

FROM EDWARDS TO SLOSSON: TYPOLOGY, NATURE,
AND THE NEW ENGLAND DOMESTIC GOTHIC

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To the memory of David H. Hirsch

Jonathan Edwards does not really require much introduction to an audience of Americanists and everyone will recognize in this title the blueprint of Perry Miller's classic essay on the continuity of ideas in New England from the leader of the Great Awakening to that of the "Transcendental Club". On the contrary, at least so far, Annie Trumbull Slosson had a long run of posthumous bad luck, since her name hardly ever appeared even in the most narrowly focused studies of the New England local color fiction at the turn of the twentieth century. Josephine Donovan, the feminist redeemer of authors disregarded and forgotten, does not mention Slosson's name in her otherwise comprehensive *New England Local Color Literature. A Women's Tradition* (1983), while the standard authority in the field, Perry D. Westbrook, devotes to her just one page in his *Acres of Flint. Sarah Orne Jewett and Her Contemporaries* (2nd rev. ed. 1981). In fact, Westbrook is quite embarrassed even by this modest sign of recognition, for he writes:

As there is no crime or immorality in being Genteel, one should approach Slosson for what she was – a short-story writer of very slender yet definitely discernible talent. ... The low-water mark of Slosson's and of the whole tradition that she represented is found in *The Local Colorist*. Realizing that her slight vein of talent has been worked out, she here resorts to parodying her own style – the excessive interest in dialect, the preoccupation with nature study, the sentimentality of her plots. When a tradition's vitality consists solely in the possibilities it offers for parody that tradition is probably near extinction (Westbrook 1981: 158-159).

In Westbrook's view, the "most impressive work" of Slosson's is a collection called *Dumb Foxglove and Other Stories* (1898). The critic even makes a brief reference to one specific tale from the volume, "Anna Malann", although for some reason he does not consider it worthwhile to mention the title. Other – indeed scanty – information about Slosson includes her place of birth, which was Stonington in eastern Connecticut; place of permanent residence after marriage, which was New York; lifelong emotional ties with New England, and passions for collecting chinaware and insects. What attracted Westbrook's attention is also the significance of traditional Calvinism or, more precisely, Congregationalism, for the predominantly female world of Slosson's fiction. All in all, then, as a kind of belated epigone – oddly enough, since actually she was a contemporary of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett – Annie Trumbull Slosson has been thus far relegated by criticism to the obscurest nook in the limbo of minor literary figures. The present effort to move her to a relatively more prominent position is based on two collections of stories: *The Dumb Foxglove*, acknowledged by Westbrook as of some importance but virtually unexamined, and *Seven Dreamers*, first published in 1890. (As a matter of fact, both volumes have been reprinted by the Books for Libraries Press in 1970 and 1969, respectively.) Particularly the latter collection – preceding *The Dumb Foxglove* and bracketed by the best known short story books of Wilkins Freeman: *A Humble Romance* (1887) and *A New England Nun* (1891) – will be approached as an arguably notable contribution to the American gothic in its late nineteenth-century "domestic" or, as Lawrence Buell has put it with emphasis placed on cultural geography, "provincial" gothic variant.

"By 'provincial gothic,'" writes Buell, "I mean the use of gothic conventions to anatomize the pathology of regional culture" (1986: 351). While in the fiction of Freeman this pathology is observed for the most part on the level of distorted or unfulfilled family relationships, as for instance in "The Revolt of 'Mother'" or "The New England Nun", often approached by critics in feminist terms (Blatt Glasser 1996; Donovan 1983: 119-138), the stories of Slosson – in particular those from *Seven Dreamers* – focus on cases of derangement and disturbances of personal identity. Consequently, one might say that the "decline and fall" of New England at the turn of the twentieth century acquires in Slosson's view a psychopathological dimension. An introductory chapter of *Seven Dreamers* presents a gallery of figures: from Enoch Stark, imagining that his sister Lucilly, who had died as an infant before he was born, actually lives with her big family far away in the West; through Cap'n Burdick, apparently "remembering" the bliss of the millenium; Wrestlin' Billy, restruggling Jacob's duel with an angel; and Lucy Ann Breed, believing – perhaps a bit like Pierre Menard, the author of *Don Quixote* – that she wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*. At a certain point, the narrator makes a revealing comment addressed to the implied reader, clearly a member

of the same regional community: "Why, I haven't ever lived or been in a New England village myself where there wasn't one or more of sech folks. You've known some yourself, too." (Trumbull Slosson 1969: 5) Insanity – or "dreaming", as it is metaphorized by Slosson to lose its subversive hard edge – turns out to be a familiar, "domestic" phenomenon; an affliction which is a "dreadful comfort in this alterin' and twistin' and turnin' world." (Trumbull Slosson 1969: 2).

One of the benign New England lunatics – Jerry Whaples "o' Groton Corners" (names of places, always verifiable by the map, enhance the overall "reality effect" (Barthes 1986: 141-148) of Slosson's fiction) – attracts the narrator's attention somewhat more than the others: "I don't know but his idee was the unusualest of any I've come acrost, for he took for his motter and watchword and war-cry, as you might say, through his whole life long, a verse from the Bible that never seemed to have much meanin' to anybody else." (Trumbull Slosson 1969: 6-7). A literal type of Job, since he "lost his wife and every child, one after the other" (Trumbull Slosson 1969: 7), Jerry chooses a single line from Isaiah – "At Michmash he hath laid up his carriages" (Is 10, 28), referring to Assyrians sent by the Lord to castigate His people in the land of Judah – and repeats it on every possible occasion, including the moment of dying, as if it were his private exorcism, a lucky spell cast against misfortune. The Scripture indeed makes the most general frame of reference for Slosson's New Englanders, and Congregationalist theology is their superior branch of knowledge, a universal key even to the most bizarre mysteries. Balaam Montmorency from the story "Botany Bay" holds it true that, according to a message brought by an unknown sailor, there are two identical Balaams, not twins but literally the same individual(s), sharing by some cardinal divine error the same "place" in God's plan of salvation. Perplexed yet still able to interpret his predicament in overlapping terms of Calvinistic divinity and democratic politics, a distant cousin of Poe's William Wilson argues in a conversation with a friend:

"How *could* it be sot right?" ... "Mebbe you think if one of us died, 'twould fix it. But about his soul, how's that? When we was made double – by mistake – nobody to blame, you know, there couldn't ha' been but one soul pervided for. I was raised respectable on 'lection and 'foreordination, jest's you was, Aleck, an' so I know that air soul was 'lected to heaven or 'tother place, an' whichever dies fust would take the place pervided for Balaam Montm'rency's soul. Ther' couldn't be two men 'lected guv'nor o' Connecticut, could ther'? No more could ther' be two souls to the same man 'lected to one place." (Trumbull Slosson 1969: 63-64).

Finally, having received from a local "Injun woman" another disconcerting message about his double, Balaam commits suicide to leave space under the sun for his imaginary "other" so that the order of things may come back to normal,

with just one Botany Bay (the title is a nickname of the main character, an amateur botanist, an expert in New England herbs) alive and ready to face somewhere out there his unique destiny. On the contrary, however, things do not come back to normal in "Deacon Pheby's Selfish Nature", also included in *Seven Dreamers*, which is probably one of the first representations of a transvestite in American literature. In this story, an identity crisis affects Phebus, a boy in his early teens whose twin sister, gentle and pious Pheby, dies of smallpox, while at the same time his mother turns blind. Since the girl – a paragon of virtue – was the mother's only solace and hope, the surviving brother – otherwise a notorious urchin – resolves to pretend that he is actually Pheby, wearing her clothes and changing his voice and behavior to the "nice, mannery ways" (Trumbull Slosson 1969: 212) of the opposite sex. In fact, the task which turns out the most difficult for Phebus is learning by heart the church hymns and reading the appropriate passages from the Bible, as before he did not care for religion at all, with time, however, he manages to master his new role. As if withdrawing beyond the Oedipus complex or renouncing the Lacanian Name-of-the-Father, he enjoys "havin' mother all to [him]self, bein' her fav'rit, her own little gal, to be coddled an' cosseted an' made much on", (Trumbull Slosson 1969: 220) but their radically inverted, "imaginary" relationship is explained only in the idiom of religious sacrifice. Interestingly, the mother's death, coming soon, does not make the sublime transvestite return to his former identity, even though for a while he seems tempted by the abandoned world of boys' sports and leisure. Motivating his decision to remain "Pheby", Phebus claims that he wants his mother, watching him from heaven, to believe that playing the girl's part was and is not for him a painful ordeal, but a token of love and dedication. Thus, a narrative which surprisingly opens to an interpretation in terms of gender construction combines its culturally disruptive dominant – a transsexual "dream" – with religious rhetoric and the clichés of conventional sentimentality.

In "A Speakin' Ghost", the concluding story of *Seven Dreamers*, the "great code" of New England Congregationalism becomes an instrument of communication with the dead, reaching into the hereafter. House-sitting in New York, all alone in her basement, the narrator experiences spectral visitations of a country boy from New Hampshire who, with the weird perseverance of Melville's scrivener, always begins his calls with the question: "Don't you want to hear me speak my piece?" What follows are short, cryptic couplets or single lines of verse which, except for the introductory message including the boy's first name, Norvle, hardly "let themselves to be read" so that the interlocutor is at a loss, trying to figure out their implicit meaning. She neither recognizes a fragment of Wordsworth's "We Are Seven", nor, for that matter, any of the other "pieces", still, eventually she comes up with a solution to her dilemma. Driven by sympathy for the "poor little feller", (Trumbull Slosson 1969: 260) the woman – an ex-

ile from her native region just as much as Norvle appears an exile from heaven – starts teaching him catechism, beginning with "In Adam's fall we sinned all" from *The New England Primer*. After a number of "lessons" – he comes and, having uttered his usual question, recites a line or two of poetry, while in return she comments on some apparently relevant passage from the Westminster Shorter – on Christmas Eve the boy vanishes into thin air, singing "Home, Sweet Home!" in gratitude for paving him the way to salvation. In this case, as in that of "A Transient", the tale of a benevolent specter from *Dumb Foxglove*, Slosson's peculiar gothicism reveals its affinity with the heritage of American domestic novel – the female narrator of "A Speakin' Ghost" adopts her supernatural, but otherwise familiar-looking visitor in order to fulfill a crucial task neglected by his natural parents.

A separate group of stories, particularly significant in the context of Slosson's immediate local tradition, consists of "Aunt Randy" and "Fishin' Jimmy" from *Seven Dreamers*, and "Apple Jonathan" and "Anna Malann" from *Dumb Foxglove*. Aunt Randy – just like the young Jonathan Edwards nearly two hundred years before (Edwards 1962: 3-10) – is fascinated with insects to the point of giving them human names and treating them virtually as human beings. She is especially fond of all kinds of butterflies and moths, since their complex metamorphosis from the "worm" through the chrysalis into the mature imago becomes for her a type of her dead child's passage from the existence on earth through the coffin to afterlife in the abode of God. Apple Jonathan, who is never seen "read any book but the Bible", (Trumbull Slosson 1970: 57) finds it full of his favorite fruit, "starting" the original sin in the Garden of Eden, and then mentioned by Solomon and Joel. Anna Malann (a distortion of "Animal Ann"), an outcast living at Wilson's Gore, a stretch of land "between the boundary lines of different land grants", (Trumbull Slosson 1970: 91) is engaged in a heretical debate with the Church, concerning the salvation of animals. In the Book of Revelation, she comes across an argument that as saints are supposed to be "dressed in white robes and riding on white horses", (Trumbull Slosson 1970: 111) an exception may actually be made at least for their steeds.

At last, the most striking example of Slosson's typological consciousness is to be found in "Fishin' Jimmy". James Whitcher of the Franconia Valley turned all his long life into a permanent "angler's holiday", having once experienced a revelation:

"That a'ternoon I took my ole Bible that I hadn't read much sence I growed up, an' I went out into the woods 'long the river, an' 'stid o' fishin' I just sot down an' read that hull story. Now you know it yerself by heart, an' ye've knowed it all yer born days, so ye can't begin to tell how new an' 'stonishin' 'twas to me, an' how findin' so much fishin' in it kinder helped me unnerstan' an' bleeve it every mite, an' take it right hum to me to foller an'

live up to 's long 's I live an' breathe. Did j'ever think on it, reely? I tell ye, his r'liging's a fishin' r'ligin all through. His friends was fishin'-folks; his pulpit was a fishin'-boat, or the shore o' the lake; he loved the ponds an' streams; an' when his d'sciples went out fishin', if he didn't go hisself with 'em he'd go a'ter them, walkin' on the water, to cheer 'em up an' comfort 'em. (Trumbull Slosson 1969: 126-127).

From this moment on, Fishin' Jimmy perceives his everyday activity as a way of following Christ – the Gospels and nature constitute for him a unified system of reference; two interrelated domains shedding light on each other in the mind of the understanding beholder. It is also at this point that the method of Slosson, practiced consistently in most of the stories included in the two collections under scrutiny, comes to full view, revealing its distant typological roots in Edwards' *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*:

The book of Scripture, writes Edwards in an oft-quoted passage no. 156, is the interpreter of the book of nature two ways, viz., by declaring to us those spiritual mysteries that are indeed signified and typified in the constitution of the natural world; and secondly, in actually making applications of the signs and types in the book of nature as representations of those spiritual mysteries in many instances (Edwards 1977: 109).

For Slosson and her protagonists – both the deranged “dreamers” and handicapped “dumb foxgloves” – nature, encompassing humans, animals, insects, and fruit, remains open to meanings imposed on it by the Bible, a universal repertoire of antitypes. In other words, in Slosson's fiction the entire natural world of New England becomes ever ready to establish a network of signifying relationships with the Scripture, to respond to the call of the already written, i.e. the divine. As a recent interpreter of Edwards's semiotics has put it, “[t]he typological character of a thing thus consists in its indication that its meaning depends on something other than itself. What makes it a type is not its antitype, for that would accept as meaningful the prior discreet existence of both things. It is a type insofar as its meaning is understood not in terms of some particular other, but in terms of its otherness, its demand that there be an antitype.” (Daniel 1994: 47). And indeed, it is precisely this “otherness” and this “demand” which reign supreme in *Seven Dreamers* and *Dumb Foxglove*: every single detail of the rural setting, every occupation and behavior, may acquire supernatural significance due to their potential participation in the common, all-pervading system of scriptural reference. In the rugged confessions of the “dreamers”, dialogically contrasted with the narrator's educated speech so that a Bakhtinian should find in Slosson's record of New England dialects an eloquent example of “heteroglossia” pushed to the extreme, the enumerations of local herbs, butterflies, and varieties of apples intertwine with ample evidence of biblical expertise. Just as in *The*

Images and Shadows of Divine Things, then, the natural world is continuously being read, both as an explanatory footnote to and a chapter of the Good Book.

Slosson's critically underrated fiction, as overtly unsophisticated as it seems, turns out to blend in quite a complex manner a few different strands of the American cultural and literary heritage: on the one hand, as a late instance of what Buell calls “literary scripturism”, (Buell 1986: 166-190) it reaches back in time, demonstrating the continuity of the New England typological imagination at least since Edwards; on the other, it combines the standard American psycho-gothic with the elements of the domestic convention and the genre of the “spirit of the place”. Thus, all in all, it is perhaps a still open question whether Annie Trumbull Slosson actually belongs or does not belong to the more distinguished company of Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Rose Terry Cooke, Harriet Prescott Spofford, Freeman, Jewett, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman – the female “domestic gothicists” of the late 19th century.

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