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The Lost America: Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs (revised)

Fog-shaped men

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Woven with a delicate sensibility towards the elements and the senses, the collection of stories that –connected by the narrator's voice- form *The Country of the Pointed Firs* deliver a rich, nostalgic, odorous atmosphere of place and a loving sense of the gravity of everyday human gestures. The landscape seems to be the main character of the story, always interjecting its voice in the slow, natural flow of Dunnet Landing' inhabitants' conversations.

“There was a silence in the schoolhouse, but we could hear the noise of the water on a beach below. It sounded like the strange warning wave that gives notice of the turn of the tide. A late golden robin, with the most joyful eager of voices, was singing close by in a thicket of wild roses.” (p.21)

Mainly consisting of older people, the world of the fictional town of Dunnet Landing obliges the modern reader to wonder about their fates, and about the reasons for Orne Jewett's calmed meandering around their lives -beyond the narrator's desire for tranquility and seclusion-. In a two-chapter long conversation with one of the inhabitants of this non-existing Maine town, the narrator and Captain Littlepage touch upon an ambiguous contrast between a seaman's scholarship and knowledge of the world (in

some ways reminiscent of our Ishmael)¹, and inshore small-town parochialism². The contrast condenses the tension or contradiction, in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, between nostalgia for a rustic country, and awareness of social, economic change.

“They saw the world for themselves, and like’s not their wives and children saw it with them. They may not have had the best knowledge to carry with ‘em sight-seein’, but there were some acquainted with foreign lands an’ their laws, an’ could see outside the battle for town clerk here in Dunnet, they got some sense o’ proportion. Yes, they lived more dignified, and their houses were better within and without. Shipping’s a terrible loss to this part o’ New England from a social point o’ view, ma’am.” (p.20)

In the same conversation Captain Littlepage relates a strange story told to him by a sea-captain, only survivor of a wrecked vessel, about an unknown place located “two degrees farther north than ships have ever been” with no ice or snow, and where the navigation instruments were useless. This place, where “there was neither living or dead” (p.25) was populated by strange, *fog-shaped* beings that seemed defiant, unreal. The town itself, visible from the ship, disappeared from sight once the crew tried to reach it in land; the day came when a fog-shaped mob expelled (in silence, in quietness) the frightened crew. The superstitious crew of the vessel believed it to be a waiting place between “this world an’ the next”.

The image of menacing fog-shaped men in a vanishing town is disturbing in a book that invests much of its pages describing the odors and the textures of an adorable town where things are well lit, crisp and clear; the blurry image of fog comes to mind as a powerful, intriguing contrast. Is *The Waiting Place*, as an unattainable, confusing reality,

¹ “Most of us old shipmasters came to know ‘most everything about something.” (p.21)

² Speaking of the defunct Mrs. Begg: “She had been brought up on one of the neighboring farms, and each of the few times that I had seen her she professed great dissatisfaction with town life.” (p.14)

a projection made –perhaps unconsciously- by a writer of a country that was unfolding in unintelligible ways? After his account, the old Captain Littlepage fixes his eyes:

“Behind me hung a map of North America, and I saw, as I turned a little, that his eyes were fixed upon the northernmost regions and their careful recent outlines with a look of bewilderment.” (p.27)

No other mentions of the Waiting Place story are done in the rest of the book. In no other passage is the word “America” pronounced.