

THE QUEER LIFE OF FLOWERS, AN AESTHETIC OF DELICACY:
SARAH ORNE JEWETT AND MARTIN JOHNSON HEADE

The picture belongs most to the man who loves it best and sees entirely its meaning.¹

As Elaine Scarry has shown, ‘the practice of writing’ is, in its most material terms, ‘a laying down of flowers upon flowers,’ since paper and ink are both vegetable substances. Painting, whether on wood, canvas, or paper, also places vegetable pigments and oils on a vegetable ground.²

The ubiquitous presence of flowers is one way to think of the overlapping worlds of Sarah Orne Jewett and Martin Johnson Heade. Jewett—an American writer of primarily short stories set in New England; and Martin Johnson Heade, an American landscape painter with an intense attraction to hummingbirds—each explored *the peculiar*. These two artists both marveled at the aesthetic ambiguity of flowers. In prose and paint respectively, they repeatedly investigated the sublime details of blossoming florae, vines of vegetal matter, and the thorns of flowering roses.

These aesthetic preoccupations in late 19th century America—specifically within the New England area—and the discourse surrounding flowers was pervasive. Henry James, John Singer Sargent, Emily Dickinson, and myriad other turn-of-the-century artists also actively explored the blossoming vegetal world. Their contentious cultural value was unmistakable.³ In *The Butterfly People*, William Leache quotes Augustus Radcliffe Grote: ‘By the 1880’s it seemed everyone in American was chasing ‘flying flowers.’⁴ What is a flying flower? The concept itself is replete with a sense of unfamiliarity. Flowers, for Jewett and Heade alike, were much more than mere documentary depictions of blossoming plants—they were quixotic living organisms: sensuous, luxuriously fecund, and melancholically funereal. For them, the sophisticated portrayal of these animate ecosystems was not topical picturesque ornamentation; rather, flowers were imbued with ghostly ambiguity and haunting strangeness.

In this project, I suggest that Heade and Jewett obliquely developed an original and uncanny vernacular teeming with robust queer sensibilities, and, what I will call an *aesthetic of*

the delicate. Through detailed visual investigation, I reveal the pathos behind one of Heade's most brilliant depictions of the floral world, his master painting *Orchids and a Beetle* painted between 1885-1895 (Fig. 1). A parallel aesthetic vocabulary of implicit fragility is constitutive of Jewett's prose, and likewise configures the body of this essay. Three sculpting terms—one, *smallness*; two, *slowness*; and three, *nearness*—are the terrain which help develop the clarity of this ulterior world. Why do Jewett and Heade each pay acute attention to the infinitesimal detail of organic matter? How could meticulous depiction of slowness engender a kind of generative imagination in both prose and paint? What are the artistic and historic stakes for encoding the intimacy of spatial distances? These types of question, along with the three proposed aesthetic categories, will each be closely explored throughout the project. I accomplish this by close-looking at a compilation of Sarah Orne Jewett's short stories—namely, 'An October Ride,' 'A Mournful Villager,' and 'An Autumn Holiday,' and simultaneously further reveal similar thematic concerns in an array of Martin Johnson Heade's paintings. This project illuminates the gravitas of their analogous artistic engagements. First, however, a bit more regarding their fondness for flowers.

Let us start with Jewett, particularly paying attention to the imagistic dimension of her prose. For Jewett, flowers not only helped compose narrative fabric and prosaic motifs, they also played a dynamic role in her letters to various friends. In this letter, Jewett's affectionate employment of flowering buds is on display:

You're my tea rose bud girl, & there's nothing in all the world much like you in looks or ways: Ellen is one of those sweet pink-rose buds. Georgie is my wild rose a bright little wide rose—not the pale kind, tender-looking, willful-looking, brave-looking little fellows! Kate is like a very tall white hyacinth, and Kate is also like spring violets...Georgia says I am like a little bright-poppy—which at the time is dreadful to think of—for what would it be one day to see my friends and myself in a bouquet together!⁵

Jewett's complicated epistolary network reveals an intimate dialogue between a cohort of women: taut with anxiety, stuffed with pervasive references to fecund flora and fauna, and

embedded with an Eros of longing, these letters suggest the potent metaphoric value of flowers.⁶ Likewise, the veracity of Heade's ecological perceptions often situate the flower as more than macabre centerpieces. Although in a different register of Heade's painting process, his still life pictures of fecund roses, apple blossoms and magnolias, disclose a similarly strange preoccupation in his *oeuvre*. *Magnoliae Grandiflorae*, from 1888, is an exemplary case of this tradition in his work (Fig. 2). Art Historian Alison Syme's magnificent art historical monograph *A Touch of Blossom*, eloquently articulates the cultural salience and intertextuality laden in depictions of late 19th century flowers. Her analysis of one Heade painting, *Roses on a Palette* from 1883, humanizes the bouquet (Fig. 3). Syme writes, "subjects [flowers, portraits, garden] became protean, significantly, through their own various and interchangeable acts of art-making, lovemaking, and pollinating."⁷ For Syme and Heade alike, the picture transforms petals and stems into a kind of surrogate hand wherein the birth of art and pigment, images and color are each born out of the flower's life.

Implicitly, both Heade's picture and Jewett's letters and stories evoke provocative and anthropomorphic questions. What are the boundaries of animate organic life? How could a secular, gendered and discursive language of verdant landscape empower a reimagining of narrative? Where does the vernacular of a sequestered feminine world begin and end? Through these types of questions, Jewett interfuses the thresholds of the often sharply delineated spheres of real and fictive life. In other words, boundaries bleed. Thus, whether, 'Ellen is one of those sweet pink-rose buds,'—an unmediated and explicit analogous symbol—*or*, 'Kate is like a very tall hyacinth,'—a once removed simile bridging body and blossom—these metaphoric allusions only further illuminate the interchangeability between flowers and persons; narrative and description.

This kind of artistic and bodily interchangeability also registered with Martin Johnson Heade. Writing about Heade's flower paintings, art historian Barbara Novak states, "Heade's flowers occupy a different realm of discourse—intense, daring, original, and... unabashedly sensual."⁸ Here I direct our attention to consider one Heade painting, *Two Fighting Hummingbirds with Two Orchids* painted in 1875 (Fig. 4). The brash sensuality and soft depictions of fluttering hummingbirds and gently budding flowers—orchids, roses, and apple blossoms—seep through the frontal register of the canvas's window-like screen. There is a visceral animate quality. In one of Heade's countless notebooks on Hummingbirds, he revels in the 'brilliant and attractive little creatures...' More specially, he writes, 'for one who is in the least degree attuned to poetic feeling that have a singularly fascinating power, which the subtlest mind is unable to explain.'⁹ Dynamically vivacious, Heade's painterly vernacular enlivens tender petals and precarious wings to life.

The tiny birds remain a mystery; their infinitesimal breasts and fragile wings continue to hold magnetic presence. Uniquely however, *Two Fighting Hummingbirds with Two Orchids* is also enveloped by ominous shadows (Fig. 5, detail). A sheet of coal-colored distant rain and graphite cumulus clouds hovers above. This darkness grants the orchid and birds alike a contemporaneous delicateness—these natural creatures are frozen in their poetic aloneness and gentle reserved intimacy; the world of the wild only ever-so-slightly invades the scene. The uncanny juxtaposition of life and death lurks most in the brazen effrontery of Heade's flowers paintings, a muted spectral presence lingers in the atmospheric hazy landscapes. While this is only a cursory introduction to Heade's visual vocabulary, these are the kind of terms at play in the delicate ghostliness of his paintings. In Jewett and Heade alike, an internal logic both melancholic and luxuriant, focuses on the original, peculiar, and evocative. The late 19th century

subversive aesthetics of the delicate —smallness, slowness, nearness—are infused with this sublime pathos. These two artists challenge normative modes of representation: phenomenological perception, methodological narrative constructs, and the *process* of interpolation in reading images and text collide. I start with Jewett and her subtle world of words.

SMALLNESS: DESCRIPTION, IMAGINATION AND EMBODIMENT

This is a very small world; we are all within hail of each other. I dare say when we go to Heaven there will not be a stranger to make friends with.¹⁰

I suppose everyone can say, ‘I have a little kingdom where I give laws.’ Each of us has truly a kingdom in thought, and a certain spiritual possession.¹¹

Sarah Orne Jewett’s words, stories and characters are finely sculpted out of a world comprised of *the small*. We can first think broadly of myriad descriptions scattered throughout her fiction: enlivened tiny corners, sweetbriar bushes and little blossoming flowers, ‘a robin’s nest on the cornice overhead.’ In my reading, these are not topical ekphrastic acts of dusting a scene; rather, these highly approximated things construct worlds within themselves. Jewett had an appreciation for the intimate smallness of the world. Laurie Shanon writes of her fiction as an ‘intimist practice—at once small-scale and intimate—and many other critics have noted her attention to small or apparently insignificant detail.’¹² Fundamentally also at stake in this paper are the subtle issues of scale, size, and shape. Here I focus on the aesthetic of smallness as it relates to things, characters, encounters, and scenes.

Heather Love writes, “Jewett’s understated reflections on women’s intimacies and female solitude – as well as her cultivation of what I call a ‘spinster aesthetic’ – draw our attention to knots, silences, and fractures that indicate the still unfinished business of feminism.”¹³ Each knotted object, small fractured fantasy, or nameless character contains something akin to an ineffable life force. Jewett draws our attention to seemingly quotidian details, then poetically articulates the luminous textures of miniscule objects and interactions.¹⁴ How is this the case?

What are her rhetorical tactics for recovering *the small*? Why is smallness imbued with a kind of ulterior power? In order to critically explore these questions, I study a few versions of smallness through a close reading of text. First, I look at the world-making potentiality of one small object and scene. Next, we will consider the ephemeral ethos of a single tiny space wherein a hermetically sealed palace—organic, small and outdoors—is the setting. Last, I examine closely the intimate and intricate relationship between smallness and children in Jewett’s sketch, ‘From a Mournful Villager.’

Jewett textures the miniscule through vividly sensual depictions—vanquished New England landscapes ooze with tiny alchemic gardens, lonesome fireplaces hiss, and hollow empty gravesites speckle her fiction. In ‘An Autumn Holiday,’ she writes, ‘That afternoon I found something I had never seen before—a little grave alone in a wide pasture which had once been a field.’ This little grave sculpts a world in the wildness of the woods. She continues to construct an animate world within this fading object. ‘The small slate head-stone was worn away by the rain and wind...it had looked many a storm in the face, and many a red sunset.’ Inscribed in this gravestone are both the darkened clouds of a rainy night as well as the life-force of a red sky. We are made to feel the eyes of some phantom realm. The gravestone—a supposed tiny and simple inanimate rock-tablet—is birthed to life. The memorial headstone is the *thing* itself; it is an activating necromantic object. It is as if the façade of this worn-down blank tablet looks into the natural world: with a projected gaze the gravestone inverts the nature of object hood as it stoically stares storms and sunsets into organic existence. Keep in mind here also the abovementioned shadowy scenes and gloomy language enveloping Heade’s pictures. In Jewett and Heade together, there is a telepathic haunting.

Jewett's prose is not only poetic and intuitive. Similar to Heade's poetics in paint, her prose is persuasively visual and imagistic. Jewett again: 'There was an old sweet-brier bush growing on the short little grave, and in the grass underneath I found a ground-sparrow's nest.' She puts into microscopic focus the sublime interconnectedness of life and death: growing bushes, a tiny bird's nest and a tattered gravestone weave to create a cosmos. 'It was like a little neighborhood' she writes, 'and I have felt ever since as if I belonged to it.'¹⁵ The writerly gesture of expanding *the small* is impregnated with supernatural significance and narrative pathos. In the acutely rendered objects of the setting, fragility and ruin create a fully embodied and sensuous world.

Think also of this: In Jewett's short story, 'From a Mournful Villager,' a strangely dislocated female narrative voice writes about a front yard, her grandfather's. Recursively, the narrator seems to drift back temporally to the front yard she 'knew best.' She recalls, "I used to be afraid of her [my grandmother] when I was in the house, but I shook off even her authority and forgot I was under anybody's rule when I was out of doors."¹⁶ Curiously, it is only in the sanctity of the small outdoor front yard—now a distant memory and evaporated tactile place—where the child's mind is free: an infinitely vast landscape and ebulliently playful sensibility blossoms in the vegetal terrain of seeds and brush. "...I was too happy when I could smuggle myself into the front yard, with its four lilac bushes and its white fences to shut it in from the rest of the world."¹⁷ The small scene is set. It is as if the dream world of our narrator needs the small space—a fenced in area, a sequestered and sacred world—in order to securely sculpt her own imagistic memories: the yard acts as a frame within a frame. Jewett's enthusiastic itinerant protagonist, recalls 'blush roses, and white roses, and cinnamon roses all in a tangle in one corner...there were small shoots of lilac, too;' and alas, she burrows into a softened small space,

snuggled furtively in the secrecy of her own dreams. The pathos of Jewett's prose—both content and form—engender *the small* with a sense of empowerment and security.

Regarding Heade, art critic Theodore Stebbins writes of a similar propensity toward niche spaces. “It is as if the painter had climbed into the trees to witness a scene both intimate and grand, one that is highly charged with natural energy.”¹⁸ Heade is a supernatural adaptor: he can become small to merge into the bodily branches of the tree; and his hand meshes with the cosmological world of the flower. Oily pigments and subject matter alchemically disappear in the painter's brush, palette and fingers. Heade's *Passion Flowers and Hummingbirds* from 1870-83, contains this kind revelatory morphology (Fig. 6).¹⁹ Red flowers tickle the surface and bouquets of dendritic grey vines grip tree-limbs as two hummingbirds sit perched, two beaks nearly kissing. Again, art historian Alison Syme offers eloquent insight into the transmutable potential of the vegetal. She writes: “The complete artist, then, capitalized on the polyvalence the act of floral fertilization allowed, becoming both a pollinator *and* a flower.”²⁰ Heade's bodily transformative torqueing gesture immersed in the canopy of trees holds the seed of this epiphany; and his keen sensitivities are not dissimilar to Jewett's imaginative transference between people, insects and birds—specifically the landscapes of ‘lilac bushes, the intimate tiny worlds of caterpillars, or a small nest of the bobolink.’ Some of Jewett's more fabled tiny settings; more from Heade shortly.

With Jewett, her authorial scope—imaginative vastness, nostalgic mood, and elegiac voice—simultaneously enacts participatory recuperation of this fleeting small aesthetic. In this context, she reflects poignantly about the unspeakable effect of vanishing material settings and bedraggled experiences. In her short sketch ‘From a Mournful Villager’ Jewett writes, ‘People do not know what they lose when they make away with the reserve, the separateness, the sanctity

of the front yard of their grandmothers. It is like writing down the family secrets for anyone to read...'²¹ It appears these kinds of writerly gestures from Jewett were propositions to protect and preserve the values of tiny space? Perhaps the prosaic substantiation of Jewett's own fictive world offers some kind of generative recourse to both marginalized experiences and the gradually eradicated landscapes of smallness. Consider how in late 19th century New England the monetary value of land was beginning to fully incorporate the domestic into the market sphere of commerce: private ownership and capitalist propriety dominated trends in the socio-cultural domain, as well as the much of artistic imagination permeating popular discourse.²² Jewett 's prose and stories push back. Instead, her voice bestows the front-yard with an almost revelatory gravitas.

Her concerns with tiny corners and forgotten non-utilitarian sanctuaries of greenspace offer an implicit critique of burgeoning economic development, the ubiquitous encroachment of entrepreneurial thinking, and the bloated consumerist paradigm of late 19th century American progress. Jewett's intuitive voice is uncanny, autobiographical and authoritative. She continues to write, 'When it was thought worthwhile to put a fence around the flower-garden the respectability of art itself was established and made secure.'²³ She illuminates the divine 'respectability of art' in its separate quietude as she carves out a space for this sacred small sphere. Similarly, by texturing tiny perceptions gently built into the fabric of the stories, Jewett teaches us to see with the artistically softened eyes of a child. Her work summons a mood. Similar to the paintings of both Heade, in Jewett the fractured and vulnerable are positioned as revelatory modes of *being*. These susceptible values are not to be dismissed, but rather are positioned as emancipatory epistemic structures demanding a perceptive sentiment of sincerity

and sensitivity. Each of these artists alike summon the oft-misunderstood paradigms of nuanced intuition and emotive peculiarity.

Perhaps *smallness* or a child's ability to *play* small engenders this radical imagination and the curiosities of *make-believe* fantasy. Keep close in mind Heade's world of paint. "I was first cousin [outdoors, alone, in the garden] to a caterpillar if they called me in, and I was my own sister to a giddy-minded bobolink when I ran away across the fields, as I used to do very often."²⁴ Created from the seeds of smallness we begin to see a child's infinitely expansive ecological fantasy. The vegetal and organic participate harmoniously in the configuration of this animate interior world. The malleability of identity within this dreamscape of quietude, soft memory and smallness, traverses the threshold of the 'real.' Infused in smallness is thus a complicated ethos of solitary musing, seductive dreaming, and secretive behavior. For Jewett, the potentiality of misbehaving and covert escapes is inscribed in the *small* life. Outside, the small young child could 'shoo off her grandmother's authority,' becoming queen bee in the domain of the plant-world. In the safe nest of this front yard Jewett reveals the fine line between sincere naïve innocence and performative seductive charm.

The above-noted passage concludes as the clenched small hand of the girl holds the tiny remains of a crumpled dead rose. This tiny blossom—a dead rose whose flower face now lies lifeless and gone—is clasped in the child's small palm. Consider again Heade's *Roses on a Palette* (see Fig. 3). The painting serves quite well as a kind of visual surrogate for Jewett's thoughts: a child's hand, a dead rose, a set of brushes to construct anew. The creative life-force and artistic impulse to make resides in the girl's quietude. Throughout this scene, her disappointed grandmother continues to sit, an inactive listening force wavers in the cove of a window seat. With much greater influence than the passively receptive grandmother, the child's

actions and array of choices determine the outcome of the story. In the delicacy of the girl's hand, the lost blossom finds a grave: the vast world of life and death condense into a small rose in a small hand. This tiny exchange between youth and elderly, child and grandmother, cements the newly formed unspoken bond. It is as if this tiny miracle of fleeting life—a crumpled and crumbling bud of red rose blood—holds the seeds of an entirely novel social existence. The *smallness* of youth is here bestowed with a degree of wild empowerment wherein the inconspicuous, discreet niches, and transitory sphere of make-believe reign supreme.

Jewett continues, 'I had my trials and sorrows in this paradise...for many days afterward I was bowed down with a sense of my guilt and shame.'²⁵ In this final scene, the child narrator is taught a life lesson: this girl, our innocent child living playfully and dreaming alone in the natural world, learns both the devastating pain and exuberant joys of living. In this alchemically warped scene of vegetative life we are witnesses to the magic of genuine curiosities and capacious imagination: caterpillars and birds are conduits for magically small transference. Absorbed in the quietude of the outdoors our child narrator continues to play alone and is transformed; she is smuggled clandestinely between four lilac bushes, a white fence, and a brick wall. This immersion in her grandmother's front yard, however, is concurrently haunted by darkness: the spectral presence of death. The child remembers the mason, whom paved the yard and signed his name into brick 'as if it were a picture,' as she says: 'He had been dead so many years that I used to think of his initials as if the corner brick were a little grave-stone for him.'²⁶ The next winter her grandmother is also dead.

In Jewett's prose, she shows us the magic interchangeability between past and present, private childhood and public world. Death comes and goes; life finds rhythm to live and often dwindles merely mindless into its own world of missing flowers and picked buds. Rachel Cohen

writes, ‘Jewett often felt that she *was* the landscape around their house, and in telling its history she felt she was telling her own.’²⁷ Landscape and painting, intertextuality and phenomenological role-reversals intoxicate the work of Jewett. In this presentation of artworks, the often-clichéd echoed analog between smallness and childhood is not only a naïvely romantic one; Jewett shows the human stakes may be much higher. The small child’s recollections, morose and most vivid, are ‘an intense curiosity to see what dying might be like.’ The funeral gave her ‘vast entertainment,’ as it was ‘the first grand public occasion in which I had taken any share.’²⁸ Only often may a child find these curiosities in the strange inexplicabilities of life and death. The funereal now has a regenerative quality; and the redemptive petrification process of dead flowers finds a visual analog in the painted ecosphere of Martin Johnson Heade.

Martin Johnson Heade’s orchid landscape paintings dialogue with Jewett’s diligently sculpted microscopic liveliness of gardens, tiny characters and seemingly staid settings. In his quixotic floral landscapes, Heade paints the pathos of small things with assiduously detailed brushwork: a niche space of nests, sensually erupting pink pistils, and steaming florescent filament animatedly breathe to create his tropical palaces. Here let us consider closely one quintessential Martin Johnson Heade flower painting, *Study of an Orchid*, from 1872 (Fig. 7).

The painting starkly juxtaposes a background scene of gothic-like atmospheric chiaroscuro with resplendently picturesque orchids. The disquieting and opulent cornucopia of organic life is scrupulously on display in Heade’s meticulous brushwork. Art critic Theodore Stebbins writes that in Heade’s work there is ‘an original combination of flowers and birds in a natural landscape, about which historians have agreed that there are quite simply no other paintings like these known in America or elsewhere.’²⁹ In *Study of an Orchid*, Heade’s commitment to an aesthetic of smallness is most palpable in three discreet registers: the

microscopic characterization of orchids as stimulating protagonists, the exaggerated nature of sensually ballooning details, and the metamorphosing potential of these dripping budded flowers. The small, for Heade, is evocative. Examined beneath his own eye's laser-fine microscopic lens, his flowers resist the withering organic process of chronological time and ultimately impending death.

As viewers of his orchids, we are beholden to immediacy and sensory absorption: through an optically magnified mirage in the foreground, Heade paints the erotic dangling threads and pink flowering minutiae of the orchid. Is it possible the accentuation of infinitesimal detail—baths of light, nuanced colors and tiny floral texturing—is some larger critique of scientific observation? It is as if Heade implicitly puts to test the linear telos of 19th century natural philosophy and scientific positivism. With immaculate precision, Heade's painterly technique unveils the sensually labyrinthine matrix of the orchid: the exaggerated iridescent leaves quiver with life with a kind of mordant *vampiric* quality. The illuminated and disquieting aliveness of an ecologically robust biosphere is painted with a kind of defamiliarizing gesture in the flower. The crepuscular and thickly encrusted textures of the plant kingdom are saturated with living potential, perhaps even an animus able to outlive the naturalized life-lines of birth and death: as an eco-portrait, the sinewy self of the flower's face gazes permanently outside of the pictorial realm.

Heade analogously emphasizes the complicated ontology of precise vision as he treads the razor-thin line between pornographically fetishizing the manicured plant world and rendering the sublime as vulgar carnivalesque landscape. Consider in *Study of an Orchid* how the perversely budding *Cattleya labiate* orchid looms over the hummingbirds (Fig. 8, detail). There is a majestic subtlety in his painterly articulation. With a caustic puckering labellum the orchids

seems able to capture the two birds. The gargantuan disproportionate scale between birds and flowers further articulates this uncanny violence. Heade's mysteriously haunting floral paintings complicate the precarious dynamism of tiny organisms over-populating the natural world. Ballooning to life, the orchid petals are nimble and potent: they aim to dislocate our normative understanding of scale, power and flesh. Stebbins articulates the strangeness of the ballooning flowers, and more generally, Heade's idiosyncratic painterly vision.

Heade's inventiveness came in combining dramatic, enlarged foreground flowers with (usually) a pair of hummingbirds before an evocative, believable tropical landscape. The result was a new kind of painting, equally still life and landscape, which possessed great sensual and emotional power.³⁰

Heade's landscapes—the vegetal and the sinuous fleshy world of plants—are timelessly anthropomorphized and animate: orchids are more than hyperbolized fauna and flowers; rather they become living luscious characters. In *Study of An Orchid*, the fluidity of formal transferences between a few different visual motifs is also striking: the gripping white roots of the orchid visually rhyme with a distant waterfall. Crawling moss in the upper right corner of the canvas is portrayed as lithely creeping appendages; at right, a sinuously drooping vine frames a distant luscious palm tree, and the manicured green palm leaves cascade into a grove of colorfully textured vegetation. Here, colors of pink, greens, greys and yellow liquefy, as if naturally bleeding in space together. Minute details and colors, animals and plants, form into one another. Our central concern, however, remains the anthropomorphic and buoyant nature of Heade's microscopically enhanced small tropical plants.

Barbara Novak's astute observations further this *liveliness*. "The sexuality of the orchid paintings is doubled in that the flowers themselves are suggestively configured and painted with a variety of stroking and touches."³¹ The weird materiality of touch is embodied in the fragile skin of the flower. In this study, a serpentine stem seems to pose as a kind of preying-mantis figure. Notice also how the fluidly green orchid leaves appear to effortlessly support the bobbing

neck of the blossoming flower—these five or six budding stamen acting as some kind of ethereal magic carpet. Dancing on this ethereal horizontal plane, it is as if the orchid’s prancing petals are attenuated mobile legs. Like Jewett, there is some kind of intermingling relational model at play that often seamlessly merges pollinators and pollination.

SLOWNESS: MELANCHOLIC LANDSCAPES AND GOTHIC DECOMPOSITION

But when I was a very little child indeed my world was bounded by the fences that were around my home; there were wide green yards and tall elm-trees to shade them; there was a long line of barns and sheds...³²

In Jewett’s sketches, decelerated solitary actions are magnified, and miniscule quotidian exchanges often contain emotively germane seeds. Tiny actions are exhaustively observed and occupy time; characters do slow things and the experience of temporality is attenuated. Think of the numerous scenes of walking, picking flowers, conversing, sewing and spinning. Rachel Cohen writes,

Jewett gradually found her own right material in the people and landscape of Maine. Her stories and sketches emerged out of the farms and fishing villages near South Berwick, where she grew up and resided, on and off, throughout her adult life.³³

Remember, for example, Mrs. Todd walking on thyme and ‘making its fragrant presence known,’ in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. The woman treads on the pungent herb, activating time: stillness pervades this scene. Motion stops. In ‘An October Ride,’ a lone long sojourn into the woods fills the opening pages. The sublime nature of solitude and the unknown are all discovered through this protracted meditative journey as distance extends and time freezes. Aloneness, quietude and slowness are empowered through Jewett’s acts of appropriation—spaces merge and time dissolves in her fluidly attenuated prose. The primal nature of slowed decay guides this section. How does she perform this alternative aesthetic? Where are patience and time contextually palpable? What are the historical stakes of this gesture?

Consider one slow scene, an old horse, and the ethos of metamorphosis. In ‘An October Ride,’ time also pauses. The narrative begins with a horseback journey into unknown woods. In

this sketch, we experience an evaporation of time. Our protagonist forgets time in the pasture, as she rhetorically muses about the ephemeral sublime of temporality. She writes, “I could see that it would not be many years, if they were left alone, before the green grass would be covered, and the old apple-trees would grow mossy and die.”³⁴ This reflection on geological time echoes an appreciation for the beauty of organic decelerated pace. Slowness here is not merely decay and destitution; rather there is profoundness in this alternative mode of processing temporality.³⁵ I cite Jewett at length here:

I could already see a cushion of juniper, or a tuft of sweet fern or bayberry. I walked the horse about slowly...and at last I found a cellar all grown over with grass...The wind blew over pleasantly and it was a curiously protected and hidden place, sheltered and quiet, with its one small crop of cider apples dropping ungathered to the ground, and unharvested there, except by hurrying black ants and sticky, witless little snails. The horse listened and stood still, without a bit of restlessness, and when we heard the far cry of a bird she looked round at me, as if she wished me to notice that we were not alone in the world, after all. It was strange, to be sure, that people had lived there...that they had followed out the law of existence in its succession of growth and flourishing and decay, within that steadily narrowing circle of trees.³⁶

Her *ekphrastic* obsessions are the whole story; and the descriptive detail repositions the fissures of fracture and disjuncture as primary. Similar to any apotheosis in paint, there is no paraphrasing: the bright delicacy of language is the jewel of the text. Jewett’s obsessive concern with slowness is less about measurable time as much as it is about immersive experience—the evaporation of time. Sheila, her horse, stands still listening. It is as if a slowed-down internal register engenders some kind of mystical possibility—vanishing pastoral scenes are recovered and we can *hear* ecosystems. The gently blowing wind exhales its pleasant slow breath. Living trees are appreciated as visceral in their embodied tactility.

Her fondness for slowness imbues the ‘sweet ferns’ and ‘cushions of juniper’ with softened approachability. Further, ‘hurrying ants’ are juxtaposed to ‘witless little snails,’ again drawing our attention to fundamental natural patterns of slow movement in time. Miniscule insects and anthropoids jaunt in their queer unknowable existence. The stillness of her horse—perhaps even, the mindlessly mindful snail—is each absorbed and attentive. Sluggish and

strange, a slow temporal existence reveals life in the creaturely realm. Quietude and contemplative stasis suggestively evoke this aesthetics of delicate slowness. Although the topic of a different visual project from within Heade's *oeuvre*, I analogously think of his haystack paintings with a similar vernacular. Consider *Hazy Day on the Marshes, New Jersey*, painted between 1871-1875. (Fig. 9). A sinuous stream slithers from foreground to horizon, framing bundles of compressed hay. This armada of bulbous insect shapes hovers on a gloomy landscape; and a creaturely quality to the hive-like large collections of hay—packed earth, dusty excess, and the remains of farmed field hands—scours the surface of the ominous landscape. These catacomb gatherings are not buzzing with life, but rather thick apiaries portraying a staid bucolic life; in this domain of quietude and forgotten rural labor there is a fractured gentleness akin to Jewett's gothic environmental kingdoms.

For Jewett, like Heade in his painted rural scenes of grass, it is not only the content but also the form of the stories that matter. While the word “sketches” suggests rapid pace—stories drawn frantically into existence—I am more concerned with the slowly unraveling and spiraled nature of Jewett's geographically precise stories. Her meticulous attention to little things emotes a melancholic pathos and otherworldly nostalgia. Heather Love notes how Jewett pays close attention to detail and is concerned with the art of observation. She writes, ‘Attending to this detail, Jewett allows her fiction to unfold at a slow pace... we can also understand it as a way to capture minor events and details... The slowing effect of repetition; of passages devoted to gossip, secrecy and shyness; of circular, plotless narratives—all these techniques form part of Jewett's regionalist practice.’³⁷ Repetition, stasis and circularity each problematize the ontological value of prescribed narrative and causal linearity. Her sketches diligently scrape bare a more subtle and quixotic world; they challenge conventional paradigms of staid New England

landscapes: a sensibility of keen discernment slowly unveils in Jewett's best work. Because of this, Jewett's circular stories attenuate our perception of time, offering us a fleeting glance into the misty veils of her own reality.

Like a mirage, she seamlessly weaves together disparate spatial scenes and opaque temporalities. Like an accomplished painter, she accomplishes this through interfusing materiality. In other words, there are diaphanous boundaries between the animate and stasis in Jewett's mind and text. "The relationship of untamed nature to what is tamed and cultivated is a very curious and subtle thing to me; I do not know if everyone feels it so intensely."³⁸ Jewett shows us this slowed amalgamation of animate and inanimate things. For example, consider the aliveness of decomposition as our nameless narrator finds a decaying cellar 'all grown over with grass.'³⁹ First, the decomposing wooden vegetal cellar halts the character. She thinks to herself: "I suppose my feeling toward this place was like that about a ruin, only this seemed older than a ruin."⁴⁰ Rhetorically, the evacuated cellar transforms—the darkened cobwebbed-ceiling-crevice becomes equated with alchemic ruins. Jewett is a visual poet; an imagistic Blakeian of the later 19th century.

Next, the 'palace garden' ruins imaginatively transform into a distant dream of Egyptian pyramids which, 'dating back to beyond men's memories, turned into sand again and dust that is like all the rest of the desert, and blows about in the wind.' As readers, we are offered a pathway into the interfusing act of writerly inventiveness: we can read both the text and subtext in a merging dialogue—Jewett's tamed mind and fictive writing blur boundaries of self. The stories ask for our own micro-performance of utterance: contemplation externalized and perceptions of patience introjected.

But Nature repossesses herself surely of what we boldly claim. The pyramids stand yet, it happens, but where are all those cities that used also to stand in old Egypt, proud and strong, and dating back beyond men's memories or traditions,—turned into sand again and dust that is like all the rest of the desert, and blows about in the wind? Yet

there cannot be such a thing as life that is lost. The tree falls and decays, in the dampness of the woods, and is part of the earth under foot, but another tree is growing of it.⁴¹
Our attention here is directed to a peculiar desert-like terrain where variant sensibilities thrive.

In this contemporaneous historic moment, perhaps the foreignness of ancient Egyptian mausoleums was in fact no stranger than the intoxicating alien landscapes of the American West. Pyramid dunes and sand dreams were visual tropes ubiquitously forecast in the American imagination. Contemporaneous photographic projects also suggest these concerns. The popularizing medium of picture-making hyperbolized the presence of virtual realities; distances collapsed and scale of representation fluctuated. In this regard, Timothy O'Sullivan's photograph, *The Pyramids and Domes*, a picture crafted from the Nevada wilderness in 1867, is revelatory (Fig. 10). Imaginative potential and geological remnants are luminously exaggerated in his mirage of desert images. In O'Sullivan's *The Pyramids and Domes*, the excavating search for organically molded mountain relics materialized: photography could majestically reveal uncanny sites of sand dunes and sacred waters. These phantasms permeated the atmosphere. Jewett's words of lush gardens and fecund ruins were a different kind of projection artistic longing. Her painstaking prosaic *exphrasis* offers a bizarre commentary on foreignness and the ceaseless earthly processes of change. Perhaps even the kind of alleged world-shattering transformations available to new mediums of visual representation were also percolating as vigorously in her delicate text.

With Jewett, alternative temporal modes of being in the world are emboldened, and an aesthetic of elongated strange slowness is highlighted.

In the darkness of an early autumn evening I sometimes find myself whistling a queer tune that chimes in with the crickets' piping and cries of the little creatures around me in the garden. I have no thought of the rest of the world. I wonder what I am; there is a strange self-consciousness, but I am only a part of one great existence which is called nature.⁴²

Let us continue the dialogue with the visual. The tactility of Jewett's words unravels with a poetic pace similar to the visual world of Martin Johnson Heade's paintings. While Jewett is the one *whistling a queer tune*—a winded breadth humming in rhythmic procession with piping crickets and crying cicadas—her poetic musings feel as much to be a part of Heade's sentiments. I turn my attention to a variety of ways Heade's paintings of small tropical universes are saturated with an *affect* of hushed slowness. In order to unveil the uniqueness of Heade's aesthetic modes of slowed and quiet temporality, here I address a few topics: first, the methodology of Heade's visual inquiry and painting process; second, the historically salient themes of ecological change and flowering natural environments; and last, the atmospheric tones ubiquitous in his greater oeuvre. Throughout, I want to think of the painting process for Heade—not only his meticulously painted brush strokes, detailed rendering of orchid petals and hummingbird wings, and his voyages into the tropics—but also the muted glaze of his cavernous landscapes.⁴³

There is a heavy thickness in Heade's tropical landscapes: sheets of rain, moss-covered residual buildup, and overgrown vegetal layering stain the canvas. At times however, Heade's carefully smudged application of paint appear to effervescently varnish the natural settings. Decomposing botanical matter dangles, trees appear to slowly suffocate, and hazy atmospheric nets of drizzle befuddle any accurate perspectival depth. This apotheosis of liquefaction into matter is apparent in *Pink Orchids and a Hummingbird on a Twig* from 1875 (Fig. 11). At first view of this work, even the hummingbird is visually inseparable from the orchid. The curving tail of the bird seems to continue the upper rim of the orchid's lips. As the flowers cosmology dominates the scene, the hummingbirds neck disappears into the pink threshold of flower and sky; its beak is lost in the process of puckering and pollination. Beholden to these kinds of

myriad niche crevices, viewers casually drift into a kaleidoscopic adventure; there is a kind of patient exploration of Heade's natural environment.

In these painterly gestures, Heade decelerates our visual attention. Opaque mists gradually surrender to the surrounding mountainous environments. Concurrently, however, these murky screens of fog reverently sculpt an interior frame of light: it is on this center stage where Heade's mysterious flowers often emerge. The orchid becomes a living creature composed of organic material: paint becomes petals, and the pigmentation of colors drifts back toward a lost natural environment. Alas, his assiduously painted exotic blossoming plants are ceremoniously placed on a melancholic pedestal. Heade provokes us to gradually telescope into the small and the intimate. The flowering buds glow; and there is an uncanny kind of anthropomorphism at work. Finally, Heade's sumptuous orchids are luxurious ruins of life and death. These quixotically animate portraits of flowers are icons of loss.⁴⁴

With fragile brush strokes and sincere observation Heade vulnerably exposes his own artistic vision of the natural world. There is naivety and sincerity to engaging so thoroughly in the pathos of biology. How could this be the case? Here, Stebbins offers insight into Heade's larger melancholic project. He writes, 'Heade painted the marsh in the way that Thoreau wrote of Walden Pond, describing every detail and every nuance of an area that to most seemed mundane and forgettable.' The work is honest. Paintings and text alike are vulnerable. Think also more broadly of the commitment to attenuated observation and solitary musing both Thoreau and Heade so highly value. Writer and painter alike encourage a different and unique way of *being*—seeing, interpolating and feeling—within the world we live in. A certain subdued gravitas is embedded in this continued attentive focus of the organic environment. Heade's landscapes are emptied of human presence; and they are thus evacuated of any quotidian chatter of the social

world. His elongated and scrupulous attention paid to detail remind us finally of the artist's burden of honest representation. In the hissing quietude of the tropical world Heade's unique artistic vision could expand.

For Heade, the pace of a reflective life was fundamental; the vast openness of nature encouraged his contemplative sensibilities. His numerous correspondence with Frederic Church and discussions of sunset, 'sheets of rain,' and foggy weather highlight these concerns.⁴⁵ The mid-nineteenth century, however, witnessed a momentous paradigmatic shift concerning unseen remote places, exotic traveling plants and foreign geographies. Stebbins again writes eloquently about these formative environmental changes for Heade. He states: 'The marsh seems also to have been an important site in Heade's mind; in it he could be alone—observing, sketching, painting—and in his paintings of it he could celebrate his love of the country and a yearning for his own youth'⁴⁶ Martin Johnson Heade, the itinerant artist and lover of exotic flora and fauna, viscerally experienced these ecological transformations.⁴⁷ Not dissimilar to the stakes of Jewett's prose, Heade's orchid landscapes quietly addresses myriad social disruptions threatening to invade the holy quietude of the organic world.

Benfey again writes, 'In later years, as railroads and canals encroached on this idyllic landscape [pastoral Lumberville, Pennsylvania] and 'took every vestige of its beauty away forever,' Heade remembered 'the glorious shooting of those days [and] the finest fishing that a modest man would wish for.'⁴⁸ In Heade's best work, slowly emerging flowers decelerate perceptions of time. Perhaps the growth of American positivism, speculative growth of market capitalism and ecological subterfuge could not in fact pervert these majestic flowers. How could this be the case?

The painstakingly slow growth of orchids is a biological process to marvel at. The orchid is delicate; it is miracle of life. Weeks and months pass with ostensibly little to no change in the plant; their chemistry is fragile as even slight environmental conditions of wetness, heat and light can dramatically alter the lifecycle of this unique plant. Think of this: an orchid's spindly-manacled white roots reach for breathable soil; flower buds bob softly suspended in transient bloom; and gentle green stems delicately sturdy the balanced plant. With a similar pace, slow creeping vines and unhurried dampened mossy growth flourish in Heade's natural environments. The biological miracle of the plant rhymes with the visual language of Heade. His flowers hang effortlessly in quietly disappearing atmospheres: the silent mood is surrounded by somber sounds—a fading elusive sigh is trapped in the furrowed lips of the flowers. Heade's fluttering hummingbirds delicately balance in this same still air—their ethereal wings soundless like the quiet movement of the wind. Heade alchemically captures in paint the ineffable; the frenzied speed of the hummingbird's flapping wings is made still and legible.

The miraculous and precarious life cycle of the hummingbird is also analogous to the delicacy and magic imbued in the life of orchids. In Heade's still life landscapes, these vibrantly colorful and strangely illustrious birds register as new types of vivaciously frozen specimens. Heade was not alone in his obsessive pursuits of exotic orchids and colorful hummingbirds. Benfey writes, 'With the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859, hummingbirds became almost as central to the debate on evolution as apes and monkeys. Opponents of natural selection ridiculed the idea that these gorgeous birds in all their variety were the result of chance rather than God's delight in creating things of beauty.'⁴⁹ Unique to Heade's orchid landscapes, however, is a certain kind of hyperbolic consciousness: his backdrops of strangely precise vapors tread the verge of the grotesque and the ghoulish, as poetic miniscule bird wings suspend

weightless in the foreground. As if microscopically enhanced, Heade's frozen blossoms, fluttering bird wings, and stiff insects are a kind of stationary elegiac sculpture.⁵⁰

The slow pace of life-and-death cycles presented in Heade's orchid paintings also unapologetically evade acrimonious cultural questions: that is, both the pervasive mid-nineteenth century tropes of seismic Darwin-like shifts and capitalistic schema are conspicuously absent in his work.⁵¹ While scientific geologic concerns, factors of nascent business culture, and turbulent economic market changes dominated social discourse, Heade's work remains committed to his own idiosyncratic visions. In so doing, his pictorial program silently unsettles the invasive tentacles of American *progress*. While various national agendas—the spheres of both scientific exploration and visual representation—were preoccupied with notions of documentation, enumeration and preservation, Heade's pictures intentionally avoid these socio-cultural developments. Most specifically, microscopic scientific revelations and other ecological transformations are visually rearranged in Heade's own imaginary time-warp of fecund organic places. His paintings pay homage to a different domain of politics; they are each a visually commemorative record of faded spaces. With Heade, there is dignified resistance; and his *still-life-flower-landscape-paintings* generously offer an animated portal into time, a foggy window into a lost past.

His best paintings mournfully unveil for us a land that time has forgotten. Benfey likewise suggests that, “a ‘folk’ aspect lingers in some of his early portraits and seascapes, especially in his depiction of claw-like breaking waves and ghostly ships on the horizon.”⁵² Benfey has in mind this kind of Heade picture, *Hazy Sunrise at Sea* from 1863 (Fig. 12). I agree with Benfey's assessment; and only would further his postulation to include something like this: Heade's vernacular of the folk, and awareness of a cosmic portent strangeness, transcends

beyond only his earliest visual masterpieces. Rather, *this* inimical aspect of his landscape painting is palpably present in the majority of Heade's work and complicates principles of visual Americana. Throughout, Heade's own novel relationship to the Anthropocene and ocular representation is undergirded by an ethos of deathly slowness; an uncanny, fragile artistic cultivation is maintained in both his response to environmental decay, and his critique of an overblown American culture of speedily invasive entrepreneurship and development. Flowers, however magnified and pictorially present, remain dislocated tokens of an unreachable staid past.

A radically different kind of Heade picture completes this investigation. *Gremlins in the Studio*, painted sometime in the decade following the close of Civil War (1865-1875), is a strange hallucinatory painting (Fig. 13). It purports to position us the viewer inside the painter's studio. An uncanny hobgoblin creature at center looks outward; its muted circular face—strangely anti-human and conniving with a tilted smile—rhymes with two wooden easel stilts bracing a picture. As if to question the very act of objecthood and painting, an ostensibly finished marsh painting occupies the majority of the picture plane. With defamiliarizing tongue-and-cheek slyness, Heade relocates the possibilities of the real: like his orchid pictures, imagination and realism collide, dreams and fantasy expand.

NEARNESS: TACTILITY OF FLOWERS, BODILY PRESENCE AND IMAGINATIVE PROJECTIONS

In Jewett's final scene of 'An October Ride' we are placed within a cottage. There is a fire nearby. Recall, Jewett's settings are often most palpably rendered after an attenuated sojourn—this scene is no different. In this intimately crafted place the burning effervescent embers of normative space disappears. "I do not know why it is these silent, forgotten places are so delightful to me; there is one which I always call my farm... In some strange way, the place has become a part of my world and to belong to my thoughts and life."⁵³ This place is close

within her thoughts. Forgotten to the world, the site lives on in Jewett's writerly intoxication. A similar pathos exists in the interior scene in 'An Autumn Holiday,' Two women are conversing and spinning yarn; the scene is quiet, intimate and small as 'two cheerful old bodies... a pair of horses with smooth gray hair spinning yarn at a pair of big wheels.'⁵⁴ There is tactile nearness to the old women's hands and yarn: the queered language, interior home and stillness of spinning triangulate to create a world of closeness. Think of the juxtaposition of bodily spaces—wheels, horses and two old women combine to transform into an intimate crystal-ball of spooled yarn.

Let us here consider closely the spectral—the apparition of one imaginary figure—and its relationship to space and time. As 'An October Ride' concludes, our narrator makes palpable the ruinous farm's 'last tenant.' The long-deceased woman is described as a 'very old women...a famous weaver and spinner.'⁵⁵ This otherworldly presence slowly seeps into the murky scene. Jewett writes, "...and I thought of her that day a great deal, and could almost see her as she sat alone on her doorstep in the twilight of a summer evening, when the thrushes were calling in the woods." Through a reverent and generous stillness, the elasticity of material reality transforms. The humming quietude of evening basking in dreamy twilight evokes the otherworldly. An effervescent woman—a ghost of the past—is summoned into existence in Jewett's performative act of meditative contemplation.

There must have been so many things happen in so many long lives which were lived there; people have come into the world and gone out of it again from those square rooms with their little windows, and I believe if there are ghosts who walk about in daylight I was only half deaf to their voices, and heard much of what they tried to tell me that day.⁵⁶

The cauldron of this ghostly ending slowly thickens as a fire is left burning. Jewett daydreams as ghosts are left evaporating into the night's remembering of softly muted embers: "I wonder who it was that had made the first fire there..."⁵⁷

Jewett writes, however, not with warm levity but instead with the uncanny jitters embedded in both plant life and interior small universes: “The life in me is a bit of all life, and where I am happiest is where I find that which is next of kin to me, in friends, or trees, or hills, or sea, or beside a flower, when I turn back more than once to look into its face.”⁵⁸ There is direct intimate nearness and bodily presence in this poetic description. Life is seemingly approachable and soft in the animate energies of the trees as our heroine ‘looks into its face.’ However, with a subtle change of tone, Jewett transforms this comfortable ‘next of kin,’ into a darkened corner space—this nightmarish cove is murkier, with nostalgic tones of something more gothic.

It gives one a strange feeling, I think, to go into an empty house so old as this. It was so still there that the noise my footsteps made startled me, and the floor creaked and cracked as if someone followed me about...up-stairs there was a long, unfinished room with a little square window at each end, under the sloping roof, and as I listened there to the rain I remembered that I had once heard an old man say wistfully, that he had slept in just such a ‘linter’ chamber as this when he was a boy, and that he never could sleep anywhere now so well as he used there while the rain fell on the roof just over his bed.⁵⁹

It is eerily quiet as she enters the ‘long unfinished room.’ In this attic with a tiny window, memory is haunted by ineffable voices from the past. A conjured memory of an old man’s inability to sleep again disturbs the space. The remembered experience of his tranquil repose in the midst of a rainstorm—a Melvillian *after quiet*—haunts the old man; not dissimilar, the uncanny ‘linter chamber’ is dusted with these hovering memories. It is as if some slumbering ambulatory ghost lingers between the floorboards of the lone window room. The story concludes with a spectral quality. “I hope the ghosts who live in the parsonage watched me with friendly eyes, and I looked back myself, to see a thin blue whiff of smoke still coming up from the great chimney.” Blue smoke dissipates into the all-encompassing quiet dark night.

Consider finally a different small interior space, similarly unusual and intimate. Whereas a haunted presence constitutes the final scene in ‘An October Ride,’ here, the setting is an alternative kind of dreamscape; imaginative childhood memory and fantastic reverie construct this world: It is a quiet scene in ‘From a Mournful Villager.’ Jewett writes, “And one of these [a

barn or shed surrounding her fenced in garden] had a large room in its upper story, with an old ship's sail."⁶⁰ Strangely similar descriptions of two different niche worlds of interiority and daydreaming bespeak the alternative modes of *smallness, slowness and nearness* at play for Jewett. The quixotic paradigm of tiny attic corners: closed and discreet, intimate small little coves of space, further texture Jewett's delicate aesthetics. How fascinating that this magical crevice in 'From a Mournful Villager,' is an also an attic—a child's corner of the world matted with a 'ship's foresail'—as if the interior place itself is nostalgic for the disappeared pre-industrial sail. The sail evokes not the magical distant dreaming of the sea abroad, but rather the *nearness* of an imagination at sail. The intimate dream space complicates the texture of space. Again, *smallness and nearness* seem to engender the possibilities of gradual metamorphosis as daydreaming, white sails and blue clouds are ensconced in the subtle setting.

These kinds of foggy tones and unsettling niche universes also help to comprise the melancholic role of distance in Martin Johnson Heade's landscapes. Specifically, I have in mind the unusually prominent role of his exaggerated and intimate flowers. Novak convincingly writes about the animate essence of Heade's flowers. 'Few floral artists, before or after him, have so eloquently grasped the inner life of the flower, its living being, so to speak, partaking as much of basic organic laws as our own bodies.'⁶² Each of these enlivened orchids seems to address the viewer with various affect—the flowers possess a kind of reversed vision. The kind of winged buoyant levity and interfusing of pictorial characters is not, however, only prescient in Heade's orchids and hummingbirds.

Let us look at a different consummate Heade painting, *Orchids and a Beetle* (ca. 1885-1895) in order to highlight both the close intimacy and uncanny strangeness of the natural world (see Fig. 1). There are two clusters of flowers: one, the main orchid on the far left; and the other,

the three smaller more muted blossoms. Each optically manipulates distance in different ways. Think first of the sensuous enveloping edges of the thinly painted rippling red labellum poetically extending forward in the left portion of the canvas. Novak continues, ‘The flower paintings, particularly the magnolias and orchids, are the unlikely avatars of the most intimate revelations of one of the 19th century's most mysterious artists.’⁶³ Perhaps issues of ephemeral blossoming life, small cosmological universes, and mysterious intimate revelations are made visually palpable in this buoying jack-in-the-box-like orchid.

In the foreground of the canvas we see a family of orchids. The flowers occupy a horizontal thick band in the lower half of the painting. The blossoming pink flowers and breathing cocoon buds are painted parallel to a horizontal moss-covered branch—ostensibly a dead tree limb speckled with white fungi and mustard yellow molds—which extends into the muted foggy abyss. This pitchforked gothic branch also rhymes with the double-headed snake-like slithering orchid buds in the far-right portion of the painting. If we read the painting from left to right the orchids become a kind of dangled unfolding text, or a finely balanced scribbled script. The muted and smudged flowers ceremoniously refuse to be legible.

This plush blossoming flower is also biologically multifaceted, it consists of two pleated and wrinkly petals opening book-like, three reclining sepals ostensibly supporting the heavier petals, a magenta-red trumpet-like labellum with a finely painted inward vaginal gulf, and a rose-pink clitoris-like anther. Billowing, the effervescent balloon-like orchid seems to lift off: the levity of weightlessness, attenuated suspension, and the feathery wing-like petals billow upwards. Conversely, the bouquet-like bundle of three orchids, at right, spatially retreats; these three smudgy orchids are painted with a hazy glaze of whiter tones and are whimsically adrift, directing our gaze away from the primary orchid. The saccharine breathing of these three

suction-cupped labella seem to swerve our visual attention into the background. These supple flowery funnels and crevices reorient visual space, scale, and depth. It is as if the puckering lips of the flowers are an optical cynosure analogous to the circular eye of Heade's own microscopic lens. Haptic space and the inner world of the flower are presented in Heraclitan flux as a slow-moving crepuscular beetle slowly scours the scene (Fig. 14, detail). The beetle is a small token of the natural world; this uncanny hardened insect a living relic in the otherwise eerily still scene. She is other-worldly, a land-before-time kind of creature; her green fortified shell dissolves and becomes part and parcel with the lush green leaves of the orchid.

For Heade, volumetric space is in question not only in the kaleidoscopic spatial complexities of the finely painted petals, but also the quality of atmospheric mist within the paintings. The saturnine depths of the background are a stark juxtaposition to both the mellifluous effrontery of the crystalline pink orchids, and the crisply crusty and gleaming shell of the beetle. The obtuse lack of proportionality highlights movement of vision, suspension, and distance. Novak writes, 'In other paintings the sinuous arabesques of the orchid stems initiate a circular movement that whirls its way into a tunnel of jungle vegetation, eventually opening to a distant rather circular light.'⁶⁴ *Orchids and a Beetle* refuses this trajectory of narrative. By juxtaposing exuberant flowers with a distantly receding darkened landscape the interior floral world of Heade becomes impregnated with Eros. The potentiality of frozen flowers and a flattened background space challenge the logic of perspective: Heade's painting inverts the pictorial teleology of linear perspectival narration. Emptied out backgrounds, evacuated hummingbirds, and the envelopment of entangled atmospheric sublime haunt his canvas. Novak: "Heade's salt marshes, storms, and flowers are assimilated with an intensity that threatens to unlock some secret, indeed secretive, aspect of his nature. In the best Heades there is a sense of

approaching an unmasking or laying bare.” Fragile yet empowered, the feminized flowers refuse erosion; they expose the enduring vulnerability of nature.

A MELANCHOLIC ATMOSPHERE: FLOWERS AND THE FUNEREAL

Though flowers had a centuries-old association with death that had probably originated in the concept of paradise as a garden, their association with funerals was a phenomenon of the nineteenth century. Their transitory beauty, a poignant symbol of mortality, gave them special charm in an atmosphere of overtly expressed sentiment.⁶⁷

The transient life of flowers is a strange thing; the *Flower*, is an ephemeral blossom of verdant plant life. This strange fleeting creature contains a kind of quixotic pathos and mysterious intimacy. It is no coincidence flowers are the most ubiquitous figures in the oeuvre of both Heade and Jewett. Regardless of the visual presentation of these budding plants—breathing natural and alive like Heade’s orchid paintings; or, still, severed in death and placed in a vase—still life painting, empty garden yards or 19th century memorial arrangements, they offer those beholden an intimate confrontation with death. Flowers are the transient haunting remnants of an opaque cycle of birth, death and rebirth: in the 19th century the flower was ceremoniously funereal. The mood of the flower, analogous to the artistic projects of Jewett and Heade, is elegiac.

Novak notes ‘a certain quirkiness in his work, a very late trace of the gothic imagination.’ There is a haunting sensation pervasive in his work. Through a gothic ambience of permeating atmospheric wetness and slow-moving vaporous haze, Heade subverts time. Robert C. McIntyre, a contemporary of Heade, writes persuasively about Heade’s lugubrious aesthetic and murky landscapes. The painterly qualities of “‘atmosphere and mood’ distinguished him...in all his work, but especially in the orchids, he felt ‘a primeval and impressive loneliness.’”⁷⁰ Think of the vanishing atmospheric clouds saturating Heade’s paintings and the ‘evanescent [hummingbird] nest like something woven of gossamer and beads.’⁷¹ The mordantly transitory is

reimagined, as the ‘tiny home for the birds seems to be vanishing before our eyes.’⁷² In a 1976 MOMA show, titled, ‘The Natural Paradise: Painting in America, 1800-1950,’ art historian Robert Rosenblum compares: ‘Mark Rothko’s special fusion of lambent color and atmospheric expansiveness’ with the ‘silent, primordial void of light and space’ one finds in Heade’s work.’⁷³ Rothko’s *No 5/No 22*, epitomizes Rosenblum’s suggestion (Fig. 15). Think again now closely of Heade’s smoky tunnel vision: orchids, hummingbirds and the sublime cavernous land of the tropics swirl into novel creations. Like Rothko, a primordial void and fusion of lambent colors quake in Heade’s paintings.

Heather Love notes a similar melancholic affect and primordial void in Jewett’s prose. She reads Jewett as a writer who ‘chronicles feelings of loss, disappointment and longing that are *internal* to female worlds of love and ritual.’⁷⁴ Love continues to posit, while ‘there is an ineradicable loneliness in the figure of the spinster; rather than trying to cure that loneliness, we need to incorporate it into the genealogy of queerness.’⁷⁵ The quiet aesthetics of delicate moods are not presented as *a priori* estranging, devastating or tragically alone; rather, Jewett and Heade alike suggest an alternative. This alternate mode of reposed living and somber perceptions was often marginalized or absent in popular 19th century discourse. The delicate aesthetics of Jewett and Heade—smallness and intimacy, slowness and melancholia—create a newly imagined world of flowers and quietude. Read together, Jewett and Heade sculpt an authentic accounting of lived life, emboldened isolation and the pathos of loss in late 19th century America. A strangely morose *worldscape* is empowered with generative potentiality, and a transcendental gothic ambiance of smoky light and peculiar small things—flowers, insects, trees, and beetles—flits and breathes.

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- ¹ Jewett, Sarah Orne. *Jewett: Novels and Stories*. The Library of America. 'An October Ride.' p. 601
- ² Syme, Alison. *A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-De-Siecle Art*. The Pennsylvania State University Press. p. 145. 1994.
- ³ Benfey, Christopher. 2008. *A Summer of Hummingbirds: Love, Art, and Scandal in the Intersecting Worlds of Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Martin Johnson Heade*. Penguin, p.18. 'In a pendant essay called 'The Procession of the Flowers,' Higginson followed the seasons of New England from the first flowering arbutus among the lingering snows of April to the late-blossoming fall blossoms heralding the coming of winter. Again, the melancholy mood was unmistakable, and again Higginson opened the essay with a hummingbird, as a stand-in for himself.'
- ⁴ Leach, William R. 2013. *Butterfly People: An American Encounter with the Beauty of the World*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, p. 2.
- ⁵ Love, Heather. 2009. "Gyn/Apology: Sarah Orne Jewett's Spinster Aesthetics." *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 55, p 326, [Footnote 37]; also, a biographical component: the 19th century language of a Boston marriage (particularly Jewett's 30 year intimate relationship with Annie Fields); Jewett as unmarried and independent; a woman born in 1849 and in the words of Heather Love: 'belonging wholly to the 19th century.' 311.
- ⁶ The solitude, loneliness and quietude of Jewett's work is part of what Heather Love labels, 'a spinster aesthetic.' For Love, this aesthetic is not a priori estranging, devastating or Tragic but rather an authentic accounting of lived womanhood and isolation—according to Love, loss and longing is part and parcel to 'female worlds of love and ritual,' and lived experience for 19th women.
- ⁷ For Syme, however, her primary example of these hyperbolized cultural idiosyncrasies is the Anglo-American painter John Singer Sargent's. The paintings from his *oeuvre* repeatedly evoke the creaturely life and its absolute unknowability. For example, his beautiful painting, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* from 1885-86 is an archetypal example of the interwoven domains of flowers and light, children and paint.
- ⁸ Novak, Barbara. 1996. *Martin Johnson Heade: A Survey, 1840-1900*. Eaton Fine Art Publishing House, p. 11.
- ⁹ <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/items/detail/notebook-hummingbirds-422>
- ¹⁰ Jewett, Sarah Orne. 1994. *Jewett: Novels and Stories*. The Library of America. 'A Country Doctor.'
- ¹¹ Ibid, 'An October Ride,' p. 601.
- ¹² Love, 314.
- ¹³ Ibid, p. 306.
- ¹⁴ Daly intended to recuperate, reappropriate the figure/tropes of the spinster – creating a more substantial account than the often pathologized stereotype of nominal identity; the spinster as solitary, empty, reclusive; she offers us 'a counter image of the spinster as powerful, dangerous and self-sufficient,' (306) She writes, 'there is an ineradicable loneliness in the figure of the spinster; rather than trying to cure that loneliness, we need to incorporate it into the genealogy of queerness.'
- ¹⁵ Jewett, 572.
- ¹⁶ Jewett, 595.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, 595.
- ¹⁸ Stebbins, 110.
- ¹⁹ Moreover, the title of these flowers was originally named because of their kindred imagistic quality to the Passion of Christ: three stigmas related to nails from the cross, and the corona filaments resembling the crown of thorns.¹⁹ Miniscule details and the potency of flowers were more than scientific assemblages or aesthetic indulgences.
- ²⁰ Syme, Alison. P. 16.
- ²¹ Ibid, 591.

- ²² Burns, Sarah. 1996. *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America*. Yale University Press. I am particularly interested in Burns' conversation of masculinity, capital and visual culture in her discussion of Winslow Homer (see chapter 6). Her investigation of Homer invokes Frank Norris' novel, *The Octopus*: the growth of capital, cultural estrangement and the turmoil of the market are implicit actors in her argument regarding Homer's life of business, masculinity and solitude. Albeit a different literary and visual analog, Burns' investigation seems motivated by similar art historical concerns presented throughout this text.
- ²³ Ibid, 592.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Jewett, 596.
- ²⁶ Ibid. 596.
- ²⁷ Cohen, 86.
- ²⁸ Ibid. 596-597.
- ²⁹ Stebbins, Theodore E., Janet L. Comey, and Karen E. Quinn. 2000. *The Life and Work of Martin Johnson Heade: A Critical Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné*. Yale University Press, p.109.
- ³⁰ Ibid, p.110.
- ³¹ Novak,13.
- ³² Jewett, 'From a Mournful Villager.' 595.
- ³³ Cohen, Rachel. 2005. *A Chance Meeting: Intertwined Lives of American Writers and Artists, 1854-1967*. Random House Trade Paperbacks, p. 83.
- ³⁴ Jewett, 601.
- ³⁵ I think of this earthly un-representable time juxtaposed to the title of the sketch, 'An October Ride.' Even the strangely ambiguous title: a month, not a day or week, or an hour/And it is a *ride*
- ³⁶ Jewett, 601-602.
- ³⁷ Love, 314.
- ³⁸ Jewett, 602.
- ³⁹ Ibid, 602.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid, 603.
- ⁴¹ Jewett, 'An October Ride.' 603.
- ⁴² Jewett, 604.
- ⁴³ Syme, Alison. 147. "In Martin Johnson Heade's *Roses on a Palette*, a full-blown, deep pink blossom and its leaves are spread out on an earth-colored palette; pink and green spots of pigment to the right can be read as leaves and a petal (while a yellow one assures us we are looking at paint), and the stem lying across the palette mimics the thin brushes that shoot out and ahead of it,"
- ⁴⁴ Loh, Maria H. 2015. *Still Lives: Death, Desire, and the Portrait of the Old Master*. Princeton University Press. Loh's scholarship aims to complicate the pathos of portraiture, the ghostly and the melancholic. Her work addresses the uncanny afterlife of painting, painter and painted. It often seems Heade's flowers are an inverted kind of intimate portraiture, albeit of the natural and decaying plant world.
- ⁴⁵ Church and Heade, AAIA
- ⁴⁶ Stebbins, p. 4.
- ⁴⁷ (Figure 5) Consider briefly the other major thematic preoccupation for Heade, namely his eerie marsh scenes. Uncannily similar to the pastoral disquietude and front yard scenes of Jewett and her fiction, these vast east coast waterways quiver. Evacuated of human presence and speckled with bee-hive-like haystacks, Heade again portrays an unsettled and haunted landscape.
- ⁴⁸ Benfey, 84.
- ⁴⁹ Benfey, p. 7.
- ⁵⁰ His work comments incessantly on the world of birds and his paintings post-1870 are in implicit dialogue with Darwin's recently published *The Effects of Cross Fertilization in the Vegetable Kingdom*
- ⁵¹ Think of the various artists and landscape from the Hudson River school; Thomas Cole, Frederick Church Asher B. Durand. I also have in mind Rachel Delue's monograph, *George Inness and the Science of Landscape*.
- ⁵² Benfey, p. 87.
- ⁵³ Jewett, 611.
- ⁵⁴ Jewett, 'An Autumn Holiday,' 575.
- ⁵⁵ Jewett, 604.
- ⁵⁶ Jewett, 609.
- ⁵⁷ Jewett, 611.

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- ⁵⁸ Ibid, 603.
- ⁵⁹ Jewett, 607-608.
- ⁶⁰ Jewett, 595.
- ⁶² Novak, 14.
- ⁶³ Ibid, 13.
- ⁶⁴ Novak, 74.
- ⁶⁷ Meinwald, Dan. *Memento Mori: Death and Photography in Nineteenth Century America*. California Museum of Photography. University of California. P. 53
- ⁷⁰ Robert C. McIntyre in Stebbins, p. 145.
- ⁷¹ Benfey, 187.
- ⁷² Ibid, 187.
- ⁷³ Robert Rosenblum in Stebbins, p. 156.
- ⁷⁴ Heather Love, 314.
- ⁷⁵ Love, 304