



EDITH WHARTON REVIEW

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**The Custom of the Country:
George Sand's *Indiana* and Edith
Wharton's *Indiana*/Undine**

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"Nightmarish" is the word that best and most literally describes the situation of George Sand--Aurore Dudevant--while writing her 1832 novel, *Indiana*, which she completed in three months: She finally obtained a legal separation (divorce being nonexistent in 1831) from her husband Casimir Dudevant, continued a sado-masochistic love affair with Jules Sandeau who made passionate love when he was not beating her, saw "convoys of corpses" during the cholera epidemic which spread through Paris,

and witnessed bloody street fighting in the June 1832 insurrection (Weingarten 103-04). Edith Wharton weathered similar conditions while finishing her 1913 novel, *The Custom of the Country*: She worked sporadically over five years, enduring the debilitating proceedings of her divorce from Teddy Wharton and other horrors, including the end of her passionate affair with the bisexual Morton Fullerton, the agonizing near-rupture of her long friendship with Henry James, and the painful termination of her relationship with her brother Edward (Lewis 345, 332). In fact, in their journals both women recorded details of their nightmares during this period, Sand dreaming of her lover bleeding on a crucifix, begging her to beat him

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BOOK REVIEW

Hoeller, Hildegard. *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction*. University Press of Florida, 2000. 208 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN 0-8130-1776-1. Cloth, \$49.95.

Writing to Sinclair Lewis after the publication of *Babbitt* in 1922, Edith Wharton praised his sense of irony, adding, "To do anything worth while, one must resolutely close one's ears & eyes to [the American public's] conception of the novel, and I admire nothing more in your work than your steady balancing on your tightrope over the sloppy abyss of sentimentality" (*Letters* 455). Wharton made similarly disparaging statements about sentimentality throughout her career, and most critics have taken her at her word, seeing her use of irony, satire, and realism as a means of balancing on her own tightrope over this same abyss. In *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction*, however, Hildegard Hoeller challenges this well-known critical perspective to take a fresh look at Wharton's use of the sentimental tradition. In a series of provocative and well-argued readings of works from several phases of Wharton's career, Hoeller looks beneath the public protestations about sentimentality and finds evidence of a sometimes ambivalent but always committed and complex engagement with sentimental tradition.

Unlike other recent critics, Hoeller is less interested in the cultural work of sentimental fiction than in what its aesthetic and formal properties and its literary tradition had to offer a sophisticated writer like Wharton. Her first chapter accordingly provides a concise but thorough history of sentimentalism and its realist critics in order to disentangle the tradition from misconceptions about its meaning. Mary Kelley, Nina Baym, Lora Romero, Glenn Hendler, and others have linked the sentimental tradition to domestic or woman's fiction, with its overt approval and hidden subversion of domestic ideology; like these critics, Hoeller finds in the sentimental tradition a protest against the market economy, a protest that, ironically, the sentimentalists shared with their realist critics. The real power of sentimental tradition, argues Hoeller, lies in its embrace of "excess as a form of uncalculated expenditure, or uncalculated giving" that "defies the ethos of exchange" central to a market economy. In an inspired extension of this concept, Hoeller links excess not only with the transgressive possibilities in what Georges Bataille calls "nonproductive expenditure" (36) but with the excessive and transgressive passions seen in both sentiment-

tal writings and in Wharton's works. Otherwise puzzling features of Wharton's work, such as her handling of the incest theme, scenes of self-sacrifice and mother love, links between illness and violent emotion, and highly pitched descriptions of sexual passion are thus seen not simply lapses of craft but conscious evocations of nineteenth-century sentimental tradition. Their use, according to Hoeller, provides narrative spaces within which Wharton critiques both the restraint preached by domestic ideology and the sensible "economy of pain" perspective of Howellsian realism.

Hoeller demonstrates that Wharton carved out these spaces very early in her career, with her early novel *Fast and Loose*. A work that mirrors the plot of the sentimental verse *Lucile* (1860) by Owen Meredith, the pseudonym of Edward Robert Bulwer-Lytton, *Fast and Loose* "meanders between realism, sentimentality, and satire" (43), but, like later works by Wharton, shows that "love and marriage are incompatible forces" (42). To complicate the question of genre and voice even further, the mock reviews that the young Edith Jones appended to her text are not simply voices promoting realism but satiric responses to "the patronizing voices of the reviewers" (52). Seen as stories that continue this dialogue between sentimentality and realism, such as "The Muse's Tragedy" and "The Dilettante" explicitly warn of the dangers of believing too strongly in a realist (and in these stories male) aesthetic of containment that causes its own kind of blindness to truth. The paired antitheses of containment and excess recur again in Wharton's letters to Morton Fullerton, which Hoeller sees as a studied performance despite Wharton's protests about their spontaneity; the often-quoted "unpacking the treasures" passage is but one example of a consistent attempt to "resist stifling economies" through "narrative excess" (79).

In paired chapters on *The House of Mirth* and *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Hoeller tackles the difficult question of sentimentality in the former and the critical failure of the latter. Taking a harsher approach to *Rosedale* than other critics, Hoeller suggests that his voice of realism and his capitalist view make him too limited and one-dimensional to serve as other than a negative figure, despite his kindness to children and belated gallantry toward Lily; whether his truth-telling is more destructive than Selden's aloof sentimentalizing about Lily's fate is debatable. More to the point,

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(Weingarten 103), and Wharton of hideous "squirming black things" endlessly writhing out of an open trunk (Lewis 355). Yet after their separations from promiscuous husbands, Sand erupted with the words "Free at last!" (Weingarten 95), and Wharton felt as if the entire weight of "Pelions & Ossas had been lifted off me" (23 Mar 1913 ltr to Gaillard Lapsley, in Lewis, *Letters* 289).

Surely these similarities--and I here name only a few--between the lives of two writers of genius, living in France in different eras, cannot have escaped Edith Wharton, an avid reader of Sand the writer and open admirer of Sand the woman. In addition to all these biographical similarities between Wharton and Sand, I am struck by the similarities between Sand's *Indiana* and Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*. Jean Gooder notes that Wharton, suspending work on *Custom* to write *The Reef*, was apparently inspired by a quick trip to Nohant whose former owner George Sand "provided some necessary touchstone" (Gooder 45). R.W.B. Lewis informs us that Wharton--who found in Sand "an affinity that was almost a self-revelation," and who placed Sand at the head of her list of unconventional, gifted women--was reading an account of Sand's affair with Alfred de Musset during yet another hiatus in writing *Custom* (Lewis 204, 228). Clearly, then, Sand was very much on Wharton's mind as she fashioned her characters and her plot. Indeed, Wharton seems to have "revised" George Sand's *Indiana* as she worked with Undine Spragg and with Indiana Frusk. Wharton added Indiana as a new character who, she said, "interests me very much" (15 May 1911 ltr to Morton Fullerton, in Lewis, *Letters* 241, n.1). Her own feelings about her affair and her divorce may well have been emotionally and artistically amalgamated with those of George Sand and her fictional Indiana.

By a curious coincidence, these two works were turning points in the artistic careers of these women whose talents and personal histories have so much in common. The publication of *Indiana* produced an outpouring of praise for the "masterpiece" as critics made such comments as "Balzac and Merimée are buried under *Indiana*," Sainte-Beuve declaring that a man would not have been capable of perceiving so much" (Weingarten 107, 108). *Indiana*'s author proclaimed, "In Paris Mme. Dudevant is dead. But Georges [sic] Sand is reputed to be a hale and hearty gay blade" (Atwood 20). Likewise, Wharton, who in her letters referred to *Custom* as "a real magnum opus" (16 May 1911 ltr to Bernard Berenson, Lewis, *Letters* 240) and her "Big Novel" (6 August 1911 ltr to Bernard Berenson, Lewis, *Letters* 252) received excellent reviews; according to

Lewis, from 1913, the year of its publication and for several years thereafter, Wharton was the "most accomplished" writer in America (Lewis 351). That she persisted in writing and completing *Custom* indicates the importance she attached to the novel: Chronologically it is the first among the five books she would later call her favorites, suggesting Wharton's recognition that *Custom* initiated the richest, most mature phase of her artistic achievement.

No conclusive evidence exists that Wharton actually read *Indiana* but, as Clare Colquitt notes, at the precocious age of 14, Wharton had written "Fast and Loose," a story whose sentimental heroine is named "Georgie Rivers," and whose opening scene is likely derived from that of Sand's novel *Indiana* (Colquitt 20-21). Certainly the similarities between *Custom* and *Indiana* are everywhere apparent. Both novels begin in the fall; use natural and artificial imagery to describe society; depict child-like men who, ironically, persistently see only women as childlike; allude satirically to Louis XV and other French notables; use imagery of hunting and war, castles and prisons, exile and deserts; and conclude with women who, having finished with husbands and lovers, are reunited with their first loves.

Further delving reveals that Undine is very nearly an anagram of Indiana (indienu, indiune). Undine's earliest friend is named Indiana. Not only do the two friends Undine and Indiana become complementary images of each other (even competing for the same men when younger), but both appear to be Wharton's response to--rewriting of--Sand's heroine Indiana (who competes with her childhood friend Noun for her lover). Sand's Indiana is generally viewed as the author's self-portrait, and some critics, notably R.W.B. Lewis, believe that Wharton's Undine is the author's "anti-self" (Lewis 350). Clearly, both Wharton and Sand emerged from their personal ordeals to write novels drawing attention to the unjust marriage laws and customs in their respective countries and epochs. In her more modern era, however, Wharton gives tremendous power to the women who refuse to stay married to one man. Not only are they able to get what they want, but--on one level, at least--they flourish.

Sand's Indiana, a Creole and thus an outsider to French society, is unhappily married to the Frenchman Col. Delmare, fruitlessly loves the dashing and hypocritical nobleman Raymon, and eventually, through her pure love and goodness, prevents her childhood friend Ralph from suicide. In contrast, Wharton's Undine, an American from Kansas and thus an outsider to both New York and French society, is unhappily married--again, and again, and again. After a fruitless affair with the dashing and hypocritical New York aristocrat Peter Van Degán, and after divorcing

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Ralph, the Old New York aristocrat, Ralph subsequently commits suicide and Undine marries the French aristocrat Raymond De Chelles. She then leaves Raymond to marry Elmer Moffatt, her youthful sweetheart—who, as it turns out, was her first husband. Notably, the suicide of Noun, the young woman whom Sand's Raymon rejects, is transposed by Wharton into the suicide of Ralph after Undine rejects him. In Wharton's version, however, a rejected man, rather than a rejected woman, commits suicide. And whereas Sand's Ralph and Indiana attempt suicide several times, Wharton's Undine is far too active and self-centered even to contemplate the idea. Ultimately, both novels expose the hypocrisies of society, whether French or American or both.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff has noted that the original "wicked Custom of this Country" (from the play by Fletcher and Massinger) is that the man who "commands" woman must have her "maidenhead" or "Ransom it for money" (qtd. in Wolff 247). I suggest an additional source in Sand's novel: The narrator of *Indiana* informs us that the "custom" of "the country" is to treat women like children, and Indiana, self-described as a slave, has no more education than "a ten-year-old child" and is pointedly excluded from her husband's financial maneuvering. Her husband Delmare, her lover Raymon, and even her true lover Ralph hold her in contempt, especially where education is concerned. Wharton demonstrates that "the custom of the country" is to deny women any participation in financial or business matters; indeed, neither Sand's Indiana nor Wharton's Undine is ever allowed a comprehensive, responsible adulthood, and in the end both are "rescued" by men from their youth. But whereas Sand's novel ends with the romantic retreat of Indiana and Ralph to their solitary island paradise, Wharton's ends in an almost brutally realistic way: The woman triumphs, but her victory is chillingly empty and futile.

Thus the central theme in both novels is that the custom of the countries is to treat marriage as a business affair in which women have no real stake. Men are masters whether in Sand's France or in Wharton's America and France. Both countries are peopled with repeated characters: Sand's novel contains characters named Indiana, Ralph, Raymon, Laure, Hubert and Paul—and Wharton's novel features Undine, Indiana, Raymond, Laura, Hubert and Paul. With what must have been sheer glee, Wharton seems to have read Sand's novel—particularly her description of Raymon, who constantly changes roles, doubling back on himself—and then adroitly echoed, twisted, reversed and doubled a number of Sand's characters.

Sand's Ralph literally plays two roles with two different personalities: First he is "fair," "golden haired," and "red-cheeked" (5) with beautiful "red" hands and skin (5, 120), the "insipid" (5), "phlegmatic" (10) and anachronistic "cavalier from another century" (5); later he becomes the ardent lover who, having worshipped Indiana since her youth, eloquently wins her in the end. In Wharton's novel Sand's Ralph becomes two separate characters. Wharton's Ralph, too, is "fair" and blonde (34), with "clear" complexion and "finely finished" hands and skin described as "pleasantly reddish" (70, 69), and is characterized by words such as "lassitude" and "apathy" (436), "the modern man in medieval armor" (469). And if any doubting readers remain, both Ralphs yearningly seek cool and peaceful waterfalls where they can melancholically escape reality (*Indiana* 232; *Custom* 146, 155). Unlike Sand's Ralph, however, whose suicide attempts fail, Wharton's Ralph successfully kills himself. It is Wharton's Elmer, ardent man of action and youthful friend of Undine, who wins her at novel's end.

Sand's completely self-centered Raymon is portrayed as the would-be seducer of Indiana whom he wants only as mistress, never as wife, and the aristocratic champion of the master-slave relationship between man and woman. In Wharton's novel Sand's Raymon becomes two characters: First, the self-centered New York aristocrat Peter Van Degan, actual seducer of Undine whom he wants only as mistress, never as wife; and, second, Count Raymond, Undine's third husband, the French aristocrat who marries her only to inform her that she must obey him and the laws of his country. Sand's Raymon and Wharton's Raymond are further similar in that both marry for money: Sand's Raymon marries Laure, the foster daughter of M. Hubert, a nouveau riche bourgeois, and Wharton's Raymond marries Undine, daughter of a nouveau riche Midwesterner, while his brother Hubert marries another American heiress. Sand's Laure, who has usurped Indiana's house, orders her out and away from Raymon, while Wharton's Laura is responsible for breaking off Undine's affair with Peter and thus exiling her from society.

Sand's Indiana and Wharton's Undine appear on the surface to have little in common except the anagrammatic similarity of their names. Yet closer inspection reveals that the romantically portrayed Indiana, who swoons when Raymon kisses her hand, is not so different from the realistically portrayed Undine, who can barely hide her revulsion when a kiss is necessary to the business of marrying ever upwards. Both have women friends whom they betray: Sand's Indiana belatedly learns that she has taken the lover of her dearest friend Noun; the discovery causes the unmarried Noun, pregnant with Raymon's child, to

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drown herself. Wharton's Undine has her complementary image in her girlhood friend Indiana, and Undine takes Indiana's fiancé. Wharton's Undine and Sand's Indiana, outsiders who come to France with their French husbands to live in castles furnished in Louis XV accouterments, gaze longingly and repeatedly out of windows. They suffer from lack of education, and even the two chivalrous Ralphs who take charge of their learning have, in fact, little regard for intelligent, informed women. Both women are repeatedly described as "bored" (*Indiana* 141; *Custom* 506), "nervous" (*Indiana* 55, 141; *Custom* 228-29), "agitated" (*Indiana* 14) or "thwarted" (*Custom* 527). They exhibit strength under pressure, and, although they later change their minds, both express a definite moral stance regarding their lovers' attempts at seduction: Indiana tells Raymon, "I would rather die than become your mistress" [172], and even Undine is essentially "innocent" (353). Indiana is romantic and "easily deceived" (180); Undine, for all her brashness and bravado, is depicted as a "tremulous organism" (57)—and it is worth noting her similarity to Wharton who described herself as "an aching mass of egoism" (8 Feb 1913 ltr to Gaillard Lapsley, Lewis, *Letters* 285). When finally each decides that accepting a lover will get her what she wants (passionate love for Sand's Indiana, a wealthy husband for Wharton's Undine), both are rejected by the men, neither of whom wants them because, after all, much of the excitement had lain in the pursuit itself, the ultimate goal being not love but rather the satisfaction of male vanity and sexual self-esteem (*Indiana* 223; *Custom* 231).

Although Indiana has been motherless from birth and Undine's mother is a definite presence, both may be said to have foster mothers—Mme. de Carvajal and Mrs. Heeny, women whose business it is to advise them how to rise in society. Neither Indiana nor Undine has any business sense whatsoever. Both are extremely naive, deriving their notions of love from books and, unfortunately, both await what Sand calls "this liberator, this Messiah" in the form of a man (46). On surreptitious outings both hide themselves behind cloaks and veils to avoid detection and thus loss of reputation but, ironically, they eventually lose their names anyway: Ill and deserted, Sand's Indiana ends in a hospital where, lacking any identification, she is registered as "nameless" (274); and she proceeds to her former home where all traces of her friend Noun have been erased—the power of man's will and money have changed even the course of the stream where she died (276). Wharton's Undine, "rendered invisible" by her French relatives (408), naively seeks her identity by adding instead a string of men's names behind her

own (Undine Spragg Moffatt Marvell De Chelles Moffatt) and, not surprisingly, ends as she began: Undine Moffatt. Both women are objects and, in their absences, their husbands die with their wives' names on their lips (*Indiana* 284; *Custom* 474). Both sell their jewelry to enable them to sail to Paris and meet their lovers. And each realizes her secondary status, her utter powerlessness: Indiana is "terrified" to learn that she is "of so little account" to Raymon (115), and is viewed by the male narrator at novel's end as "ignorant" (323) and subservient. Undine is "half-frightened" to sense that when "she ceased to please Raymond, she would cease to exist for him" (496). Her "sense of inadequacy" (506) never fully leaves her, even at the end.

Despite these similarities between Indiana and Undine, however, Wharton's ironic pen has been busy undermining them. Sand's Indiana is specifically characterized as "devoid of ambition" (43), whereas Wharton's Undine devotes her life to achieving her ends. Indiana wants to give all for love, Undine will give anything for marriage which, she believes, will give her all she wants—several times. Indiana feels sexual and romantic passion, Undine is repelled by physical signs of affection. Indiana and her friend Noun's relations were unmarred by rivalry; only the collusion of the three men in her life keeps both women in ignorance of the duplicitous man who comes between them. Conversely, Undine and her friend Indiana's relations are characterized as a lifelong rivalry—and for most of the novel Indiana, as she divorces her husband to wed a senator, seems one step ahead of Undine, as does her other friend Mabel, whose latest husband becomes an ambassador. Sand's Indiana is a devout Christian; Wharton's Undine is apparently an atheist; although nominally a Baptist, she becomes Roman Catholic only to facilitate one of her marriages, and then leaves the church to facilitate yet another. Sand's Indiana nearly commits suicide after Raymon rejects her; Undine's boundless energy and ceaseless conniving optimism bounce her back after every disappointment in the business of love. Only occasionally do we glimpse the potential energy of Indiana's spirit, when, like George Sand herself, she thrills to the power of mastering her horse during a fox hunt in the French countryside: For the most part, however, she is timid, even at the end "protected" from reality by Ralph. Undine, who also rides horses, is several times described as goddesslike in her power: Like a tornado she erupts out of Kansas into the New York social scene; elsewhere depicted as a "Diana" (403), an "Amazon" (123,124), a "Warrior Queen" (99), Undine with her temper and imperious moods is Junoesque.

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In fact, although like Sand's Indiana in her innate innocence and ultimate powerlessness in a man's world, Undine is, in her tremendous energy, ruthlessness and vanity, Wharton's female version of Sand's Raymon. And here Wharton's technique takes a fascinating twist. Sand's Raymon is described as a man who twists and turns; as he initially approaches Indiana, he moves through the "undulating waves" of the crowd (36). Similarly, Undine, named for her grandfather's patented hair waver, itself derived from the French "undoo-lay," meaning to crimp, is constantly "doubling and twisting on herself" (6). And both are consummate actors, able to adapt to the role the moment requires (*Indiana* 191; *Custom* 91, 266).

Could this gender reversal be Edith Wharton's little joke? Once, when she and Henry James visited Nohant together, they gazed up at its windows and speculated about which bedroom Sand, notorious for her many lovers, had slept in: James's answer, "in which did she not?" amused them immensely. Because Wharton knew Sand's habit of cross dressing, of changing from the ultra feminine velvet-and-lace-clad image to the cigar-smoking, tie-and-trousers wearing male one, Wharton may have asked, "What if a woman were to play the role of a Raymon? What would she be like?" The answer, of course, is that a female Raymon would be: Undine.

It is Undine who desires to shine in society, to calculate the best marriage prospects, Undine who heartlessly "loves them and leaves them," divorcing and marrying almost at will. Even the mothers of Sand's Raymon and Wharton's Undine share strikingly similar ties: Each was rooted in a modest, hard-working life before her husband became wealthy, and each sacrificed herself for her child: Raymon's mother, "withered and used up by all that Raymon had acquired and reacquired" has "accustomed him to make the most of all [her] sacrifices . . . [and] believe that the whole world was created for him" (GS 197). Undine's mother, "prematurely wrinkled" (4), has "transferred her whole personality to her child—but she [is] passionately resolved that Undine should have what she wanted" (11). As a result, Raymon and Undine are vain and spoiled.

Both have a theory of the two components of happiness. Raymon—"in his egotism," as Sand's narrator points out—sees his reputation as "the principal ornament of his existence," and so, for his "personal gratification," he requires two kinds of happiness: "Happiness in public life and in private life, social triumphs and domestic joys" (241). Similarly, Undine "wanted, passionately and persistently, two things which she believed should subsist together in any well-ordered life: amusement and respectability" (354).

Both Sand and Wharton, however, use their narrators in ironically undercutting roles. Sand's notes that Raymon voices his view only because he is socially out of favor at this time, and Wharton's that Undine, for all her apparent worldliness, sees amusement in a way "hardly less innocent than when she had hung on the plumber's fence with Indiana Frusk" (354). At the ends of the novels, having looked at marriage as a business venture, each chooses the mate with the most money. Raymon marries the foster daughter of M. Hubert, a plebeian who requires only that Laure marry upward to someone who will cut a glamorous figure in society while managing his money and business interests. Undine marries Elmer, now a Wall Street tycoon. Love is hardly the point.

As if the conflation of Sand's Raymon with Wharton's Undine were not enough, enter Laure, whom Sand describes as having "too much sense, too much knowledge of the world to dream of love when two millions were at stake. She had chosen her course calmly and philosophically (271). For Laure, "life was a matter of stoical calculation" (272). After marrying Indiana's lover and usurping her house, she orders Indiana out of the house, "secretly triumphant because the incident had placed her husband in a position of inferiority and dependence with regard to her" (280). Laura is a precursor to Undine, wise in the ways of her society: As a daughter of a wealthy businessman Laure understands with Raymon that the plebeian "class was destined to rise above the ruins of the [aristocrats], and in order to maintain oneself on the surface of the movement one must be the son-in-law of a manufacturer or stock-broker" (243). Nearly a century later, Undine, too, understands that "the future belonged to the showy and the promiscuous" (193); seeing Elmer again merely confirms the lesson: "Every Wall Street term had its equivalent in the language of Fifth Avenue, and while he talked of building up railways she was building up palaces" (537).

Wharton must have been laughing while she wrote the satirical betrothal scenes between Undine and Elmer Moffatt, now a billionaire railroad King: Entering Elmer's large "vulgar" suite with its Renaissance, Phoenician and Greek *objets d'artes*, "Undine recalled the dingy hall-room that Moffatt had lodged in at Mrs. Flynn's, over Hober's livery stable, and her heart beat at the signs of his altered state. When her eyes came back to him their lids were moist" (567). Her heart beats faster as she looks at the expensive objects he has acquired, and they look deeply into each other's eyes. "I suppose you must be awfully rich." Elmer laughs, "holding her eyes. "Oh, out of sight. . . . I own pretty near the whole of Apex [City] (534).

But a darker side inheres in this apex, this pinnacle for these childhood friends from Kansas.

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Undine is uncomfortably aware of feeling "small and tinkling" and, indeed--as with all her husbands--secondary, one more of the famous "parentheses" of the novel. She can feel Elmer's will, his "terrible power," bending her will to his own (574). In a ghastly image, Wharton describes Undine as a "woman of wax" (574), the exact phrase used to describe her mother Mrs. Spragg in the opening pages of the novel. For all her clever planning and hard work, for all her vibrancy, Undine is no different from her pitifully weak and colorless mother. In remarrying Elmer Undine comes full circle. And so predictably, despite their staggering opulence at the end of the novel, Undine still awaits the liberator-Messiah of Sand's Indiana.

If, as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg believes, 19th-century women's friendships were much closer and lacking in rivalry than 20th-century ones--as in the case of Sand's Indiana and Noun--then Wharton demonstrates that "the custom of the country" not only "elevates" women to the status of art objects and male marriage trophies, but also mandates their competition with each other. Undine's friends, as Susan Goodman explains in *Edith Wharton's Women*, are nevertheless rivals: Their glittering goals of upward mobility through alliances with powerful wealthy men, their pathetic posturing, all their sound and fury, preclude deeply rewarding friendships with either women or men. Like Sand's Indiana, Undine might as well be alone on an island, isolated and protected from any enriching companionship or feeling of achievement and self-worth. Her prison, though more luxurious than Indiana's, is equally stultifying. Even Elmer Moffatt is, at the end, in a tenuous position: Undine, already dissatisfied with her billionaire railroad king, seeks an even more illustrious husband. With her boundless and chafing and restless energy, Wharton's Undine indicates even more than Sand's Indiana the frustration of women with the financial and marital customs of the country. True, she does refuse to acknowledge that any obstacle is permanent--and, in the end, who knows? Undine has assailed impregnable strongholds before, and may achieve yet another victory--but its pyrrhic nature resonates down the decades into our own time.

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Reading "The Portrait:" Edith Wharton and John Singer Sargent

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"The Portrait" is one of Edith Wharton's earliest short stories. She wrote the story expressly for *The Greater Inclination* (1899), her first published book of fiction, while reading galley proofs of the other stories to be included. The other stories had been published before in *Scribner's Magazine*, but "The Portrait" was a new story written to replace "The Fullness of Life" and "The Lamp of Psyche," stories she did not want included, despite her editor's urgings to the contrary, because she regarded them as the "excesses" of her youth: "They were all written 'at the top of my voice,' and "The Fullness of Life" is one long shriek--I may not write any better, but at least I hope I write in a lower key" (Lewis, *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, 36). What she probably meant by writing, or shrieking, "at the top of [her] voice," was writing about her own life and experience without sufficient emotional detachment. So she substituted "The Portrait," a story written in a "lower key," about the process by which life becomes art. "The Portrait" concludes the collection as an obverse mirror of the first story in the book, the better known "The Muses Tragedy," which focuses on the travails of the subject of art (specifically, a woman immortalized in a sonnet sequence); "The Portrait" is about the travails of the artist over how to portray his subject. Together the two stories serve as fitting bookends to the collection. One story introduces and the other revisits one of Wharton's favorite motifs in the collection--a woman's painful disillusionment upon realizing that the man she loves is not the man she hoped he was--and one of its major themes--the moral necessity of pursuing the "greater" (as opposed to the lesser, meaner, easier, or more self-serving) inclination, which turns out in the end, appropriately

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enough, to be the artist's responsibility as well.

"The Portrait" is about an American expatriate artist whose powers are unmatched in portraiture. He returns to America in triumph only to be confronted with notoriety of a kind he did not solicit. The subject of one of his portraits commits suicide on the opening day of the exhibition of his works. That subject was Alonzo Vard, a notoriously corrupt New York political boss. The public judges the portrait a failure because it glaringly contradicts Vard's public image as a snarling, larger-than-life miscreant, contemptuous of the public, by portraying him instead as a "common man trying to look at ease in a good coat" (232). The narrator, a writer himself, learns from the artist the "inside story" of the making of this portrait, which involved a daughter's innocent faith in her father, and the artist's reluctance to destroy it by exposing the truth about him.

When *The Greater Inclination* was published, reviewers generally gave it very high marks for the subtlety and refinement of Wharton's social observations, and for her assimilation of Jamesian narrative techniques (without his late excesses) in the service of her own interests. "The Portrait" was among those stories singled out for special praise.¹ But more recent critics have passed over the story lightly. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Elizabeth Ammons, and most other critics who have found a great deal to say about Wharton's novels and other stories don't mention this story at all. Among biographers, Shari Benstock refers to the story as Wharton's last-minute substitute for "The Lamp of Psyche" and then leaves it alone, and R.W. B. Lewis all but dismisses the story as "a somewhat confused affair about an artist who for humane reasons paints an idealized portrait of a vulgar scoundrel" (84).

Lewis' confusion is understandable. If the portrait is indeed a whitewash of Vard's character, disguising the subject's vulgarity in order to spare the daughter any pain, Vard's suicide on the first day of its public exhibition would seem to be an oddly timed and superfluous coincidence. The reader also wonders why the artist, if he had painted Vard in such a way as to save his daughter the pain of disillusionment, is relieved that the daughter had died before the exhibition opened ("She died last year, thank God" (254)). Could Wharton have been that sloppy, or have we misread the portrait and "The Portrait"? What did the artist make of his subject, and what has Wharton made of hers?

It may help to know that the artist in the story, George Lillo, is a thinly veiled portrait of the American artist John Singer Sargent, whom Wharton admired, and who, when "The Portrait" was written, was at the

height of his fame. Wharton was certainly well informed about Sargent's work and career. He had already painted some of her friends, including Mrs. Margaret Rutherford White, wife of America's Ambassador to England, Mrs. Edward Boit, wife of the Boston painter whom Wharton knew through her husband, Teddy, and the Boit children, the four daughters Sargent had painted in his boldly original, prize-winning group portrait. Wharton and Sargent shared a number of friends in common, and it is quite possible, though not certain, that she had already made Sargent's acquaintance in New York or in Newport, R.I., where he had been honored and feted and commissioned for more "society" portraits in 1887, or in Paris or Venice during her travels in Europe where they sometimes visited the same American friends living abroad. As her writing career developed, their social circles intersected more frequently, often centering on the close friendship they shared with Henry James. It was Wharton who set in motion efforts to pay tribute to James on his seventieth birthday, which led eventually to Sargent's 1913 portrait of him that hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London.

Several exhibitions of Sargent's work appeared in New York and Boston in the late 1890's. George Lillo's personality and mannerisms are recognizably Sargent's: the ubiquitous cigar, the strokes of the beard, the long inquiring silences, the reputation for living a "curiously detached existence," such that it was "difficult to figure any closer tie than that which united him to his pictures" (232).² And Lillo's career closely parallels Sargent's--the studio in Paris, the early success with portraits of Spanish dancers (Sargent's "El Jaleo," and "La Carmencita" come quickly to mind in connection with Lillo's comment that the public had begun to wonder if he would paint anyone without castanets), and, of course, the career choice to paint evocative society portraits. But the parallels do not stop there. In "The Portrait," Lillo confesses to the narrator that he had considered Vard as a subject in the hopes of doing "something big for the next Salon" (238) that would make his reputation, a portrait that would draw a great deal of attention. He was hungry "for a victim" (238). His ambition echoes Sargent's in 1883, the year he painted Wharton's friend, Margaret Rutherford White. The "victim" that year, however, was not Mrs. White, but Virginie Gautreau, an American beauty married to a wealthy Frenchman in Paris--the Madame X in Sargent's well known *succes de scandale*. Finally, and most importantly, Lillo, like Sargent, had acquired a reputation for executing psychologically probing portraits which made some of his sitters uneasy.

What Sargent's portraits reveal about his

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subjects is actually a rather complex affair, and understanding that may help us to understand the meaning of Lillo's painting and Wharton's use of portraiture in "The Portrait." John Singer Sargent is a painter about whom there has been continuous debate over the status of his achievement. His talent has never been in question, only what he chose to do with it. He was the best trained, most accomplished, most sought after, and most highly honored portrait painter on both sides of the Atlantic at the turn of the century. But he painted at a time when traditional assumptions about portrait painting, as held by Salon juries and most patrons of the arts, were under attack by "modern" critics and painters. One traditional function of portraiture—to capture and preserve a "likeness"—had been usurped by photography, and another—to flatter or memorialize its subject—became less defensible when the subjects were self-aggrandizing bourgeoisie. Stanley Olson, Sargent's biographer, has observed of Sargent's class of patrons that "it was as if they ceased to exist when observers were not looking" (87), as if they lived for the moment in which they were lionized in oils. Amy Kaplan in her book *The Social Construction of American Realism* has observed of fin-de-siecle America that selfhood came to be evaluated not according to whether one was good or bad but rather known or unknown. Sargent's fame made a somebody of each sitter he painted. Whereas Sargent has sometimes been credited for introducing social criticism, cultural statement, and psychological complexity to a genre better known for obsequious flattery in the hands of lesser artists (Wharton in "The Portrait" sets up just such an opposition between Lillo's artistic integrity and a rival painter's fawning cosmeticism), he has also been criticized for painting too many portraits, for allowing his subject's pocketbooks to outweigh their merits as subjects, and for not fulfilling the early promise of a brilliant career. Even Henry James, Sargent's friend and early champion, conceded privately to a friend as early as 1888 that he had come to know and accept Sargent's limitations: "I don't know that I know all that he will do in the future—but I think I know pretty well what he won't do" (qtd. in Simpson 65).

The debate over Sargent's career is renewed with every new retrospective and each new monograph, illustrating, at the very least, the problematic purpose, meaning, and quality of many of Sargent's most well known portraits. It is no easy task to determine what exactly Sargent painted—a likeness, a public persona, a sitter's performance, a psychological study, a type, an advertisement for the bourgeoisie, or a satire of it. Sargent himself was extremely reticent on

the subject of his work. One thing is for certain, though: he knew how to cause a stir.

Occasionally he went too far. Sargent's portrait of Virginie Gautreau, his first and last *succes de scandale*, was judged harshly by many for allowing his subject's notorious reputation as a *femme fatale* not only to stand, but to gather strength from a portrait which portrayed her as exactly that. Parisians were shocked by the boldness of Sargent's flamboyant and aggressive treatment of his subject, showing off her sharp profile, her full *décolletage*, her black formal gown held up by a single shoulder strap (the matching one painted in later), her pale skin enameled and alluring.³ The portrait earned her a greater notoriety than even she wanted, and fearing he had made his own reputation greater at the expense of Madame Gautreau's, Sargent renamed the portrait Madame X and refused to exhibit it again so long as it could still cause her any pain. Wharton was surely aware of this scandalous episode in Sargent's career, and it may be more than coincidental that her artist, George Lillo, in "The Portrait" faces a similar temptation.

The portrait of the artist in Wharton's "The Portrait" is that of a man whose extraordinary powers of perception allow him glimpses into the secrets of his subject's character. Henry James claimed that Sargent "sees deep into his subject, undergoes it, absorbs it, discovers in it new things that were not on the surface" (James, "John Singer Sargent," 691). A portrait painter such as James describes—and such as he invented in his own story, "The Liar," a likely model for Wharton's "The Portrait"—would seem to possess powers of omniscience that even James himself would envy. If James claims too much for the portrait painter in general, and Sargent in particular, it is nevertheless quite possible that Sargent, in arranging numerous sittings for each subject (as Lillo does for Vard), was seeking a keener knowledge of them. What he painted on canvas may have been his impression of the subject, a global impression derived from numerous sittings, in which he searched for the most revealing pose, the most telling expression.⁴ Although Stanley Olson, Sargent's biographer, argues that Sargent did not possess the deep psychological insights into his subjects which many of his contemporaries (including some of his sitters) attributed to him, and that, contrary to James's claim, he was "disinclined to peer below the surface [of appearance] because he was a born observer, and could never be anything else" (155), Olson's claim is potentially misleading because it begs the question of what kind of observer Sargent was or what can be observed 'on the surface'. Sargent's advice for aspiring artists at the Royal Academy Schools where he taught from 1897-1900

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("cultivate an ever continuous power of observation..." qtd. in Charteris 188) sounds remarkably similar to Henry James' famous advice for aspiring writers in "The Art of Fiction": "try to be one of those people upon whom nothing is lost"(390). Exactly what Sargent saw and what he said through what he painted will always remain a difficult problem to solve. One way to approach it is to acknowledge the role of the performing subject. Though he is writing about photography rather than portraiture, Roland Barthes' self-characterization of that performance is instructive: "I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing.... The photograph (the one I intend) represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object, but a subject who feels he is becoming an object"(11, 14). It may have been this very tension between the subject's projected image and awareness of its essential inauthenticity which Sargent captured so remarkably well in some of his best portraits, and which contributes to a tensely strained, or awkward, immediacy in some of them. Harry Berger Jr. writes of the portrait in general as "an index--an effect and representation--solely of the sitter's and painter's performance in the act of portrayal"(89). This act becomes "both the referent of its image and its cause"(89). A portrait, according to Berger, records the artist's response to the "fiction of the pose." If indeed this is true, if what we are seeing in a portrait is an image negotiated by two parties, then there is always an "inside story" which the portrait itself cannot tell, the story of how this particular image came into being. A friend of Sargent's once observed, "not even Sargent can make us see beyond the arrested moment"(Brashfield 645). It is this "inside story" of a portrait that Wharton's narrator uncovers in "The Portrait"--a portrait negotiated, in this instance, among three parties instead of two.

The story begins with a small social gathering in a private residence in fashionable New York and a discussion of the merits of realistic versus idealistic styles of portraiture. The discussion begins when a "pretty, young woman" exclaims that "nothing on earth would induce" her to sit for the artist, George Lillo. A rival artist present at the gathering proclaims that Lillo's limitation is his habit of seeing only the faults in his sitters. The hostess for the party, a Mrs. Mellish, comes passionately to Lillo's defense, extolling the virtues of intellectual penetration and honesty in Lillo's work: "he selects the real [aspect of his sitters], the typical one, as instinctively as a detective collars a pick-pocket in a crowd. If there's nothing to paint--no real person--he paints nothing;... [B]ut look at his pictures of really great people--how great they are! ... You feel what a delicate instrument

the man is, how every sense has been tuned to the finest responsiveness....My advice is, don't let George Lillo paint you if you don't want to be found out--or to find yourself out"(230-31). The artist himself arrives on the scene too late to hear his talents praised but soon enough to hear the talk about his greatest "failure," his portrait of Vard, whose suicide on the first day his portrait was exhibited in New York caused a great deal of interest in it. There appears to be general agreement over the shortcomings of this portrait: instead of the expected "incriminating document," the portrait revealed only a bland "pseudo-gentleman,... a poor thing compared to the real Vard," and raised suspicions that "the artist had been in league with his sitter"(233). A few evenings later, in the artist's studio, the narrator, a novelist, learns a lesson about the perils of representation as Lillo reconstructs the circumstances that produced the Vard portrait.

It was Vard's daughter, we learn, who had urged her father to sit for the portrait, and who could not see her father for who he really was. Her misplaced faith in him, and mistaken sense of her own poverty of virtues relative to his, touched the artist deeply. Rather than betray her faith by portraying her father as the vulgar miscreant he appeared to be to all except his daughter, Lillo arranged for numerous sittings to try to ascertain what it was about Vard that his daughter loved so much. He discovered that the answer did not lie in Vard at all. What she believed she saw in him--a brilliant mind, a passion for books and music and art, a deep sensitivity which she alone had witnessed--she saw only as a result of her very limited experience of the world. The more Lillo saw of Vard the more he was convinced that "his depth was a false perspective painted on a wall"(244). The more sittings he arranged for Vard, the more convinced he became of something inauthentic in his persona. He began to suspect that Vard's distinction--even for corruption--was slight. "Morally, he wasn't bad enough" and "his corruption wasn't sufficiently imaginative to be interesting"(244). The daughter inspired him to "appear at his best," and the posing, Lillo perceived, was largely for her sake, "but she cheapened that best by her proximity.... For the man was vulgar to the core; vulgar in spite of his force and magnitude; thin, hollow,... a lath-and-plaster bogey"(245).

Lillo realizes that he had prepared "too big a canvas for him." He delays and dissembles, putting off finishing the face of the portrait for as long as he can, for he knows that if the finished portrait does not reveal a man "greater" than the man he sees, Miss Vard would know that Lillo sees her father differently than she does, and her respect for his powers of perception, combined with her faith in his honesty, would destroy a

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daughter's faith in her father. When news breaks of a public works scandal involving Vard, the artist is surprised to find both father and daughter in his studio that day as if nothing had occurred. Lillo's compassion for the daughter induces him to decide finally to paint Vard's face "as she saw it" and "he had only to glance at her while [he] painted" (250). They all pose for each other and are all suddenly very vivid to each other, "as though we were being photographed by flash-light" (250). But that sitting is interrupted by a mob arrived to confront Vard with his role in the scandal. Weeks later, the daughter returns to inquire about the portrait after her father had used his political muscle to wrest from the courts a complete "exoneration." The artist senses that she is looking to him for assurances she can no longer sustain on her own: "She looked up at me then for the first time; looked too soon, poor child; for in the spreading light of reassurance that made her eyes like a rainy dawn, I saw, with terrible distinctness, the rout of her disbanded hopes. I knew that she knew ..." (253-54). The daughter's faith in her father had been severely tested by the public works scandal, but even more so by the artist's delays and hesitations. After she leaves the studio, Lillo finishes the portrait, but rather than painting the "public monster" of the political cartoons, he "spared her that" and painted instead "a common man." There is no "greatness" of any kind suggested in the portrait, for the artist believed that the daughter alone possessed it, for "she was rich where he was poorest" in love and in loyalty, in pride and in faith. He did not paint the vulgar crook the daughter feared he would, for "if she could be made to feel, for a day longer, for an hour even, that her miserable secret was a secret—why she'd made it seem worth while to me to chuck my own ambitions for that" (254). He did not paint his *succes de scandale*, his Madame X, the incriminating exposure of Vard's villainy that could make him famous. Instead he painted the insignificant poseur he saw, resulting, ironically, in a *succes de scandale* he didn't anticipate—Vard's suicide, presumably the result of his recognizing his own mediocrity recorded in the "insipid" portrait. In the last line of the story the artist is thankful that the daughter died before she could see the portrait exhibited publicly, presumably because, sparing her the vulgar, miscreant Vard that would have furthered his own career, he could not spare her the insignificant Vard. Without the vulgarity, there was nothing else to paint. Lillo's story revises the public's critique of the portrait as a failure by providing the inside story of its production: Vard was much less of a "subject" than either his daughter or the public saw in him.

The artist's superior powers of perception are never called into question in the story. The issue for this artist is not what he sees or what he knows, but what to paint of it. The artist realizes with apprehension, guilt, and even some horror, the power of representations to reveal, to wound, to be the final word. Rather than paint a *succes de scandale* by giving the public what it wanted, he sacrificed ambition for a "greater inclination," the inclination to spare the daughter as much pain as possible while still revealing the mediocre truth.

What "greater inclination" would Wharton herself follow in portraying her *monde*? To whom or what would she be responsive—the reading public, ravenous for titillating scandal, her subjects, eager to display themselves in the most flattering manner, or some truth about them, mediocre or otherwise? Wharton does not flinch in "The Portrait" from exposing the vanity of the privileged, the vulgarity of the public, or the hypocrisy of the morally righteous, all aspects of her New York that she would satirize more directly and more extensively in later stories and novels. But as a story about the moral paradoxes faced by the artist struggling to render the "truth" about his subject, "The Portrait" expresses something of the personal dilemmas Wharton herself was struggling to resolve as a writer. She knew she had a subject (and James knew it too when he urged her a few years later to "do New York!"), but by substituting "The Portrait" for "The Fullness of Life" and "The Lamp of Psyche," Wharton was acknowledging a need for greater detachment from her subject if she were to succeed at portraying in fiction the New York social register she knew and the life she had lived. So she substituted a story about the sources of art for a story about her marriage. Her decision not to include either "The Fullness of Life" or "The Lamp of Psyche," her most autobiographical stories to date, may have reflected, at some level, her own fear of exposure. Wharton herself was painted only once as an adult, by her husband's friend from Boston, Julian Story. Regarding the portrait as a failure, she never agreed to sit for another one.

Portrait painters appear frequently in Wharton's fiction but rarely in so positive a light as George Lillo in "The Portrait." Paul Morpeth in *The House of Mirth* (1905) and Claude Popple in *The Custom of the Country* (1913) are all too willing to feed the egos of sitters wealthy enough to buy lasting tributes in oils. Here and elsewhere she reveals her disdain for portrait painting as a fashionable business and for portrait painters as unprincipled opportunists and social climbers. Interestingly enough, Sargent is cited as an exception in "The Pot-Boiler" (1904) for "taking liberties" with his subjects, but only because "it is like being poked in the ribs by a king" (I, 204), a prospect which

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would not have appealed to Wharton, despite the painter's honesty. In "The Pretext" (1908) a woman tells her suitor not to speak his love (for she cannot return it), but rather to leave it unsaid, like a painter who, when asked by his subject, would leave his portrait unfinished rather than reveal something she would not want revealed, or create an image that captures all she wants to be known by (I, 646). In other words, a painter should recognize that his responsibility is greater to his subject than it is to a public ravenous for scandal. In "Autres Temps" (1911) reference is made to a portrait by Sargent as the defining mark of high social status. In "Charm Incorporated" (1914) New York is thrown "into a flutter" by the announcement that the famous portrait painter, Svengaart (nearly an anagram for Sargent), is coming from Europe to "do" a chosen half-dozen sitters:

"Svengaart had never been to New York before, had always sworn that anybody who wanted to be painted by him must come to his studio at Oslo; but it suddenly struck him that the American background might give a fresh quality to his work, and after painting one lady getting out of her car in front of her husband's motor-works, and Mrs. Guggins against the background of a spouting oil-well at Rapid Rise, he appeared in New York to organize a show of these sensational canvases. New York was ringing with the originality and audacity of this new experiment.... It was incredibly exciting to be portrayed literally surrounded by the acknowledged sources of one's wealth; and the wife of a fabulously rich plumber was nearly persuaded to be done stepping out of her bath, in a luxury bathroom fitted with the latest ablutionary appliances." (II, 669)

Although Sargent too had taken New York by storm, and was known on occasion to paint his subjects *in situ*, we cannot be certain that this satire is aimed at him in

particular. Nevertheless, portraiture in Wharton's fiction is almost always compromised by the vanities of patrons, the false standards of critics, and the social and material ambitions of painters. Her most favorable characterization of a portrait painter aside from George Lillo in "The Portrait" is John Compton in *A Son at the Front* (1923), and he is far more sympathetic as a father than as a painter.

Henry James once insisted, in reference to Sargent, "there is no greater work of art than a great portrait" (James, "John Singer Sargent," 691). Edith Wharton, I think, was more skeptical. Although she lacked James's confidence as an art critic, she may have understood better than James did the subject's point of view. "The Muse's Tragedy," the first story in *The Greater Inclination*, opens with a reference to a portrait—or rather the absence of one—of a Mrs. Anerton, who has refused to sit for one, having learned only too well what it is like to be the "muse," the inspiration for an artist's work. Known to the public as a famous poet's 'immortal beloved' in a sonnet sequence, she never felt his love and would rather have had that than her fame. She came to understand at last that the subject of a portrait is but the "fertile garden" in which the imagination takes root and "flowers," or as Barthes would say, "a subject who feels he is becoming an object" (14). Mrs. Anerton's portrait in the sonnets is her only compensation for the love she missed, and it is not enough. Her quarrel is with life, not art, but one can almost hear Wharton quarrelling with the relation between the two in Mrs. Anerton's conclusion that "Life is so much more complex than any rendering of it can be" (23). Wharton had no more use for artists who "killed" their subjects than she had for those who flattered them. Rather than bag or nab a subject as "a detective collars a pick-pocket in a crowd," as Lillo and Sargent were so skilled at doing, Wharton, in writing about her monde from the greater distance from her subjects that fiction allows, would pursue a greater inclination, neither flattering nor

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IN MEMORIAM

The members of The Edith Wharton Society mourn the passing of Professor R. W. B. Lewis on June 13, 2002. Richard Warrington Baldwin Lewis, honorary member of The Society, was a major literary critic and Yale University scholar who won the 1976 Pulitzer Prize for his book *Edith Wharton: A Biography*. A ground-breaking work, the biography inspired broad popular and scholarly interest in Wharton's life and work. He also co-edited a volume on Wharton's letters with his wife Nancy. Prof. Lewis further contributed to the study of American literature with major volumes on the James family, Hart Crane and Robert Penn Warren, among others. Prof. Lewis was a featured speaker at several international conferences on Edith Wharton. He was known to us not only as an outstanding scholar and teacher, but also as kind and inspiring mentor and friend. He will be sorely missed.

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excoriating the New York social register but urging upon it a higher standard of social conduct.

Comparisons have often been drawn between the psychological realism of John Singer Sargent and Henry James. For example, Evan Charteris, who knew Sargent personally, and wrote the first biography of him, remarked that Sargent's portraits offer "what might be called Jamesian perplexities—the play of social type against personality, of the sitter's inner nature against fashion's constantly shifting ideals"(171). David Lubin in *Act of Portrayal*(1985) compares James' psychoanalytic methods of representation in *The Portrait of a Lady* with Sargent's in "The Daughters of Edward Boit." Yet affinities between the work of Sargent and Wharton may prove even more striking. They both produced a large body of work focused explicitly on the subject of social class in an era of rapidly changing social boundaries; they shared a loyalty, though not untested, to conservative aesthetic and social values; they began their careers by learning from "Old Masters," Sargent from Hals and Velasquez, Wharton from James; they were shrewd business managers of their respective careers, acutely sensitive to the market, commanding the highest prices for their work; and they shared a deep ambivalence toward the subjects they painted and wrote about, resulting in similar defining tensions in their work, and critical reputations which have raised similar questions about quality, form, and meaning. Edmund Wilson, for example, in a review of Wharton's *Old New York*, labeled Wharton "the John Singer Sargent of American Fiction" for being "too willing to deal facilely with her subjects" (qtd. in Benstock 378). Although it may be true that both went to the well too often, Sargent turning out too many society portraits, and Wharton over-mining the same New York world of her youth, it may also be true that in their best work they came as close as any of James' contemporaries to capturing "the "colour of life itself" (James, "The Art of Fiction," 408). Defending his emphasis on the psychology of his character's behavior, James insisted that "a psychological reason is an object adorably pictorial; to catch the tint of its complexion—I feel as if that idea might inspire one to Titianesque efforts"(402). Another contemporary of Wharton's, William Roscoe Thayer, essayist, historian, and biographer of Roosevelt and John Hay, both subjects of portraits by Sargent, named Sargent as the only artist whose work measured up to Wharton's for being "always unfaillingly interesting, no matter how dull or tawdry the men or women he paints" (Letter to Wharton, November 1, 1905). What is most instructive,

finally, about Wharton's choice of Sargent as the model for her artist in "The Portrait," is that Sargent's portraits have endured and continue to be celebrated not as photographic records of the subjects he painted, but as boldly intensifying, psychologically complex, and culturally significant works of art. Wharton would settle for nothing less.

Notes

¹ Reviewers for *The Philadelphia Telegraph*, *The Philadelphia Press*, *Brooklyn Life*, *The San Francisco Argonaut*, and *The Boston Journal* all singled out "The Portrait" for special praise. (Edith Wharton Papers, Beinecke Collection at Yale)

² See for example, Olson, 61, 198-204.

³ One reviewer of the exhibition had the following to say about this entry by Sargent: "The painter has deliberately rendered, with extraordinary skill and almost cynical audacity, the effect of enameled flesh and hair which owes its gold to art. The intention, no doubt, was to produce a work of absolute novel effect—one calculated to excite, by its chic and daring, the admiration of the ateliers and the astonishment of the public; and in this the painter has probably succeeded beyond his desire." (Claude Phillips, "The Salon II," *Academy* 25, no. 632 [14 June 1884], 427).

⁴ Edwin Blashfield, President of the National Academy of Design in New York, recalled in a tribute to Sargent written upon the occasion of his death in 1925, what Sargent told him about watching for psychological moments in which to "catch" his sitters and portray

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The Mnemonic Impulse: Reading Edith Wharton's *Summer* As Propaganda.

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Because Edith Wharton is best known for her exemplary works about "Old New York" and its social scene, the concept that she turned her unique literary talents towards writing a propaganda novel is difficult to fathom. Her 1916 novella, *Summer*—variously described as a "conventional nineteenth-century novel of seduction" by Blake Nevius, a "brief and elemental tale of a country girl's passion" by Millicent Bell, and as "the very antithesis of every sentimental, pastoral idyll ever written about love" by Cynthia Griffin Wolff—may, however, be of that very genre. Success in slotting the novel into a particular category becomes even more elusive when the author's personal observations regarding its creation are taken into account.

In a 1916 letter to Gaillard Lapsley, for example, Wharton describes *Summer* as "a shortish novel" which

had become "known to the author & her familiars as the Hot Ethan" (*Letters* 385), a comment which has launched numerous scholarly studies, among them those of Dale M. Bauer. Astutely, Bauer concludes that to read *Summer* only as "dark realism, regional revisionism, partner of *Ethan Frome*, or even as a repudiation of bourgeois subversion theory of women's agency" is "to miss its more profound cultural work" (34). Again, Wharton herself, in the personal letter she wrote to American publisher Charles Scribner, makes the idea of reading *Summer* merely as a companion piece to the earlier *Ethan Frome* somewhat less than satisfying, for she writes:

Some months ago I told you that you could count on the completion of my novel [*Summer*] by the spring of 1916; but I thought then that the war would be over by August. Now we are looking forward to a winter campaign and the whole situation is so overwhelming and unescapable that I feel less and less able to turn my mind from it. (*Letters* 357)

Her plea of not being able "to turn [her] mind from" the war, and her claim that if she were to proceed with the novel at that time and in the way she had initially proposed "it would be a failure" confirms for me that Wharton was too close to the events of the war to write without being influenced—consciously or subconsciously—by them. Unlike Marilyn French, who remarks in her foreword to the First Collier Books Edition of *Summer* that "the pressure and fatigue" Wharton experienced "on account of her work with refugees" from the war "is nowhere evident in the novel" (xli), I am convinced that very pressure comes to bear heavily on *Summer* in the form of allegorically-presented propaganda. In short, I believe that *Summer* is, among other things, a propaganda novel.

Wharton, according to numerous accounts like those of Hugh Auchincloss, believed that American military intervention was imperative to putting a stop to the fighting in France. Despite remarks like those of Bauer that Wharton "often denied involvement in politics and propaganda" (xii) and that the author "had no ambivalence [about] the propaganda novel" (59), she had, conversely, been quite outspoken in her political views of the war and had "debated" the merits of the propaganda novel as a form of artistic expression in literature (59). Her ambivalence may not, therefore, have been directed at the genre itself, but may have been an expression of her opinion that most authors lacked the expertise needed to craft a successful propaganda novel. Seemingly undeniable support for *Summer* as both political and propagandistic appears in a comparison between this novel and Wharton's

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collected war memories, *Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belfort*, published in 1915.

While we may never know with any certainty exactly what the author had in mind as she wrote, *Summer*, with its "crude, ugly, and barren" New England setting, conveys, as French suggests, Wharton's "sense of America" at the time of the war (xlii). It is not, however, the literal interpretation of the landscape and its people that is of primary interest here, but the reader's multi-leveled response to the written words initially and to the additional images brought mnemonically to the reader's conscious awareness by them. This multi-leveled reader response—invoked through words, passages, and other prompts the author may have chosen consciously (or which may have appeared to her through the subconscious) to assist the memory—extends the possible interpretations of the novel beyond its New England setting and into the author's physical and psychological states of being during the Great War. As Bell observes, *Summer* appears to have come "from some deepest depth of [Wharton]" (*Friendship* 202), a reaction experienced also by Alan Price, who ponders "from what deep wellspring that story of New England emerged" and asks: "Did the desolation of the houses on the Mountain in *Summer* symbolize what she observed in her tours of the front?" (181). A comparison of Wharton's description of the 'brown house' in *Summer* to that of a French landscape she describes in *Fighting France* draws an undeniable connection between the author's real experiences in the war and those she fictionalized in the novel.

The essence of the physical destruction Wharton witnessed in France: "Every window-pane is smashed, nearly every building unroofed, and some house-fronts are sliced clean off, with the different stories exposed, as if for the stage setting of a farce" (*Fighting France* 153), is conveyed through Lucius and Charity as they study old houses in the North Dormer region. Because Wharton—a self-proclaimed Francophile—saw the attack on France not only as the destruction of that nation's infrastructure, according to Cynthia Griffin Wolff, but also as the obliteration of France's "accumulated artistic and intellectual production" (262), what remained as the aftermath of a German victory, in Wharton's perception, were communities like the Mountain and people like the Bonners. Both become, allegorically, the vehicle whereby Wharton can convey what she saw as "the calculated rape of [France's] sense of self" at the hands of a German military whose atrocities were "not purposeless and random" but which were designed to

"disrupt all accumulated sense of individual continuity" in the French (262). These are given to the reader most poignantly at the "brown house," which is presented through the eyes of a fascinated Lucius and a horrified and shamed Charity.

As the couple approaches the "brown house," Charity notices it stands "alone beside a swamp bordered with alder thickets and tall bulrushes" (54). It is slowly being reclaimed by the natural environment, although characteristics reminiscent of a brighter past are still visible: "the fan-shaped tracery" on the broken light above the door, "the flutings" of what are now "painless pilasters at the corners," and "the round window set in the gable". These are all architectural accoutrements Harney has taught Charity to recognize as "things to be admired and recorded" (54), but which are strangely out of place here, as even the most casual reader intuits. Mnemonically, however, the 1916 reader of *Summer* (or the new millennium scholar looking for propaganda in the text) might be reminded of the architectural devastation Wharton witnessed at the hands of the German military in Europe. Not only breath-taking architecture but irreplaceable historical monuments and cultural artifacts were lost to future generations, as cultural historian Modris Ecksteins points out, because of Germany's determination.

Ecksteins recollects the 1914 German assault on Louvain, which "was razed, along with its library, founded in 1426, with its 280,000 volumes and its priceless collection of incunabula and medieval manuscripts" (158), a clear example of Germany's disregard for France's accumulated artistic and intellectual production. What Wharton feared more than the physical devastation, however, is what Ecksteins calls "the German inhumanity" and the "pronounced official policy of *Schrecklichkeit*, or frightfulness" in the areas it expropriated from the French (158). Transferring through Harney's eyes the author's own perception of contemporary German aesthetics, the reader begins to understand why this house is of such interest to Lucius, and why "his tone was expressive of admiration" in describing the Mountain community as well (43). Even Charity's curiosity is aroused by Lucius' enthusiasm for a group of people who, like the Germans of Wharton's wartime experiences, "don't give a damn for anybody" (43).

Extending the interpretation of the "brown house" passage mnemonically, could Wharton have been challenging her 1916 readers (*Summer* was serialized in *McClure's Magazine* before it was published in book form in 1917) to think about American policymakers—also a "handful of people"—who were isolated on their own "Mountain"—Capitol

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Hill—and who also seemed not to “give a damn” about what happened to “anybody” since they refused to enter the war to prevent a German victory and what Wharton feared would be the imposition of the German aesthetic, or *kultur*? Does she prompt the reader, furthermore, not merely to emulate Charity’s nascent curiosity but to explore more fully what Lucius’ attitude might mean beyond its literal interpretation? Does Charity’s horror at the Bonner family reflect Wharton’s own at the viciousness of German assaults and the lethargic, demoralized victims left behind when the Germans were gone? This kind of “psychological warfare” was unique in 1914, as Eksteins points out, and was all the more horrible because of its novelty. The essence of this scene, perhaps more so than the scene as represented literally, extends its interpretative possibilities considerably, especially in regard to the author’s propagandistic imperatives.

Wharton, according to Susan Goodman, believed that all readers ask themselves, “What am I being told this story for? What judgment on life does it contain for me?” (83). Clearly, Wharton was aware of what we know today as reader response theory and might readily have seconded Elizabeth Ammons’ suggestion that “The literary text we read . . . is not an isolated coherent self-contained, fictive ‘reflection’ of the world,” but is instead “an unstable, interactive site of multiple cultural inscriptions and multiple interpretive possibilities, some traceable to an author’s conscious ‘intentions’ but others completely outside authorial control or even knowledge” (qtd. in Bell 72). By reading *Summer* mindful of these “multiple interpretive possibilities,” even today’s reader can extend the literal representation of seemingly benign passages, phrases, and words from the text to indicate how they might, in fact, be conveying images of the war and Wharton’s frustration at pacifist American ideologies.

Another fascinating possibility for extended interpretation is in the way Wharton has drawn her characters in *Summer*. None of them garner much readerly ethos or pathos, as Auchincloss points out, a puzzling “falling” in a writer known for her brilliant characterizations (40). It is no accident that this “authorial intrusion” interferes with the reader’s interpretation of these characters: the author is directing her reader’s attention—mnemonically—beyond the superficially rendered people and the literal presentation of their environment to ask, “What am I being told this story for?” They are receptacles for the author’s own sentiments and become vehicles through whom the author can publicly make known her political views about America’s reaction to the war. Since Wharton’s previous pleas for an American military

commitment to the people of France had been criticized, the allegory with its inherent mnemonic characteristics and invitation to reader involvement, may have presented itself as a viable alternative to open propagandizing. It was not the first time the author had resorted to this tactic.

During a late 1915 period of correspondence with Theodore Roosevelt, for example, Wharton urged the longtime friend of her family to “come to Europe to see the front” because she was convinced that “his description of the French cause would shake America out of its neutrality” (Price 69). In one of these letters, Price notes, Wharton refers to her chagrin at America’s neutrality and pacifism, and promises Roosevelt that she will “allegorize it [the American scene] in a short story—my only weapon” (69). Confirming that the author adjusted her voice as the war went on and America’s intervention did not materialize as she hoped it would, Price notes:

Edith Wharton, it is true, wrote at the top of her voice during the early war years. She learned during the course of the war, however, to modulate her pitch and to hold “the tremolo note” when its effects served her ends. The shift in rhetorical registers is instructive. When the war began, her dominant tone had been satire, with a strong secondary suit in irony. (xiii)

She determined that allegory—and its built-in possibilities for extending the “meaning” of the text available to the reader—would better serve her purpose of confronting American readers with what she felt was their moral obligation to their neighbors in France.

Against charges like those of Blake Nevius and Elizabeth Ammons that Wharton resorted to irrational propaganda writing because she “lost her head” by what she saw at the front and became “blood-thirsty” (129), Price cautions:

We need to remember that the phenomenon of American authors turning from fiction to propaganda to sway a neutral American reading public and to aid war charities was not uncommon between 1914 and 1917. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Gertrude Atherton, Alice B. Toklas, and Gertrude Stein participated in and wrote about relief activities in Belgium and France. Even that most detached of social observers, Henry James, wrote public letters to American newspapers and propaganda pamphlets urging support for the Norton-Harjes ambulance units in France and for the Belgian refugees in London. (xiii)

James ultimately gave up his American citizenship to protest America’s inaction. I cannot recollect reading

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that he had lost his head, however, even though he had drawn his responses not through active participation in the fallout from the war, as had Wharton, but from a distance relatively far removed. As a matter of fact, newspaper reports of his death on February 28, 1916 acclaim his work for its "psychological investigation" and admire his studies of what he called "the imagination of disaster" (*Chronicle* 203). Wharton's even more complex "psychological investigation" regarding her wartime experiences has, on the other hand, had negative and lasting repercussions.

Wharton is forced to disguise her unwelcome opinions about America's isolationism and pacifist stance towards the European war by burying them in subtle meanings presented in the more accessible and acceptable literal plot of *Summer*, as Jeannette Batz Cooperman suggests many women writers have had to do in order to articulate their ideas in spheres the patriarchy determines as closed to them (13). Instead of being praised for her ingenuity, Wharton was and is ostracized for daring to challenge the white male prerogative of talking and writing about politics and propaganda. Instead of accepting the socially proscribed role of the female—and its attendant "trivialities"—Wharton chose to "write what I see, what I happen to be nearest to" and suffered the punishments allotted to non-conformists (*Letters* 91). status quo.

As Price remarks, "Even [Wharton's] most ardent admirers are left with uncomfortable questions: How did a sophisticated social satirist turn so quickly into a partisan war propagandist? What led Wharton, with her rich sense of irony, to turn her pen to sentimental fiction and propaganda essays?" (xii). One answer, as Auchincloss suggests, lies in her feelings about preserving those aspects of civilized society she valued so highly and which she felt were threatened by a victorious Germany.

Wharton had lived and traveled widely in Europe for a number of years before the war. As a cognizant observer of the environment in which she found herself, it is unlikely that she would have been unaware of what Eksteins calls the pre-war German willingness "to question western social, cultural, and political norms" and that nation's willingness during the war "to promote the breakdown of old certainties" (156). Germany's quest for power had, in Wharton's perception, turned that willingness into a purposeful destruction of any of the western cultural manifestations that opposed the anti-western German *kultur*. Given examples like that of the destruction of Louvain and German plans to violate Paris, Wharton's fear was perhaps not as irrational or as blood-thirsty as

Ammons and Nevius suggest. Because Wharton felt compelled to speak out and because she had a need to protect herself from public ostracism, allegory—with a healthy dose of allusion—appears to have suggested itself as a way to both do what she perceived to be her duty to the people of France and to insulate herself from possible additional criticism for openly propagandizing.

Wharton's circle of friends often used allusion as a kind of "group speak." Certain references, like the names of Honorius Hatchard's illustrious acquaintances, Washington Irving and Fitz-Greene Halleck, for example, serve a purpose beyond their literal interpretation in the text to become vehicles through whom the author could convey "insider" references—particularly to her friends—and engage in veiled propagandizing. To peruse *Summer* on a literal level, therefore, is to miss much of the richer meaning possible in reading it as an allegorical tale intended to propagandize the American public out of its nationalistic, isolationist attitude.

That a political theme competes against the more readily perceived "romantic" one becomes evident in giving close scrutiny to seemingly benign passages, words, images, the names of literary works, the titles of musical scores, the names of authors, and the identification of artwork in *Summer*. These extended possibilities for interpretation, while perhaps not readily available to the casual reader of *Summer*, become of primary interest to the reader searching for the possibility of propagandistic intentions behind some of the author's references. A prime example of this mnemonic device are the names of Honorius Hatchard's august companions. Washington Irving and Fitz-Greene Halleck were gentleman writers who were, according to Nevius "sanctioned by the parlor censor" because they, unlike Poe, Whitman, and Thackeray, did not introduce "new and unsettling ideas and new forms of experience" (182). In naming Fitz-Greene Halleck and Irving, Wharton is making a political statement about America's refusal to change her isolationist pacifist attitude toward the war—which is "sanctioned by the parlor censors (the American people)—and is asking them to consider "new and unsettling ideas and new forms of experience" (to support the war militarily). Irving's writing was Wharton's "companion" when she sought "solitude" despite her parents' efforts to "establish relations for [her] with 'nice' children" (*Backward* 35). Irving's name, therefore, serves as a mnemonic impulse for additional propagandistic interpretation: the words "companion," "solitude," and "establish relations" also describe what Wharton perceived to be the dynamics between

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America and France. The Americans cherished their solitude much as Wharton the child cherished hers. Wharton, however—as did her parents—perceived a benefit from “companionship” and sought to “establish [a] relationship” between the solitary United States and the “nice” French.

Another reference worthy of remark in this regard is Wharton’s mention of the Brooklyn Bridge (84), the initial promotion of which employed the theme “Two great cities united.” Perhaps, from a propagandistic reading of *Summer*, Wharton saw those two cities as Paris and Washington, D.C.? That Charity is, in the same scene, propping her “square of looking-glass against Mr. Royall’s black leather Bible” as she contemplates her date with Lucius (84) is mnemonically evocative of Wharton’s call to the American people to relinquish their narcissistic self interest and to take up their moral obligation to the people of France.

About the actual writing of *Summer*, Wharton notes: “I do not remember ever visualizing with more intensity the inner scene, or the people creating it” (Nevius 168). That intensity would surely have been attuned to the roar of guns and the explosion of bombs which were within earshot, not to mention to the broken bodies and minds visible to her both in her visits to the front and in her work with the refugees. Wharton is experiencing, from an unusual kind of duality, both the physical and the psychological aspects of war torn France and the physical and psychological aspects of the backward New England region to juxtapose them in the pages of *Summer*. Clearly both the realities of the war and the very personal effect it had on her psyche are evident in the primitivism of *Summer*, which more than anything else presents the author’s polemical state of mind regarding America’s stance toward the war.

The vapid self-interest of the characters in *Summer* and the community slowly sinking towards primitivism is Wharton’s perception of Americans and America at the time of its writing. As Auchincloss has suggested, even the protagonist, Charity Royall, does not garner much “readerly ethos or pathos” (40), for while she finds everything within eyesight “hateful,” her myopic *Weltanschauung* becomes an excuse for refusing to implement a change. Approached allegorically, Wharton’s over-determined characterization of Charity as introverted, uneducated, natural, wild, and disinterested in “culture” becomes a vehicle whereby the author can convey her disgust with similar American ideologies.

The dismal setting of North Dormer, left behind the rest of the region because her residents lack a desire for intellectual stimulation and a sense of moral

responsibility for their fellow human beings, becomes a vehicle whereby Wharton can convey her fears of a Europe dominated by a victorious Germany. For her, the values of contemporary Germans are, according to Wolff, becoming those of her contemporaries in America as well (35). The author’s representation of the paper mill at Creston River “decaying by the stream” (11), a “church that was opened every other Sunday if the state of the roads permitted” (5), and the Hatchard Memorial Library “for which no new books had been bought for twenty years, and where the old ones mouldered undisturbed on the damp shelves” (6) suggests a population uninterested in current events, guilty of moral turpitude, and disinterested in intellectual stimulation (not to mention in the preservation of historic monuments).

Charity Royall becomes the vehicle through whom the author can register—allegorically—her continuing disfavor of her natal country’s refusal to come to the aid of France. In the same way, Lucius Harney becomes the vehicle through whom Wharton can convey her own perceptions of German ideologies: His fascination with the Mountain community and their disregard for the trappings of civilization so dear to Wharton, parallels the values Wharton perceives in the Germans as well as the values Americans are willing to accept for the French. Lawyer Royall—because of his flawed personality, not in spite of it—serves as an excellent vehicle through whom Wharton can convey allegorically her memories of traditional American values—duty, honor, loyalty to one’s country, and moral responsibility for one’s fellows—while at the same time making manifest her own conviction, via his Old Home Week speech, that contemporary America is rapidly losing sight of these.

References to enclosed spaces, myopic perceptions, and themes of shortsightedness abound in *Summer* and serve as additional metaphors for representing America’s social and political stance towards the war in France. Other, personal, experiences from her frequent visits to the front in France—first published in McClure’s and Scribner’s magazines, before being published as *Fighting France*—directly find their way into *Summer* as well, and make the reading of the work as a propaganda novel additionally rewarding. Among these is Wharton’s encounter with French lace-makers, an event the author depicts in references to Charity’s and Ally’s lace handiwork.

Even the most inept of handcrafters achieves more than a “half-yard of narrow lace” over a period of “many weeks,” especially when that handiwork is the only way for a fashion-conscious female to get “any lace to trim her summer blouse” (8). Charity’s desultory

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lace work becomes a vehicle whereby Wharton can remind her readers of her refugees. As Price relates: "Realizing that the children would return to Belgium after the war and would need to make a living, Wharton set up lace-making, gardening, and carpentry classes" (x). Furthermore, the fact that Wharton has Charity doing desultorily and for narcissistic purposes what for the Belgian refugee children is a matter of survival again comments on America's isolationism, her "business as usual" attitude.

The discussion of lace in *Summer* mnemonically evokes similar references in *Fighting France*. In one such account from the latter, for instance, the author reports coming to a convent in Poperinghe where the caretaker shows her a classroom floor covered with "rows and rows of lace cushions." She adds that "On each a bit of lace had been begun—and there they had been dropped when nuns and pupils fled" (157). Unlike Charity, who can take up or drop her "bit of lace" at will, those fleeing were forced to cease their crocheting because the "evil" of Germany sought to make all things—large and small—"wither at the root" (157).

Wharton's observance of the "women who are comparing different widths of Valenciennes at the lace counter" (*Fighting France* 39), finds its way into *Summer* as well at the author's mention of Charity's "half-yard of narrow lace" (8). The "lacy garment" Ally Hawes has been commissioned to sew for Annabel Balch (149), furthermore, is surely a reference to the lingerie Wharton's refugees were making to fill orders from well-to-do American women. Finally, Wharton's choice of the name "Ally Hawes", mnemonically evocative for imagining the "ally" Wharton wanted America to be for the French, is surely no accident. In fact, a letter to sister-in-law Minnie Jones, written shortly after America entered the war, contains Wharton's postscript: "It's made me young again to be an 'Ally' at last" (Price 116).

That Charity wraps her lace handiwork around "a disintegrated copy of *The Lamplighter*" (14) is noteworthy also in scrutinizing *Summer* for propaganda. *The Lamplighter* is used propagandistically for its title and its theme of submissiveness and passivity. Wharton may have chosen this title to implore Americans allegorically for enlightenment; to envision themselves as a "Light of hope" for the people of France and to convey what Auchincloss remembers as her own fear of the war as "the battle of civilization against the power of darkness" (40). The fact that the text is "disintegrated" is richly allusive as well towards imagining the disintegration of America's passive and submissive reaction to the war.

The *Lamplighter* is mnemonically evocative also of the Statue of Liberty, which was given by the citizens of France in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the colonies' independence. Various encyclopedias describe the statue as a "female figure holding aloft a torch" and note that it represents "the Goddess of Liberty enlightening the world". It is not unreasonable to suggest, therefore, that the well-read Wharton might have inserted the name *Lamplighter* as an allusion not only to the liberty Americans were enjoying as victors in the War of Independence (to which France contributed military support) but that Americans owed the French moral — if not military — reciprocation if they would truly call themselves "enlightened".

The library and Charity's attitude about her position as librarian is richly allusive also. That she "hated to be bothered about books" and admits to Lucius that she is "in it for the money" (13), shows Charity's lack of aesthetic appreciation and convicts her of anti-intellectualism. The passage brings to mind again what Wharton believed to be Germany's ideologies during the war. Charity's short-sightedness about the influence of reading as intellectual stimulation and the benefits of "the temple of knowledge" on her community is conveyed in her observation that she "had never perceived that any practical advantage" from having the library "had accrued either to North Dormer or to herself" (12). This again evinces what Wharton felt was a German attitude of evaluating practicality over aesthetic appeal, an attitude she felt Americans were willing to have imposed on the French by their refusal to join the Allied Expeditionary Forces.

The author's veiled references to books and reading is also of great interest to the proposition of *Summer* as a propaganda novel. Ben Fry, one of the rare patrons at the library, is "fond of what he called 'jography' and of books relating to trade and bookkeeping" (13). Through him, Wharton conveys once again what she believes to be the contemporary American attitude: geography not as a study of the interconnectedness of all the peoples of the world, but (because she names geography in conjunction with books relating to trade and bookkeeping) as a study of the world's population in regard to trade and making money. America's diplomatic efforts were not so much to end the war, Wharton suggested, as they were to assure a continued commercial relationship with both sides of the European conflict.

Maintaining the status quo, in fact, was very profitable to American manufacturers of munitions and to the American economy in general in 1916. It must have irked Wharton, for example, to learn that while her

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refugee funds were often near depletion, the U.S. Steel Corporation, according to newspaper accounts, declared a profit of \$81,126,048. This was at a time when a worker at the Ford Motor Company plant in Detroit was earning \$5 a day. Furthermore, that much of this profit was related to the \$5.4 million in munitions exported daily from New York (*Chronicle* 211)—munitions that had brought about the very refugees Wharton was helping—must have been particularly difficult for the author to accept. One cannot wonder, therefore, that evidence of this "business as usual" attitude, added to what Auchincloss calls "the imperturbable blindness of Americans back home" and the "self-inflation of those who had glimpsed the devastated areas through the windows of a chauffeur-driven car" (422) evoked from Wharton a response that Ammons unfairly calls blood-thirsty.

Again, in reading *Summer* for propaganda, Charity—and by mnemonic extension America—is charged with being "blind and insensible to many things" a characterization made manifest in the scene at the library where Charity "took off her hat [and] hung it on a plaster bust of Minerva," the Roman goddess of wisdom, invention, the arts, and *martial prowess* (8). While Minerva provides a mnemonic impetus for inspiring America to commit her "martial prowess" to aid the French, the fact that Charity frustrates the opportunity by covering the catalyst for action with her hat is surely Wharton's approbation of America's "blindness" to seeing her duty in Europe. That Charity "dimly knew" of her blindness is, perhaps, the author's reference to Charity's / America's instinctive awareness that it is morally wrong to maintain an isolationist stance while hundreds of thousands are dying unnecessarily in Europe.

Charity does seek to see beyond the boundaries of North Dormer following her trip to Nettleton, but her "thirst for information" is short-lived: "the impression of Nettleton began to fade, and she found it easier to take North Dormer as the norm of the universe than to go on reading" (5). Bauer notes that Wharton often felt compelled to challenge the narcissism of what she perceived to be the "new America," and this passage in *Summer* appears to support that claim. Mnemonically, Wharton upbraids the American reader to a still greater degree.

Beyond their "fevered reading" of sanitized newspaper and magazine accounts from the front whose "impressions" soon "fade," the American reader finds of 1916 found it "easier" to live as an on-looker rather than to "go on reading" into the events of the war and recognizing America's obligations. It was easier, of course, for Americans to see America as

"the norm of the universe" rather than to investigate, beyond the paragraph-long accounts that satisfied their curiosity, the European situation. Like the residents of the North Dormer region who raptly listen to Lawyer Royall's Old Home Week speech, Americans sought out the medium but did not care to understand the message.

While we may indeed never know with any certainty the author's intentions for this work, mnemonic impulses for receiving more than what is literally presented on the pages of the text are convincing enough to suggest that *Summer* is, to a considerable extent, propagandistic. Bauer recognized in Wharton a writer "devoted to the most pressing problems of her day" (xv), and America's refusal to enter World War I to fight alongside the French and British forces became for Wharton a most pressing problem indeed. She was not only capable of propaganda writing to achieve her desire of jarring America out of its pacifism, she was willing to turn her talents in that direction. However, being a woman writer writing of "unwomanly" things, subtlety was again called for.

Is it not curious, for example, that the brown house and the lethargic, primitivistic family evoke only shame in Charity? Why does she not feel compassion for the battered children; the "weak-minded old woman;" "the ragged man" sleeping off a self-induced liquorous stupor that is his only escape from the squalor of a life that has made him "bestial?" for the "sickly-looking kitten?" Why is she able—despite the fact that she keeps repeating "this is where I belong, this is where I belong"—to deny the words, to make herself "a stranger among these poor swamp-people living like vermin in their lair?" (57-58).

Through Charity, Wharton conveys what she sees at the front in the hope that the American reader, especially, will recognize Charity's reaction as unconscionable. Unlike the French people, for whom—without American intervention—there is no escape from the riotous energy that seeks to destroy their very spirit, Charity can escape to return to the Royall home. Although she witnesses the horror and knows that she "belongs" there—as Wharton insists the Americans know they belong in France—she refuses to take a proactive stance—as the Americans also refuse—to effect a change.

Charity has the leisure to come to recognize that the Royall house she "had always hated" is instead "a vision of peace and plenty" in contrast to what the Bonners have. She remembers the kitchen at Mr. Royall's, with the scrubbed floor and dresser full of china, and the peculiar smell of yeast and coffee and soft-soap that she had always hated, but that now

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seemed the very symbol of household order. She saw Mr. Royall's room, with the high-backed horsehair chair, the faded rag carpet, the row of books on a shelf, the engraving of 'The Surrender of Burgoyne' over the stove, and the mat with a brown and white spaniel on a moss-green border. (57)

Here are the accoutrements of a civilized life Wharton cherished and saw being forcefully taken from the French. *Summer* as propaganda is most convincing in Wharton's mention of the engraving, *The Surrender of Burgoyne*. The battle symbolizes a turning point in the American Revolutionary War made possible by French assistance to the rebel forces. By mentioning it, Wharton seems to infer that America ought to feel some sense of obligation to come to the aid of France if for no other reason than to reciprocate for their military support in our own struggle for freedom. Wharton's great-grandfather, furthermore, the Major-General Ebenezer Stevens, "directed the operations leading to General Burgoyne's surrender" a feat represented in the paintings of Revolutionary victories in the Capitol Rotunda in Washington, D.C. Here is another mnemonically-initiated directive to remember Capitol Hill, the seat of American government where all military and foreign policies are made.

Lucius' and Charity's outing to Nettleton for the Fourth of July celebration is most evocative of Wharton's experiences in the war and firmly entrenches the concept of *Summer* as propagandistic. The couple disembarks the train and is greeted by "the popping of fire-crackers, the explosion of torpedoes, the banging of toy-guns, and the crash of a firemen's band trying to play the Merry Widow" (89-90). While popping firecrackers are routine Fourth of July fare, the words "explosion;" "torpedoes;" and "guns" are mnemonically more evocative of a field of battle than of a peacetime celebration. The name of the band's tune "The Merry Widow," furthermore, becomes a mnemonic impulse for remembering the widows of the European war. Mention of the "poodle with bald patches and pink eyes" (94), brings to mind the symptoms of exposure to mustard gas, introduced early in the war by the Germans, as reported in newspaper accounts at the time. The mention of firemen, logical in the literal interpretation of *Summer*, can be read also as a reference to soldiers carrying flame throwers, again introduced by the German military in 1914 as recounted in news reports of the day. That the dog "sits up on its hind legs" clearly indicates it is "begging," a position mnemonically evocative of France's (and Wharton's) own appeals for American involvement (94). Seemingly benign phrases, furthermore, like "hot tramping" and

"scarlet runner"—when cognitively conjoined with the word "crippled"—become mnemonic catalysts for envisioning soldiers marching on a battlefield running with blood (93).

Many other references, most brilliantly wrought in the author's account of Old Home Week, make the proposition of *Summer* as a propaganda novel most valid. That Miss Hatchard, "pale with fatigue and excitement" is "leaning on her crutches" as she watches some of the workers "troop away" is reminiscent of soldiers and the battlefield (112). That one of the preparations involves "sewing the stars on the drapery" is evocative of the myth of Betsy Ross sewing the stars and stripes on Old Glory (116). And Miss Hatchard's remark, "I like the idea of its all being homemade" and her pleasure at not having had "to call in any foreign talent" to help with the preparations, as well as her comment that "Lucius has such a feeling for the past that he has roused us all to a sense of our privileges" is surely a comment about America's narcissism, isolationism, and xenophobia. Finally, mention of the "Mexican blanket" which helped the couple feel "so enclosed . . . in their secret world" (126), is surely a comment regarding America's willingness to send troops to the revolution in Mexico while at the same time maintaining a pacifist stance in regard to the war in France. In trying to get America to militarily aid the war, Wharton, it seems, was desperate enough to leave few phrases unturned.

Can we chastise Wharton for resorting to anti-American propaganda as Nevius, Ammons, and even some of her most ardent admirers have? Wharton perceived the civilized world as sliding towards an ideology like that of the German citizen who, in her opinion, was indifferent to everything her cultural heritage had taught her to value "so long as he [was] well-fed, well amused, and making money" (*Biography* 422). Nevius' contention that Wharton's war fiction "adds nothing to her laurels" is unfair but not uncharacteristic of the male literary critic. He merely takes his place among those male readers who, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis suggests, "will necessarily dismiss as undecipherable, meaningless, or trivial" the female experience in female writing because they "find themselves outside of and unfamiliar with the symbolic systems" that constitute that experience (qtd. in Cooperman 13).

Perhaps himself unfamiliar with the societal conventions Wharton appreciated and which she felt sincerely were being threatened, Nevius becomes like DuPlessis' male reader. Determined that in reading Wharton's war fiction he is "entering a strange and unfamiliar world of symbolic significance" which he is "unable to decipher," he judges it as "slight and

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aesthetically wanting" and dismisses it as adding nothing to her laurels (Cooperman 13). He chides Wharton for resorting to propagandizing, and trivializes her attempts to relate to the reader her own experience as a witness to the material and human ravages of war. As Cooperman claims, "In the United States, writing about female experience has often meant professional suicide" (13), especially if that experience decries the political stance of the nation, questions its nationalistic sense of self, and challenges its belief that politics and war are exclusively a male writer's prerogative.

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Shakespeare & Company Opens Its Second World Premiere: *The Valley of Decision*, Spring Lawn Theatre, May 24 – September 1

Following its early season opener, *Golda's Balcony*, Shakespeare & Company introduces another new work to Spring Lawn Theatre during Memorial Day weekend: *The Valley of Decision*. Adapted by Dennis Krausnick from Edith Wharton's first novel, published in 1902, *The Valley of Decision* is directed by Rebecca Holderness. Previews begin Friday, May 24. Performances run through September 1. For tickets and information, contact the Box Office at (413) 637-3353 (open every day 10:00 am - 2:00 pm or curtain time of the day's final performance). Order tickets on-line at www.shakespeare.org. The turn-of-the-century Spring Lawn mansion is wheelchair accessible and offers student, senior, and group rates.

S&Co founding member and Director of Training Dennis Krausnick has acted, written, directed, and taught with the Company for 25 years. He has been instrumental in the creation and development of the Company's internationally-acclaimed training programs and has adapted or created more than 30 of Edith Wharton's works, including several by her contemporary, Henry James. Krausnick is currently preparing a volume of Edith Wharton stage adaptations for publication.

"This is the only novel that Edith wrote that is a historical romance," says Krausnick. "It explores a period of history and a locale that was foreign to her contemporary readers, in an Italy that was not in her lifetime, or even in her mother's lifetime. *The Valley of Decision* is the only novel that grapples so specifically with a set of political and philosophical conundrums. Edith had been travelling in Italy since she was a little girl; she spoke Italian and knew 18th century art, architecture, and literary art inside and out. The novel was an intellectual exercise that had attracted her as a young artist, not that she was young when she began it, but that her artistic style was still young."

The Valley of Decision follows the life of a young man, Odo Valsecca, born into minor aristocracy, who finds himself unexpectedly thrust toward the ducal throne of an imaginary Lombard duchy. Having lived an impoverished childhood, he is then trained as a soldier and given an education that becomes a young man about to inherit a throne in 18th century Italy. His education includes exposure to the great writers of the Enlightenment and to the political and philosophical implications suggested by those writers. Among his teachers is a man who espouses learning and freedom of thought, and with whose daughter, Fulvia Vivaldi,

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Odo falls utterly in love. This is where the stage adaptation begins.

Odo and Fulvia become separated for three years. During this time, the ducal crown of Pianura, the reigning state of Italy, becomes Odo's. However, political and religious forces beyond their control reunite the couple once again. Together they struggle to bring about reform to the feudal society which crushes the hopes and lives of the vast majority of an impoverished population, whose suffering supports the luxury and whimsy of a tiny group of aristocrats. Odo and Fulvia create an enlightened Constitution (based on a smuggled copy of the Declaration of Independence) that galvanizes their love and dreams for the future of their country. Against the warnings of the aristocracy, the clergy, and the ducal household, the couple plans the announcement of the Tuscan Constitution, to inform the people of their rights. The response of the people sets a tide of events in motion that not even the great Duke Odo Valsecca can turn back.

"In reading Edith Wharton, and therefore in adapting and directing a play fashioned from Wharton, we come into direct confrontation with her intellect; with her ideas," says director Holderness. "This beautiful house (Spring Lawn) is a tribute to privilege, and as the actors move through it we think of the relationship between the house and its history, the spaces we all inhabit, and how this particular house might be situated within the Lenox community. It's fascinating to work on a story that was written by an early 20th century writer about 18th century class struggle, and to perform it in a turn-of-the-century house with 21st century actors."

The Valley of Decision marks Holderness' fourth season with the Company, where her directing credits include *Glimpses of the Moon*, *Henry IV part 1* (asst. director), and performing the role of Olivia in *Twelfth Night* (Summer Training Institute). Off-Broadway: *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Lincoln Center Institute Tour); *Twelfth Night or What You Will*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *The Rover* (Lincoln Center Theatre Institute for her own company, Holderness); *Riddles of Bamboo* (Lincoln Center Theatre Lab); *Cymbeline*, *A Winter's Tale*, (Holderness/the Salon); *One Million Butterflies* (Julliard); *Nervous Splendor* (Tweed); *Edward II* (NYU/ETW). European credits: *Compagnie Image* at Aigue/Paris, and *Otello* with Andrei Serban at Choregies Dâ Orange/France. Rebecca teaches at the Experimental Theater Wing, NYU, CAP21, and The New School.

"The characters are very Flaubert-like," says Krausnick, "in that they make strong choices yet they are destroyed by those choices. Edith wrote point-to-

point, following her nose through; she had no ability to edit herself. I was attracted to adapting the novel because of the extraordinary ideas, not particularly because of the writing. What piqued my interest the most was the mix of classes, and the multiplicity of levels of the society and the battle between reason and fundamentalism -- much like the world we live in now."

The cast of seven includes Elizabeth Aspenlieder as Fulvia Vivaldi, Michael Burnet as Carlo de Gamba, Andrew Borthwick-Leslie as Count Alfieri, Lon Troland Bull as Father Orazio De Crucis, Mel Cobb as Count Trescorre, Ethan Flower as Odo Valsecca, and Catherine Taylor-Williams as The Duchess Maria Clementina.

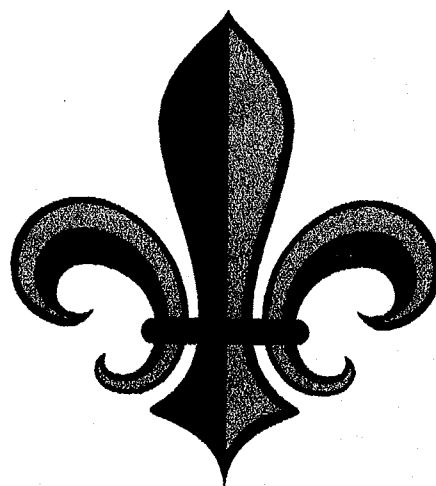
The Company's 25th Anniversary season also celebrates Krausnick and Wharton later in the summer with *The Wharton Centennial Celebration*. The *Celebration* features three of Krausnick's best-loved adaptations of Wharton: *Ethan Frome* (July 31), *Summer* (August 1), and *The Fiery Rain* (August 2), acted by many of the same actors who originally performed them at the Company's previous home of 25 years, The Mount.

At A Glance

Production: *The Valley of Decision* in Spring Lawn Theatre

Director: Rebecca Holderness **Cast:** Elizabeth Aspenlieder, Andrew Borthwick-Leslie, Lon Troland Bull, Michael Burnet, Mel Cobb, Ethan Flower, Catherine Taylor-Williams. **Costume Designer:** Jennifer Halpern

Lighting designer: Stephen d. Ball **Scenic Designer:** Lauren Kurki **Sound Designer:** Jason Fitzgerald **Tickets:** \$24-\$48 in two reserved seating sections; Student, Senior, and Group Rates Available. **Box Office:** (413) 637-3353; www.shakespeare.org



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he is "incapable of taking risk" (122), thus making him unlike sentimental characters who are defined by their ability to risk all for love and to give without thought of exchange. Using the theories of Lewis Hyde's *The Gift*, Hoeller shows how Rosedale and Trenor, who understand gifts only as a means of extracting economic advantage from that of characters such as Netty and Lily, who give gifts without expecting anything in return. What Hoeller sees as the conscious revision of *The House of Mirth* in *The Glimpses of the Moon* tries even harder to "disappoint those sentimental hopes" (137) of an understanding between Selden and Lily.

The question of excess also governs Wharton's approach to motherhood in her later works. Although Wharton was criticized for the seeming conservatism of the later works' sentimentality and self-sacrifice, Hoeller contends that the excessive love that women like Charlotte Lovell of "The Old Maid" and Mrs. Glenn of "Her Son" feel for their illegitimate children powerfully links sentiment with transgression and subverts the social order. *The Mother's Recompense* likewise shares the self-sacrifice, the rejection of second chances, and the excessive mother-love of the sentimental novel, but the torment that Kate Clephane must undergo in order to reidentify herself as mother rather than as lover tears at its conventions. Wharton's purpose is to reject both the Howellsian "economy of pain" solution "as a form of male evasion that silences those stories about women" and the celebration of domestic space in its predecessor, Grace Aguilar's 1850 novel of the same name, which Wharton mentions in her dedication.

Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction thus raises one major question even as it answers others: does this theory apply to Wharton's other works, and, if so, what is the significance of Wharton's revision of sentimental plots of excess, self-sacrifice, and the like in major works such as *Summer*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *Ethan Frome*? But the question may be moot. Like the geological and archaeological discoveries that fascinated Wharton, this book and its insights resurrects and contextualizes the buried tradition of sentimentalism so convincingly that readers should be eager to find for themselves evidence of this dialogue in other works.

Donna Campbell, Gonzaga University