

Erin Bartram, draft material from unpublished manuscript *To Make a Thorough Experiment: Crafting the Female Self in Nineteenth-Century America*. **Do not cite without permission.**

[Put the introduction of the O'Sullivan's in the first chapter, esp the stuff about Adelaide? The convent is a much more resonant metaphor for captivity for the Sedgwick's than the plantation, because they think slavery is bad and not the choice of black people or because the people in convents are white and therefore their decision to submit is even harder to process and a more effective metaphor. ~~Do you want to mention everyone else going to Europe without her at the end of the earlier chapter or the beginning of this one?~~]

In 1841, Ralph Waldo Emerson began “Self-reliance” with a phrase borrowed from Persius’ *Satires*: “Ne te quaesiveris extra.” Do not seek outside yourself, do not seek for things outside yourself, thou art sufficient unto thyself – all these translations speak to the core of Emerson’s advice for his readers: “believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men.” That same year, Charles Mayo Ellis more succinctly stated Transcendentalism’s view of how men knew the truths of the world. They came “not through the five senses, or the powers of reasoning” but from “direct revelation from God, his immediate inspiration, or his immanent presence in the spiritual world.”¹

These new ideas about knowing and being in the world swept through Jane’s social and intellectual circles. In a March 1841 letter to her Aunt Catharine, Jane offered up her opinion on this new approach.

It is true I have a strong distaste to transcendentalism... though I have derived great pleasure from the conversations of Miss Fuller...to me, Emerson's lectures are a perfectly meaningless jargon which it is distressing to listen to. They gave me a feeling of being spiritualized or exalted, nothing but a sense of dizzy giddy confusion. If it be a new light pouring in upon us I fear my eyes will never be opened to see it.

Searching his private (white, male, New England) heart, Emerson found no confusion, just the universal truths of the Oversoul, truths which coincidentally rested on and validated his own power and position in society.² Privacy, and the opportunities it afforded to cultivate an interior

¹ Gura, 10

² Benjamin Park, “Transcendental Democracy,” 490-1. In the words of Daniel Walker Howe, Transcendentalism promoted the “rejection of all authority outside the individual.”

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life and make decision on one's own, was a privilege fully afforded only to those whom society recognized as independent. While dependent people were to be subject to the external oversight and authority of others, Emerson was to be subject only to the truths of his private heart. Jane was neither a free white man nor a slave, marked neither as fully independent nor fully dependent. To what – to whom – would she be subject? How much choice would she have?

Emerging into young adulthood in the 1840s, Jane not only had to choose what kind of life was appropriate and possible for her, she had to choose how to choose. Her gender and her family's experiences with mental illness seemed to deny her the use of either pure intuition or pure reason to legitimate her choices in the eyes of society. Neither woman's heart nor her mind was formed, from the beginning, to stand on its own; while Jane had more faith in the power of woman than most of society, she often lacked confidence in her own powers. What she did have confidence in, however, was the information provided to her through her senses and her possession of a mind that knew how to make sense of that information. Despite her wry remarks that her eyes might never be opened to Emerson's "new light," she believed her eyes were sharp enough, her mind keen enough, to make sense of the world to her own satisfaction, and hopefully the satisfaction of those who had influence over her life.

While Jane subjected the night sky, the structures of society, and the internal contradictions of the Bible to her critical eye and mind, her mother worried about the effects her eldest daughter's commitment to empiricism would have on her physical and mental well-being. Comparing Jane's methods of knowing the world to her own, she drew inspiration from the Book of Sirach: "Seek not out things that are too hard for thee, neither search the things that are above thy strength - Be not curious in unnecessary matters for more things are shewed thee than men understand." She confessed to Louisa that while she was "willing to wait for the light which

Commented [EB1]: Do you want to talk about her time in Fuller's conversations at the end of the last chapter?

Commented [EB2]: "Like some species of frogs, I grow what I need."

If knowing the world (and knowing God) depends on what you're BORN with, Jane would never make it. Nor would her father. But empiricism is a system that is external, that can be understood and mastered.

Commented [EB3R2]: Would the Sedgwicks believe this was true even of non-white people? (Britt Rusert)

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comes from doing the will of God... Jane's mind desires intensely demonstration in all things." As a result, Jane Senior feared her daughter "must therefore be doomed to distraction."³ Instead of distraction, however, Jane's letters and those of her family and friends reveal an intensely focused and serious young woman. Emerson urged his readers: "Trust thyself...accept the place the divine providence has found for you." Jane took up his charge to find her place, but instead of looking inwards, she looked out to the world around her, testing its opportunities and limitations, as well as her own. Unlike her mother, who was willing to wait for the light, Jane went out in search of it.

"...take the little care of her which she may require on the road"

Jane had the opportunity to see more of the world than most young women her age; regardless of her nuclear family's financial constraints, she was still a woman of privilege with a large and well-connected family. One of the most thrilling possibilities in an elite young person's life was the "Grand Tour," a long-standing British tradition of continental travel to which Americans – increasingly American women – flocked in the nineteenth century. On a Grand Tour, Jane would be able to indulge her interest in art and architecture and use the French, Italian, and German she had learned, all while traveling further from home than she had ever been. In the late spring of 1839, Jane sewed "very industriously" and read Spanish history while her Aunt Catharine, Aunt and Uncle Robert, and cousins Lizzy, Maria, and Kate set off for Europe on a Grand Tour -- without her.⁴

While her mother preferred "the comfort of being with my own people & in my own home," she acknowledged that Jane was deeply upset at being left at home, especially since she

Commented [EB4]: For both Jane and Jane Senior, it's about the "light" – the external evidence. Jane Senior is willing to wait for that light, while Jane wants to seek it out.

Commented [EB5]: Bring in his stuff about genius here or later?

Commented [EB6]: [Insert just enough here to give a sense of the usual duration/route/changes in travel that facilitated it.]

Commented [EB7]: Emerson in Self-Reliance says that the American obsession with traveling is due to a lack of self-culture. Elsdon, xvi.

³ JMSI to LDM, n.d., Box 28, Folder 3, SFP.

⁴ Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *Life and Letters of Catharine M. Sedgwick*, 380. They joined William Minot and who else? Was he there visiting George?

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had often discussed European travel with her aunt Catharine, who had implied she would take Jane with her when she traveled. It is unclear what prevented Jane from going: her mother's continued desire to have her at home, her family's *lack* of desire to have her along, or the cost of the trip. Certainly the financial burden of sending Jane to the Continent for twelve to eighteen months would have been difficult for her family to bear, far more difficult than for Theodore and Susan Sedgwick to send Maria. Though Aunt Catharine wrote from the ship that she wished Jane were with them, Jane surely knew her cousin Kate's portion of the trip was being paid for by Catharine herself.⁵ ~~Being left behind, whatever the reasons, along with several other matters her mother was unwilling to commit to paper, formed "a combination of sorrows which to a very sensitive mind at the age of 17 form ground enough for her present depression."~~⁶

Few letters remain to tell us how Jane passed the time while her close female friends were away, and nothing in her own hand. As her mother wryly put it a few months after the Sedgwick party had left for Europe, "the greatest domestic event that has occurred to our house lately has been the loss of 3 hams stolen from the smoke house."⁷ In January 1841, however, just as the last of the Sedgwicks arrived home from Europe, Jane finally got to take a trip of her own, traveling to Washington to stay with the O'Sullivans and Langtrees. Her mother expressed little anxiety about Jane's ability to navigate new social situations on her own, but was concerned, as usual, with Jane's ability to "look respectably with economy" without her guidance or Louisa's. Yet, she supposed, Jane would "slump along some how." On the eve of her daughter's twentieth birthday, Jane Senior "concluded at last that it was best to let her judge & act for herself."⁸

⁵ CMS to JMSI, May 13, 1839, Reel 17, Catharine Maria Sedgwick Papers.

⁶ JMSI to LDM, n.d., Box 28, Folder 1, SFP, MHS.

⁷ JMSI to LDM, August 14, 1839, Box 28, Folder 20.

⁸ JMSI to LDM, January 2, 1841, Box 29, Folder 11, SFP.

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The Sedgwick trip to Europe resulted in Aunt Catharine’s *Letters from Abroad*, dozens of letters home from all the participants, and four journals kept by Kate – a thousand pages of writing and pressed leaves. Only one letter in Jane’s hand remains to document her brief trip to Washington during the same period, but it reveals that she did far more than simply “slump along.” As her mother hoped, she exercised her capacity to “judge & act for herself,” but while her mother was primarily concerned with her judgement in matters of fashion and frugality, Jane’s own account of her trip reveals an educated, curious young woman on the cusp of adulthood, eager to test the theories, systems, and popular wisdom of the day against her own experiences, observations, and self-knowledge.

For Hal’s benefit, she detailed two visits she made with Cheery, one to a plantation, and one to a convent, two places which functioned as important metaphors for American conceptions of both personal liberty and the inherent capacity of a given group of people to understand and strive for that liberty. Prior to these visits, Jane had read and thought about both places, but had seen neither in person. Her grandfather had, of course, helped bring the suit of two enslaved people challenging slavery’s continuation under the Massachusetts state constitution. She had also undoubtedly heard or read some of Fanny Kemble’s letters to her Aunt Charles well before their 1863 publication in Kemble’s *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839*. But the Sedgwicks and Minots were much closer to the captivity of the convent, both geographically and socially. Their reaction to Adelaide O’Sullivan’s situation indicated they were much more concerned with protecting a young white woman from the clutches of an archbishop than any active anti-slavery work.

Jane did not mince words in her description of what she encountered on the plantation and in Washington more broadly: “it is enough to make a cooler head than mine indignant to see

Commented [EB8]: [The Grand Tour’s explosion in popularity meant that by the time Aunt Catharine published her *Letters* in 1841, she began by acknowledging that American “stayers-at-home” had probably had enough of “churches, statues, and pictures” before proceeding to talk about all three.¹]

Commented [EB9]: In this letter, Jane acts as a tourist, as an anthropologist, and as a social critic trying to understand two spaces of bondage and captivity. She also acts as a young woman deeply frustrated – “in a fidget” – with the constraints placed on her.

Commented [EB10]: She focused on two places that people in America used to conceptualize personal liberty and the inherent capacity of a given group of people to understand and strive for that liberty. The “contradiction” she saw in the plantation was one that her New England culture would have agreed with – a recognition that slaves were not happy as slaves, but a rather weak one at that, with no recognition that black Americans had an inherent intelligence that made them capable of and willing to strive for personal liberty. Cite that Furstenberg piece here.

Her willingness to reconsider the captive space of the convent, however, showed how much her friendship with Cheery had eroded the received New England wisdom with which her family had raised her.

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the way in which the negroes are generally treated here even by those who consider themselves kind, indulgent, considerate.” On a nearby plantation, she saw “miserable hovels, not fit to kennel a dirty dog,” where slaves slept on the floor and were given “a peck of meal” a week; these slaves, she was “assured fared better than many of them.” Already predisposed to distrust the views of slave-owners, she found herself unpersuaded by their rhetoric when faced with the reality she was allowed to see: “They talk about the negroes being such a happy set of people, but I had not seen one in the district who, if they did not look too utterly stupid to have any expression at all, did not appear from their countenances to be. . . miserable.”⁹ Unlike Kemble and Frederick Law Olmsted, the two most famous nineteenth-century Northern chroniclers of the slave South, Jane focused exclusively on the enslaved and their conditions, commenting on white Southern culture only inasmuch as its claims about the peculiar institution failed to hold water.¹⁰

After her description of the slaves she met, Jane continued her letter by telling her brother of a visit to the Georgetown Visitation convent facilitated by Adelaide O’Sullivan, “a favor rarely granted to strangers.”¹¹ Adelaide had arranged for the Superior to give them a full tour of the convent, but Jane specifically mentioned visiting “the cells and the different apartments.” She noted that the nuns “were apparently so happy and some laughing and talking so merrily together that it gave me anything but an idea of the gloom which I had supposed was to be found within the walls of a convent.” In particular, Jane was struck by the “lovely faces” and “charming manners” of the nuns she met, swearing they made such an impression on her she could never forget them.¹² Again, her account focused on the people “in captivity.”

9 Brentwood letter

¹⁰ Cox, Ch. 3 and 4

¹¹ Her own parents had been prevented from visiting a convent in Montreal

¹² *Ibid.*

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Though Jane herself drew no attention to the contrast between her experiences at the plantation and the convent, the juxtaposition of the stories is striking, especially given Jane's frustration with Herbert and Cheery for poking her two sore spots: "slavery and the Rights of Women." She encountered slavery already believing it was wrong, and successfully resisted efforts by her friends to persuade her otherwise, and she approached the convent believing it was oppressive, only to have her mind changed somewhat. Her mother once lamented: "Jane's mind desires intensely demonstration in all things," and her interested in knowing the plantation and the convent for herself seems to confirm this assessment.¹³

Yet empiricism's value to white Americans lay in its claims to objectivity, and Jane's observations reveal the power of that supposed objectivity. In subjecting the faces and domestic spaces of enslaved people and women religious to her observation and appraisal, believing that she could ascertain the "truth" of their experiences and feelings, Jane exercised the power of her cultural position – the power to know others, even better than they knew themselves. At their core, her observations were not about reproducing *or* subverting "truths," but about Jane's refusal to trust something without observing it herself. She didn't trust the enslaved woman to know herself, but she didn't trust the slave mistress to know the enslaved woman either. Observing these two spaces, and discovering that conventional narratives failed to hold up to that observation, reinforced her confidence in her powers.

[Unlike Fanny Kemble, who tried to impress upon her husband's slaves the "value" of bourgeois Northern domesticity, urging them to practice those values in their own quarters, Jane attributes such "miserable conditions" directly to the slaveowners who provide and provision

¹³ JMSI to LDM, n.d., Box 28, Folder 3, SFP.

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them.] In her appraisal of the enslaved men and women she encountered, she channeled the practices of the slave market, in which enslaved bodies were read to ascertain their vigor, temperament, and strength before purchase. In her focus on the *faces* of the enslaved men and women she encountered, rather than their limbs and teeth, Jane deviated from the standard market appraisal of black bodies as commodities. If prospective buyers read an enslaved person's face, it was only for signs of physical characteristics that indicated "value." Jane searched the faces of the enslaved for indications of their thoughts and feelings. In searching for intelligence and happiness in the faces of the enslaved, rather than for monetary value, she indicated that she saw those before her as more than mere commodities, but in finding them both miserable *and* stupid, she avoided fully confronting their humanity.¹⁴ She expressed annoyance that Herbert pushed her on her sore points, including slavery, but her encounter with enslaved men and women revealed the limitations of her epistemology, and the limits of New England sympathy, even in a family with an anti-slavery heritage. The enslaved may have been miserable, but their stupidity suggested that "better treatment," rather than liberty, might be sufficient.

Even as Jane and her contemporaries believed that enslaved Americans were held against their will, they could also hold the experiences of the enslaved at a distance by emphasizing different racial capacities for understanding and enacting liberty.¹⁵ The problem of nuns was different. Even avid readers of the tales of Rebecca Reed and Maria Monk had to admit most nuns were there voluntarily, and while submission was a feminine virtue in the eyes of the previous Sedgwick generation, this submission to a seemingly-false authority was incomprehensible. Only a few years earlier, Jane had argued that Adelaide had clearly been

¹⁴ Walter Johnson, *Soul to Soul* 141-2.

¹⁵ Hartman

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“worked on by the nuns” who pressured her into her decision, one Jane was sure stemmed from “religious feeling and even enthusiasm” rather than “steady principle,” an imbalance of faculties rather than steady religious conviction.¹⁶

Jane was unique neither in her focus on the faces of the nuns she encountered nor in her surprise at their beauty. Twenty years earlier, her Aunt Catharine expressed shock at meeting a nun from New Hampshire —“a Yankee nun!”— in Montreal, but found that despite the clothes she wore, which at first made her look “old and ugly,” the woman’s “countenance was bright and rather pleasing.”¹⁷ Harriet Hillard’s 1831 account of a novice taking her final vows in a Portuguese convent in China depicts a woman bedecked in fine cloth and jewels embracing her “sister nuns...who are behind the grating, covered with their long black veils.” Despite being hidden behind the grating, under veils, Hillard was sure these women were “ugly old creatures,” and lest her readers assume the young woman was beautiful, she assured them the new nun “was excessively ugly, and, it is said, not under thirty-two years of age.”¹⁸

Taken together, these accounts reveal the dual meanings of the “ugly nun” trope. For Hillard, this ugly woman had chosen religious life because both her exterior and interior were unappealing to men: “I suppose she despaired of ever getting a husband to please her mind...The gentlemen made no attempt to rescue her.”¹⁹ Aunt Catharine’s surprise, however, reveals a less petty concern. She was stunned that the captivity of the convent and the captivity of Catholicism itself were not visible on the face of this young Yankee nun. Aunt Louisa had visited the

¹⁶ JMSII to WMII, March 30, 1838, Box 27, Folder 7, SFP.

¹⁷ *Life & Letters of CMS*, 143.

¹⁸ Harriet Low Hillard, *My Mother's Journal: A Young Lady's Diary of Five Years Spent in Manila, Macao and the Cape of Good Hope from 1829-1834*. Hillard, Katherine, ed.. (Boston, MA: George H. Ellis, 1900), 98-100.

¹⁹ Harriet Low Hillard, *My Mother's Journal: A Young Lady's Diary of Five Years Spent in Manila, Macao and the Cape of Good Hope from 1829-1834*. Hillard, Katherine, ed.. (Boston, MA: George H. Ellis, 1900), 98-100.

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Georgetown Visitation Convent four years before Jane’s visit, and she too noted the “angelic face” of the sister who accompanied her on the tour. Ever the artist, Louisa said any painter would be happy to capture the look on Sister Lucille’s face, and she knew its origins: “it is what the sentiments of devotion, nourished in a heart naturally affectionate & refined only could have imparted.”²⁰ Even if a woman were not unattractive upon entering religious life, American Protestant commentators and the authors of escaped nun’s tales asserted that over time, the depravity of a Catholic interior would make itself visible on the outside, yet here were women “in captivity” who not only appeared happy but beautiful as well.

Yet a pleasing countenance and good manners could be deceiving, and regardless of their chastity, solidly-Protestant Americans knew that nuns were simply a variety of painted woman. Almyra Raymond, on meeting some women religious in Valparaiso, Chile in 1840, noted that they “appeared cheerful and lively” and were polite, but quickly lamented the “blind superstition” that had led them to this life, and prayed “that their moral darkness might give way to the light of divine truth and they learn to love and serve the Lord.”²¹ Aunt Louisa’s praise for Sister Lucille, and her pleasant audience with the archbishop – “a man of noble figure & very mild & intelligent face extremely courteous & graceful in his manners” – did little to persuade her that their faith was anything but “the chains of superstition.” The faces and manners of Catholic women religious and priests might appear to reflect devotion and faith, but they were deceptively engineered to persuade and then ensnare those they encountered.

Jane’s first exposure to Catholicism had been when Castilia lived with her family, though

Commented [EB11]: Pagliarini, *Divining the Female Body*, shows that subjecting women’s bodies to the male gaze to ascertain the truth of their experience was not exclusive to Protestants.

²⁰ LDM to JMSI, May 17, 1836, Box 29, Folder 9, SFP.

²¹ Immediately following her description of these nuns, Raymond included the following: “The climate here is very warm and most of the work is done by the slaves who groan under their burdens. Oh that we might remember that while we have the comforts of life, they are the most entirely destitute of the same. Let us pray that the Lord in His wisdom would undertake for them for truly they are miserable.” *Westward to Oregon*, 19-22.

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it was limited; there was no church for him to attend in Stockbridge, and he later noted that he had never spoken with Jane about his faith.²² At the same time, her introduction to the O'Sullivans came with a healthy dose of family drama in the form of Adelaide's entrance into the Georgetown convent, a decision Jane had mocked at the time. Her reaction to the Georgetown nuns on this trip, in particular her attention to their faces, is not dissimilar

This ability to recognize that perhaps the happy slave and the miserable nun were *both* myths demonstrates what Jane's mother once noted about her daughter. Reflecting on Jane's struggles with "religious dogmas" well before any particular interest in Catholicism, her mother had once noted: "I am willing to wait for the light which comes from doing the will of God. But Jane's mind desires intensely demonstration in all things. She must therefore be doomed to distraction."²³ For Jane Senior, this tendency was problematic for the ways that it might exacerbate her dyspepsia without the proper balance of "physical & intellectual labor," but it also reflected the Unitarian values with which she had been raised. Beyond her mother, friends and family noted her tendency towards skepticism, though they took a more positive view. Family friend Lucy Channing Russel compared Jane and her own daughter Anna, who she considered "born a skeptic," lamenting that "all that she receives must be tried by her own mind." Despite these tendencies, Russel considered Jane and Anna to have one character virtue that mitigated their skepticism: they were both "true." Therefore, despite the potential for "distraction" that worried Jane Senior, Russel believed Jane could be trusted to always come down in the right place.²⁴

²² GdC to JMSII, March 8, 1858.

²³ JMSI to LDM, n.d., Box 28, Folder 3, SFP.

²⁴ Lucy Channing Russel (hereafter LCR) to JMSI, n.d. [1840s], Box 29, Folder 17, SFP. In addition to her deep and intense study of languages and history, during which she studied "late at night & before breakfast," Jane often spent her social time engaged in intellectual pursuits. One of Jane's occupations in Stockbridge was her participation

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lack of an escort

[this isn't in the dissertation, or at least not in this chapter (maybe you put it with the part about her coming back from Europe?) but you can pair it with that tidbit about G Ashburner, use it to talk about how Jane's go-it-alone personality gets her disapproval. the Sedgwicks lament the captive nun, but Jane cannot stray from the appropriate captivity/surveillance, someone respectable enough to watch her movements]

While half of her letter detailed her observations of bondage and captivity in new spaces, the other half, directed to her mother, focused on her own “captivity.” She wanted to go home

in a local scientific society, and she engaged in “a discourse on theology & human nature” and the source of human vices and virtues with her cousin Bessie. CMS to LDM, November 26 1836, Box 80, Folder 7, SFP; JMSI to LDM, n.d., Box 28, Folder 15, SFP; JMSI to HDSII, May 24, 1841, Box 26, Folder 2, SFP.