CONSTANCE FENIMORE WOOLSON
THE LAKE COUNTRY

Woolson as Precursor:
Jewett and Wilkins Freeman Talk Back to “Ballast Island”

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The fiction of Constance Fenimore Woolson is thick with allusions. Just one story sent me chasing down passages from the Bible and Greek myth, looking up a German mystic whose name I couldn’t pronounce, scouring atlases and encyclopedias and anthologies of American, English, French, and German literature. There I was, a full professor with the resources of a good university library, struggling to scale a mountain of learning that had been built by a woman whose formal education had ended at Madame Chegaray’s finishing school for young ladies.

The range and depth of Woolson’s reading humbled me, but more than that, it intrigued me. Woolson’s allusive ways allied her with a literary culture that marginalized women and defined women writers’ ambitions as illegitimate. But it was clear that even while she was curtsying to her forefathers, she was challenging them. Not with the lethal blows with which Harold Bloom imagines belated male writers attacking the work of their literary fathers, but with witty replies that invited further dialogue. Picking up an image here and a situation there, Woolson says to Hawthorne and Cooper, to Bret Harte and Henry James, and most daringly to the Bible, “Yes, but what if...” and sometimes “No” or even “No, damn it!” She revises their plots, brings their marginal characters to the center of her narratives, questions their assumptions and even critiques the genres in which they write.

But Woolson is rarely seen as precursor herself—as a writer so powerful that she provokes strong readings from other writers. The case I want to make for Woolson as precursor is not an easy one to prove. I’m going to argue that her early story “Ballast Island” made a profound impact on two women writers who are far better known than she is. One of them—Sarah Orne Jewett—can’t even be called belated because she was born in the same year as Woolson—1840—though her major work was written after Woolson’s death. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman was half a generation younger, but if I’m right that she was replying in her own fiction to “Ballast Island,” she would have had to remember Woolson’s story for 18 years after it appeared in Appleton’s Journal in June of 1873. Jewett would have had to remember it for 23 years. That’s claiming a lot for human memory.

Still, I hope to persuade you that with this story, Woolson created a spinster so original and memorable that she prompted Jewett and Freeman to respond to her both energetically and specifically, if a bit tardily. All three were spinsters themselves, though Miss Wilkins would marry Mr. Freeman when she was 49. And like all serious women writers of their time, they kept close tabs on each other’s work. Planning a story, Woolson wrote in her collection of “Mottoes, Maxims, Reflections.” “Have all the scenes as distinctly American as S. Jewett, and Miss Wilkins...but more realistic.” Jewett and Wilkins Freeman must have followed Woolson’s work as well, since she was publishing steadily, and to serious critical acclaim, in the same prestigious magazines where they were placing their own work.

“Ballast Island,” Woolson’s story about a solitary woman lighthouse keeper, was itself responding to several strands in American life and fiction. One was the fascination with solitary bachelors like Natty Bumppo, the enduring creation of Woolson’s great-uncle James Fenimore Cooper, and the New England recluse like Thoreau at Walden Pond and Hawthorne in his “haunted chamber.” These men were repected, but for a woman to “select her own society, then shut the door” as Emily Dickinson did, was a far more radical act of rebellion.

Spinsters provoked a cultural debate throughout the 19th century. Susan Koppelman claims that at the start of the century, fiction made “the lot of the women who did not marry appear so loathsome, so ridiculous, so pathetic, so unnatural or unhealthy, so empty and cold, that no one would willingly choose such a life” (3). By the 1830s, however, a reaction set in and old maids were often depicted as wise aunts who were loved and appreciated for their devotion to the happiness and well-being of family and community. Competing with the
Cult of True Womanhood was the Cult of Single Blessedness. But by the 1870s, when Woolson was starting to publish, the pendulum had swung back and spinsters were once again depicted as “socially and spiritually stunted” (Chambers-Schiller, 35, 39-40). In 1888, when Henry James lists the types of characters whose inner lives interest Woolson, he lumps together “the weak, the superfluous, the disappointed, the bereaved, the unmarried” (272).

Bereaved and unmarried women were in fact more numerous than ever before in American life, since the Civil War had killed off more than half a million young men. Women for whom no mates existed were seen either as superfluous or “redundant.” Young men who had survived the war often left their homes to seek their fortunes elsewhere. The situation was particularly acute in New England, where Jewett and Freeman lived and where Woolson was born. She claimed to be “very strongly ‘New Hampshire’ in all my ways. I have a row of tall solemn Aunts up there, silent, reserved, solitary, thin, and a little grim; I am as much like them as the kind of life I lead will allow” (Hubbell, 732). We’ll meet these in the remarkable spinster of “Ballast Island.”

Woolson opens her story with a young woman setting off in her rowboat on Lake Erie because she’s angry with the muscular young minister she loves. A violent gale strikes and blows her past all the islands but Ballast with its lighthouse. Elizabeth manages to land her skiff on the island’s narrow beach, and fight her way through the storm to the only shelter on the island. There she meets the lighthousekeeper, a tall, thin, shapeless woman who calls herself Miss Jonah. (Women did indeed tend lighthouses on the Great Lakes.) Ironic and shrewd, strong and competent, Miss Jonah nurses the exhausted girl and saves the minister from drowning when he sails through the gale to find her. But the young lovers evoke memories of Miss Jonah’s own heartbreak, and she tells them about her youth as an orphan in Georgia whose family was “not exactly poor white trash”(838). She raised her sister Mattie and got engaged to Joe, though after seven years he still couldn’t earn enough for them to marry. One evening in the garden she overheard Joe and Mattie confess their love for each other and their refusal to betray her. Now at this point I think Woolson is revising a story by the prolific writer Catharine M. Sedgwick, whose Tales and Sketches were published in 1835 and may well have been in the Woolson library. Sedgwick’s story “Old Maids” features another motherless girl who also dotes on the young sister she raises. Agnes keeps school to pay for Elizabeth’s education, but her fiancé falls in love with Elizabeth and one evening Agnes overhears him declare his love and her sister’s wish to die rather than betray the only mother she’s ever known. Agnes sees “yawning at their feet—an abyss only to be cleared by her self-immolation”(25). She leaps into the abyss and when the man proves an “inconstant” husband, “self-indulgent, and idle, and finally intemperate,” she labors year after year to support her sister and educate her children (26).

Woolson recognizes this kind of devotion, though in her story “Miss Elisabetha” she explores its subterranean motives and suggests that it’s unlikely to be rewarded. But in Miss Jonah she creates a spinster too passionate to endure marriage to a man who doesn’t love her, or a life watching him married to the sister she adores. Instead of the self-immolation that Agnes chooses, Miss Jonah tosses her shawl into the reeds to make Joe and Mattie think she’s drowned, then flees to the North and takes a pseudonym so she can never be traced. Then Mattie can inherit the farm and marry Joe without guilt. She nurses Confederate soldiers in prison camps and then gets the job as lighthousekeeper of Ballast Island. “I like it,” she says. “It’s lonely, but I’m best alone” (838). Miss Jonah is not a recluse. Solitude is part of her job. She keeps a cot for Old Kit who brings her supplies and keeps his Sunday clothes in her cabin. Company is welcome, maybe even a lover, when one comes her way.

Has Miss Jonah sacrificed her life for those she loved? The minister thinks so, and Victoria Brehm agrees, in her essay discussing Woolson’s Great Lakes fiction. But Miss Jonah makes her motives plain: “I can stand being away from Joe,” she says, “but I couldn’t stand being near him. I love him the same as ever” (839). Leaving home was an act of self-preservation. She doesn’t even want to know if her choice has brought happiness to Joe and Mattie: “If I have done wrong, it can’t be mended now,” she says; “if I have done right, it mustn’t be spoiled” (839). She refuses to leave the island with the young lovers, because she “couldn’t be happy nowhere.” Life has cornered her. Though she made a bold choice, even a heroic one, reliving her loss sets her pacing the beach in “dumb agony” (839) and, I think, pondering suicide. This woman who, at 43, is strong as a horse, has “a fancy I shall not live long” (838). She asks to be buried without “any stone or even a mound, for I want to be clean forgotten” (839). This seems to challenge Victoria Brehm’s conclusion that Miss Jonah’s life poses “an alternative to marriage, an example of how a woman can thrive without love” (176-7).
What is does demonstrate, I think, is how a woman can choose to live bravely and generously without immolating herself or destroying those she loves. But I wouldn’t say she thrives.

Mary Wilkins Freeman lifts the central dramatic situation of her story “A New England Nun” directly from “Ballast Island.” Here too, a woman overhears her fiancé—also named Joe—confess his love to another woman. Both Joes have a strong sense of loyalty and vow to marry the women who have waited for them for seven years, in Woolson’s story, or fourteen years, in Freeman’s, while their Joes tried to earn enough money for them to marry. But Freeman poses a bold question to Woolson. What if a woman’s response to overhearing her fiancé declare his love to someone else is not anguish but relief—a sudden epiphany that she prefers her single life? If she breaks her engagement won’t have to endure a man’s dirt and disorder or worry that he’d free her old dog and liberate that male lust she keeps on a chain. She wouldn’t have to meet the demands of his autocratic mother or cook heavy meals. She could go on nibbling delicate cakes and biscuits, distilling the essences of her flowers and sitting by the window while the noisy, fertile life of the village goes on without her. If Louisa “had sold her birthright she did not know it,” Freeman concludes, “the pottage was so delicious, and had been her sole satisfaction for so long.” A woman may indeed find satisfaction outside of marriage, but unlike Miss Jonah, this “uncloistered nun” does no useful work and has no broader or higher commitment than to her own “placid narrowness” (360).

When Sarah Orne Jewett replies to Woolson’s story she not only mirrors the situation where a fiancé falls in love with another woman, but also the setting—a deserted island—and the heroine’s name, turning Miss Jonah into Miss Joanna. Joanna’s fiancé does not suffer the pangs of honor that afflict the Joes. When he’s “bewitched” by another woman he simply jilts Joanna. And she is so angry that she commits the “unpardonable sin”: “My thoughts were so wicked towards God,” she says, “that I can’t expect ever to be forgiven” (106). Believing she’s unfit to live among other people, she leaves her share of the family farm to her brother, as Miss Jonah leaves hers to her sister, but Joanna doesn’t disappear into anonymity to spare him guilt and pain. Instead, she sails off to Shell-heap Island where people on Black Island can see her through a spyglass and her family and friends can see the smoke from her chimney. Like Miss Jonah she rejects entreaties to return to society, but unlike Woolson’s heroine, she doesn’t seek a useful job but works only to keep herself alive to live out her self-imposed penance.

Jewett seems most interested in Woolson’s audacious rewriting of the story of Jonah. What if Jonah were a woman? A man might run from God, but a woman would run from people, Miss Jonah to spare everyone pain, Joanna because she believes God demands it. While sailors throw Jonah overboard to calm a violent storm that’s about to wreck their ship, and Miss Jonah pretends to throw herself overboard, Joanna heaves herself overboard and onto a desert island. Though Jonah cries out from the belly of the whale, neither Joanna nor Miss Jonah pleads with God. They take matters into their own hands.

In both tales, the central scene dramatizes a visit to the island by a young woman and a minister. Woolson’s minister is so richly endowed with heart and brain and muscle that he manages to sail to Ballast Island in a gale to find Elizabeth. Jewett is far less impressed by clergy. Her Parson Dimmick is so dimwitted he nearly capsizes the boat he’s sailing to Shell-heap Island by insisting on keeping the main sheet cleated. When a gust comes he stands up and shrieks, and Mrs. Todd has to knock him down in order to untie the rope and save their lives. While Woolson’s minister is keenly sensitive to the pain and needs of Miss Jonah, Parson Dimmick accuses and threatens Joanna instead of encouraging her to cure her ills helping others. After his visit, she refuses to see anyone until the day of her death.

Another concern these stories share is the women’s relation to nature. Annis Pratt has pointed out a broad stream in women’s fiction that shows young women in ecstatic communion with nature, finding in the “green world” a sense of autonomy, freedom, and possibility, and sometimes a “green world lover” who supplants living men (16-24). But Woolson often parodies as affection or delusion the Romantic desire to live “close to the great heart of nature” (“Lady,” 3) which she generally attributes to solitary men. Single women in her fiction tend to domesticate nature. In “Castle Nowhere,” the innocent Silver marooned on a floating castle on Lake Michigan makes pets of two seagulls and kisses the flowers that she grows “everywhere—on the floor, up the walls, across the ceiling, in pots, in boxes, in baskets, on shelves, in cups, in shells, climbing, crowding each other, swinging, hanging, winding around everything” (37). Like Hawthorne’s Beatrice Rappaccini, Silver’s criminal father has isolated her and forced her to make sisters out of flowers. Flowers comfort the lighthousekeeper of Ballast Island, too. Like Silver, she fills her rooms with flowers—“in boxes, pots, and baskets, on shelves, on the floor, hanging from the ceiling, and climbing over the plastered walls”