



INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Barbarians at the Table: The Parvenu Dines in Edith Wharton's <i>The Custom of the Country</i> By Alexandra Rahr	1
Edith Wharton and Susan Minot: A Literary Lineage By Carol Singley	8
Book Reviews: <i>Hermione Lee's Edith Wharton</i> By Irene Goldman-Price	12
Julie Olin-Ammentorp's Edith Wharton's Writings from the Great War By Elsa Nettels	14
UPCOMING SPRING ISSUE: Winner of the Edith Wharton Essay Contest 2007 and Honorable Mention Essays	

**Barbarians at the Table: The Parvenu Dines
in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the
Country***

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*One could say that an entire world is
present in and signified by food.*

Roland Barthes

Much attention has been paid to the issue of economic consumption in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913). Critics have read the novel as a commentary on the emerging economy, the nouveau riche segment of American society, and particularly as a statement on the marriage market (Wolff xii, xiii). Clearly, the text is preoccupied with appetite—appetite displaced and thwarted by gender, and the desire of a new class for the old rewards of wealth and privilege. But despite this interest in metaphorical consumption, little has been written about the act of physical consumption in the novel, or the rituals that surround this most human of activities. Yet, as Skubal notes, attention to food in literature may be highly revealing:

While images of food have, indeed, taken us elsewhere—certainly to sexuality and mortality, but also to consumerism and capitalism, opulence and decadence, incorporation and imperialism, and everywhere from love and hate to the fall from grace and the communion of the saints—there is something about images of eating which seem at once to convey meaning and yet to deflect consideration....This is often the case when eating is mentioned in fantasy or

fiction: the *significance* is assumed to be elsewhere. (Skubal 7-8)

This exhortation to focus on the orality of consumption, and not its symbolism, points to a marked absence in *The Custom of the Country*. Surprisingly, the significance of food in Wharton's novel is based on lack; material nourishment barely exists in the text. Meals are mentioned only occasionally, such as the uninspiring fare offered at the Van Degen table, the cake for young Paul's birthday that remains uncut and Peter Van Degen's ill-tempered complaints about cold coffee and bad cigars at the Nouveau Luxe. The food that is portrayed exists almost exclusively in Old New York; once Undine Spragg leaves her husband and son for Europe, the meal virtually vanishes from the novel. This aporia might be unremarkable were it not for the novel's proliferation of dining rooms, that space designed specifically for the sharing of a meal. Despite the absence of food, Undine Spragg's hunger for social advancement is played out in the very settings intended for its consumption, from the Fairford and Van Degen dining rooms to a café on the Rue de Rivoli, the Nouveau Luxe restaurant, and, finally, her own New York home.

The disjunction between space (dining room) and content (food) in *The Custom of the Country* is jarring, and perversely draws attention to the normative meaning. When yoked together, as they commonly are, what are the primary functions of the dining room and the shared meal? Clearly, the fundamental purpose is physical fulfillment. However, as Roland Barthes argues, food serves a much greater function than the simple fulfillment

(Continued on page 2)

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(Continued from page 1)

of physical need. In the foundational "A Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption," Barthes suggests that food is also "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior....All food serves as a sign among the members of a given society" (167, 168). One of the most significant of these signs is that of communality – a shared meal establishes a corporate body. As anthropologists Farb and Armelagos remind us, "in all societies, both simple and complex, eating is the primary way of initiating and maintaining human relationships" (3). Eating, then, is as much about community as it is about physical nourishment.

In *The Custom of the Country*, however, the absence of food complicates these social and physical functions. Can community exist around a table that is bare? The novel continues to observe the conventions of the dinner party, but the sustenance provided by such an event is absent. Undine Spragg appears to develop community around a shared table; she meets both Ralph Marvell and Raymond de Chelles in dining rooms. But her connections to the two men result in their destruction. If nourishment and community are the two primary purposes served by food, why then is Wharton's novel littered with the space for dining but absent of its material form? What does it mean to perform the ritual of communality in the absence of food? I argue that this incongruity constitutes an attack on the parvenu. The novel's simultaneous proliferation of dining rooms and paucity of food serves to highlight the hollowness of Undine Spragg's world. It points to the new class's interest in form rather than content, and reveals them as mimics, monkeys, pretenders. The nouveau riche, the novel implies, enact the ritual of communality even as they vacate it of meaning.¹

This position is, of course, itself open to interrogation: although the text appears to draw a causal link between imitation and moral rot, Norbert Elias observes that all culture is process rather than natural fact. The rituals of the Old New York dining room are not evidence of the Dagonets' innate civility, but rather a complex code of behaviour. As Elias notes, "Nothing in table manners is self-evident, or the product, as it were, of a 'natural' feeling of delicacy" (88). Rather, such rituals are social artifact, and these customs spread through a system of imitation: "There is a more or less limited courtly circle which first stamps the models only for the needs of its own social situation," but over time such customs become more common, and as "ever broader strata become willing and anxious to adopt the models developed above them: they spread, also gradually, throughout the whole of society" (88). Thus, mimicry is not necessarily morally suspect, regardless of the novel's implications. The claim that ritual is inherently meaningful and has been stripped of signification by the parvenu is instrumental and not an ontological truth. However, it is essential to note that this accusation of evacuated ritual is extraordinarily meaningful in strictly codified Old New

York. The reader need not accept the novel's position, but should recognize that such an accusation of de-signified ritual is profoundly resonant for both Wharton and the Dagonets. Indeed, the novel's skillful disjunction of food and communality does more than suggest that Undine Spragg is merely uncivilized. Rather, Wharton implies that the parvenu is actually inhuman, not just atavistic but completely "monstrous," as the text so frequently describes her.² Provoked then by the contradiction of absent nourishment in present dining rooms, this paper will read the site designed for the satiation of physical hunger—the dining room—in a text which denies satiation. It will argue that the absence of food in *The Custom of the Country*'s many dining rooms constitutes an ironic subversion of nourishment and communality intended to undermine the very humanity of Undine Spragg and her fellow parvenus. In this novel, Wharton suggests that it is not merely the tables which are bare, but also the souls of those who sit around them, toast, talk, and do not eat.

The Meaning of an Invitation: Dinner with the Fairfords

From its very first dining room scene, the novel emphasizes Undine Spragg's interest in form rather than content. Early in the text, Laura Fairford invites Undine Spragg to dinner. The sister of Ralph Marvell, Undine's future husband, Mrs. Fairford is a formidable hostess. This is the first offer the newcomer receives to participate in the social world of Old New York, and for Undine, the invitation is far more significant than the actual event at which her company is requested. In this circumstance, then, the dining room functions as a place of social acknowledgement; what matters is the invitation and its consequences, not the content of the party itself. As Diane McGee observes, "For Undine, dinners are important social occasions, but not to meet and converse with people or even to pay homage to the hostess: the point is to be invited in the first place and then to be admired" (76). Thus, Undine voices no concerns over whether she will be at ease among new company, or if she will enjoy herself or indeed if the Fairfords will find her an amenable guest. The content of the evening is not a matter of concern. Instead, she worries over how to word her letter of response, which dress to wear, and, especially, whether her hosts are socially prominent enough to render the invitation enviable. On this last point, Mrs. Heeny quickly assuages her fears:

"I've seen Mrs. Harmon B. Driscoll of Fifth Avenue laying in her pink velvet bed with Honiton lace sheets on it crying her eyes out because she couldn't get asked to one of Mrs. Paul Marvell's musicals. She'd never 'a dreamt of being asked to a dinner there! Not all of her money couldn't 'a bought her that—and she knows it!" (21)

This vignette, which can be read as a social climber's cautionary tale, reveals that Laura Fairford's request for the pleasure of Undine's company is indeed exclusive. The dining room's power lies partly in the fact that it is a

(Continued on page 3)

(Continued from page 2)

restricted space. Anthropologists observe that in Western society hospitality is imbued with a complex gradation of intimacy: "When people in modern societies organize various social events, they are using food and drink as metaphors for the character of a relationship...For instance, meals preceded by drinks are for close friends and honored guests" (Farb 122). A shared meal, then, is a mark of intimacy. Thus, Mrs. Harmon B. Driscoll may be invited into the drawing room for a musical, but never into the dining room for a meal. As Undine wishes to be desired by fashionable society, entrée into this most restricted space is highly meaningful. What actually transpires there is less important than the fact that Undine is offered a seat at the table. This is, of course, a highly utilitarian view of the dining room. It interprets the space primarily in terms of its accessibility and what that accessibility indicates about the guest. There is little interest here in the festivity of a shared meal, or any suggestion that for Undine "food is the material sign of human dialogism, conviviality is also the discovery of the other" (Biasin 27). Undine anticipates no connection with the Other at the Fairfords; indeed, the Other in the form of Mrs. Driscoll functions simply to heighten Undine's pleasure at her own inclusion.

The narration of the Fairford dinner party similarly emphasizes the importance of the invitation. As the masseuse declares of Mrs. Driscoll, "'She'd never 'a dreamt of being asked to a dinner there!'" Undine Spragg, however, does dream of being invited to the Fairfords. One difference between the two aspirants, then, is that of imagination; Undine hungrily pictures a world in which she is welcomed by New York's élite, and she does not know of any obstacles that would prevent this scenario. The proof of her ability to imagine acceptance lies in her remarkable anticipation of the event. Wharton's narrative strategy also underscores the difference between imaginative anticipation and lived experience. The dinner party is narrated not as it occurs, but in anticipation and recollection. Wharton describes Undine's expectation of the event, and her preparations for it. Similarly, Undine herself recalls the dinner, but the event itself is not narrated as it unfolds. Even this retrospective description of the dinner itself lasts only a few pages, much less text than is accorded to Undine's anticipation of the event. In this way the reader is forced to share in Undine's disinterest in the event itself, and can enter the Fairford dining room only before and after the dinner party and not during it. By denying the reader a place at the table and a communal experience of the meal, Wharton's narrative strategy echoes content in this early dining room passage.

Despite her hopes, the Fairford dinner party falls far short of Undine's expectations. Significantly, the nature of this disappointment is aesthetic. She finds the dining room, the décor, and the food decidedly lacking in luxury:

Though she would not for the world have owned it to her parents, Undine was disappointed in the Fairford

dinner. . . . She had expected to view the company through a bower of orchids and eat pretty-coloured entrées in ruffled paper. Instead, there was only a low centre-dish of ferns, and plain roasted and broiled meat that one could recognize--as if they'd been dyspeptics on a diet! (28)

These lines cogently illustrate Undine's expectations as a dinner guest in the home of the social élite: the fare should be exotic and the meal aesthetically remarkable. However, Undine complains that "one could recognize" the meat; familiarity in this case is despicable. Additionally, the Fairfords fail to provide the orchids and ruffled paper that would render the table pleasing to Undine's exacting eye. Interestingly, the dinner guest relates no expectations as to the taste of the food. She does not hope to dine on a succulent, flavourful meal, prepared with great skill. Instead, she expects excess, and objects to the restriction associated with "dyspeptics on a diet." Thus, Undine Spragg's expectations for the Fairford dinner party may be characterized as aesthetic and utilitarian. Her blithe dismissal of the proffered hospitality once again elevates form over content; she wonders what to wear, and criticizes the simplicity of the meal and interior design while appearing unaware that a shared meal may signify beyond these concerns. It is significant that Undine implicates herself here; the narrator does not openly condemn her transgressions but simply details them in a kind of reportage.

Undine's disappointment is particularly keen precisely because her vision of an Old New York dinner party is so highly developed. Contrast her experience of the Fairford dinner with her fantasy of the meal shared by Ralph Marvell and Clare Van Degen before the opera: "Undine had a sharp vision of the Van Degen dining-room - she pictured it as oak-carved and sumptuous with gilding - with a small table in the centre, and rosy lights and flowers, and Ralph Marvell, across the hot-house grapes and champagne, leaning to take a light from his hostess's cigarette" (54). It is notable that when faced with disappointment in one dining room, Undine does not amend her vision, but simply shifts it to another locale, another imagined, but as yet unexperienced, dining room. Her expectations are hardy enough to weather disillusionment, and, indeed, it may be argued that Undine's vision never changes, until the last moments of the novel when she is at last able to enact her own exclusive and luxurious dining room in the home she shares with Elmer Moffatt.

It is perhaps instructive to note that Undine's fantasy of the Van Degen dining room, "sumptuous with gilding," clashes with Edith Wharton's own views on décor. In *The Decoration of Houses*, Wharton's treatise on contemporary interior design, the author characterizes modern life as "a varnished barbarism" (198). She declares that in architecture "the supreme excellence is simplicity....beauty depends on fitness, and the practical requirements of life are the ultimate test of fitness" (196). Wharton's accent on the virtues of "moderation, fitness

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 3)

and relevance" in interior design suggests that for the author, form does follow function. Undine's opulent taste clearly violates this axiom, as do her views on decorum. She places her fantasy of an intimate moment between Clare Van Degen and Ralph Marvell in the dining room, a space which Wharton clearly indicates is public, and, therefore, not intended for private assignations. But Undine is a wholly public creature, whose private life exists only in service to her public ambitions, a trait which allows her to imagine an illicit dinner in a common room. This aesthetic is based not on a sense of privacy, but on performance. Indeed, Undine's fantasy of the Van Degen dining room is drawn from popular theatre: "Undine had seen such scenes on the stage, she had come upon them in the glowing pages of fiction, and it seemed to her that every detail was before her now" (52). Undine Spragg regards the dining rooms of Old New York as stages on which exclusive dramas of seduction and luxury are played out. In this conception, ritual becomes entertainment. When divested of food and communality, the dining ritual is stripped of meaning; it is form without content. For Undine Spragg, the stage is the model of real life—it shapes her fantasies and beliefs about reality. But for the Fairfords, as for Edith Wharton, reality is not based on melodramatic stage performances. Thus, when Undine dines at the Fairford table, two contradictory codes of behaviour come into conflict. She views the dining room very differently than do her hosts, who in this first scene are able to impose their system of values on the shared space. However, as Undine's power begins to grow, so does her ability to enact her own social beliefs, and to violate freely the codes of behaviour so cherished by Old New York.

The Consuming Guest: Dinner with Grandfather Dagonet

Following Undine Spragg's engagement to Ralph Marvell, she is invited to meet Ralph's Grandfather Dagonet, a socially prominent Old New Yorker. Significantly, the family dinner party is described in the language of warfare, such as when the clan's initial resistance to the marriage is characterized as a "short sharp struggle" (80). But battle is fleeting, and by the time the Marvells gather around the dinner table, a cease-fire has been declared: "The conflict over, the air had immediately cleared, showing the enemy in the act of unconditional surrender" (80). Such imagery turns the dining room into a battleground, thus preventing the development of communality. Undine believes herself to be dining with the enemy, and this conviction alienates her from Ralph's family. Notably, Wharton's staging of such an inter-personal breach in the dining room is characteristic of her era. Diane McGee notes that early twentieth-century fiction by women reflects the "modern anxiety about change in the home....The literature of the period demonstrates that people were indeed eating together, if under increasingly alienated circumstances, [and] modernist women writers depict and express this uneasiness around their own fictional dining-room tables" (37). In Undine's case, this estrangement is expressed in the language of war; such imagery points to

especially violent and profound breach between the new and old worlds.

This alienating effect is apparent in Undine's perception of her fellow guests. Her new relatives are described primarily in terms of their amenability to her charms: "Old Mr. Dagonet—small, frail and softly sardonic—appeared to fall at once under her spell . . . Mrs. Marvell, low-voiced, faded, yet impressive, was less responsive to her arts, and Undine divined in her the head of the opposition to Ralph's marriage" (80). As for Laura Fairford, Undine recognizes that her sisterly affection for Ralph is deep, "and guessed that this would make her either a strong ally or a determined enemy" (81). Ralph's family exists for Undine only in terms of their resistance to or approval of her. Even their surprising "unconditional surrender" is not attributed to the family's decision, but to the irresistible power of her weapons. Faced with unexpected capitulation, Undine attributes the retreat to the power of her own charms. In this way she erases the power of the family tradition in which she finds herself; the motivation for surrender is narrowed to submission to Undine's beauty and will. Thus, Undine Spragg sits in the Marvell dining room, surrounded by portraits of a family history, and sees only her own face. In this communal space, the only power she can perceive is her own: "This was not [Undine's] idea of warfare, and she could ascribe the completeness of the victory only to the effect of her charms" (80). When Undine characterizes the family not simply as defeated combatants, but almost as drones whose capitulation is inevitable, she imbues her own appeal with a virtually irresistible power.

With victory foisted upon her, Undine uses the dining room as a backdrop to display her newly-found authority. The enemy's capitulation is only made more visible by the intimate nature of the dinner party. Undine expects the gathering to be larger, but accepts the size as "it was small enough to permit of her dominating it. Not that she wished to do so by any loudness of assertion" (81). She pauses only to assure that her dominance will not be overly loud; Undine betrays no doubt that the Dagonet dining room is an appropriate location to display her supremacy. Indeed, the small size of the gathering is perceived not as a mark of familial closeness but as tactical advantage. As the victor, she regards the dining room setting only as the spoils of war. The future Mrs. Marvell describes "the family portraits overhead [and] the old Dagonet silver on the table—which were to be hers,

(Continued on page 5)

**Edith Wharton Conference in Lenox, Massachusetts,
June 26-28, 2008:
"Edith Wharton and History"**

Call for Papers: The broad theme of this conference, organized by the Edith Wharton Society, aims to bring historical, cultural, and literary contexts to Wharton's life and all of her work. Please send abstracts of no more than 1000 words and a one-page cv to Carol Singley [singley@camden.rutgers.edu] by January 20th, 2008.

(Continued from page 4)

after all!" (81). Undine's response to the space of the dining room is one of possession – of the affections of Ralph's family, of the conversation she dominates, and the material contents of the space. Thus the conquering guest converts the willing surrender of the Marvells not into common ground but an iron-clad hierarchy which she, and not Grandfather Dagonet, commands.

Despite this proliferation of war-like imagery, the most violent event to occur in the Dagonet dining room springs from Undine's unconscious declaration of hostility. She casually declares that her friend Mabel Lipscomb will leave her husband: "He isn't in the right set, and I think Mabel realizes she'll never really get anywhere till she gets rid of him" (84). Note that this planned desertion is not based on antipathy, as Undine assures her audience that Mabel and her spouse "like each other well enough" (84). Rather, the separation is based on expediency. Additionally, it is a matter of gradation; Mabel will "never really get anywhere" with her husband. The problem Mabel faces, then, is not that her husband fails to offer her any advancement, but that he simply cannot bring her far enough. In other words, she will not starve, but neither will she be sated.

Undine's confident speculation as to Mabel's post-divorce chances meets with significant resistance around the Marvell table. Unchastened by this disapproval, Undine assures Ralph that if he does not please her, she will follow Mabel's example. When she declares that she wants nothing less than "everything" from her husband, Mr. Dagonet replies "My child, if you look like that, you'll get it" (85). The assembled family seems to view Grandfather Dagonet's remarks as a charming deflation of an increasingly uncomfortable exchange; his words contain "a change of tone that relaxed the tension of the listeners" (85). But, in fact, his assurance of Ralph's *hospicé* is much more than an instance of skilful hospitality. It is also an acknowledgement of the increasing irrelevance of Old New York's cultural codes. As Norbert Elias notes, since the eighteenth century, the relevance of manners as a mode of social distinction in Western society has been steadily waning:

The elaboration of everyday conduct never entirely loses.... its importance as an instrument of social distinction. But from now on, it no longer plays the same role as in the preceding phase. More exclusively than before, money becomes the basis for social differences. And what people actually achieve and produce becomes more important than their manners. (86-7)

Grandfather Dagonet acknowledges this shift when he tells Undine that her beauty trumps her transgression of good manners. She does indeed "shock the table with her outspoken and rather flippant views on divorce, certainly tactless at an engagement dinner" (McGee 76). But there is much more at stake here than poor etiquette, a fact which escapes the Marvell family. Undine's challenge effectively removes the assembled clan from their chairs and places them on their own dinner plates. They become the meal, and the route to Undine's social

nourishment. By sanctioning Mabel Lipscomb's amicable divorce, Undine Spragg serves notice that she will consume and discard Ralph if she can "never really get anywhere" with him (84).³ This warning proves to be eerily accurate—having gained what she could from Ralph Marvell and Old New York, Undine Spragg leaves for France. There she finds a dining room to her liking, and participates in a dinner hour most notable for its fraudulence.

Spectacle of Mimicry: Dinner at the Nouveau Luxe

The hollowness which characterizes ritual stripped of content is at its height in the sparkling void of the Nouveau Luxe, and it is during this scene that the novel makes its most forceful case for the barbarity of Undine Spragg. This passage stands in contrast to the dinner parties depicted earlier in the novel: it occurs in Paris, rather than America, and in a public restaurant rather than a private home. As its name indicates, the Nouveau Luxe represents a social order characterized by novelty and luxury. Its style is diametrically opposed to the staid, restrained Fairford and Dagonet dining rooms. Significantly, this is the table Undine Spragg has chosen for herself; she rejects her husband and son in favour of the Nouveau Luxe. In this setting, and not in the Marvell dining room, she is surrounded by her chosen community, who are gathered together at the dinner hour. And it is in this space of her own making that Wharton depicts Undine Spragg's world as nothing more than mimicry.

It is across the glittering expanse of the Nouveau Luxe dining room that Raymond de Chelles first spots Undine Spragg. Notably, the most important aspect of this scene is the self-conscious foregrounding of the process of representation. Wharton highlights the constructedness of the scene; like an art expert examining a painting, she stands in close, points out the tricks of light and perspective and turns the canvas over to reveal the artist's false starts and errors. Charles Bowen, de Chelles' dinner partner, waits for the Count at a corner table, where he writes a letter home describing "the fantastic improbability, the layers on layers of unsubstantialness, on which the seemingly solid scene before him rested" (240). These lines imply that for all its opulent detail, the Nouveau Luxe is somewhat less than real. Such an assertion points to the tension between realism and the inauthenticity which underlies this scene. The novel's intently observed detail implies a high degree of verisimilitude, but Bowen's impressions of the Paris restaurant undermine any claim of realism. For the American, observing the packed restaurant is like "watching the picture compose itself again before his eyes" (240). These lines draw attention to the highly constructed nature of the scene Bowen observes. This is not reality but representation, Wharton asserts. The author extravagantly highlights the act of re-creation in this episode; even Bowen's observations of the restaurant are recorded in the letter he pens while waiting for de Chelles. Here Charles Bowen himself is engaged in narrative representation as he skilfully captures the scene for an American correspondent. The

(Continued on page 6)

(Continued from page 5)

letter, then, is an interpretation of a scene that is itself an unrealistic representation. Dinner at the Nouveau Luxe reveals, in Bowen's words, "human nature's passion for the factitious, its incorrigible habit of imitating the imitation" (241). The text's insistent foregrounding of questions of representation implies that this dining room is utterly lacking in authenticity, and decidedly unoriginal. Later, Bowen assures de Chelles that the Count's wife would be perfectly safe in the fashionable eatery, for "Nothing ever goes on! Nothing that ever happens here is real!" (242). Dinner at the Nouveau Luxe is spectacle, sham, evanescent fakery.

Charles Bowen can be read as a proxy for Edith Wharton. He is the author-figure who records the scene before him with a declared detachment and familiarity. Bowen, like Wharton, inhabits the world of the Nouveau Luxe but is not wholly of it. And it is this separateness that allows him, unlike Undine Spragg or Peter Van Degen, to recognize the imitative nature of the Parisian dining room. Despite its luxury, its "seemingly endless perspective of plumed and jewelled heads, of shoulders bare or black-coated," the party at the Nouveau Luxe lacks true festivity (240). As Christopher Ames observes, modernist fiction frequently invokes the image of the failed party, a gathering marked by "false transgression, the decadent pose of excessive behavior not seriously experienced as festive release" (300). It is significant that in such a scenario the party-goers may not be aware that the festivities have failed. The patrons of the Nouveau Luxe do not appear to recognize the illusion that Bowen so attentively depicts. And notably, the author-figure himself is not immune to such blindness. Bowen's analysis is focused solely on the Nouveau Luxe – he does not acknowledge that *all* human ritual may be culturally determined rather than natural fact. Thus Bowen's—and Wharton's—gimlet eye is trained on the Nouveau Luxe and not on the Dagonet dining room. In a moment of implied exceptionality, Old New York rises above analysis and its own imitativeness—of European aristocracy, for instance—is glossed over. As Elaine Showalter notes, "[Wharton] mocks Undine's ignorance in reading 'When the Kissing Had to Stop' and enjoying the music hall but sees nothing comic in the New Yorkers' slavish adulation of European high culture" (95). In this way the scene at the Nouveau Luxe serves to emphasize the vapidness of the parvenu while simultaneously reifying Old New York.

Concluding Observations: The Questionable Humanity of Undine Spragg

It is clear that in *The Custom of the Country* the significance of food far outstrips its role as physical nourishment. Roland Barthes articulates the ways in which food constructs social reality:

Food is charged with signifying the situation in which it is used. It has a twofold value, being nutrition as well as protocol, and its value as protocol becomes increasingly more important as soon as the basic needs are satisfied, as they are in France. In other words, we might say that in contemporary French society food has a constant tendency to transform

itself into situation. (172, italics original)

Thus, in societies where there is adequate nourishment to prevent starvation and guarantee survival, food becomes not the satisfaction of a bodily need but an event in and of itself. Its meaning is no longer determined by the body's demand for sustenance; in the absence of a growling stomach, food structures social interaction. Barthes uses the example of the coffee break to illustrate this idea. In the modern world, "coffee is felt to be not so much a substance as a circumstance. It is the recognized occasion for interrupting work" (172). For Undine Spragg and her set, food functions to signify beyond itself; it no longer has meaning as nourishment. Dining is an opportunity for social advancement, as provided by the Nouveau Luxe, or the display of victory, as offered by the Dagonet dining room. Thus in Barthes' terms, the novel is rife with "situation," but has been vacated of the signifying food.

Undine Spragg is the embodiment of protocol, or form, rather than nutrition, or content. She is ravenous, but not for food or sex. Just as she does not eat, she is not tempted by physical intimacy: "Undine had been perfectly sincere in telling Indiana Rolliver that she was not 'an immoral woman.' The pleasures for which her sex took such risks had never attracted her" (312). Undine Spragg is a beautiful woman who marries four times and yet is uninterested in physical passion; she frequents dining rooms, both public and private, and yet does not eat. She is constantly the object of male desire, and yet her desire is all social. In this sense even Undine's hunger is hollow—she desires invitations to exclusive dining rooms rather than the meals consumed there, and the contract of marriage rather than its sexual basis.

Significantly, her ravening desire is unchecked at the end of the novel. This is the truly unnerving aspect of Undine Spragg: an unpredictable and insatiable hunger is her primary characteristic. If Elmer Moffatt had not told his wife of Jim Driscoll's appointment as Ambassador to England, might she have remained content? She is a monster of consumption, and yet she does not eat and cannot be filled. In the last lines of the novel, the narrator records this restless hunger: "Even now, however, she was not always happy. She had everything she wanted, but she still felt, at times, that there were other things she might want if she knew about them" (526). This passage illustrates nothing so much as Undine's remarkable egotism—note the repetitive use of "she" in these lines. In one sentence alone the pronoun occurs five times. Wharton does not replace "she" with "Undine," or "Moffatt's wife," or any other descriptor. Instead, the pronoun is repeated and allowed to insist upon the reader's ear. Given this egomania, it is appropriate that Undine's final scene is played out in front of a mirror. Elmer Moffatt comes and goes, but the relationship that bookends his appearance is Undine's connection with her own reflected image. She is gazing at herself in the mirror when her husband enters the room, and returns to this pose after he departs: "She turned to give herself a last look in the glass, saw the blaze of her rubies, the glitter

(Continued on page 7)

(Continued from page 6)

of her hair, and remembered the brilliant names on her list" (529). As at the Fairford dinner party, guests exist only as the reflective surface in which Undine perceives her own image.

Finally, it is important to note that the hunger with which Wharton endows Undine Spragg is so monstrous as to raise questions about the protagonist's very humanity. She does not eat, or appear to form a genuine connection with others, and so fails to participate in the most basic of human functions. And the fact of Undine's imitativeness is so emphasized as to become almost an ontological question: can the copy exist? There is certainly tension between Wharton's view of Undine Spragg as pretender, as ersatz, and yet also as dangerous. The author clearly fears that the copy has exceeded the original; that the fraud no longer exists simply as a degradation of the authentic. In this novel Wharton edges towards reading the nouveau riche not simply as barbaric, but also possibly as inhuman. Certainly, Undine Spragg and her ilk are cannibalistic; the true act of consumption in *The Custom of the Country* is the devouring of one class by another. The placement of this act in dining rooms which have been absented of food emphasizes Wharton's fear that when seated at the table, Undine Spragg is capable only of a hollow mockery of nourishment and communality.

Notes

¹It is important to note that despite her dislike of the social newcomers, Wharton does not idealize Old New York. On the contrary, Ralph Marvell and his family are portrayed as outmoded and extinct. Wharton does not regret the passing of the old as much as she despises the hollowness of the new; Old New York is the normative comparison, but it is no social Eden. In the rough levelling of Wharton's social order, survival is highly prized, and even as Marvell dies and de Chelles is diminished, Undine Spragg thrives. However, the humanity of Marvell and de

Chelles is not compromised--while they may lose the social lottery, they are not monstrous.

²Early reviewers intuited Undine Spragg's inhumanity; as Millicent Bell notes in her account of the novel's reception, critics "shrank from Wharton's strong portrait. Undine Spragg was a 'monster'...so monstrous that she seemed inhuman" (2). Helen Killoran quotes from *The New York Sun's* review, which called Undine Spragg "'an ideal monster' with no human feeling, who is 'absolutely immoral,' not a real person but an 'abstract type'" (66). And more generally, Showalter notes the "critical revulsion" that Undine Spragg elicited in the novel's early reviews (89). However, these critics do not explore the nature of Undine Spragg's inhumanity. They note the protagonist's bestiality, and are repulsed by it, but do not examine how it functions.

³This discussion of Undine Spragg as voracious consumer is of course an essential aspect of the novel's critical reception. In what has become a standard interpretation of the text, Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes that because of Undine's gender, her "intrinsic energy and ambition must necessarily be distorted and displaced: she is given only one transaction through which to work -- marriage" (xv). This reading views Undine Spragg as the ultimate consumer; she ingests people, goods and status without care for the destruction she wreaks in this search for satiation. It also highlights the domesticity of her restricted sphere of influence, and further illuminates the importance of the dining room as both a social and domestic space. But Wolff's is not the only interpretation of Undine. Sassoubre suggests that it is Undine herself who is consumed: "She is never an agent in the market (the way Indiana Frusk is), she is only ever on the market -- as a commodity" (703).

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Edith Wharton Collection Research Award

Deadline: March 15, 2008

Each year the Edith Wharton Society offers a Edith Wharton Collection Research Award of \$1500 to enable a scholar to conduct research on the Edith Wharton Collection of materials at the Beinecke Library at Yale University. Prospective fellows for the 2008-2009 award are asked to submit a research proposal (maximum length 5 single-spaced pages) and a resume by March 15, 2008 to Hildegard Hoeller at hilhlr@aim.com or at 395 South End Ave, #24L, New York NY 10280.

The research proposal should detail the overall research project, its particular contribution to Wharton scholarship, the preparation the candidate brings to the project, and the specific relevance that materials at the Beinecke collection have for its completion. The funds need to be used for transportation, lodging, and other expenses related to a stay at the library. Notification of the award will take place by April 15th and the award can be used from May 1, 2008 through May 1, 2009. A final report will be due June 1, 2009.

We are pleased to announce that the winner of the 2007 Edith Wharton Research Award is Shafquat Towheed for his project "Reading the War: A Detailed Examination of Edith Wharton's Reading and Responses, 1914-1918"

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Edith Wharton and Susan Minot: A Literary Lineage

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If imitation, as the saying goes, is the sincerest form of flattery, then Edith Wharton has reason to feel proud. References to her work and life appear in the works of contemporary writers as diverse as Carol DeChellis Hill (*Henry James's Midnight Song*), Lev Raphael (*The Edith Wharton Murders*), and Candace Bushnell (*Sex and the City*). These literary tributes signify Wharton's continuing importance in American letters and suggest new directions in realism and manners. Wharton's genius is visible in the fiction of contemporary novelist and short story writer Susan Minot. Born in 1956, Minot is the author of three novels, a novella, a collection of short stories, a screenplay, and a collection of poems. She wrote the introduction to the Bantam paperback edition of Wharton's novel, *Summer* (1917). Her first novel, *Monkeys* (1986), features siblings reminiscent of Wharton's brood in *The Children* (1925). The more topical *Lust and Other Stories* (1989) explores, as does much of Wharton's fiction, women and their sexual world. *Folly*

(1992), arguably Minot's most Whartonian work, evokes in title, setting, and plot Wharton's novel, *The House of Mirth* (1905). Minot's third novel, *Evening* (1998), adapted for film, explores a subject missing in Wharton's oeuvre: death from cancer of a fifty-six-year-old woman. However, with its interweaving of past and present and its insight into the heroine's secret loves, it is the kind of story we could expect had Lily Bart lived or Ellen Olenska told her tale. Minot's recent work of fiction, a novella entitled *Rapture* (2002), demonstrates her skill in the shorter narrative form practiced by Wharton, James, Flaubert, and Conrad. Although more explicit in its treatment of sexuality than most of Wharton's fiction, it is Whartonian in its probing of two lovers' hopes, motivations, and disappointments as they confront each other across an unbridgeable gender divide. Minot shows signs of being as popularly and critically acclaimed as was Wharton in her day, shares her thematic and aesthetic interests, and works in a literary tradition that unifies both writers' work.

Wharton's influence on Minot specifically can be understood in terms of Wharton's perspective on literary influence generally. An avid reader, Wharton openly acknowledged the literary traditions from which her fiction evolved. She demonstrates this awareness in her book, *The Writing of Fiction* (1925); in her memoir *A Backward Glance* (1934); and in essays and reviews (collected by Wegener). In *The Writing of Fiction* Wharton echoes T. S. Eliot, emphasizing the importance of tradition. There are no "short-cuts in art," she writes, "[t]rue originality consists not in a new manner but a new vision" that comes from nourishing creativity with "an accumulated wealth of knowledge and experience" (18-19). She also speaks specifically about the artist's responsibility: the writer must heed his "Counsellors" who appear in the form of "the great novels of the past . . . and the works of his contemporaries (21-22). Only by learning "to listen to them, take all they can give, absorb it into himself" can he "turn to his own task with the fixed resolve to see life only through his own eyes" (22). In the opening chapter of *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton acknowledges those who influenced her writing, such as French realists Balzac and Stendhal. Later in the book, she praises Proust for his "analysis of half-conscious states of mind" and "faculty of penetrating into a chosen subject and bringing to light its inherent properties" (155, 166). Minot similarly admires Proust and pays tribute to him in an essay entitled "By Shutting Her Eyes." Proust, writes Minot in an echo of Wharton, "zeroes in," his "rambles rewarding the reader "with stunning insight" (111-12).

In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton also cites Tolstoy, Thackeray, and Trollope for their mastery of portraiture (210). Linking her writing to that of other writers of her time, Wharton explains that modern fiction begins with the transference from the street to the soul (2). She describes this negotiation between inner and outer realities in her and other realists' work. Writers, she argues, must possess "imagination" an ability to penetrate minds and both "stand apart from them and see beyond them" (15).

Sensitive to the criticism sometime leveled against

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novelists of manners like herself, Wharton tackles the question of the writer's subject matter. "There are subjects trivial in appearance, and subjects trivial to the core," she explains (*Writing* 26). She keeps her focus on substance and moral import. "[T]here must be some sort of rational response to the reader's unconscious but insistent inner question, 'What am I being told this story for? What judgment on life does it contain for me?'" (27). She ends with a declaration: "A good subject, then, must contain in itself something that sheds light on our moral experience" (28). The fact that the novelist writes of manners and the minutiae of everyday does not preclude the work from having moral weight.

Wharton does not, in *The Writing of Fiction*, identify the subject matter that inspires both her writing and that of Susan Minot: the situation of women in society. She makes the connection between morality and the social imperatives of gender in *A Backward Glance*. She famously presents her heroine Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* as her answer to the question, "In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the 'old woe of the world', any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society could guess? The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals" (207). At the core of this expression of authorial intent is not only Wharton's defense of manners but also her insistence on literature as a form of human expression that can teach us how to live. In another essay, "The Great American Novel," Wharton takes up the issue of moral import. In large part a traditionalist, she was not entirely sanguine about the contributions of modern literature. For example, she argues that "the conditions of modern life in America, so far from productive of great arguments, seem almost purposely contrived to eliminate them," and declares that "Nothing can alter the fact that a 'great argument' will give a greater result than the perpetual chronicling of small beer" (153).

Putting her two statements about gender and modern literature together, we see that the challenges facing women form the "great argument" of Wharton's fiction. This interest unites her work with Minot's. Both writers are committed to representing the lives of women characters through a realistic style marked by lucidity and understatement. With incisive wit and irony, both Wharton and Minot present the surface of women's lives but also reveal the turbulence below the surface. In their chronicles of personal desire in conflict with social processes, that which is critically important and emphatically felt often goes unsaid or unaddressed.

Both Edith Wharton and Susan Minot write about their social worlds from first-hand experience. In the historical novel, *Folly*, Boston-born Minot explores a world of leisure and privilege during World War I. Her representations of insularity and complacency in this Brahmin culture call to mind Wharton's retrospective description, in *The Age of Innocence*, of the 1870s Old New York society in which she was born and raised. Minot also writes familiarly of

affluent, fast-paced New York, depicting contemporary social dynamics as accurately as Wharton did in her time period. Both writers focus on the numbing rituals that structure characters' lives and substitute for genuine intimacy. For example, in *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton describes the museum-like rigidity of households managed by Aunt Peniston and the van der Luyden family. Minot similarly chronicles the daily routines of well-heeled New Yorkers who, as critic Madeleine Blais writes, live in penthouse apartments that are "half art gallery." Minot's characters lunch at posh restaurants and develop nuanced relationships that are revealed in a gesture or a word: "the way a cab is hailed, a beer fetched, bread buttered" (7). Their coded interactions evoke the "hieroglyphic world" of Old New York, "where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs" (*Age* 45). Like Wharton's members of the leisure class, Minot's upscale New Yorkers are busy, but "we never see them at work" (*French* 33).

Like Wharton, who earned popular as well as critical acclaim during her lifetime, Minot is "a contemporary voice to reckon with" (Blais 7). She has been praised for "vivid observation and lucid prose" and for "wonderfully wrought" descriptions of character and incident (Maitland 25). Opinion is far from unanimous on the quality of both authors' writing, however. Andy Solomon might be writing about Wharton when he describes Minot's "grim vision" and comments that she "eschews the grandeur of high tragedy in favor of taut realism" (3). Despite being consummate practitioners of realism, Wharton and Minot have been criticized for observing decorum that is at times too decorous. Irving Howe writes that Wharton "had little alternative to the varieties of comedy that dominate her books" (13). Similarly, Sara Maitland charges that in Minot's work that such "precision-honed social realism actually traps her novel too tightly in place" (25).

In Wharton's and Minot's writing the weight of circumstance pulls inexorably against characters' exercise of free will. Characters in both writers' work are often constrained by situations they neither welcome nor control; the physical environment, with its social exigencies, presses on their psyche. The force of family also exerts itself, sometimes distorting relationships, especially between parents and children. Wharton depicts, in her novel, *The Children*, a family of young people vulnerable to adult whims and foibles. Minot similarly focuses on youngsters in her debut novel, *Monkeys*, producing what Karen Sue Smith calls "skillfully crafted episodes that 'exhibit a child's-eye view of thirteen years of family life'" (572). In Wharton's novel, step, half and full siblings must contend with their parents' absence or neglect and learn to parent themselves. In *Monkeys*, brothers and sisters must not only cope with the first Christmas since their mother's death but also take care of their alcoholic father. "Go back to bed, Dad," they tell him at one point, whereupon he dubs them "extraordinary children," and leaves them to decorate the holiday tree alone (138).

Both Minot and Wharton have been taken to task for

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their insider indiscretions. Wharton defended herself in *A Backward Glance* against complaints from Old New Yorkers who recognized unflattering portraits of themselves in her writing. Similarly, New Yorkers object to Minot's pointing out, as Robley Wilson puts it, that New York is "a fictional construct, a cardboard world of parochial celebrity assembled tab-and-slot by artificers" (829). Perhaps the greatest affinity between the two writers can be found in reviewers' and critics' observation that both Wharton and Minot are "old-fashioned" (Garrison, Rubin, Wood). It is well known that Wharton, even when living and writing in Paris, shied away from the literary innovations of modernist writers such as Stein, Natalie Barney, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald, preferring the refined neighborhood of St. Germain to the lively arts scene of the Left Bank (Benstock). At first glance, Minot's style—minimalist, precise—seems wholly modernist and her characters hip, up-to-the-minute, and savvy. However, critics also detect sentimental romance and longing in her writing (Wood 7). Georgia Brown, noting that the romance is a typically female genre, criticizes her feminine attitudes and perspectives. In both writers' work, women struggle against conventions as they attempt to reconcile public and private desires. Not only constrained by circumstance but also inarticulate about the nature of their passion, they frequently fail to find sympathetic, committed mates.

Minot's most Whartonian novel, *Folly*, combines elements from *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Old Maid* (1924). Lillian Eliot, whose names echoes that of Lily Bart, seeks a suitable husband. Lillian also resembles May Welland, a sheltered daughter from a proper family not in Old New York but in Boston, a city which outsiders consider "dull" but which members of its small society deem the center the universe. Like Lily, and Charlotte in *The Old Maid*, Lillian gives her heart to a charming but inconstant lover. Walter Vail evokes Lawrence Selden in *The House of Mirth*, who lives in the rarified "republic of the spirit" as well as the artistic, adventuresome Clem Spender in *The Old Maid*. Walter exudes charm, but one could not rely on him "for practical things" (39). When Walter remains in Paris after World War I, a desolated Lillian makes a conventional marriage to Gilbert Finch. They raise children and lead a stable life until at the end of novel Walter reenters Lillian's world and she, like Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence*, is given a second chance to compose the life she never had. As they meet and stroll, not through a museum as Archer and Ellen do before she leaves for Europe, but through a cemetery, the sense of loss is palpable. Walter reawakens Lillian's passion, but ultimately it is a thrill Lillian remembers rather than re-experiences. Just as Archer ambivalently affirms that "there was good in the old ways" and "[t]here was good in the new order too" (347, 349), Lillian must reconcile dreams of the past with realities of the present. "It's the life I chose," she tells Walter about her marriage to Finch, "Not a bad life" (262). Like Archer, who forsakes the exotic Ellen for the predictable May, Lillian opts not for Walter's rakish irresponsibility but for Finch's stability. "People put too much stock in promises. .

. What do they matter?" Walter says in defense of his fickleness, to which Lillian responds, "They matter to me." When Walter counters, "is that the Bostonian speaking or the Puritan?" he identifies the unproductive stoicism that shapes both Wharton's and Minot's fiction and leads to characters' suffering without the hope of redemption (273). Minot's novel affirms, as does Wharton's, the safety of the conventional but at a perilously high price.

Calling Minot old fashioned by no means suggests that her fiction is stuffy. On the contrary. In the title story from her collection, *Lust and Other Stories*, an unnamed female narrator tells stories—many about explicitly sexual relationships. The vignettes fall under the gender-neutral rubric "lust"; however, these descriptions of ostensibly mutual sexual consent conclude with a gendered pronouncement, "It was different for a girl" (7). Not only do women experience sex differently from men, Minot's fiction demonstrates, sex is always connected to power. For example, Minot describes a situation in childhood play that sets the stage for a later sexual dynamics. She writes that "the brothers next door tied up our ankles" and "wouldn't let us out till we showed them our underpants" (7). The line between being boys' partners in play and being objects of their sexual conquest momentarily blur when girls and boys engage in sports together, but it never entirely disappears. The struggle for control reasserts itself, and girls more often than not capitulate to boys' demands, more out of a need to be "cool" than out of genuine desire. The double sexual standard is alive in Minot's fiction as it is in Wharton's: "The more girls a boy has, the better," Minot writes in "Lust," but "for a girl, with each boy it's as though a petal gets plucked each time" (10-11).

Minot's use of flower imagery in this quotation, alluding to Wharton's portrayal of Lily as a delicate, dying flower, underlines the fact that the female love story is a alive and well, updated in Minot's writing for contemporary readers. Many of Minot's plots, like Wharton's, revolve around romance and marriage. Unlike the chaste Lily Bart, Minot's characters meet boys and have sex, but her protagonist in "Lust," like Wharton's in *The House of Mirth*, looks for love and finds the quest less fulfilling with each round of matchmaking. In Minot's fiction, parties at friends' houses when parents are away are like affairs at Bellomont and other mansions where Lily jockeys for male attention and skirts disaster. At age twenty-nine, Lily is weary of the marriage circuit. In "Lust," Minot's heroine says, "You wonder how long you can keep it up" (14). For both protagonists, the legacy of attraction is abandonment and betrayal. At the end of *The House of Mirth*, Wharton uses water imagery to depict the emptiness that Lily feels after being forsaken by Selden, refused by Rose-dale, and violated by Trenor:

[T]here was . . . the clutch of solitude at her heart, the sense of being swept like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of the years. That was the feeling which possessed her now—the feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral . . . without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could

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cling before the awful flood submerged them. (319) Susan Minot, also using a water metaphor, writes:

After sex, you curl up like a shrimp; something deep inside you ruined . . . and slowly you fill up with an overwhelming sadness. . . . You don't try to explain it, filled with the knowledge that it's nothing after all, everything filling up finally and absolutely with death. . . . You haven't been able to—to what? To open your heart." (16-17)

Summing up Minot's story collection—he might be describing Wharton's fiction—Richard Eder writes that "the woman's lot is as bad as it's ever been" (3).

Edith Wharton anticipated modern feminism; she was a trail blazer in confronting the difficulties women face when trying to chart their own sexual paths. Susan Minot writes as if the women's movement has come and gone—or never come at all. Both Wharton's and Minot's characters are conspicuously inept at getting what they want, often because their efforts are frustrated by a male protagonist. Both writers have been faulted for portraying deficient men. Minot's tales abound, as do Wharton's, with dilettantes and Johnny-come-latelys. In Minot's story, "Île Sèche," a couple pause to admire the view, as do Lily and Selden at Belmont in *The House of Mirth*, but when Minot's heroine asks her partner to notice the quality of light as well, the request is too much for him. In another Minot tale, "The Swan in the Garden," a woman yearns to give herself to love and unite with her soul mate, as do many Wharton heroines, for example, in the story, "Fullness of Life." However, when the protagonist in the Minot story finally musters the courage to utter an understated, "I care," she is told "to care a little less" and is dismissed with, "Can we please stop talking about this now?" (92-93). These rebuffs cut Minot's protagonist to the core, but throughout her fiction, emotional apathy and reserve rather than disclosure remain part of sexual game. Reviewer Robley Wilson might be describing the hapless lovers in Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, *The Reef*, or *Summer* when he comments about Minot's writing in *Lust and Other Stories*: she "has discovered how best to present what lust really is: not a passion, not a reckless pleasure, not an erotic madness, but only a thoughtless sexual drift, the unwilling suspension of consequence" (829, original emphasis).

Fate, chance, and circumstance figure prominently in both writers' work. Wharton's and Minot's characters fill with vague anxiety and a nagging sense that something is missing while their narratives skim serenely, even surreally, along the veneer of life. Sometimes the characters are only dimly aware of their heart's desire, but they sense the impossibility of fulfillment nonetheless. Despite emotional devastation, they are circumspect, restrained, resigned. For example, after a break up, one of Minot's characters asks, "Do you think he'll be alright?" to which another answers, "He's not going to commit suicide if that's what you mean." ("The Break-up" 80). Similarly, in Wharton's novel, *Summer*, a traumatized Charity Royall, pregnant with her lover's baby and

married to her adoptive father, is told, "You're a good girl." Defeated but given little choice but to endure, she can only utter faintly, "I guess you're good too" (224).

Beginning in the 1970s, second wave feminists demonstrated the importance of discovering and continuing a tradition of women's literature. Wharton died before she could benefit from this transformative critical work, but Minot and her contemporaries are its full legatees. A comparison of the two writers' work reveals that literary influence is not a simple mother-daughter "Daughteronomy," as Susan Gilbert once termed it. It is a dynamic interchange in which both writers' work gains in significance. Susan Minot's writing bears testimony to the fact that Wharton's legacy is alive and evolving. Wharton's gift to other writers, and to women author in particular, is clarity and courage of expression. Wharton was ahead of her time in confronting the still vexing question of women's relationship to desire, to men, and to their own bodies. "Life is the saddest thing there is, next to death" Wharton once wrote (*Backward* 379). Sadly, where women are concerned, Minot might agree.

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Book Review

Lee, Hermione. *Edith Wharton*. NY: Knopf, 2007. 870pp.

"Edith at her Edithest": Hermione Lee's *Edith Wharton*
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Review of Hermione Lee's *Edith Wharton* is a wonder. Meticulously researched and documented, comprehensive and contextualized, compellingly narrated, it is a pleasure to read, all 762 pages of it (870 with notes and index). Both personal and intellectual biography, it offers us Wharton the writer, the home designer, the traveler, the wife, the lover, the friend, the gardener, and, above all, the manager of her own life. One might quarrel with some of the analysis of specific texts—that's what makes Wharton's work so endlessly interesting, after all—but one will come away from this biography with a far richer sense of what Elisina Tyler used to call, "Edith at her Edithest" (482).

As scholars of Wharton are only too aware, Wharton's intellectual abilities and the sheer number of documents

she left behind can be daunting. However, to the biographer of Virginia Woolf and Willa Cather, it perhaps didn't seem as much of a challenge as it might. Not only has Lee read the primary texts in print and much, if not all, of the unpublished fiction, poetry, and essays, but she also has surely read and considered most of the 4,000-6,000 extant Wharton letters (Colquitt 256) and, equally impressive, countless letters, essays, and memoirs about Wharton by her friends and acquaintances. With unprecedented access to Wharton's personal library, she has read much of what Wharton herself read, and, presumably, in the original languages (a caveat for readers: Lee translates the German, but leaves most of the French and Italian for her readers). Furthermore, she has looked deeply into the various contexts for Wharton's life and knowledge—uncovered allusions, researched Italian architecture, English country house society, Fauburg society, French divorce law—and also made judicious use of the mass of work that other scholars have compiled on Wharton in the last thirty years. To use an inelegant metaphor, it is as if Wharton scholars everywhere have been examining different parts of the elephant, and Lee has come along, considered all the evidence, and presented us with the elephant entire, in all her complexity, her frailty, and her glory.

The sense that we now have a more complete Wharton comes not just from the information, but from the way Lee has chosen to organize her material. Rather than proceeding chronologically, as most conventional biographies do, she leads us topically through Wharton's life. For instance, Chapter 4, "Italian Backgrounds," begins with Wharton as a young married woman, but its central subject is how "gradually, over years of travel and reading, Wharton came to feel in possession of Italy" (90). From Wharton's 1888 journey on the *Vanadis* to her many forays into Italy over the next twenty years, Lee explores Wharton's acquisition of Italy and her chronicling of it in novel, stories, poems, and travel books. We learn of her relationship to her three "introducers" to Italy: Charles Eliot Norton, Paul Bourget, and Vernon Lee (Violet Paget). We meet the Roman and Florentine society in which Wharton mixed while seeking out the villas and gardens for her work, and we get a description of Salsomaggiore, the spa to which she would return for help with her asthma and exhaustion. With delicious examples of travel advice from Minnie Jones's *European Travel for Women* ("wear very simple underclothes while traveling, as they will receive very hard usage from the washerwomen"), we get a sense of the manner in which Wharton traveled (89). And, as throughout this intellectual biography, we get a good sense of what writers and ideas were influencing Wharton (notably Goethe) as she studied her way through Italy. Had this information been presented chronologically, we would have lost the force and flavor of the argument Lee develops about the centrality of Italy to Wharton's consciousness and creativity.

Perhaps the most compelling, and poignant, story is the one Lee compiles about Edith's life with Teddy Wharton. Neither the victim of R.W.B. Lewis's version, nor the

(Continued on page 13)

(Continued from page 12)

silently suffering neurasthenic of Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Lee's Wharton is a fully mature, intelligent woman who grows to understand that her intellectual, emotional, and physical needs are not being met and who nevertheless attempts to be a good wife until such time as that becomes impossible. Teddy's mental decline, beginning with his first "nervous collapse" in 1903, is placed in the context of their entire marriage, and also in the context of what was known and speculated about mental illness at the time. Interestingly, Lee compares Teddy's symptoms with Edith's descriptions of her own twelve years of nausea, asthma, and depression, a comparison that Wharton herself never makes. She studies Wharton's reading, particularly Shaw's *Getting Married*, and her writing about marriage and divorce. She also analyses *Ethan Frome* within the context of Wharton's experience of Teddy's illness, something that directly contradicts Cynthia Wolff's contention that Wharton "was extraordinarily happy when she was writing it" (183).

In "La Demanderesse" and the earlier chapter, "L'Âme Close," we see Edith, even while she was in love with Morton Fullerton, working again and again to find some comfort for Teddy as well as a respite for herself from him. She arranges trips to Arkansas and the Rockies, to spas and retreats in Switzerland and the Italian lakes, even a trip around the world with a paid companion, all to no avail. In 1909, Teddy comes to stay in Paris just as Edith is negotiating her relationship with Fullerton, and Lee is straightforward in her depiction of Edith's desperate machinations to see Fullerton while appeasing a clinging Teddy who won't leave the apartment and won't let his wife out of his sight. We see Teddy's difficult sister stonewalling any suggestion of Teddy's illness, and Edith's growing desperation.

In late 1910 Edith spends two months, miserably, in New York with Teddy, getting him ready for his trip around the world. During this time, her dear friends Henry James, Walter Berry, and Morton Fullerton come together to support her, the last time they would all meet in America. Teddy gone, Edith returns to Paris, where she has a few good months writing and visiting until Teddy shows up, worse than ever. Lee notes that during this time Edith is compiling a dossier of sorts that will eventually work to her advantage in obtaining a divorce and also in securing her reputation against blame. The biographer is sympathetic with both the Whartons, but she pulls no punches when she suggests that Teddy's probable knowledge of Edith's affair might well have made him worse. "The most punitive case that could be made against her is that Teddy's mental instability was intensified because she did not love him and was unfaithful to him. But it may also be that he was jealous of her professional success and resented her financial domination in the marriage" (364). Altogether we get a full picture of a marriage, a life together, with both its charms and its problems.

It is also at this time that Lee begins finding indications of suicidal longings. Though she doesn't put these references together, I note that between 1910 and 1914 Lee finds three references in the letters to an attraction to sui-

cide (385, 397, 488-9). Later she notes that in Wharton's books of poetry "passages of deep emotion...feelings of solitude and longings for death" are heavily marked (673). Not just passion, but also fragility and sadness underlay this most competent of women.

Among the reconsiderations and the discovery of new materials, there are a few surprises and a few differences from previously accepted versions of Wharton's life. For instance, Lee dates "Beatrice Palmato" between 1918 and 1923 (Lewis suggests 1935) and considers it Wharton's attempt to be more French and more sexually candid. In another matter, I was surprised to learn that R.W.B. Lewis had been chosen by William Tyler, Tyler's lawyer, and the curator of the Yale archives, to do the first Wharton biography using soon-to-be-available materials. They also considered, among others, Alfred Kazin, Edmund Wilson, Leon Edel, and Jean Stafford (757).

Not surprisingly, Lee confirms Benstock's correction of Wharton's so-called nervous collapse during the early years of her marriage. Those Wharton scholars who rely on Lewis's account of Wharton having a breakdown, out of which she heroically wrote her way into better health, should take good note. Benstock documented incontrovertibly that Wharton was never under the care of S. Weir Mitchell or any of his disciples. Furthermore, Wharton was busy writing letters, clipping articles, and sending presents while in Philadelphia and, despite Lewis's contention that she was totally alone for four months, she was accompanied for much of the time by Teddy (Benstock 93-5). As Lee puts it in her version: "[Wharton] was leading a complicated, active, energetic life, all through the period in which she was also unwell, unhappy, and depressed" (80). Then, "There are three energetic strands in her twenties and thirties which are not stories of illness. One is the making of American houses, one is her entry into the literary marketplace, and one is her taking possession of Italy" (81). Lee takes up each of these in the next three chapters. One hopes that this will put to rest forever the notion that Wharton had a series of breakdowns, or an identity crisis, in her thirties and emerged a writer (Auchincloss, Wilson, Kellogg, Wolff, Lewis).

Lee's biography does not, however, supersede earlier work, on which she at times relies. If we want to know what Wharton was doing on any given day or month, or a listing of all her published works in chronological order, or business arrangements and sales figures for her novels, we would still want to consult Benstock. For family context, if we want the text of her poem written the day after a night with Fullerton or the fragment of *Beatrice Palmato*, and for overall color, we would still look to Lewis. However, Lee did have access to documents and information that have become available only since the most recent biography.

Notably, of course, is Wharton's own library, with all her underlinings and annotations, which Lee uses to excellent effect to analyze Wharton's opinions and states of mind throughout the course of her life—what Lee tellingly calls "the private library of her mind" (716). For Wharton scholars, this information will be a treasure, and a pleas-

(Continued on page 14)

(Continued from page 13)

ure. Additionally, the letters of Wharton's friend Léon Bétugou have recently been published, revealing a closer relationship between them than was previously guessed, including Bétugou's complicity in her affair with Fullerton. And Fred Wegener's invaluable volume of previously uncollected writings, along with his useful detective work, became available in 1996, two years after Benstock's biography. Lee also consulted sources that have been available, but passed over. The most interesting of these is the correspondence between Kenneth Clark and Grace Kellogg, Wharton's first female biographer.

The Edith Wharton who emerges from this deep analysis is far more European than we have considered her. She is also more modern, more engaged with her literary contemporaries of the post-war world (Lee brings a welcome expertise in this era). Most of all, one gets a sense of Wharton as an intense, energetic, commanding woman with a zest for life and an insatiable desire for ideas and conversation, but also a fragility that she sought stoically to overcome. She was constantly planning and going and doing, even as she was reading—almost inhaling books—and conversing and writing. Most of her friends found her overwhelming and exhausting, but also large-spirited and kind, generous, and endlessly interesting. To read this biography is to encounter Edith at her Edithest.

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Book Review

- Olin-Ammentorp, Julie. *Edith Wharton's Writings from the Great War*. Gainseville: University Press of Florida, 2004. 305 pp.

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Until Julie Olin-Ammentorp's book, *Edith Wharton's Writings from the Great War*, was published, no full length study of these works had appeared. Her book is likely to become the definitive treatment of them. It is hard to

imagine anyone surpassing her work in mastery of the subject. In all respects, Olin-Ammentorp's book is exemplary—in style, organization, comprehensiveness, and depth of insight.

Just in themselves, Wharton's publications during the war years, 1914-1919, constitute a substantial body of fiction and nonfiction: *The Marne*, *Summer*, *Fighting France*, *French Ways and Their Meaning*, several short stories, poems, essays and articles in newspapers and magazines. Two appendices contain the war related poems and realistic accounts of the hostels and workrooms that Wharton established for refugees. But Olin-Ammentorp goes beyond these works, which would alone justify a book, to show how deeply the war influenced Wharton's writing in the postwar years.

The first chapter, "Edith Wharton and the Literary Legacy of the Great War," relates Wharton to two traditions of war writing. The romantic treatment of war is evident in Wharton's frequent use of medieval, heroic rhetoric to celebrate the ennobling effects of war and the values of courage and honor. Judged by the anti-romantic tradition, Wharton's idealism, which survived her painful awareness of suffering and death, could be dismissed as naive and sentimental, further proof that war was a man's subject. But as references to "The Myth of the War" (8), and "the principles of the Great War canon" (75) make clear, the irony and disillusionment of the anti-romantic war writing were conventions no less than the romantic celebration of heroism and sacrifice. Interestingly, passages quoted from histories by Barbara Tuchman and John Keegan show that "Wharton's voice may, in some respects, have more in common with the tone of some military historians than with that of the better-known poets and novelists of the Great War" (224).

Wharton's writings published during the war years are discussed chronologically to show the changes in her attitude as the war dragged on, Paris was flooded with refugees, and the United States, to Wharton's increasing distress, remained neutral. Commingled fascination and a sense of horror inspired by the war mark Wharton's first major work, *Fighting France* (1915), which conveys most explicitly her frustration at being excluded from frontline battle, frustration reinforced by the prejudice against women's undertaking to write about war. Wharton's nonfiction provides a context for understanding (if not admiring) her creation of her spokesman Troy Belknap, the youthful protagonist of *The Marne*, whose exclusion from battle intensifies his passionate devotion to France and the French cause. Olin-Ammentorp sees more in *The Marne* than most critics do, but finds this short novel, like its nonfictional counterpart, *French Ways and Their Meaning*, lacking in "literary ambiguity" and "complicating moral issues" (58). On the other hand, hitherto neglected short stories—"Coming Home," "Writing a War Story," and "The Refugees"—are shown to be more interesting and complex than recognized before, perhaps because their ironies are undiluted by the didactic romanticism of *The*

(Continued on page 15)

(Continued from page 14)

Marne.

Of the wartime publications, only *Summer* has become one of the half dozen of Wharton's most celebrated and exhaustively analyzed works. Olin-Ammentorp notes its importance as an escape or "psychological refuge" (89) from the war but argues that it was also "deeply shaped by the war" (61). Comparing the mountain people in their "savage misery" to the war refugees, she defines the Mountain, where Charity (did Wharton's wartime charities suggest the name?) sees her mother's dead swollen body, as the "psychological and experiential equivalent of the front lines"—"devastating" and "better left behind" (65).

An excellent, wide-ranging chapter on *A Son at the Front*, set in wartime Paris but essentially a "novel about parents and children" (143), identifies possible models for the artist/father, John Campton (Conrad, Renoir, James), and shows how Wharton revised the first draft to make Campton even more possessive and vindictive. Campton's misogyny does not wholly account for the absence in the novel of any "completely admirable" female character, except the French concierge, Mme. Lebel (131). *A Son at the Front* remains a puzzling novel with undercurrents that resist the most delicate analysis.

The war years came almost at the midpoint of Wharton's career. To show that "The Great War had an immense impact on Wharton's imagination" (234), that "its effect on her writing was profound" (232), Olin-Ammentorp analyzes fiction and nonfiction published after 1919 which seem far removed from scenes of war. In particular, her fine analysis of *The Age of Innocence* shows the value of reading the later fiction in conjunction with the war writings. Not only does *The Age of Innocence* celebrate French culture and endow Ellen Olenska

with the self-control, stoicism, and recognition of painful realities that Wharton admired in French women; Wharton's sense that the war had completely destroyed the prewar world of Old New York explains her desire to preserve it by recording its manners and customs, down to the smallest detail (e.g. the "invisible claws" holding the sapphire in May Welland's engagement ring). Here and throughout her book, Olin-Ammentorp illuminates Wharton's artistry by alertness to telling details that a less attentive reader could easily miss.

Olin-Ammentorp does not engage in the controversies inspired by some of Wharton's novels (e.g. the endings of *Summer* and *The Age of Innocence*) but she takes issue with critics when she disagrees with them and makes clear her point of view. For instance, she believes (rightly, I think) that Newland Archer's much-debated choice at the end of *The Age of Innocence*, to forgo the chance to see Ellen Olenska after May's death, Ais left profoundly ambivalent" (195). But after noting many parallels between *The Age of Innocence* and *The Mother's Recompense*, she quotes the passage which shows that "readers are meant to admire Kate's choice" to decline Fred Landers's offer of marriage (195). When she connects biography and literature, she draws evidence of Wharton's feelings from the writings themselves. For instance, she sees reflected in Wharton's postwar fiction effects on the novelist of the deaths of the young in war, which "deepened her sense of what it must be to lose a child" (197): "The experiences of John Campton and Kate Clephane imply that any parent who suddenly finds an adult child who is also a perfect companion is fated to lose that child . . ." (197). *Edith Wharton's Writings from the Great War* is filled insights like this that distinguish a book of unflinching intelligence and integrity.

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**It is with great regret that we report the passing of
Dr. Edie Thornton,
outstanding Wharton scholar, current vice-president of the
Edith Wharton Society, and beloved colleague and friend.**

*A classic is classic not because it conforms to certain structural
rules, or fits certain definitions (of which its author had quite probably
never heard). It is classic because of a certain eternal and irrepresible
freshness. -Edith Wharton*

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