A Distinctly American Voice:

The Emersonian Consciousness in the Writings of

Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Sibert Cather

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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(Expected Date of Graduation: May 4, 1996)

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This research was funded by an Undergraduate Fellowship awarded by the Ball State University Honors College.

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana
July 21, 1995
Abstract:

Using the works of Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Cather as examples, this thesis illustrates the persistence of Emersonian ideas -- particularly those advanced in *Nature*, “Self-Reliance,” “The American Scholar,” and “The Poet” -- in the twentieth-century American consciousness and thus in American fiction which reflects the “everyday people who [grow] out of the soil.” Drawing on Jewett’s “A White Heron,” *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, and *A Country Doctor*, and on Cather’s novels, *O Pioneers!* *My Antonia*, and *The Professor’s House*, as well as on their letters and other writings, this thesis considers Emerson’s four seminal essays in turn, and provides corresponding examples from the women’s texts to establish the endurance of his ideas.
Conventional wisdom holds that the American nineteenth century, in which Ralph Waldo Emerson was firmly entrenched and which he helped to define, decisively ended with the ascendance of modernism after the First World War. Indeed, within his own lifetime Emerson’s ideas were regarded as obsolete, vanquished by the industrial age; memorials written upon the occasion of his death, in what Charles Mitchell calls “reverent but shallow praise” (23), speak glowingly of his personal nobility and his exemplary life, and do mention his impressive body of work, but almost wholly ignore its substance. By 1882, Emerson’s ideas were generally regarded as quaint, antiquated, and definitely dangerous when pursued by lesser men, and thus were largely neglected by the literary elite. Henry James, in his 1904 essay on Emerson for the Atlantic Monthly, attempted to completely dismiss Emerson from the canon by explaining how feminine, and therefore unworthy of attention, his ideas had been.

Yet America mourned Emerson’s 1882 passing as that of an American ideal, a representative man, and he is now said to stand at the head of the American literary tradition. Obviously, contrary to the desires of many, Emerson’s influence did not disappear in the later nineteenth century, as writers brought up during his prime continued to publish, nor did it die out in the twentieth century, perhaps in part because the life his opponents idealized had, in fact, been lived largely in accordance with his principles. These tenets -- self-reliance, a recognition of man as part of a larger whole, a belief in the necessity of original intellectual activity -- found a place in the American system of ideals, and can be seen in various
ways in the works of such diverse later writers as John Steinbeck, Zora Neale Hurston, A. E. Robinson, Robert Frost, Susan Glaspell, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Willa Cather. Indeed, in the works of these last two authors alone, we can see an alternative, Emersonian tradition persevering through the literary maelstrom of the first half of the twentieth century, which I believe continues today in the works of authors who reflect most truthfully their subjects, the American people.

Jewett, of course, is an obvious candidate for an Emersonian tradition: born in Maine, and traditionally considered a regionalist, Jewett spent much of her adult life in the Boston home of Annie Fields, widow of the publisher James T. Fields, and was fully engaged in the Boston literary scene of the late nineteenth century, when Emerson was still remembered as a close friend by many of Jewett’s acquaintances. In fact, Jewett herself was a close friend of Emerson’s daughter, Ellen, as Emerson sank into his “peaceful senility” in the late 1870s, and she held him in great esteem, even composing a poem about him for Annie Fields (Silverthorne 72). Nothing indicates Jewett took Emerson as a model, however; her adopted master, like Cather’s, was Gustave Flaubert. Rather, Jewett spoke clearly in her own voice, which we hear in her characters, limited plots, language, and form; the author brought her Maine neighbors to life using her father’s advice to “‘tell them just as they are’” (Silverthorne 68). Her masterpiece, The Country of the Pointed Firs, conforms to no standard
model; like the quiet lives it depicts, it comes closer to a series of short
stories than a novel. She always simply referred to it as "the Pointed Fir
papers" or "the Pointed Fir sketches," apparently not concerned with its
unconventionality as long as it accurately reflected her subject matter. As
she advised Cather later. "Write it as it is, don't try to make it like this or
that. You can't do it in anybody else's way -- you will have to make a way
of your own. If the way happens to be new, don't let that frighten you'"
(KA 449). Though she could have been paraphrasing him, Jewett
recognized Emerson simply as a prominent part of the literary landscape
and of her own background, an author whose ideas demonstrated a
remarkable correspondence with her own.

Willa Cather, on the other hand, growing up first in Virginia and then
on the Nebraska frontier, engaged in a much more conscious and
contentious struggle with her literary heritage than Jewett. Initially
convinced she had to be male to be an author, Willa became William, and
grew well-acquainted with the literary classics and any other books
within reach. After graduation, Cather began producing stories which bore
a strong resemblance to the fiction of her literary idol, Henry James. As
she said in 1925, "All students imitate. I began by imitating Henry James.
He was the most interesting American who was writing at the time, and I
strived laboriously to pattern after him" (qtd. in O'Brien 297). As Cather's
subject matter and style did not change significantly until after her
friendship with Jewett in 1908-1909, it might seem that echoes of Jewett, rather than Emerson, appear in Cather's fiction. Jewett's advice, however, like Emerson's, was not to change Cather's idol, but to redirect her focus inward to "that gleam of light which flashe[d] across [her] mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages" (SR 259). Jewett simply gave Cather the courage and confidence to follow Emerson's advice in her writing as well as in her life. Cather, who lived to see modernism at its height as Jewett did not, eventually found herself a lonely voice of Emersonian optimism, yet her protagonists, set in a sea of conformity and materialism, reflect his beacon of hope well into the mid-twentieth century.

Initially struck by the similar sense of unity I saw in the three authors' conceptions of the world, I discovered in my research that some critics have made comparisons among them, though connections are frequently drawn between Cather and Emerson or Cather and Jewett, and rarely between Jewett and Emerson. Beverly Gail Busch's 1986 dissertation is the most comprehensive analysis of the influence of Jewett on Cather, though Sharon O'Brien's biography of Cather includes a great deal of similar information. Both women deal with elements of the authors' writing which they term "Emersonian." More directly, Valerie Reid Shubik's 1985 dissertation, "Willa Cather: An Emersonian Angle of Vision," includes Emersonian analyses of "Eric Hermansson's Soul," My
Antonia, and One of Ours, as well as a helpful contextualization of Cather's work in the midst of twentieth-century literary movements. She characterizes Cather's adherence to Emerson's maxims as an "influence," however, which I think may be too strong a word; I prefer to suggest the elder writer's ideas were very much a part of the American consciousness and thus had a more indirect and inevitable route to Cather's pages. Elizabeth Hardaker Marsh also concentrates on the relationship between Emerson and Cather, claiming Cather built on an Emersonian philosophical tradition. In contrast to Shubik, however, who focuses on Cather's male characters -- Jim Burden, Tom Outland, and Eric Hermannson -- Marsh concentrates exclusively on Cather's self-reliant females. Finally, Richard Dillman has also explored Cather's debt to Emerson, suggesting Tom Outland in The Professor's House is Emerson's "American Scholar," and among earlier Cather scholars, James Woodress and Bernice Slote mention Emersonian influences on Cather. A few Jewett critics, among them Elizabeth Silverthorne, Richard Cary, and Sarah Way Sherman, and the dissertation of Sister Mary Conrad Kraus, briefly point to an Emersonian element in her writing, though Jewett's lesser stature as a writer means she is frequently manipulated for political reasons: tied to the canon as a validation of her writing, or, alternatively, removed from the canon entirely by separatist feminist criticism.
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A second group discusses Emerson somewhat secondarily, placing Cather and frequently Jewett among a pastoral or romantic tradition which owes Emerson a debt. Susan Roskowski’s *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather’s Romanticism* and the dissertations of Marilee Lindemann, John Stoufer Zeigel, Kathleen Davies, and Kevin James Hearle all use this tactic. Last, Charles E. Mitchell’s dissertation, “The Anxiety of Reliance: Appropriations of Emerson, 1880-1940,” while it does not touch on either Jewett or Cather directly, does provide insight into the prevailing critical stance on Emerson’s works in the decades in which the women were writing, opinions they would certainly have encountered in publications of the day.

Though a few of these dissertations, Shubik’s and Marsh’s in particular, *assume* an Emersonian tradition into which Cather falls, they are limited to exploring the connection as the debt of one author to another rather than discovering common Emersonian elements in the work of two authors and, perhaps more importantly, in the people whom the works depict. Together, Jewett’s and Cather’s writings champion Emerson’s ideas for the next three-quarters of a century as the three lives overlap. Jewett, as an aspiring author, knew and respected the elderly Emerson just as forty years later, Cather, a struggling fiction writer, would come to know and respect Jewett and be reminded by her of the Emersonian lessons Cather had learned as a child.
Critically, at their best, both women were highly respected authors who reflected, as they wrote, the American self-image, an image which owed a great debt to the writings of Emerson. Dillman, for example, presents Outland as "an American archetype and symbol of revered American values. He is self-reliant, idealistic, and a lover of nature" (375). The works of Jewett and Cather, which reflect so clearly Emerson’s common people, their country neighbors, are particularly fitting illustrations of Emerson’s perseverance in the American ideal. In short, whether transmitted through his essays or through contact with the myth that evolved around his life, Emerson’s ideas touched a chord in the American consciousness as well as in these two women. So strong was his hold on American letters that even thirty years after his death, Emerson survived the modernist onslaught and reemerged in the works of those authors who had discovered Emerson’s peculiarly American voice and adopted it, or, more accurately, had recognized their own thoughts in his words and taken from him the characteristically American message of Self-Reliance.

Four of Emerson’s essays convey the most relevant and enduring messages of his work: Nature, with its emphasis on the unity of life and spirit which both Cather and Jewett seem to have instinctively seen, and “Self-Reliance,” “The American Scholar,” and “The Poet,” with their axioms for both authors and their characters. Among Jewett’s works, the
frequently anthologized "A White Heron," her "conventional" novel, *A Country Doctor*, and her less conventional but more acclaimed work, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, seem to show both the breadth of her range and all the elements thought characteristic of her work. Choosing from Cather's works was still more difficult, but *O Pioneers!*, the first of her novels to occur in the Nebraska with which she is associated, *My Antonia*, which focuses on a character who truly draws on, learns from, and depends on the natural world, and *The Professor's House*, in which Cather addresses both scholarship and authorship, together seem to show a correspondence with Emerson's ideals. These examples from the works of the three authors illustrate a remarkable confluence, one which I cannot believe to be either coincidental or isolated.

**I. Nature**

In discussing nature, Emerson wrote, "The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other, who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man . . ." (N 10). Emerson's "lover of nature," however, does not see in nature merely the values of commodity, or of innate beauty, but the answer to every query; for him, "the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects . . .
distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood-cutter from the tree of the poet" (N 9). In fact, Emerson claims "the unspeakable but intelligible and practicable meaning of the world [is] conveyed to man, the immortal pupil, in every object of sense" (N 32). Thus, every observable fact of nature (defined simply as anything apart from one's own soul) is a manifestation of the divine mind which will, when fully perceived through the faculties of both instinct and sensory experience, provide a perfect understanding of the reasons for and natures of God, the world, and one's self.

Emerson, in trying to explain our persistent lack of this understanding, wrote that "few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child" (N 10). Sylvia, heroine of Jewett’s "A White Heron," is a young girl on precisely Emerson's edge between infancy and adulthood, to whom "it seemed as if she never had been alive at all before she came to live at the farm" (WH 459). The story revolves around her decision to retain that spirit of infancy, of innocence and connection with the natural world, and to reject the materialism represented by a young ornithologist who offers her money and affection in return for finding a white heron. "As we degenerate, the contrast between us and our house [or environment] is more evident" (N 42), Emerson wrote; certainly there is a far greater contrast between the "determined, and somewhat"
aggressive" (WH 460) ornithologist and the environment than between Sylvy, "part of the gray shadows and the moving leaves" (WH 460) as her name suggests, and the rest of her world. Upon the ornithologist's arrival in Sylvy's rural sanctuary, "the great world for the first time puts out a hand to her" (WH 465), but Sylvy rejects both money and the ornithologist's tempting affection for the sake of the heron. This rejection, as well as her ability to differentiate between her love of the heron and the ornithologist's (like Emerson's poet and wood-cutter and the tree) marks her as an Emersonian consciousness, a true "lover of nature" who does not and, in fact, refuses to see the bird as a commodity as she passes into adulthood.

The "wild delight" of which Emerson spoke is most apparent in the story at its climax, Sylvy's sudden awareness of the world beyond her marsh. From the top of the great pine tree, Sylvy can suddenly see as far as the sea in the east, and miles across the farms to the west, pulling trees, birds, sails, steeples, and villages into a grand, unified vision which recalls Emerson's "whole circle of persons and things . . . . as one vast picture, which God paints on the instant eternity, for the contemplation of the soul" (N 39). Indeed, highlighted by Jewett's dramatic shift of narrative voice, the incident suggests Emerson's epiphany: "In the woods, we return to reason and faith. . . . I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or
particle of God. . . . I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty” (N 10). Sylvy, questioned by both her grandmother and the ornithologist, the extent of her human society, keeps her silence in trust with a different kin, the heron. Sylvy lives, in that one decision, as Emerson had urged: “A life in harmony with nature, the love of truth and of virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text” (N 25).

In her preface to Jewett’s The Country of the Pointed Firs, Cather spoke of “A quality that one can remember without the volume at hand, can experience over and over again in the mind but can never absolutely define, as one can experience in memory . . . the summer perfume of a garden” (CPF 9); it is this quality in the novel which communicates Jewett’s sense of nature yet makes it difficult to describe. Emerson suggests “an occult relation between man and the vegetable” (N 11); Jewett writes of a brook’s “live, persistent call to a listener” (CPF 184). Emerson wrote of becoming a transparent eyeball; Jewett writes of “getting so close to nature that one simply is a piece of nature” (CPF 181). Jewett’s sparrows forget themselves, her women are “wandering hermit crab[s]” or have “flower-like faces” (CPF 82), and her narrator finds a tiny village “large and noisy and oppressive” after returning from the woods (CPF 80).

Yet Jewett’s Emersonian conception of the environment extended beyond a sense of kinship to embrace his sense of a “vast picture, which God paints on the instant eternity” (N 39), a grand design, and his
assertion that “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact” (N 20). Her narrator, for instance, wonders why Mrs. Blackett had been “set to shine on this lonely island of the northern coast,” and concludes, “It must have been to keep the balance true, and make up to all her scattered and depending neighbors for other things which they may have lacked” (CPF 72), as though her residence was part of a grand plan. In fact, much has been written about religion in Jewett’s book, sparked in part by the correspondence she illustrates between the natural and spiritual, as when a “sunburst upon that outermost island made it seem like a sudden revelation of the world beyond this which some believe to be so near” (CPF 50), or her “song sparrows sang and sang, as if with joyous knowledge of immortality, and contempt for those who could so pettily concern themselves with death” at a funeral (CPF 30). Like Emerson, Jewett saw in the world around her symbols of a deeper meaning which we can come to understand only through interaction with and appreciation of nature; by 1896, she was capable of expressing this point less didactically than she had a decade earlier in “A White Heron.”

In Cather’s _O Pioneers!,_ as in Jewett’s short story, we again see a life in harmony with nature, this time in the context of consequent societal scorn and suspicion. Crazy Ivar, as his nickname suggests, is not well-regarded by most of his neighbors, but he “had lived for three years in the clay bank, without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote
that had lived there before him had done” (OP 21). He “understands animals” (OP 22), Alexandra says, and it is she who takes him in and with her prosperity defends him. Ivar, perhaps more than any other character in Cather’s or Jewett’s literature, recognizes Emerson’s assertion in Nature that

The world . . . . [is] a projection of God in the unconscious. . . . Its serene order is inviolable by us. It is, therefore, to us, the present expositor of the divine mind. . . . We are as much strangers in nature, as we are aliens from God. . . . Is not the landscape, every glimpse of which hath a grandeur, a face of him? (42)

Ivar’s religion is built on the natural world; he “never went to church. He had a peculiar religion of his own and could not get on with any of the denominations. . . . He best expressed his preference for his wild homestead by saying that his Bible seemed truer to him there” (OP 22). He, like Alexandra, believes “everyone should worship God in the way that is revealed to him” (OP 45), and, as did Emerson, Ivar believes “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact” (N 20). For Ivar, as for Sylvy, his “intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food” (N 10). Ivar’s “daily food,” however, does not restrict him simply to an appreciation of the commodity or beauty values of nature. Ivar does “understand the notes of birds,” and “the fox and the deer” do not flee him;
nature is for him the "present expositor of the divine mind" (N 42), a teacher and an ideal to which he conforms his life.

In Antonia, Cather creates another character who draws on the natural world for her "daily food," one who illustrates that "beauty in nature . . . is the herald of inward and eternal beauty" (N 19). Emerson claimed,

Nature is not fixed but fluid. Spirit alters, moulds, makes it. The immobility or bruteness of nature, is the absence of spirit; to pure spirit, it is fluid, it is volatile, it is obedient. Every spirit builds itself a house; and beyond its house a world; and beyond its world, a heaven. . . . Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions. A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit. . . . As when the summer comes from the south; the snow banks melt, and the face of the earth becomes green before it, so shall the advancing spirit . . . draw beautiful faces, warm hearts, wise discourse, and heroic acts, around its way, until evil is no more seen. (N 48)

This passage virtually tells Antonia’s story: brought to Nebraska by her out-of-place father and greedy mother and brother, Antonia is first described as having eyes which are "big and warm and full of light, like
the sun shining on brown pools in the wood. . . . She was quick, and very eager” (MA 23, 26). This spirit, however, is initially suppressed by her family, who see in nature nothing more than a commodity or an enemy, and for whom relations with the country are difficult. Later, Antonia is hired at the Harlings, in town. Jim Burden, with whom Antonia had initially shared her tutor, Nature, is happily ensconced in school and conventionality, having taken books as his new teachers. For Antonia, though, the separation from Nature is traumatic: possessed with spirit, she does not conform to the Black Hawk mold so easily and is swept away by the frivolities of town life, eventually exploited by Larry Donovan and left pregnant with an illegitimate child.

It is only when Antonia, in disgrace, returns to the farm that she begins to see the obedience of nature, and recognizes its necessity: “I’d always be miserable in a city,” she tells Jim. “I’d die of lonesomeness. I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly” (MA 320). Soon after that conversation, she marries, escaping the oppression of her mother and brother, and, in Cather’s description, the farm is as bountiful as Antonia’s family, “a veritable explosion of life” (339), yet a place of “deepest peace” (MA 341). As she tells Jim, “I belong on a farm. I’m never lonesome here like I used to be in town. . . . And I don’t mind work a bit, if I don’t have to put up with sadness” (MA 343). Recognizing this bond between Antonia’s spirit and the heaven which she
had built, the revolution in things which she had set in motion, Jim says, . . . she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one’s breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. (MA 353)

Freed from the bonds of myopic people, Antonia’s spirit and her life in harmony with nature allowed her to build a life which conformed to the pure idea in her head, and a world in which evil was no more seen.

Cather and Jewett shared Emerson’s sense of nature as a teacher, and as eventually the answer to any curiosity it awakens. They also seem to have concurred in his assertion of the Unity of nature, the single truth reflected in every object, in which “Each creature is only a modification of the other; the likeness in them is more than the difference, and their radical law is one and the same” (N 30). For Sylvy, the unnamed narrator of The Country of the Pointed Firs, Ivar, and Antonia, as well as many American protagonists to follow, the boughs of the tree do wave in acknowledgment, and the sun seems indeed to shine into both the eyes and the heart.
II. "Self-Reliance"

Emerson’s "Self-Reliance" probably earned him much of his reputation for dangerous writing. In it, he advises against conformity and consistency, against adopting the values or opinions of society without first questioning them, and against reliance on tradition or the thoughts of previous generations, suggesting instead that in the pursuit of one’s potential, one should "Insist on yourself; never imitate. . . . Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles" (SR 278, 282). Yet as revolutionary as his words sounded to some of his contemporaries, he was not advocating a retreat from society; as he wrote, "It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude . . . . your isolation must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, must be elevation" (SR 263, 273). His self-reliance, then, was not literal but intellectual and spiritual, a type of independence which shows up frequently in the characters and letters of Jewett and Cather.

Emerson wrote in "Self-Reliance,"

There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of
nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed
on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. (259)
These words of advice, among Emerson’s opening lines in the essay, mirror
those Jewett was to give to Cather, and that Cather was then to give to the
many aspiring authors with whom she corresponded, and also presage a
primary theme in the two authors’ works: the necessity to follow one’s
nature, to achieve one’s potential, and to ignore the dissuading voices of
society and convention. Cather’s heroines tend to be largely solitary, a
literal fact (less deliberate than a consequence of their rural locations)
which highlights their intellectual adherence to Emerson’s principle, but
though most of Jewett’s works depict close-knit communities of women,
these groups must not be construed as society in Emerson’s scornful sense,
for they are never hindrances (but, frequently, are catalysts) to the
realization of her heroines’ potential.

The most striking example of self-reliance in Jewett’s works is the
somewhat autobiographical A Country Doctor. Jewett’s heroine, Nan, left
in the care of Dr. Leslie as a child, realizes that she wishes not to be
married and to make a home, but to be a physician, a cause in which the
doctor wholeheartedly assists her, but which brings her into fierce conflict
with most of the women in the story. As Emerson advised, “That which
each can do best, none but his Maker can teach him. No man yet knows
what it is, nor can, till that person has exhibited it” (SR 279); yet the
women in Nan's environment have a very clear idea of the purposes for which Nan was designed. Disapproving society is represented most forcefully in the novel by Mrs. Fraley, who is horrified that "a refined girl who bears an honorable and respected name [would] think of being a woman doctor. . . . It lowers the pride of all who have any affection for you" (CD 281). In explaining to Mrs. Fraley her desire to pursue medicine rather than marriage, Nan says, "I believe that God has given me a fitness for it, and that I could never do anything else half so well. . . . People ought to work with the great laws of nature and not against them" (CD 281, 283). Yet city society (not that of the supportive town in which Nan was brought up) still casts her out for her decision. As Emerson wrote, "What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it" (SR 263). In rejecting a marriage proposal from a man she genuinely loves, a marriage which would also have brought with it fortune, social prominence, and respectability, Nan explains simply that she cannot "forget all that nature fitted me to do" (CD 321).

To pursue her Emersonian duty, the realization of her own nature, Nan ignores the sirens of love, money, social prominence, and comfort,
discovering as she pursues her studies that the same traits which have allowed her to devote her energies to medicine will allow her to succeed: she "knew better and better that it is resource, and bravery, and being able to think for one's self, that make a physician worth anything . . . . every student of medicine should be fitted by nature with a power of insight . . . for knowing what is the right thing to do . . . without constant reliance upon the books or the fashion" (CD 184-85). Emerson would no doubt have agreed with Jewett's heroine that "it is a pity that we have fallen into a habit of using strong-mindedness as a term of rebuke" (CD 279); he instead offered commendation to those like Nan: "High be his heart, faithfull [sic] his will, clear his sight, that he may in good earnest be doctrine, society, law, to himself, that a simple purpose may be to him as strong as iron necessity to others!" (SR 274).

In "A White Heron," of course, Sylvy's "simple purpose" is most easily tied to Emerson's Nature, but the explanation of her choice can be similarly explained as an instinctive Emersonian self-reliance: she turns away from the path which would have earned the approval of the ornithologist and of her grandmother to follow the course based on a principle she does not understand, but merely feels. Indeed, her grandmother "fretfully rebukes her, and the young man's kind, appealing eyes are looking straight in her own" (WH 465), yet Sylvy "explore[s] if it be goodness," and makes her own decision, one which preserves, as
Emerson wrote, the sanctity of “the integrity of [her] own mind” (SR 261). “No law can be sacred to me but that of my own nature,” Emerson explained: “Good and bad are but names readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my own constitution, the only wrong what is against it” (SR 262). Self-reliance is a simpler matter for a child who has not yet experienced the crushing pressure of social expectation, particularly for Sylvy, who feels she is defending something of which she is a part, but there can be no doubt that in her sudden secrecy, she surprises even herself. Perhaps like Emerson, she already recognizes that “you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it” (SR 263).

Catherine’s Alexandra Bergson would also have won Emerson’s approbation, though her simple purpose was more closely tied to “that plot of ground which is given to him to till” (SR 259). Alexandra’s society is rather more limited than Nan’s, restricted primarily to her family, Carl Linstrum, and Marie and Frank Shabata. Yet she, like Nan, is strong-minded, following her own instincts in the cultivation of the land as well as her own affairs, and she stands in contrast to those around her because of her success. Of all Emerson’s maxims in “Self-Reliance,” Alexandra’s is “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the peace that divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events” (SR 260). Alexandra saves the
pigs by seeking and following Crazy Ivar's advice to treat them with respect, mortgages the farm to buy land when all the neighbors are selling, is the first to plant alfalfa and wheat, puts up the first silo, shelters Ivar, and hosts (and later marries) Carl Linstrum, all despite the scorn of her brothers, who represent conventional society and who feel they should, by virtue of their gender, be guiding their sister. It does not bother Alexandra, however, either that "people have begun to talk," or that her brothers disapprove. Forever admonishing her that she is "making a fool of herself" and "getting taken in," while admitting she knows more about business than either of them, Lou and Oscar do not fully realize the extent of Alexandra's self-reliance until she tells them in no uncertain terms she simply "can't take advice" from them (OP 73, 76). As in Jewett's novel, Alexandra's true friends -- Marie Shabata, Ivar, Carl, and Mrs. Lee -- do not represent the "society" Emerson scorned, but encourage her in her independence and unconventionality; in going to visit Frank Shabata in prison, Alexandra makes a wholly independent evaluation of "whether it be goodness," an evaluation whose outcome greatly surprises Frank. Even Alexandra's eventual marriage to Carl does not represent a loss of these qualities; it is clearly a marriage of companionship rather than dependence, and as she walks with Carl in the novel's closing pages, Alexandra reaffirms her independence from
everyone and everything but the land, something Cather would reassert later in *My Antonia*.

“I do not wish to expiate, but to live. My life is for itself and not for a spectacle. I much prefer that it should be of a lower strain, so it be genuine and equal, than that it should be glittering and unsteady. I wish it to be sound and sweet, and not to need diet and bleeding” (SR 263). Although Emerson’s in “Self-Reliance,” these words could as easily have belonged to Antonia Shimerda, and the message of self-reliance shines through her character quite clearly. Nearly destroyed in the glittering environment of the dance tent and Black Hawk, Antonia finds herself again in the relative solitude of life on the farm, and is once again able to establish goodness for herself. On her return from Denver, for example, Antonia initially plays the role of the shamed young woman, “crushed” (MA 314), but by the time Martha, the very symbol of her disgrace, is a year old, Antonia has her photograph professionally taken; when Jim sees it hanging prominently in the studio, the photographer gives a “constrained, apologetic laugh,” and remarks with some amazement that Antonia “seems proud of the baby.” As Jim Burden notes, “Another girl would have kept her baby out of sight, but Tony, of course, must have its picture on exhibition at the town photographer’s in a great gilt frame” (MA 303). Indeed, where Emerson advised a “genuine and equal . . . sound and sweet” life, Antonia’s existence is “quiet and steady,” one of “deepest
peace" (MA 318, 341), and in it, finally free from the controls of her conformist, materialistic mother and brother and from the social pressures of the town, she finds happiness, even in the child who would have, had she been concerned with popular opinion, been a source of constant sorrow.

There is, in My Antonia, a second, darker side to the message of self-reliance in the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Shimerda and Ambrosch, Antonia's family. "A weaver by trade" who "had been a skilled workman on tapestries and upholstery materials" and used to play his fiddle to "pick up money," Mr. Shimerda was "old and frail and knew nothing about farming" (MA 20). In the midst of the Nebraska plains, then, far from home, he was hardly an example of self-reliance in a literal sense. As Emerson writes,

Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdoms which cannot help itself. The genesis and maturation of a planet, its poise and orbit, the bended tree recovering itself from the strong wind, the vital resources of every animal and vegetable, are demonstrations of the self-sufficing, and therefore self-relying soul (SR 272).

"Homesickness . . . had killed Mr. Shimerda," Jim says, and, as his son and wife react to his death, the reverse of Emerson’s prescription is again apparent. For Mrs. Shimerda and Ambrosch, life is "a spectacle," and they
would rather "expiate" than live, devoting wages to paying for masses for Mr. Shimerda's soul rather than to bare necessities, and doing their best to have him buried beneath the crossroads. Significantly, neither Antonia nor her sister Yulka is implicated in these schemes, for Cather clearly delineates those who have life in themselves from those who do not.

The message of Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” was very important to Jewett and to Cather (and no doubt to many others) in both a personal and a professional sense. Neither woman fulfilled societal expectations: Jewett remained unmarried, and though her writing was regarded as a ladylike endeavor, and her habitation with Annie Fields accepted without censure, she was nonetheless unconventional. Cather, however, was decidedly unusual, not only remaining unmarried but also going by the name William early in life, completing (and excelling in) college, and becoming a senior editor at McClure’s. Jewett deliberately remained a “lady”; Cather went out of her way to avoid the label. Both women, though, were acting in accordance with their own natures, “not by any known or accustomed way” (SR 271), as Emerson put it. It is in their style of writing, however, that Emerson’s principles of self-reliance are most recognizable. Jewett’s writings, which she most frequently termed “sketches,” are unconventional. Rather than attempt to build conventional stories and novels using the elements of characterization and setting (at which she excelled) and plot (at which she did not), Jewett was content to write in
the way and about the subjects for which her talents, nature, and background best prepared her. As Cather maintained, "She was content to be slight, if she could be true. . . . [She] quietly developed her own medium and confined herself to it" (MJ 855).

Cather, on the other hand, began by imitating the works of Henry James, and turned to Jewett’s distillations of Emersonian self-reliance as her guide in maturity. Emerson warned that the self-reliant individual "shall not discern the footprints of any other; you shall not see the face of any man; you shall not hear any name: -- the way, the thought, the good, shall be wholly strange and new" (SR 271). Jewett more pointedly advised Cather to "write it as it is, don’t try to make it like this or that. You can’t do it in anybody else’s way -- you will have to make a way of your own. If the way happens to be new, don’t let that frighten you. Don’t try to write the kind of short story that this or that magazine wants -- write the truth, and let them take it or leave it" (KA 449). Certainly Cather found the way "strange and new" in beginning to write about Nebraska, and somewhat frightening as she abandoned the Jamesian forms, but she had reached what Emerson called the "time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide. . . ." (SR 259). She later wrote,

. . . usually the young writer must have his affair with the external material he covets; must imitate and strive to follow
the masters he most admires, until he finds he is starving for reality and cannot make this go any longer. . . . When a writer once begins to work with his own material . . . . he finds that he need have little to do with literary devices; he comes to depend more and more on something else -- the thing by which our feet find the road home on a dark night, accounting of themselves for roots and stones which we had never noticed by day. (PAB 942)

The author of such a description would certainly have echoed Emerson’s advice, “Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life’s cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another, you have only an extemporaneous, half possession” (SR 278). Jewett seems to have recognized the value of self-reliance in her writing earlier than Cather, but at their best, both women expressed their artistic philosophies in terms quite close to Emerson’s.

III. “The American Scholar”

Perhaps Emerson’s most famous address was one given to Harvard’s Phi Beta Kappa Society in 1837, “The American Scholar,” in which he called for a distinctively American literature, and explained the “Man Thinking” from whom it would come; this call was repeated by T. W. Higginson in the pages of the Atlantic in 1867 and again in 1870, where Sarah Orne Jewett
likely read it (Donovan 9). Emerson’s address defines the scholar to be no more than a “delegated intellect” for mankind in the mutually exclusive occupations of a divided society; he defines his ideal to be far more, a “Man Thinking”: “Him nature solicits with all her placid, all her monitory pictures; him the past instructs; him the future invites. Is not, indeed, every man a student, and do not all things exist for the student’s behoof?” (AS 54).

The scholar’s primary influence, therefore, should be nature, from whom he should draw lessons about himself, recognizing that “Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind . . . . the ancient precept ‘Know thyself,’ and the modern precept, ‘Study nature,’ become at last one maxim” (AS 56). Secondly, he should find lessons in the past (e.g., books), though Emerson cautions that “it needs a strong head to bear that diet”: “One must be an inventor to read well” (AS 59). As he points out, “Genius is always sufficiently the enemy of genius by over influence” (AS 58), and the purpose of books should be restricted to inspiration, their perusal left to idle hours. The final influence on the scholar should be a life of action. He should not limit his pursuits, but should realize that living “is a total act” and thinking “is a partial act” (AS 62), and that in doing the former he shall improve the latter.
Emerson believes the duties of the scholar

... may all be comprised in self-trust. ... He is the world's eye. He is the world's heart. ... Whatsoever oracles the human heart. ... has uttered as its commentary on the world of actions, -- these he shall receive and impart. And whatsoever new verdict Reason from her inviolable seat pronounces on the passing men and events of to-day, -- these he shall hear and promulgate. (AS 63-64)

Emerson implies as well that the scholar's duty is to perceive "the worth of the vulgar," to make the masses see that "The near explains the far. The drop is a small ocean. A man is related to all nature" (AS 69). At the same time, in both an individual and national sense, he insists it is "the chief disgrace in the world not ... to yield that peculiar fruit which each man was created to bear, but to be reckoned in the gross, in the hundred, or the thousand, of the party, the section, to which we belong; and our opinion predicted geographically, as the north, or the south" (AS 71).

Emerson concludes hopefully, again in terms of both individuals and the nation, that "we will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. ... A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men" (AS 71).
Catherine A. Meeker

No doubt familiar with Emerson’s ideal, Cather and Jewett both created characters who fulfill Emerson’s prescriptions for the “American Scholar” in various ways, though few suggest themselves as perfect examples. The most obvious, if only because he is one of the few educated heroes in the literature of either woman, is Tom Outland, the absent hero against whose memory Cather’s _The Professor’s House_ unfolds, and whose story occupies the center third of the novel. Both Richard Dillman, in his article “Tom Outland: Emerson’s American Scholar in _The Professor’s House_,” and John Randall see Tom as Cather’s version of Emerson’s ideal, conveniently removed by the war from a society in which he could not have fit, a society in which Louie Marsellus’ materialism and slick salesmanship are idolized and, as Randall says, “Emerson had long since been replaced by Rockefeller as a cultural hero” (213).

Tom Outland is nevertheless the hero of the story and quite clearly Cather’s hero; the more sympathetic other characters are, the more they revere Tom’s memory. Professor St. Peter, who has (or has had) elements of the Emersonian ideal in his love of nature, his sudden vision of the plan for his history, and his creativity, mourns Tom’s death terribly and wants only to escape from the activities of his life. His younger daughter Kathleen shares his sense of loss, in a personal sense and in the corruption of Tom’s memory, and remarks to him, “. . . now he’s all turned out chemicals and dollars and cents, hasn’t he? But not for you and me! Our
Tom is much nicer than theirs" (PH 132). Indeed, it is the Professor's elder daughter, Rosamond Marsellus, Tom's fiancee at his death and heir to his now-profitable patent, who is least sympathetic and, with her husband Louie and newfound wealth, closest to Randall's Rockefeller. Louie himself, however, to whom worldliness has always seemed "natural and proper" (PH 160), is a more generous and sympathetic character than the professor's wife and elder daughter, in whom the materialism has recently developed. Interestingly, in writing a novel which may well be an eulogy for Emersonian idealism in the rampant conspicuous consumption of America in the 1920s, Cather only highlighted her own unflagging dedication to his principles.

Few of Cather's other characters possess the formal knowledge necessary to exemplify Emerson's "Man Thinking," but Jim Burden of *My Antonia*, educated at the University of Nebraska and later at Harvard, would certainly seem to qualify. Yet given how far Jim fell from the Emersonian ideals of *Nature* once his grandparents moved to Black Hawk, it is hardly surprising that Jim becomes precisely the type of scholar Emerson railed against in his address, the "delegated intellect . . . a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking" (AS 54). As stated, Emerson saw three key influences on his "Man Thinking": nature, the Past (exemplified for him by books), and action. As he wrote, "Only so much do I know, as I have lived" (AS 60). Yet Jim is a lawyer in New York
City, even more divorced from the nature of his childhood than in his Black Hawk adolescence, and he spends most of his time outside the city ensconced either in the observation car or the stateroom car of his railroad (MA ix, xi), physical labor a long-forgotten part of his past. Symbolically, his marriage is childless, and as the narrator of the Introduction says, Mrs. James Burden, "unimpressionable and temperamentally incapable of enthusiasm," has "her own fortune and lives her own life" (MA x).

Jim thus slights the influences of nature and action only to become caught up in the allure of books and of scholarship which knows no world beyond them, finding an idol in Gaston Cleric, who, as though Cather were reminding her readers of Emerson's admonishments against being enveloped by the past, ruined his health in a night among the temples of antiquity. As Jim explains, Cleric introduced him to the world of ideas, and "when one first enters that world everything else fades . . . ." (MA 258). Emerson had warned, though, that "Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments": "Books are for the scholar's idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings" (AS 58). Ultimately, books remove Jim completely from the Nebraska plains where he could most easily have read God directly in nature and in the people around him.

"Not out of those, on whom systems of education have exhausted their culture, comes the helpful giant to destroy the old or to build the
new, but out of unhandshelled savage nature, out of terrible Druids and Berserkirs, come at last Alfred and Shakespeare” (AS 62), Emerson wrote, and savage nature in the person of Antonia balances Jim’s deficiencies. Antonia, though she never even attended the Black Hawk school, possesses the understanding and sympathy with nature and the active life which Jim lacks; she loves her apple trees “as if they were people . . . like children” and “could still stop one’s breath for a moment by a look or a gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things” (MA 340, 353). Emerson maintained that “there is virtue yet in the hoe and the spade, for learned as well as for unlearned hands” (AS 63), as Cather’s happy depiction of the family and farm which Antonia’s labor created attests. Just as Jim still possesses an appreciation for nature and labor, though he does not often experience them now, Antonia appreciates the value of Jim’s education, taking pride in him and even at the beginning of his schooling, pleading, “‘Sometime you will tell me all those nice things you learn at the school, won’t you, Jimmy?’” (MA 124). In the end, only together do the childhood friends fulfill Emerson’s ideal; as Jim tells Antonia, “The idea of you is a part of my mind. . . . You really are a part of me” (MA 321).

Jewett’s characters, like Cather’s, tend to lack the formal education Emerson implies in his explanation of the past as an influence. Though Emerson probably would not have termed her a “Man Thinking” and she is
never seen with a book, Almira Todd possesses an amazing comprehension of nature in her herbal remedies and an active soul and, through her stories, demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the past of the people around her. This is, perhaps, Jewett’s own, more social version of the American scholar, or at least the version most prevalent among the people whom she depicted.

In Nan Prince, however, Jewett creates a more Emersonian character, a character who finds “inspiration” in the “clear air” (CD 344) of the countryside. Nan is frequently referred to as an “eager young scholar” (CD 184), yet she displays an intimacy with her neighbors and her natural environment much like Antonia’s or Mrs. Todd’s; she is well-liked and admired in the village and surrounding farms, taking every excuse to visit, and nature is both her friend and teacher. She caresses “the neighborly old hawthorn-tree,” the “warm wind that gently [blows] her hair [feels] almost like a hand,” “the trees [stand] about and [seem] to watch her,” and the birds are “quick to feel that [she is] . . . a friend and not an enemy, though disguised in human shape” (CD 349, 351, 165). She is also, of course, well-schooled, but recognizes that the knowledge she gains from study must be secondary to her natural “instinct that recognizes a disease and suggests its remedy, . . . as an instinct . . . finds the right notes and harmonies for a composer . . .” (CD 184). Last, Nan fulfills Emerson’s requirements of action: “Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is
essential. Without it, he is not yet man. Without it, thought can never ripen into truth. . . . Inaction is cowardice . . .” (AS 60). Nan, echoing Emerson, understands “that indecision is but another name for cowardice and weakness” (CD 147), and pursues every opportunity for action granted her, whether in interaction with Dr. Leslie’s patients or a good run along a country path, until Dr. Leslie proclaims her a “teller of new truth, a revealer of laws, and an influence for good” (CD 334); certainly, Nan, perhaps more than Tom Outland, Jim Burden, or Antonia, fulfills Emerson’s description of the scholar’s office: “to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances” (AS 63).

Clearly, both Jewett and Cather believed as Emerson did that “Life is our dictionary”: “Years are well spent in country labors; . . . in frank intercourse with many men and women . . .” (AS 61). As Emerson had suggested, too, both women wrote about ordinary people, “everyday people who grew out of the soil” (MJ 851), as Cather put it. Emerson had written, “I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low” (AS 68); Jewett lovingly depicted the Maine country people among whom she spent her childhood, and Cather her immigrant Nebraska neighbors. As Cather said later, *O Pioneers!,* her second “first novel,” was “a book entirely for myself”: “a story about some Scandinavians and Bohemians who had been
neighbors of ours when I lived on a ranch in Nebraska . . . there was no arranging or ‘inventing’; everything was spontaneous and took its own place . . .” (MFN 963). The three authors share a belief in the wisdom to be gained from everyday surroundings and occupations with many who would follow.

IV. “The Poet”

Emerson’s essay “The Poet” builds on the ideas of Nature, “Self-Reliance,” and “The American Scholar” to express his definition of a true poet: one who does not necessarily possess “poetical talents, or . . . industry and skill in metre” (450), but rather the ability to perfectly render that which he sees, both in and in terms of the world around him, natural as well as man-made. The poet alone is capable of fully receiving and then imparting the “conversation” he has with nature:

Too feeble fall the impressions of nature on [the rest of] us to make us artists. Every touch should thrill. Every man should be so much an artist that he could report in conversation what had befallen him. Yet, in our experiences, the rays or appulses have sufficient force to arrive at the senses, but not enough to reach the quick, and compel the reproduction of themselves in speech. (P 448)

For Emerson’s true poet, who sees the Unity of truth and realizes that
“there is no fact of nature which does not carry the whole sense of nature” (P 454), every element of nature will confirm each of his observations and truths, and the use of symbols from nature to indicate various meanings is an important tool of expression. The poet also recognizes that “the world is not painted, or adorned, but is from the beginning beautiful; and God has not made some beautiful things, but Beauty is the creator of the universe” (P 449); the “chief value” of every fact is “to enhance the great and constant fact of Life” (P 456). Thus, the more accurately the poet captures the essence of what he observes, no matter how lowly, the more beautiful the work. True poetry, then, as the accurate rendering of experience,

... was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings, and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word, or a verse, and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem. The men of more delicate ear write down these cadences more faithfully, and these transcripts, though imperfect, become the songs of nations. (P 449)

As Emerson writes, “All books of the imagination endure, all which ascend to that truth, that the writer sees nature beneath him, and uses it as his exponent” (P 463).
Neither Jewett nor Cather frequently created characters who were writers, perhaps because the subject was too personal, or perhaps because writing did not seem a life conducive to the “action” a story demands. Instead, when the creative process was central to the story, both women more frequently used other careers as metaphors for their own: medicine in Jewett’s *A Country Doctor* and music in Cather’s *Song of the Lark* (and perhaps also in *Lucy Gayheart*, which in some ways mirrors Cather’s relationship with S. S. McClure). There are some exceptions, however: Godfrey St. Peter is a writer, as are Jim Burden and Jewett’s narrator in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Though relatively little is shown of their creative processes, the characters appear to share Emerson’s sense of the artistic duty to render rather than create. Godfrey St. Peter shows Cather’s interpretation of an artist who captures rather than invents this poetry “written before all time was”; he claims that “the design of his book unfolded in the air above him, just as definitely as the mountain ranges themselves. And the design was sound. He had accepted it as inevitable, had never meddled with it, and it had seen him through” (PH 106). Similarly, Jim Burden, whose sole purpose in writing of Antonia is to “amuse” himself, admits to his friend, “I didn’t take time to arrange it; I simply wrote down pretty much all that her name recalls to me. I suppose it hasn’t any form” (MA xi). Yet the friend says, “He made me see her again, feel her presence, revived all my old affection for her” (MA xi);
Jim did not succumb to the temptation Emerson saw to “substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem” (P 449). Last, even Jewett’s unnamed narrator, of whom we know very little, remarks despairingly that her “sentences failed to catch these lovely summer cadences” (CPF 30), implying an Emersonian ideal of capturing the poetry “written before all time was” (P 449).

Echoing his idea in “The American Scholar” of “embrac[ing] the common” (68), Emerson says in “The Poet,” “The beautiful rests on the foundations of the necessary” (452), and every mundane reality, beyond its own inherent beauty, is a symbol of universal truth. Thus Mrs. Todd, in a reflective moment, “might have been Antigone alone on the Theban plain . . . she seemed like a renewal of some historic soul” (CPF 75), and the narrator finds “all the pleasure that one can have in gold-digging in finding one’s hopes satisfied in the riches of a good hill of potatoes” (68). Cather, too, creates moments of extraordinary beauty and symbolism from the commonplace:

On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share -- black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun. (MA 245)
Emerson, who had lamented that "Our logrolling, our stumps and their politics, out fisheries, our Negroes, and Indians... the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon, and Texas, are yet unsung" (P 465), would have been pleased.

Obviously, as Emerson defined him, the poet has a responsibility not to create, but instead to render as truthful a portrait as possible of his subject (which is, necessarily, his perception of the subject). Just as Emerson maintained that "poetry was all written before time was" (P 449), Jewett wrote to Cather, "The thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper -- whether little or great, it belongs to Literature" (MJ 849). Cather, struggling to explain the perfection she saw in Jewett's writing, used as an example "The Hilton's Holiday":

... the slightest of stories... yet the story is a little miracle. It simply is the look -- shy, kind, a little wistful -- which shines out at one from good country faces on remote farms; it is the look itself. To have got it down upon the printed page is like bringing the tenderest of early spring flowers from the deep wood into the hot light of noon without bruising its petals.

(MJ 851)

Later, in writing her preface to The Country of the Pointed Firs, Cather named Jewett's book, with The Scarlet Letter and Huckleberry Finn, as the
three with the greatest "possibility of a long, long life," defending the work by citing Gilbert Murray's illustration of "the two kinds of beauty": one "which comes from rich ornamentation" and one like "the beauty of a modern yacht, where there is no ornamentation at all," but where "it has an organic, living simplicity and directness" (PCPF 13). Murray claims the latter was the beauty for which Greek writers strove; Cather claims it was the beauty for which Jewett strove, and certainly it was the beauty which both Cather and Emerson revered. As Emerson wrote, "all books of the imagination endure. . . . Every verse or sentence, possessing this virtue, will take care of its own immortality" (P 463).

Jewett and Cather obviously shared a philosophy of literature with the man who asserts that "it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem, -- a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own" (P 450). Again and again in letters and essays, Cather and Jewett speak of capturing the essence, of writing not "about life" but "life itself" (L 29), of finding a story that "seems to be there of itself, already moulded" (PAB 942), of "trying to get these conceptions down on paper exactly as they are to [the writer] and not in conventional poses supposed to reveal their character" (MJ 850). "... The poet is representative," Emerson wrote. "He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth" (P 448). He could have had no truer
disciples than Jewett, who sought to show the country people to their city brothers, and Cather, who endeavored to present the people of the Divide to the East.

V. Conclusion

At the age of fifteen, Willa Cather named Emerson her favorite prose writer; Sarah Orne Jewett was born in a New England which still revered him. His principles were clearly shared by both women, whether planted there by early exposure to his essays or simply found to be in sympathy with their own. Yet the Emersonian elements in their writings should not be dismissed as simply Emerson's influence on either or both of the authors. Both women wrote stories and novels which are particularly vivid, true reflections of the people they saw around them, striving to capture "the look itself"; the fact their heroes and heroines frequently conform to an Emersonian ideal and their works display an Emersonian optimism and faith in the individual is at least as indicative of Emersonian elements in the American value system as of Jewett's or Cather's adherence to Emersonian principles.

Emerson's ideas, asserting the power of the individual in concert with a benevolent nature, were particularly well-suited to nineteenth-century America; as Marsh says, "such ideas appealed to the hearts and minds of the inhabitants of a newly formed nation bent on structuring a
society 'of the people, by the people, and for the people'" (41). Yet the relevance of his philosophy did not end when the census declared the frontier closed in 1890, for cultural inheritances remain strong. Self-reliance has been the foundation of the American ideology at least since the Declaration of Independence articulated it, and, as Emerson says, "In self-trust all the virtues are comprehended" (AS 65). The Pilgrims were driven to the New World by their independent thoughts, and centuries of immigrants and pioneers followed them to this country and pushed its borders westward with the same self-trust.

Similarly, nature has always been regarded as a force (whether positive or negative) with which one must establish a relationship; initially, the howling wilderness terrified the colonists, only to be replaced by the myth of the American West, Manifest Destiny, streets paved with gold, the Dust Bowl, and, most recently, the controversies over the best use of a vanishing wilderness. In America that sense of the environment as a virtual being has remained relevant until the fairly recent past, if it is not still so. Last, exploration of the virtue of the common and everyday necessarily finds a willing audience in a democracy, based in its very essence on the inherent and equivalent worth and dignity of every person.

Thus, most of Emerson's ideas found a ready reception among the already self-reliant people who had left their homes for self-betterment of some kind. That sympathetic audience remains in their descendants,
brought up with the persistent cultural value system which we now acknowledge as peculiarly American. We instinctively recognize in Emerson's words the ideals to which we aspire, even if we have not yet defined them and, as Dillman asserts, find in his models distinctively American archetypes. We should not be surprised, then, to discover those same exemplars in the fiction of two writers who strove to accurately and truthfully depict everyday Americans, nor, for that matter, in other authors. Rather than insisting that Emerson influenced Jewett and Cather specifically, we should recognize the presence of Emersonian ideals in their fiction first and foremost as evidence of Emerson's skill in both defining and shaping the peculiarly American paradigm. Given this Emersonian influence on the American identity, we cannot help but find an Emersonian tradition among the rare American authors who "resemble a mirror carried through the street" (P 467).
Abbreviations Used

AS  "The American Scholar"  (Emerson)
CD  A Country Doctor  (Jewett)
CPF The Country of the Pointed Firs  (Jewett)
KA  The Kingdom of Art  (Cather)
L  Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett  (ed. Fields)
MA  My Antonia  (Cather)
MFN  "My First Novels (There Were Two)"  (Cather)
MJ  "Miss Jewett"  (Cather)
N  Nature  (Emerson)
OP  O Pioneers!  (Cather)
P  "The Poet"  (Emerson)
PAB  "Preface to Alexander's Bridge"  (Cather)
PCPF  "Preface to The Country of the Pointed Firs"  (Cather)
PH  The Professor's House  (Cather)
SR  "Self-Reliance"  (Emerson)
WH  "A White Heron"  (Jewett)
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