

‘ENISLING’ NARRATIVES

Some Thoughts on Writing the Small Island

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Otherness

Small, offshore islands, Maine island writer Ruth Moore wrote, “belong to themselves/They stand in their own sea” (Moore, 1990). In an aerial view, the island Moore knew best—the island where I also live—floats, amoeba-like, an irregular shape bounded by a ring of bright granite, against its dark sea. This island, like the Scillies described by John Fowles, appears to represent an “obstinate separateness of character” defined in large measure by the “enisling sea.” It is ever silent, elusive, separate. It is always “other” (Fowles, 1978: 30).

But Fowles approaches narrative as islanded as well. “Key events and confrontations” within the text are, he says, like separate, bounded islands within the “sea of story” (Fowles, 1978: 30). Although this observation no doubt relies in good measure on Fowles’ reading of Odysseus’ island ventures and is not intended as definitive for centuries of island narratives, I find it valuable in considering how episodic structure informs particular examples of small island writing. The American writer Sarah Orne Jewett may also have had structural correspondences on her mind when she declared that she could not write long, sustained narrative (Alpers, 1996: 397). Jewett’s most famous work, *Country of the Pointed firs*, is a series of episodes experienced by a narrator from ‘away’; and though a coastal rather than island narrative, arguably its two most important chapters are played out on two contrasting offshore Maine islands, two separate specks of sea-separated land.

The notion of otherness also characterizes commentary about literature of the island: J.M. Synge’s *Aran Islands* has been called an “anomaly” that eludes genre classification (Franks, 2006: 87), and Tove Jansson’s 1974 classic, *The Summer Book*, has been described as “impossible to categorize” (Freud, 2003: 9). Both of these texts—written almost a century apart, one non-fiction, the other not—are, like Jewett’s *Pointed Firs*, collections of loosely connected ‘chapters,’ each an entity in itself. In these examples of modern island literature, both time and place specific, we do not find a long sustained narrative that might be likened to a journey ‘from coast to coast.’ Small islands do not have ‘coasts’ in this sense. We do not begin at one defined spot and end at another. Rather, we move around in a small island, experience parts that are themselves “enisled”.

Paradise Found and Lost

That the parts are small adds to their appeal to the modern sensibility. “An island pleases my imagination” the nineteenth-century American writer Henry David Thoreau once wrote (Gillis, 2004: 29). To find a similar pleasure the modernist writer, driven by a sense of alienation and desirous of an ‘uncontaminated’ world, may seek out the farthest, smallest, and most isolated island of any archipelago (Franks, 2006: 6). The boundaries—on my small Maine island, the

ring of bright granite on the dark field of the sea—suggest a sense of wholeness and coherence, protection and control, that counters the notion of separated, even incomplete or fragmented, parts. This perspective renders the island not an alien ‘other’ but a version of the enclosed, edenic *locus amoenus* (delightful place) of classical pastoral literature.

In the small island writing of Jewett, Synge, and Jansson, a concern with loss and the need to preserve a particular moment and ward off the ravages of time and change, substantiate a pastoral connection (Alpers, 1996: 10; Ettin, 1984: 29-30). In, for example, *The Aran Islands*, JM Synge’s mission to recover and preserve, on the islands, a threatened language and culture may be seen as the urban intellectual’s desire to discover in his own country a “primitive, unspoiled civilization,” to retrieve an earlier innocence or communal state (Mortimer, 1977: 297). Whether motivated also by psychological or emotional need, Synge, as writer and observer, finds on the Aran Islands, by his own account, an idealized community:

It is likely that much of the intelligence and charm of these people is due to the absence of any division of labour, and to the correspondingly wide development of each individual, whose varied knowledge and skill necessitates a considerable activity of mind (Synge, 1921: III, 13).

But if the people of the islands can be likened to the shepherds of classical pastoral, frozen in a pre-industrial world, the relentless forces of time and nature, of mortality itself—traditional threats to the edenic ideal—are hardly absent from the small island; indeed, such processes may even be exaggerated in the bounded place that sits in its own sea. Death, for example, is omnipresent in the final section, Part IV, of *The Aran Islands*. It sits center stage in tales and local yarns:

for the night before a woman had a great sight out to the west in this island, and saw all the people that were dead a while back in this island the south island and they are all talking with each other (Synge, 1921: IV, 55).

And it is not by chance that the description of the funeral for a young man dominates this section of the text.

The young Aran Islander who goes to a premature death finds his counterpart on another continent, though within a similar time period, in Sarah Orne Jewett’s *Country of the Pointed Firs*, where the theme of loss sounds with increasing emphasis. Jewett’s narrator, also a visitor from the mainland, encounters the story of “poor Joanna” who, disappointed in a youthful love, spent the remainder of her life as a recluse on the small, shell-heap island. Viewing Joanna’s house, now reduced to the stones of its foundation, with only mere traces of its garden remaining, the narrator looks back to the “busy, hard-worked, and simple-thoughted countryside of the mainland”. “There” she observes, “was the world, and here was (Joanna) with eternity well begun. In the life of each of us. . . there is a place remote and islanded” (Jewett, 1981: 82). Joanna is, as Paul Alpers points out in his classic exploration of the pastoral tradition, a “lone and heroic shepherdess” whose fate embodies the character of a past-time and whose memory serves as a bond in the diminished community of the present (Alpers, 2004: 404).

Vulnerability and Resilience

Both Synge and Jewett demonstrate that the small island, though apparently enisled in its sea, is ultimately never protected from the work of time. So too the mainlanders—real or

fictional—are comers and go-ers, destined, in time, to depart from their small “enisled” space. In *Pointed Firs*, where a temporal motif connects the ostensibly disconnected episodes of the text, it is no accident that Jewett’s story of Joanna and the Shell-Heap Island, a meditation on mortality, takes place in late summer. Fully aware that as a summer visitor, she will soon be leaving, the narrator tells us specifically that:

The month was August, and I had seen the color of the islands change from the fresh green of June to a sunburnt brown that made them look like stone (Jewett, 1981: 80).

Tove Jansson’s novel, *The Summer Book*, is, above all, exactly that: a ‘summer book.’ All its characters will disappear, the text will come to its end, when the summer is gone. Time is condensed on Jansson’s small island, and in her text. The ending comes sharply and abruptly: the final episode of *The Summer Book*, titled ‘August,’ begins: “Every year, the bright Scandinavian summer nights fade away without anyone’s noticing. One evening in August you have an errand outdoors, and all of a sudden it’s pitch-black” (Jansson, 2003: 166).

The descent of darkness, the end of visibility, starkly underlines, in *The Summer Book*, a pervasive awareness of time and mortality. The novel is a quasi-fictionalized account of an aging woman and her granddaughter, a child whose mother has recently died and whose father, though also living on the island and ostensibly part of the family group, is largely absent from the text. Having spent almost all the summers of her life on a small Baltic island, moving in 1964 from an island home that was family owned to the smaller island of Klovharum, further out, on the rim of the archipelago, Jansson conveys, in apparently simple, pared down language, a sense of distillation, of concentration. We are ever aware of the smallness of scale, of the limits of the island space.

But as seen in both the well-known Moomin books she wrote for children and in her work for adults, Jansson masterfully plays also with dichotomies of scale. *The Summer Book* is a study in ambiguity and complexity. Even more intensely than Synge and Jewett, Jansson has written a narrative of small parts; but her treatment of separate and demarcated island locations draws our attention always to the larger themes that inform the book: time, mortality, life, and loss. Jansson’s island is a place of mystery; it asks questions fundamental to the human condition, and it offers no easy answers.

Separation and Contiguity

Ultimately, Jansson’s small island narrative negates the very notion of separation. Contrasts, like those in the landscape, only point up connections. Bare rock, a dead forest, and a “tangled mass of stubborn resignation” balanced between survival and extinction, suggest the dehumanizing processes of nature in an apparently vulnerable space. But on Jansson’s island, the disorderly wood occupies the same space as the family’s well-groomed land, “an orderly beautiful park” (Jansson, 2003: 28). This is no Aran Island—Synge’s text as well as Robert Flaherty’s famous film, *Man of Aran* come to mind here—where man fights relentlessly against opposing natural forces, scrabbling existence from harsh rock and soil. *The Summer Book* demonstrates, rather, what environmental writer and activist Rebecca Solnit calls the “imaginative role” of nature that enables us to “make connections between disparate things” (Solnit, 1997: 25). Jansson shows us that nothing is simple, nothing entirely apart from its opposite.

In such a setting, life and loss are also inseparable. “Take it away!” the child, Sophia, screams when she finds in the lush overgrown forest an animal skull that “lay on the ground

and gleamed with all its teeth” (Jansson, 2003: 31). But the aura of mortality never really goes away. A mother has recently died; a grandmother, surrogate mother, struggles against the frailty of old age; and a child copes with loss. In the very first chapter of *The Summer Book*, benignly titled ‘The Morning Swim’, Sophia asks her grandmother “When are you going to die?” (Jansson, 2003: 22).

And death may occur outside of its ‘natural’ time. In an early summer expedition described in ‘The Scolder’ episode, Grandmother and Sophia come upon the remains of a long-tailed duck. Sophia objects that the ducks can’t die at this point in the summer because “they are brand new and just married”; but accepting that time may be out of joint, the grandmother tells the child simply “It did die now, all the same” (Jansson, 2003: 34).

An Island Lens

The eye of the grandmother is central to *Summer Book*. The grandmother can view the young ducks of early summer with a sense of “anticipation and renewal” even as she knows that ultimately there is no real explanation for one duck’s death. For her, the small island becomes what Maine writer Philip Conkling calls a “lens for looking” (Little, 1997: 55). The grandmother’s eye takes in the contrasts of scale, sees the distant in the close-up, the absent in the present.

Through the aging woman, Jansson moves our perspective outward—to a neck of land out toward the point, now transformed by winter storms from rock to sand—and then back to the close and the small. Grandmother raises her arm so that beneath the arm of her sweater “she could see a triangle of sky, sea and sand—quite a small triangle.” But she also sees much more in a vision of the miniscule:

There was a blade of grass in the sand beside her, and between its sawtoothed leaves it held a piece of seabird down. She carefully observed the construction of this piece of down—the taut white rib in the middle, surrounded by the down itself, which was pale brown and lighter than the air, and then darker and shiny towards the tip, which ended in a tiny but spirited curve. . . . She noted that the blade of grass and the down were at precisely the right distance for her eyes. . . . She saw the conical depression in the sand at the foot of the blade of grass and the wisp of seaweed that had twined around the stem. Right next to it lay a piece of bark. If you looked at it for a long time it grew and became a very ancient mountain (Jansson, 2003: 36).

The fleck of down, so carefully observed, is ultimately carried away in a light morning breeze; in a trick of perception, the tiny piece of bark turns into “a very ancient mountain.” And then, having risen slowly from the ground in a way that bespeaks her age, the grandmother sees that “the landscape had grown smaller” (Jansson, 2003: 37).

Standing on an island in Maine, an artist friend of mine used his hands like a lens to look at the distant horizon, to see it as it might be created on canvas. So too Jansson’s character of the grandmother, on her island, literally creates a kind of lens with her hand. She sees the blade of grass and the tiny speck of down; and she sees them move out to the horizon. “The big events always take place far out in the skerries. . . . Only small things happen in among the islands” Jansson says in the “Midsummer” episode (Jansson, 2003: 82). But to quote Philip Conkling again, “The smaller and more enclosed (small islands) are, the larger the window on the infinite, the farther they telescope heaven” (Little, 1997: 55).

Paradox

Jansson's island, at the same time small and large, separate and connected, in time and out of time, accommodates the present and the absent. Neither the pastoral model of an enclosed garden, nor Fowles' metaphor of "enislement" is adequate on its own. The former negates the "big events" that may take place "far out": the latter, privileging the island as an isolated speck in a broad ocean, overlooks the connections and misses the whole picture. It's no accident that as she departs on the steamer from her summertime haven on the coast, Jewett's narrator sees that the "islands and the headland had run together" (Jewett, 1981: 133). Neither the small island nor its narrative stands, ultimately, in its own sea.

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