences of travel or as fictional pieces told through the character of a first-person narrator; or readers could simply have chosen not to draw such distinctions at all, relating to all of these first-person narrators as expressions of authorial character and perception, regardless of the fictional status of the events narrated. Although the original book publication of *Pointed Firs* was removed from this particular context, it contained no preface or other additional matter distinguishing Jewett from the narrator.

An instructive comparison can be made between the first installment of *Pointed Firs* in the January 1896 issue of the *Atlantic* and one of Henry James's artist tales, "Glasses," which appeared in the February 1896 issue. Although the first-person narrator remains unnamed throughout the story, the rapid accumulation of detail about him and his life, includ-
ing his profession as a painter, quickly marks him as a fictional character. Readers of the *Atlantic* would have known James and his reputation as they would have known Jewett and her reputation, and they knew he was not a professional portrait painter. As James critic Barbara Hochman argues, James's use of first-person narrators with clearly delineated personalities in his artist tales "inevitably drives a wedge between the act of narration and the figure of the writer." Indeed, Hochman argues, such first-person narration creates even more of a distance between narration and the figure of the author than James's use of a distant, impersonal narrator in his later novels whose narrative voice merges with characters who serve as narrative "reflectors." In James's later novels, a reader can still catch glimpses of a narrating voice and the personality of that voice, even if such a personality is harder to locate than that of an engaging narrator; but when the first-person narrator is a fictional character, a voice that the reader might identify with the author's is nowhere to be found. The narrator of "Glasses" often self-consciously draws attention to himself as a writer, if not a professional one, and to his act of constructing his tale, beginning the story with a reflection on the act of narration: "Yes, I say to myself, pen in hand, I can keep hold of the thread, let it lead me back to the first impression." The "I" holding the pen at the opening of "Glasses," however, is a fictional character, his act of narration doubly displaced from the figure of James, the man holding the pen behind the man holding the pen. The figure of the author in the text disappears altogether, and a reader seeking the author's personal presence in the text will be frustrated.

I would emphasize, however, that a first-person narrator only creates distance between the act of narration and the figure of the author when that first-person narrator is clearly distinguished from the author. The first-person narrator of *Pointed Firs* does not drive a wedge between the act of narration and the figure of the author, but instead allows for the possibility of bringing the two together, thus satisfying reader desire for authorial presence. From the realist perspective, we might read the narrator of *Pointed Firs* as functioning as the sort of Jamesian character-narrator that Horace Scudder urged Jewett to adopt, a figure detached from the author as teller (and thus detaching the author from her readers). However, from the perspective of a reader reading for the author, the narrator functions as a clear stand-in for Jewett, who thus remains in her text and accessible to her readers. Through this invocation of autho-
rial presence, the text maintains a connection to the tradition established by Jewett's female predecessors, adapting a realist strategy to distance herself from the represented world of her text while simultaneously allowing and even encouraging conflation of her as author with her author character who narrates the action. Of course, Jewett's strategies are not entirely the same as those of her predecessors. On a formal level, her narration is less intrusive. Although the narrator occasionally comments on the action before her, she does so because she is a direct observer and sometime participant, not because she is an engaging narrator. Although she draws attention to herself and her perceptions, she does not directly draw attention to her reading audience through direct address to that audience. On a thematic level, Jewett's narrator as a character belongs to a different cultural moment than Isabel Oakley or Ruth Hall. The description of her profession is presented matter-of-factly, and no crisis or conflict between authorship and domesticity structures the book. However, *Pointed Firs* still crucially aligns the narrator as an author figure with domestic scenes of production and consumption of story. She often drifts away from the professional labor of writing to observe and participate in the life of Dunnet Landing, or, on a metaphorical level, the author "disappears" to become an audience for oral folk culture.

The narrator only engages in the business of writing in the first few chapters of the book, a period of time during which she feels torn between her role as writer and her role as audience. She sits alone in her room in Mrs. Todd's house, and she finds it "impossible not to listen, with cottonless ears... with an idle pen in my hand, during a particularly spirited and personal conversation" between Mrs. Todd and one of her customers. After she lets herself abandon her writing to become Mrs. Todd's assistant in the spruce beer trade, she rents the empty schoolhouse in which to write, but once she is there, the "half-written page" (21) on her desk becomes a mark of her separation from the Dunnet Landing community. Although her encounter with Captain Littlepage in the schoolhouse at first seems like an answer to her longing for a "companion and for news from the outer world" that is "half-forgotten" in her authorial pursuits, the Captain is not the representative of oral folk culture that he at first seems to be. As his name suggests, he is a "little page," a man trapped in the world of intensively read works of "great" literature (Milton, Shakespeare, and the unnamed but obviously implied Coleridge). Littlepage derides the modern townsfolk for getting
"no knowledge of the outside worlds except from a cheap, unprincipled
newspaper," but despite his world travels, he appears to have gotten
all of his knowledge of the world from Milton, acquired while he spent
his time in solitary reading below deck in order to avoid getting too
"familiar" with his crew (25). After escaping the Captain and his print-
induced, Coleridgean phantasmagoria, she obligingly ingests a mysteri-
ous draught from Mrs. Todd's stock, and this draught seems to break her
ties to authorship, the schoolhouse, and the overly literate world repre-
sented by the Captain.

Despite her claim that she rented the schoolhouse for the remainder
of her stay in Dunnet Landing in order to have a quiet, private place to
write, after her encounter with Captain Littlepage, the narrator never
mentions writing again (and considering her report of her activities
for the remainder of the summer, one is led to assume that she had no
more time in her schedule for writing). Instead, the narrator turns to a
more authentic oral culture of stories passed from mouth to mouth,
often at the hearth, the center of the home, and to direct experience of
the world. In a typical progression surrounding the story of "Poor
Joanna" and Shell Heap Island, the narrator first actively solicits the
story from Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Fosdick, with prompting statements and
questions ("What time of year was this?" [61]; "How large an island is it?
How did she manage in winter?" [62]), until Mrs. Fosdick and Mrs. Todd
begin prompting each other, and the narrator's questions and her nar-
rated analysis drop away, the storytellers taking over. After she hears the
story, the narrator makes a pilgrimage to see the island firsthand, with
Mrs. Todd's and Mrs. Fosdick's words motivating her trip and shaping
her perceptions.

The eating of the pies inscribed with text at the Bowden Reunion
represents, I think, the apotheosis of the oral recapture of the abstract
world of print publication and circulation. In what Elizabeth Ammons
calls a "feast of language," a sacrament in which "a modern women writer
find[s] renewal and nurture in a matrifocal community" through eating
a pie that "fuses the realms of literary art (language) and domestic arts
(cooking),"32 the act of eating fuses not only domesticity and literature,
but orality and the written word. "[D]ates and names were wrought in
lines of pastry and frosting on the tops" of the pies, says the narrator, and
there was "even more elaborate reading matter" on one pie at her table,
which the guests "began to share and eat, precept upon precept" (96).
Mrs. Todd specially selects the word “Bowden” for the narrator to eat, while Mrs. Todd selects the word “Reunion” for herself. The cook, echoing the world of print, inscribes the pie with text, and the “author,” a guest at the table, returns the world of print to its source, the mouth. The metaphorical equation of reading with eating is an old one and, as critics have recently pointed out, in late-nineteenth-century America the metaphor usually served to simplify and hierarchize the relation between reader and text, figuring the text as a thing that readers simply swallowed; the object swallowed rather than the act of swallowing produced either a positive or negative effect on the swallower. The metaphorical equation of reading with eating thus often reinforced the notion that readers (particularly less-educated and female readers) were mindless, passive consumers. In the reunion scene, however, Jewett reclaims and revises the metaphor by making it clear that eating is not a mere matter of swallowing and incorporation. In Jewett’s reworking, reading is eating, but eating that happens in the rich, interactive social context of the meal, the banquet, or the feast. Here, “author” and “reader” sit together, with the “book” passed from hand to hand, the pieces tasted, savored, and commented upon. And the narrator, in an act of community and reciprocity, takes the role of the reader, the one who eats as opposed to the one who prepares and serves the food.

The narrator has been a guest at many houses during her stay in Maine, and in the end, she fittingly eats a house, the gingerbread representation of the Bowden Homestead, which is not covered in text, but which she describes as “an essay in cookery.” After consuming the word Bowden and eating the Bowden Homestead, the narrator’s sojourn in Dunnet Landing, her time as a guest and as audience, must end. She must leave so that she can again enter the abstract world of print, and, implicit in the logic of the book, write the narrative that is The Country of the Pointed Firs. Mrs. Todd’s placing of a bay twig in her basket when she departs implicitly recognizes this necessity; she must leave and take up her laurel wreath (bay being another name for laurel), reassuming the mantle of authorship. The “author” has been a guest contained within the homes of ordinary people, but now she will return to the city and literary professionalism and recontain those homes inside the world of the text she creates. Or, to use the narrative’s own imagery, she will bake her own big pie, inscribed with many more words, a representation of the world of Dunnet Landing, for others to consume in their homes.
The design of the book thus allows readers to imagine a very personal and immediate relationship between an author and her readers, including a reciprocity and exchanging of roles. Jewett herself often engaged in just such a personalized, author-centered mode of reading. In her letters, she writes of spending long evenings with authors whose works engaged her on a very personal level. She supplemented her heavy diet of literary reading with authors’ memoirs, biographies, and collections of published letters. No doubt she enjoyed the “Memories of Hawthorne” by his daughter Rose Hawthorne Lathrop and the excerpts from Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s letters that ran concurrently with *Pointed Firs* in the *Atlantic*. On her trips abroad with Annie Fields, she went on literary pilgrimages to visit living authors she admired, such as Tennyson, and to retrace the steps of dead ones. In a letter to Sarah Wyman Whitman, she describes with satisfaction her visit to Haworth for a pilgrimage to the Bronte home, even though she had been warned that things had changed since the death of the Bronte sisters: “Never mind people who tell you there is nothing to see in the place where people lived who interest you. You always find something of what made them the souls they were, and at any rate you see their sky and their earth.” In *Atlantic Monthly* sketches appearing alongside and between installments of *Pointed Firs*, Mary Argyile Taylor and Alice Brown shared their own literary pilgrimages with readers. Taylor describes with sensuous detail her stay in a house in Nohant, France, where George Sand once lived. She lingers over the oddly eroticized thrill she feels each night, when her “brain was strangely fired” as she “lay down to rest in the great curtained bed of George Sand.” In “Latter-Day Cranford,” Brown describes her trip to Knutsford, England, which, she is careful to say, “is emphatically not the Cranford of Mrs. Gaskell’s lovely chronicle, but it glitters with links of similitude” nevertheless because Gaskell had lived there. Nineteenth-century readers of *Pointed Firs* would, I believe, have felt just such a sense of intimacy with Jewett through the figure of the author-narrator, just as many latter-day pilgrims to Martinsville, Maine, have recognized that it is emphatically not the Dunnet Landing of Jewett’s chronicle, though they still seek links of similitude and traces of Jewett’s presence.

Describing the shrinking size of her stories in an 1890 letter to Annie Fields, Jewett says, “They [the stories] used to be long as yardsticks, they are now as long as spools, and they will soon be the size of old-fashioned peppermints.” As Sarah Sherman says of this typically puckish Jewett
self-analysis, it is crucial that Jewett envisions her art as something to be eaten or consumed, like a “domestic communion wafer: a sweet designed to disappear into the substance of the reader, not to remain outside experience like a yardstick.” A yardstick is also, of course, an instrument of measurement and judgment, and Jewett chose not to stay outside of her readers to measure and judge them, like the Jamesian author, God the Father. Jewett’s fictional strategies in *Pointed Firs* are more akin to those of Harland and Fern than those of James. Serving readers’ desires to connect imaginatively to the author, Jewett created an author figure who puts aside the task of writing to listen to ordinary people and to be an honored guest in their homes. Jewett’s author heroine allows herself to be taken into the home, away from the call of “Art” and professionalism; through her author figure, Jewett built a personal relationship with her readers rather than stage a Jamesian withdrawal from them. Although in the act of fiction writing she necessarily assumed a controlling position outside or above the world of her readers, she was not an impersonal, omniscient Author-God, but a woman who strategically allied herself with the domestic values of her readers without surrendering strong authorship.

Notes


5. For the useful and evocative phrase “reading for the author,” I am indebted to Barbara Hochman, who applies the phrase in a different manner. See “Disappearing Authors and Resentful Readers in Late-Nineteenth-Century American Fiction: The Case of Henry James,” ELH 63 (1996): 177–201.

6. Daniel Borus, Writing Realism: Howells, James, and Norris in the Mass Market (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988). My account relies on Borus’s central insight: that realism advocated effacement of personal authorial presence in literary texts at least in part in reaction to the commodification of the author in the expanding literary marketplace. However, Borus focuses exclusively on male realists. Although he claims that he is mapping the intellectual terrain of realism and that his narrative would look the same if he discussed women writers (10), as my argument will suggest, the aesthetic dicta of high realists were a gendered response to the practices of popular women writers. Jewett, as a woman writer who valued the tradition of women writers who came before her, does not break as radically from their literary practices. For the sake of simplicity, I will be using the term “realism” throughout to indicate the literary strategies sometimes called “high realism” that emerged in late-nineteenth-century America, while recognizing that the term “realism” is problematic.

7. Borus reads high realism much more sympathetically than I do, seeing the withdrawal of the author as an attempt to reestablish direct, personal communication with the reader who has been alienated from the celebrity author. Considering the tenor of male realists’ critiques of the excesses of sentimentality practiced by their female predecessors and contemporaries, however, I tend to see their pronouncements more as a turf war with a popular, female-identified tradition that apparently served the needs of many readers very well. For a very different reading of Jewett’s work as reacting to the aesthetic dicta of male high realists, see Michael Davitt Bell, “Gender and American Realism in The Country of the Pointed Firs,” in New Essays on “The Country of the Pointed Firs,” ed. June Howard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 61–80. For Henry James’s antagonism toward his female predecessors and contemporaries, see Alfred Habegger, Henry James and the "Woman Business" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

8. Mary Kelley, Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), passim. See viii–ix for her explanation of her choice of the term to designate these writers.


14. Among other novels of this genre that employ similar tropes are Harland’s *Phemie’s Temptation* (1869), Susan Warner’s *Queechy* (1852), Augusta Jane Evans’s *Beulah* (1859) and *St. Elmo* (1867), and Helen Hunt Jackson’s *Mercy Philbrick’s Choice* (1876). Mary Kelley discusses many of these novels in chapter 5 (“Secret Writers”) of *Private Woman, Public Stage*. I am greatly indebted to Kelley’s work, which interprets these novels as unconscious expressions of psychic conflict in the author’s own lives, but I prefer to read the novels as means of strategic authorial placement in the literary field. Evans’s novels, particularly *St. Elmo*, are better known to modern readers than Harland’s, and many (including Kelley) have commented on Edna Earle’s failure to reconcile authorship and domesticity and have taken this failure as typical. However, despite the conflicts that also appear in the other novels named above, reconciliation of domesticity (with or without marriage) and authorship, not Edna’s forswearing of one for the other, is the norm. Note also the stark contrast between these fictions of female authorship and Melville’s *Pierre*, which reveals the author-hero, Pierre, to be incapable of accommodating himself to the market (and its many female readers). He bars himself in a room alone to write, away from the bizarre female menage that lives with him, and commits suicide when his publisher tells him that his book, then in page proofs, will not be published because it would be a fraud on the public.


16. See Borus, *Writing Realism*, chapter 5, for a discussion of this genre. Again I read the primary materials quite differently. Borus sees the “system of celebrity” elaborated through the author-at-home genre as causing the “author’s status [to dwarf] the reader’s” (117), thus introducing distance and mystery. Instead, I see the genre as potentially closing the distance between author and reader and allowing for personal communication.

17. “Pleasant Day with Miss Jewett,” *Philadelphia Press*, August 18, 1895, n.p. I have surmised that this article was syndicated based on the appearance of an apparently identical article on the same date in both the *Press* and the *Boston Sunday Herald*. See descriptions of these items in Gwen L. Nagel and James Nagel, *Sarah Orne Jewett: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978), 28–29. On the development of the fiction syndicates generally, see Charles Johanningsmeier, *Fiction and the American Literary Marketplace: The Role of the Newspaper Syndicates in America, 1860–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Not coincidentally, Jewett sold at least four stories to the Bacheller newspaper syndicate in 1895, suggesting both Irving Bacheller’s and Jewett’s recognition of the promotional value of a biographical sketch in the same venue. See


21. James is aware of the irony of his review, which, after proclaiming that the letters shouldn't have been published, proceeds to quote from those letters at length in his analysis of Flaubert's "artistic temperament." Thus, after a brief protest, James nevertheless takes on the task of probing Flaubert's tortured psyche with great relish.

22. [Horace Scudder], "Recent Novels" (review of Old Friends and New), Atlantic Monthly 45 (May 1880): 686.

23. See, for instance, Jewett's letter to a young fan, Mary E. Mulholland, who asked where on the Maine Coast Dunnet Landing was: "I cannot tell you just where Dunnets [sic] Landing is . . . . It is not any real 'landing' or real 'harbor'" (Sarah Orne Jewett Letters, ed. Richard Cary [Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1956], 89). Note also the attempt of residents of Port Clyde, Maine, a town close to Martinsville, where Jewett vacationed before and perhaps during the writing of Firs, to claim the Port Clyde schoolhouse as the place where she wrote Firs, thus conflating the town with Dunnet Landing and the narrator with Jewett (Paula Blanchard, Sarah Orne Jewett: Her World and Her Work [Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1994], 75).

24. Review of The Country of the Pointed Firs, Critic (February 13, 1897): 110. The review continues to conflate Jewett with her narrator by using this unspecified "she."


26. Although Catherwood and Repplier are relatively obscure figures now, they were also regular Atlantic contributors who would have been familiar to many readers. Several more installments of the Repplier and Catherwood travel sketches appeared in the following 1896 issues of the Atlantic, alongside or between appearances of subsequent installments of Firs, as do strikingly similar first-person travel and nature accounts by other writers, such as Bradford Torrey's descriptions of birdwatching in the Southern states (February and September), Maurice Thompson's account of bird specimen collecting in the Okefenokee (April), several sketches by Lacfadio Hearn of life in Japan (May and September), and yet more birdwatching memoirs (Olive Thorne Miller in Maine in May, June, and July).

27. The four installments of Firs appeared in the January, March, July, and


30. Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), 18. All subsequent page references are to this, until recently the most widely available edition. However, my analysis focuses only on those chapters that appeared in the original book publication in 1906 (that is, I ignore “William’s Wedding,” “A Dunnet Shepherdess,” and “The Queen’s Twin”).

31. Many scholars have examined the dynamics of storytelling in *Firs* (see, for just two examples, Marilyn Sanders Mobley, *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison: The Cultural Function of Narrative* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1991], and Sandra A. Zagarell, “Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre,” *Signs* 13 (1988): 498–527), so I will not discuss these dynamics in detail here. Recent ideological critiques of regionalism have alerted us to the possible conservative impulse behind Jewett’s claiming of Maine rural culture as “authentic” and of the cosmopolitan narrator’s appropriation of that authentic culture (see Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*; Sandra A. Zagarell, “Country’s Portrayal of Community and the Exclusion of Difference,” in *New Essays*, ed. Howard, 39–60; Elizabeth Ammons, “Material Culture, Empire, and Jewett’s *Country of the Pointed Firs*,” in *New Essays*, ed. Howard, 81–100; and Susan Gillman, “Regionalism and Nationalism in Jewett’s Country of the Pointed Firs,” in *New Essays*, ed. Howard, 101–17). Without denying the validity of the concerns raised by the critique of regionalism, I want to suggest that the relationship between the narrator and the people of Dunnet Landing operates on more than one axis. “Urban” and “rural” are not the only operative terms structuring these relationships; the characters also exchange the roles of “authors” and “readers,” “tellers” and “audiences.” As Johanningsmeier argues in “Two Shrewd Businesswomen,” the newspaper syndicates allowed Jewett to reach many poor and rural readers, readers that Brodhead insists were not readers of regional fiction, but were instead only the objects of a fiction that was consumed by middle- and upper-middle-class readers of magazines like *Harper’s* and the *Atlantic Monthly*.

32. Ammons, “Material Culture, Empire, and Jewett’s *Country of the Pointed Firs*,” 81. In this, Ammons’s most recent essay on *Firs*, she emphasizes not the matrifocal celebration of the feast, but the way that the feast and attendant reunion ceremonies transform Dunnet into a center of empire. Ammons’s read-
ing flattens the text down to one level of meaning; I cannot agree with Ammons's insistence that the reader has no choice but to enact that meaning, consciously or unconsciously.


34. Although Jewett added the chapters featuring the narrator’s visit with Elijah Tilley for book publication, the serialization fittingly ends with the reunion and the implicit recognition that the narrator’s visit must draw to a close with the closing of the summer. The final chapter, describing the narrator’s departure, was also added for book publication.


