



EDITH WHARTON REVIEW

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Introduction to Current Issue

Augusta Rohrbach, Guest Editor
Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

As an author who played an important role in the development of American letters—contributing to a variety of genres from travel writing, autobiography, and interior design to poetry, the short story and the novel—Edith Wharton's work is a force to be reckoned with in the context of our literary history. The papers here assembled stand as an effort to suggest the depth and breadth of Wharton's participation in the ideas and events of her own period and consider the way her response to contemporary issues reflects (and revises) our ever-changing estimation of Wharton's work.

Situating Wharton's opus in a context that extends beyond her oeuvre,

the papers in this issue of *The Edith Wharton Review* were first presented at an Edith Wharton Society sponsored American Literature Association panel called, "EDITH WHARTON IN CONTEXT." Seeking papers that would position Edith Wharton within the larger context of American culture, I sent out a Call-for-Papers. In response, I received papers that examined her place within the pantheon of American writers, papers that historicized her contribution to significant genres such as regionalism, realism, and modernism as well as papers that considered her in dialogue (or argument) with other figures in American letters. Of these, the three I selected addressed what I believe represent (three major areas for Wharton criticism: the literary marketplace, popular culture,

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EDITH WHARTON SOCIETY BUSINESS MEETING AND DINNER

December, 2002

New York City MLA

Business Meeting: Monday, the 30th, 1:45 p.m., Concourse A, Hilton

Dinner: Sunday, the 29th, 7 p.m., Vivolo Restaurant,

140 E 74th St., NYC 10021 . \$45 (tax and tip incl.)

Checks for dinner reservations should be made out to the **The Edith Wharton Society** and be sent to be received by December 20 to:

Augusta Rohrbach, 8 Prescott Street, Cambridge, MA 02138-3929.

For reservation form and menu choices (to be made at the restaurant), click on:

<http://www.edithwhartonusociety.org/dinner2002.html> or

<http://www.gonzaga.edu/wharton/dinner2002.html>

BOOK REVIEW

Deborah Lindsay Williams. *Not in Sisterhood: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zona Gale, and the Politics of Female Authorship*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

By the early 1920s each of the writers in Deborah Williams's engrossing study was a well-established author of best selling novels and a frequent contributor to the popular mass-circulating magazines. Each had won a Pulitzer Prize—Wharton for *The Age of Innocence* (1921), Gale for the dramatic version of her novel *Miss Lulu Bett* (1921), and Cather for *One of Ours* (1922). Who could have predicted that seventy years later Wharton and Cather would enjoy canonical status among the foremost novelists of the modern era, while Gale would be all but forgotten, virtually erased from American literary history? Williams's bibliography cites 14 scholarly books and articles about Wharton, only two about Gale. Most of Gale's fiction is out of print. Her stories do not appear in the anthologies of American literature where Cather and Wharton have for the past thirty years been assured of a place. Williams has brought to light the correspondence that Gale maintained with both Wharton and Cather for more than a decade, but none of the biographies of either Wharton or Cather even mention Gale so completely has she been forgotten.

Why has Zona Gale sunk into obscurity while Wharton and Cather scholarship thrives and new editions of their works multiply? To answer this question, Williams places the three writers in relation to each other: she compares the works of fiction that marked turning points in their careers, traces the connections between their critical reputations and their public images, and explores the implications of their letters. (Most of Gale's letters to and from Wharton and Cather are at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.) Williams finds the key to the three writers' literary fates in their views of themselves as artists, which determined their relationships with other writers and their attitudes towards engagement in social reform. As Williams notes, Gale, Wharton, and Cather were astute professionals in the literary marketplace and serious artists who resisted being classed as "women writers" in the nineteenth-century tradition of domestic sentimental fiction. Only Gale, however, championed sisterhood, sought community with other women, and all her adult life worked for progressive causes such as suffrage, world peace, and racial equality, convinced as she was that the artist must also be a "social being." In contrast, Williams claims, Wharton and Cather feared that identification with feminist causes and other women writers would threaten their status as literary artists, and thus they held themselves aloof from each other and from other women who could be perceived as peers and rivals. Their view of the artist as a detached, solitary figure, above the claims of politics, Williams argues, conformed to the dominant ideology of

the New Criticism while Gale's socially conscious fiction, lacking the ambiguity and paradox valued by the New Critics was ignored by them.

An irony revealed by Williams's study is that the writer at the center, who links the other two through her correspondence with them, is Gale, the all-but forgotten figure. In a fascinating analysis of their letters, Williams demonstrates the ambivalence of both Wharton and Cather towards the whole-hearted friendship Gale extended to them: "Desire and recoil are the two movements of the letters." She notes that in private correspondence, Wharton and Cather appeared to welcome literary exchange but set up barriers to intimacy, in private letters they expressed a sense of kinship with Gale, but neither Wharton nor Cather ever mentioned Gale in their published criticism, while Gale found many occasions to praise their work in her essays.

The Wharton-Gale letters are particularly revealing of the different impulses that moved each writer to sustain the correspondence. Gale took the first step in 1922, by sending a letter praising *The Glimpses of the Moon* to her and Wharton's editor, Rutger B. Jewett of Appleton's, who forwarded the letter to Wharton. Wharton's response to Gale initiated a correspondence, comprising at least 23 letters, that spanned more than ten years. The two writers never met, but they regularly sent each other their books, which inspired many of the letters. From the beginning, Wharton assumed the role of mentor and guide, mingling lavish praise with criticism. Although Gale had been publishing fiction for more than fifteen years, she cast herself as a neophyte at the start of her career, a disciple for whom Wharton was like a god to be revered. To receive Wharton's praise of *Miss Lulu Bett*, Gale wrote, was "like being knighted, as if I might now at last begin the long quest." Despite the distance Wharton maintained between herself and Gale, the correspondence makes clear that Gale soon became the confidante to whom Wharton wrote most fully about the art of fiction.

Williams keeps the subject of sisterhood to the fore in the chapter on the writers' best known novels: *The House of Mirth*, *My Antonia*, and *Miss Lulu Bett*. She focuses on secondary characters in Wharton's and Cather's novels—Carry Fisher in *The House of Mirth* and Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball in *My Antonia*—whose enduring loyalties are to other women and whose professional careers offer alternatives to the lives of the protagonists. While these characters remain at the margins of the narrative, Williams observes, the transformation of Lulu Bett from a drudge in her sister's house into an independent, self-supporting, self-confident woman is the central action of Gale's novel.

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and urban identity. As seen through a variety of methodological approaches, each paper re-situates Wharton's work within a larger context, complicating it in interesting ways.

Alice Kinman's "Edith Wharton and the Future of Fiction" uses a marketplace approach to uncover the how, where and why Wharton saw herself fitting into the contemporary literary marketplace. Too frequently positioned as operating some how outside of market concerns—largely because of her inherited fortune and class position—Kinman explores Wharton's relationship to the marketplace as one that was strategic and multi-purposed. Jared Stark's essay, simply titled, "Wharton's Suicides," uses Wharton's little known work—in this case an early poem published in the popular press—to consider how the theme of suicide took on foundational significance in her writings. Betsy Klimasmith's "The Hotel Spirit: Modernity and the Urban Home in Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*, James' American Scene, and Gilman's Short Fiction" uses a comparative analysis—between Wharton and two of her contemporaries—to get at her sociological agenda.

Taken together, these papers suggest a level of engagement in a wide range of critical issues in circulation when Wharton was writing. They also—just as importantly—gesture toward ongoing debates within our own period and disciplines. These papers offer readers a fresh look at Wharton's critical contribution to deliberations than and now over literature's engagement with the world out of which it springs. From tenements and hotels to widows and suicides, Wharton's work—these papers show—pulses to the beat of her immediate culture, as it continues to reverberate in our own.

Edith Wharton and the Future of Fiction

Alice Herritage Kinman,
University of Georgia

I decided to send three of my poems to three of the leading literary magazines of the day: "Scribner's", "Harper's" and the "Century". . . . I did not know how authors communicated with editors, but I copied out the verses in my fairest hand, and enclosed each in an envelope with my visiting card! A week or two elapsed, and then I received three answers, telling me that all three poems had been accepted. (Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 866)

Edith Wharton began her adult literary career at a particularly volatile time in American literary

history. The year was 1889 when she celebrated the literary success described above, a moment when, according to commentators of the day, the future of American literature was in some doubt. Congress had recently failed to pass an international copyright law, thereby ensuring that the literary marketplace would remain flooded with cheap, reprinted editions of European titles. Not even the most famous American writers could compete on such unequal ground. As the critic Maurice Thompson wryly noted in the July 1889 *North American Review*, "neither Mr. Howells nor Mr. James, with their names rung up and down and back and forth, day in and day out . . . has ever been able to compare editions with Zola, Daudet, or many another alien novelist" (Thompson 119). The ready availability of "alien" fiction, and in particular the work of French realists and naturalists, also gave rise to a considerable amount of concern. The influx of French fiction (the novels of Emile Zola were the most frequently cited offenders) was, according to observers, spawning an industry of cheap, sensationalistic imitators, and American critics wondered aloud about the deleterious effects of "alien" fiction on the moral fiber. While the leading literary editors and critics of the day recognized the continued importance of realism, they were also expressing doubts about what they often referred to as the "limitations" of realism, and, in particular, the "tendencies" of realism toward a Zolaesque naturalism. In short, a study of literary criticism of the late 1880's and 1890's reveals the presence of a significant backlash against realism in American literature.

One form which this backlash took was a protracted debate about the relative merits of two aesthetics, one usually labeled "realism," the other "idealism" or "romanticism." While this debate was complex, and the definitions of its terms shifting, certain areas of consensus and emphasis do emerge. Realism was generally understood as having to do with material facts perceived through the senses, while idealism was understood as treating the realms of emotion and imagination, in other words, the unseen. Those who were questioning the predominance of realism, as I will illustrate below, called for literature that depicted the non-empirical areas of human experience, and, as I will argue, Edith Wharton's first story, "Mrs. Manstey's View" (Scribner's 1891), can be understood as a considered response to these discussions.

It is worth mentioning here that until recently it was a commonplace of Wharton criticism to consider Wharton's earliest work in the context of her *isolation* from the literary marketplace, and to read the early stories from a psychological viewpoint, as representing Wharton's own sense of loneliness. This approach certainly characterizes criticism of "Mrs. Manstey's View," which critics have traditionally read as thinly-veiled

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autobiography, a parable of Wharton's own sense of isolation and alienation within the enclosed world of New York society. More recently, however, several critics have shown that Wharton, even as early as the 1890's, had knowledge of trends in the American literary marketplace and that she sought from the beginning of her career to define a place for herself amid the various "isms" current in the literary marketplace at the end of the century — realism, naturalism, romanticism, idealism, etc. Indeed, Wharton's own account of her first adult attempts at publication, couched as it is in self-deprecating language regarding her lack of knowledge about "how authors communicated with editors," still reveals a certain *savoir faire* on the part of the young society matron about the marketplace. She did, after all, know which were the "three leading literary magazines of the day."

The success of "Mrs. Manstey's View" (which was not only published in *Scribner's* in 1891 but was also included in the 1893 collection, *Stories of New York*, part of the *Stories from Scribner's* series) can thus be directly related to the savvy apprentice's knowledge of the profession to which she sought entrance. Yet, the story is more than a demonstration of Wharton's knowledge; it is also a creative and innovative response to issues that concerned the professional insiders. In it Wharton demonstrates her familiarity with the terms of discussion surrounding the state of American fiction as well as her desire to place her own work within the context of this discussion. At the same time, Wharton's story, through its language and structure, calls into question the very terms of the realism/idealism debate, making a case for both "views" while suggesting that neither offers a satisfactory narrative perspective.

American Fiction and the Literary Magazines

At a time when American novelists were struggling to make headway in the crowded and uneven field of the American literary marketplace, the short story was emerging as the most profitable form, thanks to the literary magazines to which Wharton sent her first poems. The fact that these magazines were, during the 1890's, the primary outlets for good-quality American fiction was recognized by contemporary observers of the literary scene. Maurice Thompson, for example, who saw little hope even for the best novelists to sell editions, added that "the art of fiction has failed in American only in the novel." In contrast, "the short story . . . has been better developed in the United States than in any country, with the exception of France," a result, he writes, of "[o]ur great magazines [which] have done excellent work in encouraging the short story by paying liberally for it" (119). A decade later, literary historian Henry Pancoast, surveying the recent past for

his 1898 *Introduction to American Literature*, found little to praise except the magazines, which, he wrote, "fill an enormous place in the mental life of America" and "have been the medium for much that is best in our recent literature" (322-23). These magazines, as "house organs" for the major New York publishing firms, had a vested interest in developing and marketing a domestic product. In fact, both *Scribner's* and *The Century* had a stated mission to publish only American fiction. In Boston, James Ripley Osgood, a partner in Ticknor and Fields which owned *Atlantic Monthly*, was noted for his ability to attract new American talent. As for Harpers, in 1886 it contracted with Howells to publish a monthly column, the "Editor's Study," which was frequently devoted to discussions of the current state of American fiction, and particularly of its status in relation to the English and Continental traditions.

Because of their interest in promoting it, the editors of all three of the magazines Wharton mentions took an active part in the ongoing discussions about the present and future state of American fiction. Furthermore, a survey of their writings during the late 1880's and early 1890's (both in the editorial columns of their own magazines and in the scholarly journals that published their book reviews and comments) and of the literary criticism printed in their magazines reveals that at least two of the three, Burlingame and Gilder, were experiencing doubts about the literary trends that each in his own way had helped to foster during the previous decade. It appears that these critics objected to what they perceived as the narrow focus of realism as it had developed by the late 1880's and 1890's. As formulated by Howells in his now-famous "Editor's Study" from 1887, the realistic writer is like a scientist who attempts to describe a grasshopper. Both writer and scientist must reject "the ideal grasshopper, the heroic grasshopper, the self-devoted, adventurous, good old romantic card-board grasshopper" in order to perceive the "simple, honest, and natural grasshopper" (13). Thus, for Howells and his followers, realism as a literary method was closely related to the scientific method: both posited a model for observing and recording the world that relied on a detached, objective viewer. The assumption was that such a viewer would not be blinded by the "ideal" and would focus instead on the "actual."

Yet it was precisely this emphasis on fiction as an extension of science that seems to have generated the backlash among many critics, including Burlingame and Gilder, who found that the "new fiction" promoted its scientific view of life exclusively, ignoring in the process the "emotional" or "imaginative" areas of experience. Their concern reflected their fear of a growing cynicism in American culture about "the deeper ranges of man's spiritual nature" (Gilder 11). Both Gilder and Burlingame, in articles published in 1887, argued that "Realism" was

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limited by its exclusive focus on the "intellectual side" of existence, to the neglect of the "ideal side of life" (Burlingame 310; Gilder 11). Gilder, in a much-quoted article for *The New Princeton Review*, criticized "certain tendencies in current literature" that lead to an "elevation of the insignificant" (6). He lamented trends in current fiction that indicated a "loss of the old love of beauty" (11). Similarly, Burlingame, in an 1887 review of Henry James's *The American*, alluded to the "limitations" of realism. While praising the technical skill of James's style, Burlingame took the opportunity to criticize the "school" of "intellectual lotus-eat[ers]" to which James's narrator (and perhaps James himself, Burlingame suggests) belongs: the "spectator *ab extra*; the critic, the analyst, rather than the sharer, of strong feeling" (310). Other critics joined in expressing doubts about the value of realism in fiction. Charles Richardson, the literary historian, included a largely derogatory account of contemporary realism in his 1889 history of American literature. His major objection was to the limitations of a literary mode so "shorn of sentiment": "[M]odern American realism . . . gives no evidence of personal sympathy . . . [and] insists constantly upon the duty of portraying life as it is; and yet omits many of the most important factors of life's problems" (431-32). In a similar vein, the poet and critic Arlo Bates, in a lengthy article for the August 1887 issue of *Scribner's* entitled "Realism and the Art of Fiction," attacked realism for its "distortion of standards" and "destruction of proportions." The realistic writer, by focusing attention on "trifles . . . destroys all true values by giving to things unworthy of notice a prominence wholly false" (251). Bates believed that artist "who addresses himself to the intellect alone . . . is manifestly confining himself to the lower range of his functions." Taken together, these critical pronouncements constitute a significant reaction against realism in American fiction, and the common ground in all these statements is the call for literature that reflects the full range of experience, both intellectual and emotional.

The main argument of these critics was not against the presence of realism *per se*. Both Burlingame and Gilder had done much to further the trend toward realism in American fiction. Burlingame, in particular, displayed a preference for realistic fiction in the early numbers of *Scribner's*. The inaugural issue of January 1887, for example, concluded with a story by Margaret Crosby that explicitly set in opposition an "ideal" view of life and one grounded in the "actual." The story, set in a shabby neighborhood near Washington Square, is about a violinist so caught up in his love for Beethoven and his dream of becoming a great musician that he is blind to his own lack of talent. His failure to live in "the actual" (as the story's narrator, an educated, Bohemian

artist, terms it) eventually leads to his death. Reflecting on this sad ending, a secondary character, appropriately, a French man, states the story's moral: "When I was young I wished to be a great actor; but, my faith! I soon found I could not act, and so - I kept a restaurant. . . . At present, . . . I have enough. In this world it is a mistake to be too ideal!" (128). The moral of the story is clear: the contented human being is one who does not allow romantic notions of the ideal to interfere with his or her perception of the actual state of things.

In different terms, Gilder echoed this sentiment, calling realism "the Time-Spirit" and the "state of mind of the nineteenth century." Similarly, Arlo Bates acknowledged that in promoting "knowledge" and "understanding," realism is capable of "arousing emotion." Thus, these critics recognized realism as a viable art form, but one that needed to be tempered by a renewed emphasis on those areas of experience not observed via the scientific method.

As already noted, even those critics who were most pessimistic about the current state of American fiction saw much to praise in the shorter fiction being written for the newspapers and magazines. For the most part, those critics associated with the reaction against realism praised the local color sketch, calling it America's chief contribution to world literature. In their view, the virtue of the local color sketch lay in its ability to depict the ordinary details of life - just like a realistic story - but in such a way to emphasize the unique, rather than the commonplace, qualities of individual human experience. Charles Richardson, for example, praising the "younger realists" writing the "smaller American fiction" for the magazines, does not use the phrase "local color sketch," but what he describes is recognizable as such. These writers, he argued, "seek to portray the ideal in the real, not the real without the ideal" (439). Richardson appreciates the way their stories make "admirable" use of the "details of ordinary life," but he especially admired the conflation of both a realistic and an idealistic perspective in the plotting of these stories, praising their "fashion of plain truth-telling . . . which nevertheless remembers that life has its color and romance as well as its dun tameness, and that from its wood and ashes the fire of aspiration flames up toward the ideal" (415-16). According to Richardson, the local colorists, in contrast to the "Realists" who depict life "shorn of sentiment," create stories that depict the full range of human experience (431).

Burlingame, too, expressed approval of this double perspective in his favorable review of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *That Lass o' Lowrie's*, which he reviewed in the same article as the James review already cited. The story, set in the "coal-region of English Lancashire," features a "pit-girl surrounded by every kind

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of coarsening influence" (318). Burlingame praises the novel for "the excellence of its local color," and he especially admires Burnett's ability to "brin[g] out the whole womanliness of this girl's nature" and to "sho[w] her development into an altogether different being" without "call[ing] in cant or impossible absurdities to aid her in the task" (318). Burlingame seems to appreciate the way Burnett's tale shows the triumph of the heroic spirit; the pit-girl rises above the influences of her environment to become something "different," in other words, a lady. However, this triumph of the heroic does not come at the expense of a realistic depiction of the girl's surroundings and experiences. Without "cant or impossible absurdities," Burnett transforms a commonplace girl into a type of heroine. In other words, Burnett's local-color mode is capable of depicting the ideal without losing too much realism in the process.

One can imagine the young Edith Wharton of the late 1880's reading closely the articles cited above along with many others that dealt with the topic of American fiction. Certainly "Mrs. Manstey's View," when read in light of these discussions, emerges as a skillful and innovative response to calls for short fiction that combines the strengths of both realism and idealism to depict the "ideal in the real."

Mrs. Manstey's Double View

One way of thinking about "Mrs. Manstey's View" is as a talented novice's attempt to win approval of the professionals by demonstrating her knowledge and understanding of the profession to which she sought entrance. The story does indeed offer a double "view," both of Mrs. Manstey herself (pathetic, obscure old woman and heroic artist) and of the view she sees from her third-floor window (sordid, untidy, and a living canvas that depicts the timeless dramas of human existence). This double vision is embedded in the language and structure of the story, which itself explores the apparent conflict, if not the mutual exclusiveness, of the realistic and idealistic points of view. However, as I will argue, Wharton disrupts this high-culture debate between idealism and realism by introducing a third discourse, the political discourse surrounding the spread of tenements in New York City. In doing so, Wharton's story suggests that neither the idealistic nor the realistic view finally offers a satisfactory narrative perspective.

"Mrs. Manstey's View" is carefully structured to incorporate both a realistic and an idealistic account of the story's subject, but the balance of power between the two views is a complicated one. The story's opening is loaded with rhetorical markers of realism, and in particular of the sub-genre of realism sometimes called the "New York story." The ordinariness of the subject is announced in the first clause – "The view from Mrs.

Manstey's window was not a striking one" – suggesting that the young writer had studied her Howells and had internalized his views about the importance of literature reflecting ordinary life. In addition, the narrator's language, with its detached tone and classical references, evokes the scientific observer so typical of realistic fiction. For example, when the narrator tells us that Mrs. Manstey lived "in a street where the ash barrels lingered late on the sidewalk and the gaps in the pavement would have staggered a Quintus Curtius" we recognize the outlines of Burlingame's *spectator ab extra* – a gazer from the outside who maintains a distance, emotional and cultural, from the object of the gaze (3). This distance remains intact during the description of Mrs. Manstey herself as an "uncommunicative old woman" whose extreme loneliness causes her to "cling so fervently to her view from her window, a view in which the most optimistic eye would at first have failed to discover anything admirable" (3-4). The "realism" of Mrs. Manstey's situation, that is, her position as an ordinary woman in a world over which she has no control, is augmented by allusions to the naturalistic forces that have shaped it – death, migration, illness, and old age. Her husband is dead, leaving her poor and alone. Her only daughter has married and moved to California, and even the limited contact provided by letter-writing is circumscribed by a "right hand . . . growing stiff with gout." Her existence is also defined by a harsh, urban environment, and she is estranged from the natural setting that traditionally provides the starting point for the idealizing vision. Although she had at one time harbored a nostalgic longing to live in a house in the country, with "a henhouse and a garden," she now only feels a "vague tenderness for plants and animals." To emphasize this estrangement from nature, the narrator describes the "ivy and a succession of unwholesome-looking bulbs" that she "nurse[s]" in the very window from which she observes her view. As for the view itself, the narrator describes it as a colorless cityscape: a block of untidy backyards, littered with rubbish barrels, empty bottles, and, periodically, clotheslines full of "miscellaneous garments and frayed tablecloths." Within the context of this sordid, "realistic" setting, Mrs. Manstey has no real power, no room for the play of her individuality or personal expression.

This realistic narrative voice introduces both situation and conflict, and therefore may be said to be in control of the narrative, but beginning in the third paragraph a new voice emerges. The narrator is still speaking, but its voice becomes more passionate and empathetic as it describes the view from Mrs. Manstey's perspective. Furthermore, once the description of the view itself begins the narration is for a time completely usurped by Mrs. Manstey's idealizing vision. Within a few sentences, the backyards visible from the window are

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transformed from "stony wastes, with grass in the cracks of the pavement and no shade in spring," into a "long vista" in which Mrs. Manstey, from her "coign of vantage," finds "much to admire." Along with the elevated diction ("vista" and "coign"), words expressing strong feeling emerge. Mrs. Manstey "love[s]" the "green yards." A cook in one house receives her "warmest sympathies" for secretly feeding the alley cats in the evenings. On one occasion, her "feelings [are] racked by the neglect of a housemaid, who for two days forgot to feed the parrot committed to her care" (4). Mrs. Manstey's emotional involvement with the objects of her gaze thus marks her as the antithesis of the *spectator ab extra*. Neither critic nor analyst, she is thoroughly a "sharer . . . of strong feeling" (Burlingame 310). Her position is that of neither scientist nor photographer, to evoke Howells' terms. Indeed, her perception aligns her closely with the local colorists that Charles Richardson had praised, those writers who realize that "life has its color and romance as well as its dun tameness" (415).

In fact, as the description of Mrs. Manstey's view continues, the narrative voice fully becomes that of an idealist and a colorist. In an impassioned series of rhetorical questions, the narrator enacts a Romantic transformation of the landscape into a narrative of timeless truths:

In the very next enclosure did not a magnolia open its hard white flowers against the watery blue of April? And was there not, a little way down the line, a fence foamed over every May by lilac waves of wisteria? Farther still, a horse chestnut lifted its candelabra of buff and pink blossoms above broad fans of foliage; while in the opposite yard June was sweet with the breath of a neglected syringa, which persisted in growing in spite of the countless obstacles opposed to its welfare. (4)

This highly figurative description of the landscape is dense with personification, reflecting Mrs. Manstey's self-projection onto it. Like a Romantic lyric poet, Mrs. Manstey's openness to the beauties of nature is the prelude to her "reading" it as the embodiment of human experience.

In fact, in her response to the landscape, this "uncommunicative old woman" becomes a type of hero-artist, "an artist at heart . . . sensible of many changes of color unnoticed by the average eye" (5). In a detail that faintly echoes the opening section of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," we learn that Mrs. Manstey notices "the trail of smoke from a far-off factory chimney, and misse[s] a detail in the landscape when the factory close[s] and the smoke disappear[s]" (5). As if to reinforce this allusion to English Romantic poetry, the

narrator tells us that Mrs. Manstey often enters, while observing the view, a "more meditative mood" in which she "ios[es] herself" in the contemplation of the "distant brownstone spire . . . melting in the fluid yellow of the west." Like the view of the Wye for Wordsworth's speaker, Mrs. Manstey's view is capable of evoking in her the "blessed mood / . . . / In which the heavy and the weary weight of all this unintelligible world, / Is lightened." As she gazes on her view, Mrs. Manstey seems to rise above the actualities of the sordid world around her.

Mrs. Manstey's heightened perception is especially evident during the scene in which she learns that her view is threatened by her neighbor's plans to build an "extension" to her house, which would replace the view with a blank brick wall. Mrs. Manstey learns this news from her landlady, Mrs. Sampson, who can be seen as a caricature of the realist point of view — practical, concerned only with facts, and apparently blind to certain areas of experience.

It seemed harder than usual to turn from the blue sky and the blossoming magnolia to Mrs. Sampson's unsuggestive face . . .

"The magnolia is out earlier than usual this year, Mrs. Sampson," she remarked . . .

"The what, Mrs. Manstey?" inquired the landlady, glancing about the room as if to find there the explanation of Mrs. Manstey's statement.

"The magnolia in the next yard — in Mrs. Black's yard," Mrs. Manstey repeated.

"Is it, indeed? I didn't know there was a magnolia there," said Mrs. Sampson carelessly.

Mrs. Sampson's "view" is decidedly near-sighted, a point to which the narrator calls our attention by judging her reaction as "careless." It is the limited, practical vision of the businesswoman. Her inability to see something that is actually there — the magnolia tree — is the emblem of her blindness to what is "ideally there" as well — its beauty, its significance, its truth. Thus, in this short exchange, Wharton makes a strong case for the "reality" of the beauty Mrs. Manstey perceives in her view.

The story, however, cannot be resolved as an argument for the romantic or idealistic point of view. The outcome of this realism/idealism dialogue is disrupted by a third discourse that Wharton introduces into the story. When Mrs. Manstey learns about the extension that will block her view, her story becomes part of contemporary political discussions about the spread of tenement districts in New York City, and her neighbor, the allegorically named "Mrs. Black," emerges as what Wharton's contemporary readers would undoubtedly have recognized as a tenement builder. In December 1889 Scribner's had published

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excerpts from a new book by Jacob Riis, the New York journalist, photographer, and activist famous for his stories and real-life accounts of slum life in New York. *How the Other Half Lives* (Scribner's, 1890), an argument in words and pictures for stricter building codes to prevent building practices like Mrs. Black's, calls attention to the widespread misery caused by the unchecked greed of a few landlords. Scribner's advertised the book by featuring the excerpts as its lead story, complete with detailed photoengravings of Riis's now-famous photographs which vividly depicted the grim conditions of tenement life. Riis, like so many of his contemporaries, was clearly influenced by the philosophy of naturalism in his analysis of the tenement problem; "tenants . . . sink to the level of their surroundings," he argued. Even so, he also acknowledged the power of political action to mitigate and even overcome these effects, advocating laws that would end the practice of building "rear houses" or "rear tenements." These structures, extensions like Mrs. Black's that occupied what was once the "old garden where the stolid Dutch burgher grew his tulips or early cabbages," doubled the floor space of the original house. At the same time, they blocked the flow of light and air into the overcrowded rooms. While the earliest of these structures were only "two stories high," eventually they were, like Mrs. Black's planned extension, "carried up another story" (Riis 9). As Riis observed, the practice of building rear tenements created a desperate shortage of light and fresh air for the inhabitants of the tenement. Over time, entire blocks of these dark, poorly ventilated double houses were built up, divided only by narrow, crime-infested alleys.

In his analysis of the forces that created tenement life, Riis emphasized the force of greed, "reckless and unrestrained" (10). With the growing need for cheap housing, property owners had a strong incentive to build another structure in the backyards of existing ones. These newer structures were notoriously unsafe, often, like Mrs. Black's extension, simply attached to the existing foundation. In addition, the wooden balconies which were always tacked onto the back of such structures were hazardous firetraps, a fact that Mrs. Manstey takes advantage of near the end of the story. Riis makes it clear, however, that the force of greed can be checked by political action. In his final chapter, entitled "What Has Been Done," he begins with a review of current improvements: "[O]ne tremendous factor for evil in the lives of the poor has been taken by the throat, and something has unquestionably been done . . . It is no longer lawful to construct barracks to cover the whole lot. Air and sunlight have a legal claim, and the day of rear tenements is past" (268). Thus the chief

villain, for Riis and for Mrs. Manstey, can be defeated by means of direct political action. Riis is cautiously optimistic about the power of individuals to affect their surroundings.

For Mrs. Manstey, however, this power is elusive. We might say that she is trapped from both a "realistic" and an "idealistic" point of view. According to the former, she is defined by social forces beyond her control, such as the spread of tenements, while according to the latter she is the type of solitary artist whose penchant for "meditative moods" cuts her off from society and therefore from the possibility of engaging in collective political action. Even her attempts to take action to preserve her (idealistic) view, first through bribery then through arson, are futile because she tries to act alone. Individual action, though perhaps heroic, is ineffective.

The closing paragraphs of the story are worth quoting at length because of their remarkable conflation of language that suggests that ultimate triumph of the ideal with that suggesting its defeat by the real:

They carried Mrs. Manstey to the window and placed her in her chair. The dawn was abroad, a jubilant spring dawn; the spire had already caught a golden ray, though the magnolia and horse-chestnut still slumbered in shadow. In Mrs. Black's yard all was quiet. The charred timbers of the balcony lay where they had fallen. It was evident that since the fire the builders had not returned to their work. The magnolia had unfolded a few more sculptural flowers; the view was undisturbed.

It was hard for Mrs. Manstey to breathe; each moment it grew more difficult. She tried to make them open the window, but they would not understand. If she could have tasted the air, sweet with the penetrating ailanthus savor, it would have eased her; but the view at least was there — the spire was golden now, the heavens had warmed from pearl to blue, day was alight from east to west, even the magnolia had caught the sun.

Mrs. Manstey's head fell back and smiling she died.

That day the building of the extension was resumed. (11)

Again, the idealizing voice that describes the view is powerfully present, yet its value is undercut by the symbolism of the closed window. As always, Mrs. Manstey is cut off from the landscape itself, experiencing it only optically, as a "view." Even so, as the passage progresses, the closed window is no obstacle to Mrs. Manstey's emotional, imaginative involvement with the view, as the highly figurative

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language suggests. The "golden spire," the "warm heavens," and the personified magnolia that "catches" the sun are all emblematic of Mrs. Manstey's enduring ability to find meaning in the view. In addition, her happy ending – she dies "smiling" – is a tangible benefit derived from her romantic response to the view.

The last sentence, of course, with its somber irony undermines once again the power of Mrs. Manstey's idealizing vision. The reality of Mrs. Black's extension has not been eradicated by the power of Mrs. Manstey's view. In fact, Mrs. Manstey's apparent belief that the building had been halted permanently is an illusion, a fact that highlights, perhaps, the illusory nature of Mrs. Manstey's "view" of her view. Yet reading the threatened extension in light of Jacob Riis's analysis of tenement building might lead readers to conclude that the social force that threatens Mrs. Manstey's idealism is not an inevitability of environment, but a production of individual human will that can be countered by the exercise of collective political action.

"Mrs. Manstey's View" performs a difficult balancing act between two world views. In fact, the story succeeds in being the type of story that Charles Richardson admired in 1889, one that "portray[s] the ideal in the real." Yet the story is more complicated than a simple response to the desires of late-nineteenth-century critics. As Wharton disrupts the conflict between realism and idealism and leaves it unresolved, she suggests that neither view alone can offer a satisfactory narrative perspective. Just as Mrs. Manstey attempts to burn down the wall that threatens to obstruct her idealistic, and idealizing, view, Wharton's story seems to be an attempt to burn down another "wall" in the literary marketplace – the one that separates realism and idealism. As the story demonstrates, the "realistic" viewer, maintaining a proper scientific detachment, is in danger of missing the magnolia in the next yard, while the "idealistic" viewer is in danger of isolation and self-absorption. The future of fiction, Edith Wharton might have asserted in 1891, must lie somewhere beyond the terms of this debate.

Notes

¹ For an account of the battle over international copyright laws and its effects on the American literary marketplace, see Wilson 63-74.

² Expressions of fear regarding "foreign influence" on American fiction, and in particular negative references to Zola, are numerous in literary journals at the time Wharton began publishing in them. A few notable examples include a series of comments in the *North American Review* in 1889. Albion Tourgee, in the March 1889 issue, lamented the fact that "our criticism and our

literary art have, in a certain diluted form, come to be French in their tendency" (387). A few months later, Maurice Thompson, writing in response to the failure of international copyright, struck a dire note of warning in asserting that "an alien art brings with it a touch of the foreign soil and a waft of the foreign air. The civilization of Great Britain is the opposite of a Republican civilization; that of France is even more pronounced in its attitude of antagonism to that crystal purity of democratic patriotism upon which, if upon anything, must forever depend the perpetuity of our national life. The political nihilism and the social gloom and pessimism of Russian fiction are said to be fairly representative of the trend of Russian national influence" (118). And still later that year, Edgar Saltus referred to naturalism as "that silk stocking filled with mud" (584). But the *North American Review* was not alone in its distaste for Zola and . A writer for the *Atlantic Monthly's* "Contributor's Club" in 1887 compared Zola's art to photography, which "has its limitations, and its perspective is invariably false. Zola's pictures of French social life and manners are obviously the grossest exaggerations. Society, as he reflects it, could not hold together a twelve-month" (572). Even William Dean Howells, in his "Editor's Study" for August 1891, lamented the "decay in the morality of our fiction" evident in the selection of novels at a newsstand: "Some of these romances were translations from Continental tongues; there were, of course, the reprints of English novels of much innocenter aspect, but these looked dull; and the native American fiction was modelled outwardly, and too probably inwardly, upon that of the Latin tongue" (476).

³ In her recent book, *Reading for Realism*, Nancy Glazener devotes a chapter to what she calls the "Romantic revival" of the 1890's. She associates this movement with the work of a single prominent literary critic, Agnes Repplier, whom Glazener discusses as an antagonist to the literary elite associated with the "Atlantic group," a tightly-knit group of literary magazines that included the magazines I cite in this article. Repplier consciously opposed herself to William Dean Howells, and her critique of realism lamented the "decay of sentiment" in American fiction. Glazener's analysis of the political implications of this backlash is fascinating, although I would argue that the backlash itself was more widespread during the 1890's than she implies.

⁴ Wolff, for example, discusses Wharton's early fiction as "landscapes of desolation" and "tantalizing failure[s]" — tantalizing because of their haunting depictions of "the gradual loss of self," but failures because "they carry the cumbersome freight of Wharton's unresolved emotional difficulties" (62, 68). Such "primitive representations of self," Wolff argues, cannot be taken seriously as fiction

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(80). Elizabeth Ammons, in *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, agrees with Wolff that "much of this [early] fiction . . . records the author's personal misery" (3). Ammons then dismisses Wharton's work during the 1890's on the basis of her "failure to emancipate a single one of her female characters" (10).

⁵ Shari Benstock's 1994 biography, *No Gifts from Chance*, does much to revise our understanding of Wharton's apprentice years. Where R. W. B. Lewis had characterized the 1890's as a relatively unproductive time, marred by "a recurring and desolating mental depression" (74), Benstock, drawing on a large body of unpublished sources, suggests that Wharton was much more active, physically and intellectually, than Lewis suggests. Stretches of time that Lewis notes as periods of creative inactivity, Benstock reveals as filled with work on a variety of projects: buying and decorating houses, working on writing other than fiction, and entertaining friends.

Donna Campbell, too, in *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1885-1915* (1997), assumes that Wharton was intellectually active during the 1890's, describing her as "an ambitious woman writer responding to the 1890s transition between" the literary movements of women's local color and naturalism (148).

More recently Hildegard Hoeller in *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimentalism* (2000) discusses Wharton's awareness of the realist critique of sentimental "excess," an awareness that Hoeller dates back to the juvenile work, "Fast and Loose." Hoeller argues against the dominant view in Wharton criticism that Wharton consciously rejected sentimentalism in order to align herself and her work with the realists. Instead, Hoeller argues for the presence of an ongoing "dialogue" in Wharton's work "between female sentimental expression and a male literary taste preferring irony, economy, and realism" (Hoeller 53).

Ellen Dupree, too, in a recent issue of *Edith Wharton Review* offers a survey of Wharton's correspondence with her editors, illuminating Wharton's talents as a business woman in the literary marketplace. ⁶ My understanding of Wharton's apprenticeship is partly influenced by the work of anthropologist Jack Haas. Drawing on studies of a variety of apprentice groups, Haas finds important similarities in the ways apprentices think about audience. According to Haas, apprentices initially think of audience in terms of mentors, and thus they begin their work in a "ritual posture of deference" (87). Their first task is to demonstrate their willingness to conform to the norms of the profession. Yet very quickly the usefulness of this posture is exhausted, as apprentices realize that to impress their "legitimizers," they must "demonstrat[e] . . . both conformity and novelty, or initiative-taking" (88). This account of the early

stages of apprenticeship sheds light on Wharton's strategies in her early stories.

⁷ Short stories published in the leading literary magazines served as a kind of advertising for the publishing houses with which the magazines were connected. Henry James and William Dean Howells, for example, were publishing short stories in *Atlantic Monthly* even as the magazine's owner, Ticknor and Fields of Boston, were publishing their novels. Edith Wharton herself struggled with her editor at *Scribner's Magazine* when he insisted that her first short-story collection, *The Greater Inclination* (1899) could not be published until several stories had appeared in the magazine (Dupree 7). The practice of serializing novels in the literary magazines before their publication in book form by the magazines' publishers was also widespread.

⁸ In a memoir by Charles Scribner, Jr., the son of Wharton's publisher, Scribner emphasizes his and his father's dedication to American literature. Scribner's was committed to publishing only American fiction.

⁹ See Michael Winship, *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (1995), for a detailed analysis of the business practices of Ticknor and Fields.

¹⁰ Ever since George Santayana's 1911 lecture on the "genteel tradition" in American literature, it has been a commonplace of American literary criticism to excoriate the editor-critics of the late nineteenth century for their emasculating effects on American literature of the period. This point has perhaps been overemphasized. For a revisionist account of the role of the editor-critics, and their concern with protecting a developing American literary culture, see Schneirov 36-37.

¹¹ No critic, of course, can write about realism without acknowledging the complex (and lively) debates surrounding this term over the last two decades. As literary criticism became more informed by literary theory, the concept of realism became deeply problematized. Howells' project to avoid the "literary" and focus on the "real," it is argued, ignores the ways that any use of language shapes "reality" in ways that are politically, culturally, and historically specific. June Howard's influential study of the genre, *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (1985), for example, argues that "the real exists . . . but no text embodies it. As soon as I speak of the real it has become a text, has been transformed into a shaped reality by the very language that made it accessible" (14). Amy Kaplan, surveying the field from the perspective of New Historicism in *The Social Construction of American Realism* (1988), finds that "[r]ealistic narratives . . . actively construc[t] the coherent social world they represent; and they do this not in a vacuum of fictionality but in direct confrontation with the elusive process of social change" (9). Michael Davitt Bell, in *The Problem of Realism: Studies in the Cultural History of a Literary Idea*

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(1993), notes that thinking of the practice of realism as a "kind of generalized response to rapid social change" leads to the fallacy of making literature "secondary to the social or historical 'reality' it is supposed to reflect" and thus "denies the literary quality of literary work" (2).

For my purposes here, I am less concerned with how modern critics should understand the literature produced during the last thirty years or so of the nineteenth century than I am with how critics of the day understood their project. I agree with Bell that there seems to be no "coherent formal tradition" that we can call American realism, but that we cannot wholly dispense with the term "American realism" (4). Instead, we must ask what purpose the term served for the writers and critics who used it.

¹² It is worth emphasizing here that these critics' pronouncements were perhaps more powerful shaping forces of American fiction than current readers can readily appreciate. As David Shumway notes in *Creating American Civilization*, literary criticism at this time was primarily in the hands of the magazine editors, since American literature had not yet been institutionalized in the universities. Thus such editor-critics as Gilder, Howells, and Burlingame exercised enormous influence not only on what was read but also on what was written.

¹³ The name most closely associated with the "New York story" at the time Wharton was beginning to write short fiction was H. C. Bunner, editor of *Punch* magazine and a frequent contributor to *Scribner's* and *The Century*. Bunner's *Story of a New York House* (1887) was serialized in the first several issues of *Scribner's*, and the following year the same magazine published his three-part *Natural Selection: A Romance of Chelsea Village and East Hampton Town*. That Wharton was familiar with and perhaps enjoyed Bunner's work is suggested by the title of her novella, *Bunner Sisters*, written in 1892.

¹⁴ The "spirit of wretched pedantry" that Howells evokes in his famous "cardboard grasshopper" essay faults the scientist's interest in the "real" grasshopper by saying, "The thing that you are proposing to do is commonplace; but if you say that it isn't commonplace, for the very reason that it hasn't been done before, you'll have to admit that it's photographic" (155).

¹⁵ See Hildegard Hoeller's *Edith Wharton's Dialogue with Realism and Sentimental Fiction* for a convincing account of how Wharton used the sentimental voice throughout her career to critique the limitations of male realism.

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Wharton's Suicides

Jared Stark
Cornell University

On May 28, 1879, the front page of the New York *World* carried the story of the suicide of a twelve-year-old boy, Harry Ackley, in a Philadelphia juvenile reformatory. After a week of solitary confinement imposed following a feeble attempt to escape the institution, Ackley had hung himself from the bars of his cell window, it was reported, "with a deliberateness of purpose appalling when it is considered that he was a mere child" ("Suicide of a Little Boy"). The article also noted, however, that Ackley's act must have been "impelled" by the conditions of his incarceration.

Indeed, a page-four editorial on the same day accused the boy's wardens of "homicide by official stupidity," while his mother charged that her son had died not by his own hands but of "mistreatment" ("The Ackley Suicide"). The more detailed coverage in the Philadelphia *Press* expanded the scope of institutional responsibility: only by chance and journalistic tenacity was the "mysterious secret" of the boy's death uncovered, raising questions about both the disciplinary methods of the House of Refuge (the name of which, the newspapers noted, had acquired ironic overtones) and its public accountability ("Driven to Death," "The Ackley Atrocity"). Stories over the following days would report "other and worse cases of cruelty," and would bring debate over reformatory practices "to a white heat" ("The Latest Horror").

Among the items dealing with Ackley's death was an eighty-line poem printed in the *World* on May 30, 1879 over the pseudonym "Eadgyth." Edith Wharton would recall the circumstances surrounding her writing and publication of this poem some forty years later: "I had read an account of a little boy who had been put in the 'lock-up' for some childish offence, & had hanged himself in the night. This appealed to the morbid strain in my nature, & I wrote a poem on the subject, which I sent to the Editor of one of the New York papers—I think the *World*" ("Life and I," 1091). The poem, even in its title, "Only a Child," captured the prevailing sentiment of the press coverage. How could a mere child have been subjected to such harsh treatment? And how could a mere child be accused of deliberately taking his own life? Yet the title also asks about the child's particular agency, about the exceptional ability of his action ("Only a Child") to expose invisible forms of institutional oppression. Not simply an event dictated by external forces, the boy's suicide constituted for Wharton an active appeal demanding a response. The writer of "Only a Child" answers this demand not only by retelling the story of the boy's death, but also by issuing through it an appeal of her own. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff observes, the publication of "Only a Child" marked Wharton's "one youthful literary triumph" (47).

The poem gathers significance not only from the

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IN MEMORIAM

The members of The Edith Wharton Society mourn the passing of Scott Marshall, until recently, a Vice-President at The Mount. He was known to us not only as an excellent scholar, especially in films, but also as a kind and inspiring friend. He will be sorely missed.

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role it played in Wharton's literary career, but also from the continued hold stories of suicide would have on her literary imagination, whether in marginal roles—in novels such as *The Fruit of the Tree*, *The Children*, and *The Mother's Recompense*, and in a number of short stories—or, more prominently, in *Sanctuary* (1903), *The House of Mirth* (1905), *Ethan Frome* (1911), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929), and *The Gods Arrive* (1932). That suicide figured critically in Wharton's literary development is underscored by the final two novels, which, indirectly recalling Wharton's own first publication, feature a novelist whose first work of fiction concerns his own attempted suicide. Certain biographical data may link Wharton's interest in suicide to personal circumstances—perhaps most directly the suicide of her father-in-law in 1891 and her own thoughts of suicide, confided at least once to Henry James (Lewis 238). But Wharton's fiction, I would argue, is less preoccupied with her own possible suicide than with the question of what suicide means for modern life and modern fiction—that is, of what it means to live and write as the surviving witness to another's self-destruction. In Wharton's fiction, as I hope to demonstrate, suicidal thoughts and acts appear not simply as effects or symptoms of prior causes, but rather as critical and necessary forms of engagement with the personal, political, and cultural consequences of modernity.

I. The limits of identification ("Only a Child")

Wharton's autobiographical writings make clear the importance of the publication of "Only a Child." In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton places the poem's publication, contrary to fact, before the private and extremely limited printing of *Verses* in late 1878, making it, as Millicent Bell observes, "a more significant starting-point for the new writer" (Bell, "'Eadgyth' Wharton," 64). The narrative placement of the episode, immediately after a famously chilling moment when an "icy comment" from Wharton's mother "shook [her] crudely out of [her] dream of writing fiction," further casts the writing and publication of the poem as acts of resistance to familial and social norms, constituting what Wharton calls "a moment of unheard-of audacity" (*Backward* 73). This sense of defiance continues in Wharton's account of her refusal to "cabin [her] Muse with [the] bounds" of metrical convention; rather than revise her composition, she prefaced it with a note—addressed to no less a figure than "the Editor of the World"—"apologizing for the fact that my metre was 'irregular,' but adding firmly that, though I was only a little girl, I wished this irregularity to be respected as it was 'intentional'" (74).

What does it mean that this first experiment in authorship, this first challenge to the silencing regime of family and society, takes a suicide as its occasion? Despite what has been characterized as the moralizing tone of the poem (Benstock, *Gifts* 37), "Only a Child," by focusing on the forced inactivity of the boy's hands (featured in eight of ten stanzas) and on his silenced voice, produces a material connection between boy and writer in which the latter, while identifying her own plight with the boy's imprisonment, simultaneously contests the suppression of her own voice by giving voice to the boy's suffering and dying. In this light, "Only a Child" might anticipate the gesture of Justine Brent in *The Fruit of the Tree*, who, responding to a romantic disappointment, writes "the history of a damsel similarly wronged. In her tale, the heroine killed herself; but the author, saved by this vicarious sacrifice, lived, and in time even smiled over her manuscript" (2:218). This sort of melodramatic or "morbid" identification, however, only partly accounts for Wharton's choice of theme. Also at stake in the poem is the young writer's attempt to address a matter of pressing public interest. For the *World's* attention to Ackley's suicide was hardly unusual. In 1879, suicides were reported almost daily, often on the front pages, while concern over a suicide epidemic dated back at least two decades. In their attention not only to the boy himself but to institutional and social conditions, the articles surrounding Harry Ackley's death can be considered emblematic of a larger discourse around the social and moral meaning of suicide in which "Only a Child" seeks to participate. Like the newspaper items to which it responds, "Only a Child" indicts the boy's wardens of criminal negligence and laments a more general climate of indifference. In echoing and developing the arguments of the *World's* editorial writer and of Ackley's mother, "Only a Child" marks the beginning of Wharton's lifelong engagement with issues of popular cultural concern, an engagement that served both to convey deeply held opinions and to negotiate the demands of the literary marketplace.

The poem's narrator thus appears as both a fellow disenfranchised victim and as an empowered, external observer. This dual position, however, induces anxiety. What does it mean to identify with a suicide? What does it mean to indict others for its occurrence? Although the poem begins in an accusatory tone, the first-person plural subject of its concluding line implicates the author in the child's death: "And the Father has room in heaven/ For the children we don't want here!" (l. 79-80). Allied with the "they" who only heed the boy's suffering belatedly, the poem faces an interpretive dilemma. To hold the boy responsible for his own end would be to exonerate the social conditions that allowed his death, while to hold others responsible is to elide the possibility of the boy's agency altogether and so effectively to reinstate his silence and passivity. Instead,

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the writer figures the boy's death as a blank:

His little hands had nought to do
 But beat against the wall,
 Until at last too tired they grew—
 Poor little hands, so small!
 And so he lay there voiceless,
 Alone upon the ground;
 If he wept, his tears were noiseless,
 For he feared to hear their sound.

At last perhaps the silence grew
 Too deep—it dazed his head—
 And his little hands had naught to do;
 And so—they found him dead! (l. 57-68)

In depicting the boy's death as the result of inactivity and silence, and not as a form of active resistance, the poem casts doubt on its own expressive capability: at the moment of the boy's death, the poem itself falls silent. The hiatus that marks the moment of his death ("And so—") draws the limit of both identification and interpretation, and consequently calls into question the poet's ability to ground her own act of writing on the site of the boy's suicide. Indeed, when read together with the newspaper article that depicted Ackley in his cell with "nothing to read, nothing to do; only the floor upon which to sit, and only his thoughts to keep him company" ("Suicide of a Little Boy"), it becomes unclear whether the poem says anything in its own voice about the scene or instead merely reproduces the newspaper's language.

The only place where the poem may maintain the possibility of the child's agency—that is, the possibility that the child's suicide is a meaningful appeal in itself and not simply a futile symptom of madness or concession—would be in the almost imperceptible orthographic shift from "nought" (l. 57) to "naught" (l. 67), where the latter includes in its semantic field the sense of something destructive ("naughty") not included in its partial synonym "nought." The "noiseless" and "voiceless" child takes his own life, as it were, in the unvoiced alteration of *o* into *a*. Is this orthographic shift simply an oversight? Or does it constitute another "intentional irregularity"? With no way to resolve this question, the agency of the text, like that of the child, remains irretrievably mediated by the institutions that regulate and produce it (as juvenile delinquent, as published poem). By the same token, agency is not entirely erased by this mediation, since for each there remains the possibility of *intentional error*, of something that might seem to be a mistake or lapse but that nonetheless may be "intentional." Binary categories of

intended and unintended action, which in turn dictate attributions of guilt and innocence, become insufficient for grasping the significance of the boy's death. For the poem situates the boy's death at a moment where both the boy's and the poem's intentions become radically uncertain. In providing a model or pretext for the writer's "moment of unheard-of audacity," the boy's "appalling act" thus exposes the poem and its readers to the limits of interpretation. The poem, consequently, can allow the unintelligibility of the boy's suicide only by risking its own intelligibility.

II. Symptoms of modernity ("A Cup of Cold Water," Sanctuary)

In exploring the ethical and political implications of another's suicide, Wharton's writing responds to and participates in a notable turn-of-the-century shift in the ways suicide is conceptualized. For by the end of the nineteenth century, industrialization, secularization, and political revolution had decisively unsettled traditional attitudes towards self-destruction and the institutions that enforced them, affecting both laws concerning suicide and its cultural meanings. With suicide no longer officially marked as inhuman, sinful, or criminal, with the corpses of suicides no longer subject to desecration nor their estates to forfeiture, with the decline of political structures organized around the sovereign's right to kill, it became possible, and necessary, to reconsider what suicide meant and how it could be defined and interpreted. Conversely, debates over the meaning of suicide became a privileged site for late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century efforts to discover, invent, or limn the conditions of modern selfhood and society. Wharton's interest in suicide can be helpfully illuminated by juxtaposing her early fiction with representative turn-of-the-century discussions of suicide by William James and Emile Durkheim.

In his 1895 lecture "Is Life Worth Living?," William James seeks to develop an argument against suicide. Rather than adhere to traditional metaphysical or theological preconceptions or to the suicide taboo, however, James adopts a fundamentally modern position according to which suicide is taken to be *a priori* both conceivable and legitimate: "That life is *not* worth living the whole army of suicides declare.... We, too, as we sit here in our comfort, must 'ponder these things' also, for we are of one substance with these suicides, and their life is the life we share" (38). This solidarity means that the argument against self-killing must find a new basis and form: "What I propose is to imagine ourselves reasoning with a fellow-mortal who is on such terms with life that the only comfort left him is to brood on the assurance, 'You may end it when you will'" (39). The imagined scenario of an empathetic dialogue

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presages some of the cultural and institutional changes that would take place at the beginning of the twentieth century, when, for instance, the first suicide prevention organizations were formed—a short-lived “anti-suicide commission” in Cleveland in 1905 (“Mr. Johnson’s Latest Experiment”), the National Save-A-Life League in New York City in 1906, and the Anti-Suicide Bureaus of the Salvation Army, the first of which opened in London the same year (Colt 287-9). These organizations, like James’s lecture, signal a transfer of responsibility from the suicide, or potential suicide, to the community.

Yet to assume responsibility for another’s possible suicide, James’s argument suggests, is to admit the possibility of one’s own. The affirmation of the right to die thus effects a change in the very nature and meaning of suicide: “The certainty that you now *may* step out of life whenever you please, and that to do so is not blasphemous or monstrous, is itself an immense relief. The thought of suicide is no longer a guilty challenge and an obsession” (45). Whereas the prohibition of suicide posits it as an exceptional act—whether exceptional as a crime, sin, or symptom of madness, on the one hand, or as an act of martyrdom or rebellion, on the other—the affirmation of the right to die vitiates its exceptionality. The reason for refraining from suicide is no longer that it severs one from the community, but rather that it would fail to demonstrate or effect such a division. Life is worth living because I can—but refuse to—commit suicide: “It is only by risking our persons from one hour to the next that we live at all” (53). Suicide becomes the sign and promise of self-determination precisely at the moment it is rejected.

“A Cup of Cold Water,” the penultimate story in *The Greater Inclination* (1899), stages and assesses the consequences of the modern attitude towards suicide I associate with James. The decline of metaphysical truths that structures James’s inquiry is mirrored in Wharton’s story by the loss of ethical absolutes: “Was not the staunchest code of ethics but a trunk with a series of false bottoms? Now and then one had the illusion of getting to absolute right or wrong, but it was only a false bottom—a removable hypothesis—with another false bottom underneath. There was no getting beyond the relative” (158). Based on this pointed assessment of modernity, Wharton’s protagonist, a bank clerk named Woburn, decides to flee the country to evade embezzlement charges after a series of failed financial speculations. The critical scene in the story takes place in that eminently modern setting, a hotel, the night before his planned flight. Upon hearing sobs from the adjoining room, Woburn peers through the keyhole to witness a woman holding a revolver and preparing her suicide note. As she lifts the gun to her head, he breaks down

the door:

“I saw what you were going to do and I had to stop you”

She looked at him for a moment in silence, and he saw the terrified flutter of her breast; then she said, “No one can stop me for long. And besides, what right have you—”

“Everyone has the right to prevent a crime,” he returned, the sound of the last word sending the blood to his forehead.

“I deny it,” she said passionately. “Everyone who has tried to live and has failed has the right to die.” (162)

Woburn’s flushed reaction to his own utterance signals both his identification with Ruby Lee—he realizes that from the perspective of his employers he too is a criminal—and a recognition that in labeling her act a crime he reproduces the false-bottomed ethics of which he sought and seeks to disburden himself. Ruby Lee’s affirmation of the right to die forces this realization and leads him to attempt another mode of intervention, consonant with James’s imagined dialogue: “Tell me what has gone wrong, and let’s see if there’s no other way out of it” (162). Ruby Lee’s difficulties, like Woburn’s, are financial; having left her husband for another man only to be in turn abandoned, she is penniless and without means to afford her hotel bill and train fare back to the Midwest. As the title of the story predicts, Woburn successfully cools Ruby Lee’s suicidal passion. This is achieved, however, not by rekindling her will to live nor by creating a better or different future, but simply, in a gesture that seems to encapsulate James’s reasoning, by extinguishing the urgency of her determination to die: “It was curious how her passion was spending itself in words; he saw that she would never kill herself while she had anyone to talk to” (164). Ruby Lee is saved, not (as romantic convention would have it) through a revitalizing affirmation of a passionate attachment to the world or to another, but rather through an encounter with a stranger whose disinterested and dispassionate listening seems to allow her to attain a certain distance from her own situation. Similarly, Woburn’s own “thought of flight” is cancelled by his encounter with Ruby Lee. Though he is left alone with her revolver and seems on the verge of using it, he too decides against suicide, and instead returns to the bank the next day to “face the future which the last hours had prepared for him” (171). But whether Woburn and Ruby Lee enter the future capable of resisting the forces that first led to their suicidal gestures remains unresolved. For although both relinquish their thoughts of suicide in order to live, as James would put it, “from day to day,” they remain no less isolated than before, and are again subject to conditions identical to those they initially sought to escape. In their last moment together, as Woburn installs

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Ruby on a train returning to the Midwest, the narrative registers the alienating effects of their return to social space: "he felt that the people in the other seats were staring at them" (170). A few hours later, Woburn will think of Ruby Lee on her homebound train with a touch of self-satisfaction. But his refusal to give her his address or full name has also permanently severed their relationship. The story thus evinces a deep suspicion of the ethics of suicide prevention. For if ethics demand Woburn's intervention at Ruby Lee's moment of crisis, it is less clear that survival constitutes an unqualified good. Indeed, the story asks whether a chance to defy convention and to transform the future has been missed, or even whether such defiance and transformation are possible. In the end, Woburn and Ruby Lee's return to social anonymity casts a shadow on Jamesian pragmatic optimism, pointing instead to the wings where forces beyond Woburn's and Ruby Lee's control—the forces of desire as well as of economic and social structures—remain untouched.

In immersing both the would-be suicide and the witness or samaritan in an inescapable social field, "A Cup of Cold Water" moves towards the sociological interpretation of suicide developed over the course of the nineteenth century and consolidated by Durkheim in his 1897 *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. For Durkheim, as for James, there is no difference in principle between the suicide and the non-suicide, no intrinsic monstrosity or madness, heroism or genius, in the one who takes her own life. Consequently, suicide must be recognized as a potentially meaningful, relevant act. But where suicide for James sheds light on individual, internal meaning, for Durkheim its significance pertains to "realities external to the individual" (37-8). Whereas, for James, the other's suicide challenges me to consider (and reject) my own possible suicide, and therefore allows me to perceive myself as a self-determining individual, for Durkheim, the other's suicide proves the determining power of social conditions. Suicides are significant for Durkheim to the extent that they generate the statistics that tell the story and diagnose the present conditions of a given society. These statistics become, rather than signs of personal or private meaning or difference, transparent signifiers granting the sociologist access to the "real" social dynamics that determine individual behavior. Sociology thus manages to acknowledge the potentially communicative dimension of suicide while also disallowing the suicide's heroism or radical alterity.

Kate Orme's efforts to grasp the social and ethical meanings of suicide in Wharton's second novella, *Sanctuary*, published in 1903, can be set against the background of the sociological interpretation of suicide in that the novel addresses the fundamental questions of sociological inquiry: What impact does suicide have on

society? How is society implicated in the suicides of its members? And what ethical consequences does this complicity entail? In the first part of *Sanctuary*, Kate learns that a woman claiming to be the wife of her fiancé's late brother has drowned herself and her child in a nearby lake. The woman's failed lawsuit had produced a passing scandal in Kate's social world, "a darkness [that] had crossed her sky and left it as unclouded as before" (109). The discovery of the suicide, however, divides the world of *Sanctuary* in two. The Peyton family, falling back on conventional attitudes and anxious to "hush up" any scandal, attribute the woman's actions to her "fallen" nature. "Why, I suppose it was her last throw, and she was desperate; we don't know how many times she may have been through the same thing before," contends Kate's fiancé, Denis Peyton (113). Denis's mother shores up the case: "Surely religion teaches us that suicide is a sin? And to murder her child!... Of course one is shocked at the woman's crime—but, if one looks a little deeper, how can one help seeing that it may have been designed as a means of rescuing that poor child from a life of vice and misery?" (129).

Against these self-serving recriminations, the deaths of the woman and her child generate in Kate a critical perspective on society: "But hitherto she had been like some young captive brought up in a windowless palace whose painted walls she takes for the actual world. Now the palace had been shaken to the base, and through the cleft in the walls she looked out upon life" (115). Through this breach, Kate understands the suicide as a proclamation of outrage and innocence, as proof that the woman's claims were in fact legitimate. When Denis concedes this fact, as well as his own complicity in covering it up, Kate is transformed into a sort of sociologist: "She had begun to see that the fair surface of life was honeycombed by a vast system of moral sewage. Every respectable household had its arrangements for the private disposal of family scandals.... Who was she to pass judgment on the merits of such a system? The social health must be preserved: the means devised were the result of long experience and the collective instinct of self-preservation" (136). Far from exceptional, the woman's suicide and the efforts to dismiss its implications are revealed as part of a larger social pattern; indeed, the very sphere of the "private" appears here as the effect of collective interests. Anticipating one possible reading of *The House of Mirth*, the suicide of the "fallen" woman, like her dispossession, mark various ways in which the "system" disposes of that which it cannot contain.

But even as she is able to diagnose the social realities revealed by the other's suicide, Kate remains constantly aware, and in the grip of, the event that affords her this perspective. Her identification with the

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suicide thus precludes the presumed distance or neutrality of the sociologist: "I found myself exulting that you and I were so far from it—above it—safe in ourselves and each other—and then the other feeling came—the sense of selfishness, of going by on the other side; and I tried to realize that it might have been you and I who—who were down there in the night and the flood—" (116-17). Rather than appear as a symptom of deeper social dynamics, the other's suicide issues an ethical imperative, calling on her to relinquish the distanced position of spectator. Denis's reply, however, reasserts the limits of Kate's position:

"Upon my soul," he said with a laugh, "you must have a nice opinion of us both."

The words fell chillingly on the blaze of her self-immolation. Would she never learn that Denis was incapable of mounting such hypothetical pyres? He might be as alive as herself to the direct demands of duty, but of its imaginative claims he was robustly unconscious. The thought brought a wholesome reaction of thankfulness.

"Ah, well," she said, the sunset dilating through her tears, "don't you see that I can bear to think such things only because they're impossibilities? It's easy to look over into the depths if one has a rampart to lean on." (117)

Denis's failure of imagination shows that Kate can only relate to the other's suicide by transforming it into a hypothesis or fiction. This fiction seems to allow Kate to grasp her own reality, but only belatedly. She can imagine her own ethical "self-immolation" only from a position of safety that necessarily misses the significance of the very experience it seeks to fathom.

Suicide in *Sanctuary*, then, rather than provide a stable ground for the apprehension of social reality, reveals the epistemological error on which Kate's ethical and social views are based. But this error, the novella suggests, is a necessary one, the result of the structural limits or "impossibilities" that preclude knowledge of the experience of death. What separates Kate from her society, in other words, is also what separates her from herself: as she attempts to pursue the consequences of the actuality unveiled by the other's suicide, she increasingly finds herself divided between a set of outward behaviors that conform to social norms—she marries Peyton, raises a son, and watches in passive silence as he negotiates his own ethical relation to society—and a set of covert motivations, justifications, and actions that generate an internal story for her about her own resistance to and impact on her world, that is, about her ability to respond to the "imaginative claims" issued by the suicide. Thus, she imagines that by marrying

Peyton she does not endorse the system he represents but rather "might expiate and redeem his fault by becoming a refuge from its consequences" (139). When her son, like his father before him, faces "his hour, his one irrecoverable moment" (190), she pictures her own silence as a form of action. At the end of *Sanctuary*, her son seems to validate this fiction: "If you'd said a word—if you'd tried to influence me—the spell would have been broken. But just because the actual you kept apart and didn't meddle or pry, the other, the you in my heart, seemed to get a tighter hold on me" (201). If this "happy" ending realizes Kate's ethical vision, however, it also exposes the limits of her agency, which can be exercised only through another form of what she earlier called her "self-immolation." She acts only by withdrawing.

From "Only a Child" to *Sanctuary*, Wharton's fictions of suicide address not only the personal or psychological implications of self-destruction, but, more generally, the decisive role figures of suicide play in modern visions of the ethical subject and ethical society. For characters like Woburn and Kate Orme, as for thinkers like William James and Durkheim, suicide or the thought of suicide seems to grant an otherwise unobtainable purchase on reality, one that cuts through the mystifications of theology or ideology in order to expose a more authentic ground for individual or social life. And yet Wharton's fictions also insist on the limits of the witness's or interpreter's grasp of suicide, limits that undermine the effort to find in suicide a stable point of orientation. As Wharton's writing participates in the new explanatory frameworks for suicide developed in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, it also exposes the ways in which these frameworks, despite their claims to give the meaning and legitimacy of suicide its due, work to limit or vitiate the radical uncertainties to which any interpretation of suicide is subject.

III. Lucid failures ("The Portrait," The House of Mirth)

In turning to Wharton's later writing, I want to focus on the role this uncertainty plays in her representations of suicide. For if the act of suicide, as I earlier suggested, remains a crucial figure for the act of writing in Wharton's work, the above discussion suggests that the basis for this association may be less in the ways that suicide and writing might each be taken as forms of resistance, opposition, or freedom, than in the forms of indeterminacy that each involves.

"The Portrait," the final story in *The Greater Inclination*, begins to address these questions. The story takes as its situation the coincidence of two events, the suicide of a controversial politician, Alonzo Vard, and the public exhibition of a portrait of him painted some years earlier

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by a renowned portrait artist, George Lillo. It thus alludes to a tradition of stories, including Poe's "The Oval Portrait," Hawthorne's "The Prophetic Pictures," James's "The Liar," and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which portraits, by supplanting and appropriating their subject's vitality, seem to kill or induce the suicides of their subjects. As if well-versed in such tales, Lillo's audience expects the portrait to be a "masterpiece" with "the zest of an incriminating document, the scandalous attraction of secret memoirs" (175). These expectations, however, reduce the notion of artistic power over life to mere convention. Whereas Lillo's Faust-like precursors seek truth in painting only to be possessed and even destroyed by the occult force of their work, Lillo's audience—and Lillo himself—relate to the possibility of artistic creativity or destructiveness only vicariously. As one of Lillo's ardent admirers remarks: "My advice is, don't let George Lillo paint you if you don't want to be found out—or to find yourself out. That's why I've never let him do me; I'm waiting for the day of judgment" (174). Lillo similarly casts his artistic ambitions less in terms of a quest for truth than for professional success. At the beginning of a long monologue that makes up the second section of the story, he asks the narrator, "Don't you get up every morning meaning to prove you're equal to Balzac or Thackeray? That's the way I felt then; only give me a chance, I wanted to shout to them; and I saw at once that Vard was my chance" (178). Like his audience, Lillo takes for granted his power to produce a work of total authenticity: "his face was *there*, waiting for me; at times it almost shaped itself on the canvas" (181-82). He is equally confident that his painting would leave Vard's daughter's vision of her own father "in splinters" (181). But the question of whether Lillo's work would act as destructively as that of his precursors is foreclosed by an act of apparent self-censorship, in which Lillo, after erasing his own renditions of Vard's face several times, produces an expurgated likeness. What results is a painting that its audience sees as "his biggest failure" (174), but that Lillo, like the young Wharton and her metrical irregularities, insists is a "lucid failure" (176).

In contrast to the preconceptions of his audience, it should be noted, Lillo's narrative draws no material connection between the exhibition of the painting and the suicide of its subject. Indeed, he makes no mention of his subject's death nor of any possible role his work may have played in inducing it. Wharton's story does not fill the gaps in Lillo's monologue. The narrator reports that Vard committed suicide "strangely enough" (174) on the day of the painting's exhibition, but not even the method of his death is revealed. And although some readers have assumed that the death of Vard's daughter, which Lillo says had taken place a year

before the exhibition of her father's portrait, is the effect of Lillo's painting (White 39), the story supplies no hard evidence for this view. Indeed, the story's many loose ends have led some readers to characterize it as "suggesting unresolved personal content" (White 38) or "somewhat confused" (Lewis 84), while others, comparing it to Henry James's "The Liar," have seen it as a failed, derivative work (Tuttleton et al. 13-14, 23-25; Bell, *Edith Wharton* 230-34).

Uncannily, however, such reactions to "The Portrait" are mirrored, one might even say anticipated, by the reactions of Lillo's public to his portrait of Vard. This thematization of artistic failure might call for another approach to Wharton's tale. One such approach is suggested by the narrator, who, tellingly, is himself a novelist: "It was as though the artist had been in league with his sitter, had pledged himself to oppose to the lust for post-mortem 'revelations' an impassable blank wall of negation. The public was resentful, the critics were aggrieved" (175). Rather than view the painting as a mere failure, the narrator's imagined alliance between the artist and the suicide imbues the negativity of the painting with oppositional force. Amplified and redoubled by the narrator's redundant overinsistence on the painting's impenetrability, this negativity seems to resist any attempt to equate blankness with failure. Instead, the narrator's analogy between the suicide and the portrait suggests that the painting's very self-effacement could hold the meaning to its subject's death, or even that the portrait bears no relation to its subject whatsoever, such that it would appear as a pure abstraction, a non-portrait. In this light, the story's own elliptical or incomplete nature acquires another significance, not as a symptom of artistic shortcomings, but rather as a "lucid failure"—a performative gesture that conveys the indeterminacy it thematizes. The failure or refusal to make sense of Vard's suicide generates a mode of writing that acts by rendering futile any attempt to decide upon the work's "success" or "failure." Rather than find in suicide a figure for aesthetic power, "The Portrait" grounds the oppositional force of art in the negativity of an indeterminate act.

Perhaps no novel pursues the relation between indeterminacy and opposition more vigorously than Wharton's most ambiguous suicide story, *The House of Mirth*. As is suggested by Lily Bart's name, which combines the painter Lillo with the suicide Vard, the protagonist appears in the novel as both the artist of her own image, and as the object of others' speculations and representations. Interpretation of the novel hinges on whether she is understood as a figure entirely subject to the conventions encoded in the social and economic world she inhabits and the literary conventions that inform the novel's plot, or instead as an agent capable of disrupting, troubling, escaping, or otherwise opposing

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such conventional determinations. In this light, Wharton's statement that in *The House of Mirth* she sought to show how "a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys" (*Backward* 207) can be read in two equally persuasive ways. On the one hand, Lily is destroyed because she is the quintessential product of social frivolity. Her destruction in this light is nothing more than the demonstration of the impossibility of distinguishing her from her environment; it is a "social fact" without independent significance. On the other hand, her destruction marks a reaction to, and thus an affirmation of, her difference from the frivolity that destroys her.

The novel encourages the former reading in its concern with the determining effects of social structures as well as of literary convention. "She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her" (7), thinks Selden in the first chapter of the novel. The witnesses to her death accordingly recognize her death as a suicide of the same sort reported daily in the press, while Gerty worries about a possible inquest that would presumably make Lily the subject of one of those generic stories. "It was the greatest mercy," exclaims one of the bystanders (325). Lily's death thus appears as entirely unexceptional, a symptom of larger realities that produce, contain, and explain it. The association the novel draws between her father's death, which directly follows from his financial ruin, and her own, following her bankruptcy, further ties her death to external social factors. Elizabeth Ammons succinctly argues this view: "On a symbolic level, she is murdered by her culture; and its ghastly triumph is to make her its agent, its last enforcer of a literal and permanent passivity on Lily Bart" (42). Such narratives of social determination are reinforced by the novel's coding of Lily's death as the suicide of a tragic or melodramatic heroine, for instance in her unexecuted plan to pose as Cleopatra in the *tableaux vivants* scene, or in her stationery with its emblem of a flying ship, which associates her (a resident of New Amsterdam after all) with the story of the Flying Dutchman, who can be redeemed only by the suicide of his lover, or when she imagines that to confide once and for all in Selden would be "as seductive as the river's flow to a suicide" (173), or in her inscription into "a nineteenth-century version of the rape of Lucrece" (Waid 99). To the extent that Lily's end is understood according to the patterns set by such precedents, her character coincides with generic conventions or ideologies that evacuate the question of Lily's agency.

Yet the novel also maintains the possibility that Lily may be aware of, and may play to, the plot-machines that dictate her demise. In a conversation with Gerty Farish late in the novel, Lily addresses the difficulty of telling her story apart from its determining literary and

social background. Anxious to dismiss the rumors circulating about Lily, Gerty urges her to "clear herself": "The important thing is that you should clear yourself—should tell your friends the whole truth" (225). But Lily sees this request as intrinsically misguided:

"My story?—I don't believe I know it myself. You see, I never thought of preparing a version in advance. . ."

But Gerty continued with her quiet reasonableness: "I don't want a version prepared in advance—but I want you to tell me exactly what happened from the beginning."

"From the beginning?" Miss Bart gently mimicked her. "Dear Gerty, how little imagination you good people have!" (226)

To Gerty, spontaneity would guarantee veracity. Her legal ideal of the "whole truth" and her insistence on knowing "exactly what happened" assume a referential model of language: conveying the truth is simply a matter of finding the right words. But to Lily, whichever beginning one chooses will invariably "prepare a version in advance." In response to her own critical and ironic question—"What is truth?"—Lily proposes nothing but a list of equally overdetermined stories:

"Why, the beginning was in my cradle, I suppose—in the way I was brought up, and the things I was taught to care for. Or no—I won't blame anybody for my faults: I'll say it was in my blood, that I got it from some wicked pleasure-loving ancestress, who reacted against the homely virtues of New Amsterdam, and wanted to get back to the court of the Charleses!" And as Miss Farish continued to press her with troubled eyes, she went on impatiently: "You asked me for the truth—well, the truth about any girl is that once she's talked about she's done for; and the more she explains her case the worse it looks." (226)

These generic plots—the cradle-to-grave life story, the mock fairy-tale, the Hardy-esque story of inherited flaws—all inform *The House of Mirth* at various points; it is therefore not surprising that the novel has been read with equal persuasiveness as an instance of realism, naturalism, *Bildung*, romance, and satire. And yet, Lily suggests, a story that would relate "exactly what happened from the beginning" would not fit any "versions prepared in advance"; indeed, it would resist "talking" and "explaining" altogether. In addressing the question of how Lily relates to the generic and social laws that frame her, Frances Restuccia observes that in this scene, "Lily resists Gerty's compulsion to totalize" (408). But Lily mobilizes this resistance not only by remarking the impossibility of revealing or returning to a clear origin or truth, but also by offering an explanation of the narrative system she inhabits, in which explanation

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can never catch up with that which it tries to explain, but instead worsens, redoubles, and reproduces it.

This insight makes Lily less the victim or heroine of her story—and of her death—than its artist, detached from and, to various degrees, observing and producing its progress. However, as in Wharton's earlier fictions of suicide, the artist arrives only belatedly. Any creative act she may perform, in other words, appears to her as one already anticipated by her audience, such that the creative difference of such an act would be instantly assimilated to a "version prepared in advance." To the extent that Lily embodies both the artist and her subject, both the suicide and its witness, *The House of Mirth* depicts a paradoxical situation in which Lily's actions take place after their consequences, in which she is always already too late for her own suicide. Or as Wharton would write of her own creative process, "From the first I know exactly what is going to happen to every one of [my characters]; their fate is settled beyond rescue, and I have but to watch and record.... But these people of mine, whose ultimate destiny I know so well, walk to it by ways unrevealed to me beforehand" (*Backward* 204). In granting her characters "subsidiary action [that] seems to be their very own" (*Backward* 204), Wharton produces a world in which effects precede actions. Or as Lily puts it to Gerty, "My story?—I don't believe I know it myself."

Particularly at the end of the novel, Lily seems to embody the consequences of the gap between agency and fate that Wharton's characters inhabit. It need hardly be repeated that the novel devotes significant attention to the status and function of Lily's intentions, beginning with the opening scene where she is characterized by Selden as one whose "simplest acts seemed the result of far-reaching intentions" (3). When Carrie Fisher remarks that "it's the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study" (189), it is again a question of the relation between intentions and acts. Indeed, Lily's entire story can be seen as comprising a series of disjunctures between action and intention, thus subverting the presumed priority of intention. Intention appears not as that which anticipates and produces action, but as a belated fiction invoked retroactively in order to make sense of what has already taken place: in Selden's words, Lily's "genius lies in converting impulses into intentions" (67). Lily's skeptical reply—"Is there any final test of genius but success? And I certainly haven't succeeded"—however, defers judgment of her "success," and so insists that intentions become subject to interpretation only from the perspective of their own future. In this light, her death, to the extent that it marks an event that interrupts her future, can never be intended, or can only be intended in a time after death. Lily seems to

recognize this in the moments before her final sleep:

She was appalled by the intense clearness of the vision; she seemed to have broken through the merciful veil which intervenes between intention and action, and to see exactly what she would do in all the long days to come.... The thought terrified her—she dreaded to fall from the height of her last moment with Selden. But how could she trust herself to keep her footing?... If only life could end now—end on this tragic yet sweet vision of lost possibilities.... (320-1)

The "veil" pierced here is not simply one that hides the causes of action, but rather is a figure for the role fiction plays in retrospectively attributing intentions to actions. Lily's "intense clearness" would therefore seem to resolve the inverted temporality of her story and so to escape or master the fictions that determine her. However, in rigorous conformity with her earlier insight into the narrative system she inhabits, Lily can gain access to this lucidity only belatedly. Against the terrifying vision of an existence of pure monotony, Lily's notion conjures an image of beautiful death, of a death that would redeem the future in the form of her "tragic yet sweet vision." And yet the "lost possibilities" that are the content of this vision seem to encompass not only the romantic self-image she seeks to redeem, but also the beautiful death that would enable this redemption. Even the ability to end her life "now," the ability to die beautifully, appears only as another "lost possibility," which can therefore only appear hypothetically, "if only." Lily's terror of monotony stems from the terror of not being able to take her own life. What makes her life unlivable, paradoxically, is her inability to commit suicide.

The idea that Lily could end it when she will, which is to say, that she possesses a life worth living, or that she possesses a life at all, turns out to be the ultimate fiction. Her life, in other words, appears only as the effect of her death, only as a lost possibility that the belated interpretations of her readers animate. Suicide in *The House of Mirth* thus names neither the fantasy of self-determination nor the recognition of the inexorability of external determination. Rather, the novel troubles both of these explanatory frameworks in its demonstration of the ways in which the meaning of suicide is bound to a retroactive, fictive temporality. Even as it acknowledges and plays with available interpretive frames for understanding suicide, those I have associated with Durkheim and William James, the novel lays bare the mechanisms whereby these frames are constructed, and hence marks their limits. To claim to know the meaning of another's suicide, to relate that event to one's own history, to make it the ground of one's own identity, is to cover up its inscrutability, and consequently to become its author. To commit suicide, then, is to admit the impossibility of either mastering one's own meaning, on

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the one hand, or of meaning nothing at all, on the other.

Indeed, in a preface to the novel written thirty years after its publication, Wharton would retrospectively posit this indeterminacy as the condition of possibility of her fiction, stating that "the strangest, and not the least interesting, adventure of any work in the imagination is the inevitable distortion it undergoes in passing from the mind of the writer to that of his readers" (267; my emphasis). Neither an empathetic dialogue in which the positions of self and other are mutually interchangeable, nor a totality that contains author and readers in the same coherent realm, Wharton's fiction, in these terms, is like Lily's suicide in that it functions neither as a sign of the author's self-determination nor of her external determination, but rather exposes or generates an irreducible divide between an intention and its interpretation. And yet this suicidal writing, far from canceling out the intentions of the "mind of the writer," works instead to establish her as an incontestable, if also indeterminate, figure of authority.

IV. Suicidal fictions (*Ethan Frome*, *Hudson River Bracketed*, *The Gods Arrive*)

Wharton's subsequent fictions of suicide repeatedly stage scenes of division, scenes in which fantasies of authority fracture into ironic forms of misprision. In *The Custom of the Country*, for instance, Ralph Marvell's Werther-like suicide takes place in a frame of reference utterly incompatible with the context in which it is received by Undine, for whom it is merely an unpleasant means to a desired end: "she continued to wish that she could have got what she wanted without having had to pay that particular price for it" (487). Undine's terrific indifference—exceeded only by the perniciously neutral diagnosis that "it was the hot weather [that caused Ralph's suicide]—his own family had said so"—finds its obsessive mirror-image in *Ethan Frome*, where Ethan and Mattie pay an incommensurate price for a moment of desire.

The failure of Ethan and Mattie's suicide attempt also provides a material analogue for the role of the narrator, who, as has been observed, pieces together, or even fabricates, his "vision of [Ethan's] story" (25) based only on incomplete evidence (e.g. Waid 68). While Wharton may have set out to contest what she saw as the picturesque conventions of other depictions of New England life ("Introduction to *Ethan Frome*," 259), and while her narrator may aim to "co-ordinate the facts" (10) of Ethan's life, the story that emerges is always already shaped by fictional models, most crucially when Ethan and Mattie's "smash-up" is imagined as a *Liebestod*: "She was right: this was better than parting. He leaned back and drew her mouth to his..." (169; Wharton's ellipses). Yet the retrospective structure of the

text suggests that the ideal of dying for love encoded in this scene was always already unavailable. This is underscored by the obstacle that triggers Ethan's involuntary movement—a vision of his wife Zeena's face—which not only signals an inescapable domesticity but also, through a possible allusion to Hawthorne's Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*, a loss of the romantic ideal on which Ethan and Mattie think to base their action. The ending of Hawthorne's novel juxtaposes a heroic, aestheticized image of suicide with the material reality of Zenobia's bloated corpse. But whether one sees Zenobia's death, along with Coverdale, as a "perfect horror" (216), or, instead, as an act of defiant heroism, it constitutes, in either view, a deliberate and significant response to the frustration of romantic desire (whether erotic or utopian). If romance, as Henry James characterizes it, deals with "experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions which usually attach to it" (280), Zenobia's suicide is either a quintessentially romantic act, or else it marks the moment of breakdown or the limits of romantic experience. In *Ethan Frome*, however, such experience and the exemptions it entails are no longer even thinkable. When the "twisted monstrous lineaments" of Zenobia's namesake loom before Ethan as he and Mattie speed toward the elm tree, it is as if to recall his belatedness, as if to insist that, whichever path he takes, suicide is no longer a meaningful option. This is apparent in the very method Ethan and Mattie adopt for their suicide, which demands not that they act positively to produce their deaths but rather that they refrain from action. When Ethan involuntarily alters the sled's course, the slippery border between voluntary inaction and involuntary action is crossed; what results is a half-suicide, with Mattie and Ethan both permanently crippled. And yet what impedes and invalidates the romantic fantasy in the novel is not, as might be expected, an ineluctable material or social reality, but rather is itself a hallucination, a fiction that refers only indirectly, only distortedly, to the framing material circumstances of Ethan's situation. *Ethan Frome's* modernity emerges not from an insistence on realism over romance, but rather from a vision of fiction as both decisive and unmasterable.

The belatedness or impossibility of suicide finds its final expression in Wharton's work in her last two completed novels, *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*. In these novels, which follow the literary career of Vance Weston, the condition of the modern writer is defined through his relation to suicide. *Hudson River Bracketed*, gathering together themes developed throughout Wharton's work, focuses on the ways that suicide and writing intersect and collaborate in Vance's attempts to escape his familial and social origins and to establish his own independence and originality. Indeed,

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Vance's first story emerges from an attempt to escape an oppressive reality through suicide: "He was like a captive walled into a dark airless cell, and the walls of that cell were Reality, were the life he would in future be doomed to. The impulse to end it all here and now possessed him" (30). When he does not find his father's revolver in its usual place, however, this setback appears as another inescapable reality: "He might have looked elsewhere, might have hunted...but a sudden weakness overcame him." Crawling back to his room, he immediately sits down to write what would become his first published text, titled "One Day" because "one day had sufficed to dash his life to pieces" (31). Like Justine Brent in *The Fruit of the Tree*, Vance distances himself from his own experience through writing: "He would set [his experiences] down just as they had befallen him in all their cruel veracity, but as if he were relating the tragedy of someone else" (32). The fairy-tale structure recalled here allows him to overcome his suicide by telling its story. And yet, to the extent that this telling demands an act of self-cancellation, storytelling itself appears as a continuation of suicide. Writing, for Vance, is therefore not an act of self-recuperation or repair, but instead bears witness to an irreversible event of fragmentation.

The repercussions of this episode resonate throughout the novel. At a crucial moment in his career, when he fears a loss of originality or authenticity, it is to this episode that he returns, recalling it as a privileged moment of literary creativity unencumbered by external considerations: "What he longed for was to vanish into space, to get off into a universe of his own where nothing associated with his former life could reach him. It was what he had tried to do after he had seen his grandfather and Floss Delaney by the river; only this time his suicide would have taken the form of losing himself in a big city, to reemerge from it when he had made himself a new existence" (167). A similar recollection takes place later in the novel (540). *Hudson River Bracketed* underlines the irony of this gesture, however, in official evaluations of "One Day" offered by two editors, one of whom sees the story as something "any chap with a knack could usually pull off...at the start" (194), and the second of whom dismisses it as a "me-book" (232). With "One Day" thus reduced to a conventional exercise, Vance is expected to prove himself by "tackl[ing] something outside himself" (194). This Vance does in his first novel, aptly titled "Instead," which is characterized as a work of pure detachment, "an emanation, not a reality," that "charmed its reader by its difference" (394), and which therefore, in the eyes of Vance's publisher, establishes Vance as a professional writer—so much so, in fact, that it would be "sheer suicide" not to write another novel in the same vein

(416). Vance's fear of losing access to his authentic self, however, makes such a "suicide" seem necessary: "No... he must try his hand now at reality, the reality that lay about him" (412). But this attempt to grasp "reality" proves equally futile, and in a self-destructive gesture he shreds the sole copy of the manuscript. In the final words of *Hudson River Bracketed*, Vance is left wondering "if at crucial moments a veil of unreality would always fall between himself and the soul nearest him; if the creator of imaginary beings must always feel alone among the real ones" (560).

Although *Hudson River Bracketed* concentrates on the ways in which the world of professional publishing debases the writer's inspiration and feeds his insecurity, the final lines of the novel relate the antagonism between creative authenticity and market-driven superficiality to a more general antagonism between writing and living. This appears in particularly vivid form in *The Gods Arrive*, where Vance encounters a version of his younger self in the aspiring writer and critic Chris Churley in the French town of Oubli. Far from a site of forgetting, Oubli becomes the stage for a displaced repetition of Vance's past. Like Vance at the moment of his suicide attempt, Churley suffers from a sense of personal and artistic paralysis, which he blames on the stifling atmosphere of the small French town. Churley's failures, in turn, help Vance recover his own flagging inspiration. As if writing a sequel to "One Day," Vance conveniently disposes of Churley once he has served his purpose by financing Churley's escape from Oubli. But Churley, who gambles the money away in Nice, is not so easily disposed of. Thus, when Vance travels to Nice to track down the truant Churley, he finds himself returned to the scene of his own suicide attempt, with Churley embodying his suicidal self and Floss Delaney, the woman whose betrayal prompted his youthful despair, again on the scene. Torn between his responsibility to Churley and his obsession with Floss, he pursues the latter, such that his negligence becomes a contributing cause in Churley's subsequent suicide.

What is striking in the second half of the novel is that Vance now relates to suicide only in fictional forms. Although he knows he should and desperately tries to feel and experience the reality of Churley's death and his implication in it, this actual suicide leaves him unaffected: "No alteration of setting or ideas—not even the profound shock of Chris Churley's suicide—could shake him out of his unwilling subjection" (260). However, when Floss again betrays him, a metaphor of suicide emerges as the most fitting description of his dejection: "Nothing mattered—nothing would ever again matter. He felt like a man who has tried to hang himself because life was too hideous to be faced, and has been cut down by benevolent hands—and left to face it" (400). Vance, like Lily, relates to suicide not as a future

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potential, not as an act that could distinguish him from his surroundings or establish his difference, but rather as a lost possibility, that is, as an impossibility. Nothing that follows for him—a sense of spiritual renewal after a period of voluntary isolation, his return to the maternal space of Halo Tarrant—escapes the shadow of this image, according to which he owes his survival not to personal strength, genius, or courage, but to hands—are they really benevolent?—that interrupt and undermine a moment of fateful decision. Left to face a life “too hideous to be faced,” Vance survives not by redeeming the hideousness of life, but rather through the strategic, even defensive production of fiction, such as the fiction of himself as a failed suicide. His fiction, consequently, appears not as a sign of self-determination, but as the perpetual commemoration of his interrupted suicide, of an event that suspends the writer, Cassandra-like, between a state of pure insignificance (“Nothing ever mattered—nothing would ever matter again”) and a meaning that remains to be faced.

In Wharton's fiction, suicide neither redeems an authenticity debased in the modern world nor testifies to the immanence of external determinations. Rather, Wharton's suicides expose the limits of such fictions, that is, the place where they silence, distort, or appropriate the indeterminate acts that produce or elicit them. From its early fixation on stories of suicide to the self-destructive acts of writing in her later work, Wharton's writing turns to suicide not because it seems to embody the conditions of modern selfhood or society, but because it calls into question the governing fictions of modernity. To read Wharton's suicides is to discover the political and aesthetic significance of her fiction not in its ability to give life to silenced, imagined, or otherwise inaccessible worlds, but rather in its ability to dwell in its own indeterminacy, perhaps even lucidly.

Notes

Comments and questions raised at the 2001 meeting of the American Literature Association, where a version of this paper was presented, have been extremely helpful. At different stages, this work has benefited from the extraordinary intelligence of Elaine Golin, Anupama Rao, Johannah Rodgers, and Augusta Rohrbach.

¹ Stories in which suicide plays a role include “A Cup of Cold Water,” “The Portrait,” “The Last Asset,” and “The Day of the Funeral,” as well as the unpublished fragment “Beatrice Palmatto” (according to the plot summary of which both Beatrice and her sister take their own lives). Hermann Sundermann's *The Joy of Living*, a play Wharton translated early in her career (1902), also has suicide as a central plot element.

² For instance, in May, 1879, the *New York Times* reported

23 suicides, four on its front pages. Supplementing these news reports were frequent editorials on suicide, its causes, and its meanings. Apparent increases in suicide rates in the U.S. during the second part of the nineteenth century led to frequent reports of a possible ‘suicide epidemic,’ for which media coverage was also often held responsible (Kushner 111-17). The most comprehensive study of the rhetoric of epidemic in the nineteenth century is Lieberman. A striking manifestation of the anxiety over a suicide epidemic in England is found in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, in which the suicide of Little Father Time is immediately recognized as a symptom of a threat to the social fabric, “the beginning of the coming universal wish not to live” (411).

³ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In “Life and I,” Wharton describes several crucial childhood episodes when she was found “naughty.” See also, for instance, Ophelia's admonition of Hamlet: “You are naught, you are naught” (III.ii.173).

⁴ Underlining this possibility is the fact that while “Only a Child” displays numerous metrical irregularities, none is as evident as one produced at the very site of the inscrutable shift from “nought” to “naught.” By repeating the one line—“His little hands had nought to do” (l. 57)—ten lines later but with an extra syllable appended—“And his little hands had naught to do” (l. 67)—the poem displays an *internal* metrical inconsistency discernible without reference to any external standard.

⁵ Minois provides a fascinating and synthetic account of cultural attitudes towards self-destruction in Europe from the middle ages to the early-twentieth century. Other crucial works in the cultural history of suicide include Bayet, Gates, and MacDonald and Murphy. While no comprehensive history of suicide in the U.S. exists, a partial history is provided in Kushner.

⁶ On the significance of the hotel as a characteristically modern space in Wharton's writing, see Klimasmith.

⁷ It is interesting to note that a similar situation—the attempted suicide of a jilted woman in a New York hotel—prompted Baptist minister Henry Marsh Warren to found the National Save-A-Life League in 1906 (Colt 287).

⁸ Kate's acute sense of shame as analyzed by Raphael would therefore be the affective equivalent or consequence of this error (34-40).

⁹ A phrase in Poe's “The Oval Portrait” perfectly captures this dynamic: “...the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sate beside him” (738). For a fascinating cultural and literary history of this theme and its political implications at the turn of the century, see Otten.

¹⁰ Recent interpretations of the novel have sought to take into account the novel's seeming self-consciousness about the problem of marking difference from within conventional structures. Michaels, for instance, argues that what appear to be signs of alterity might be seen to

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participate in the construction of the subject of speculative capitalism, i.e. that it is precisely where Lily seems to escape the social frames that determine her that she is most implicated in them. Waid, in an equally rigorous counter-reading of the novel, finds marks of the novel's self-difference in the resistance posed by the materiality of the novel and the letter to the social and literary frames that attempt to contain Lily and the novel. While such readings crucially insist that the novel be read as an allegory of fiction, they nonetheless align themselves with ¹¹ Spangler, for instance, links *The House of Mirth* to Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and London's *Martin Eden* as novels that "reached the same conclusion: modern society is a killer, the suicide its victim" (296). ¹² Though Hudson Bart is not specifically identified as a suicide, his financial collapse casts him as a Vard or Woburn-like figure. That he is named after the site of so many New York suicides underscores this association. Stories of suicides linked to economic crises were common in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century newspapers (Kushner 146-8).

¹³ See, for instance, Trilling: "What makes Lily a heroine for the reader—one of the greatly appealing heroines worthy of association with Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina—is the ultimate triumph of spirit over good sense even though the transcendence guarantees her destruction" (105). As Higonet argues, however, female suicide in the nineteenth-century novel is less a sign of transcendence than of "male overdetermination of women's suicides" (78).

¹⁴ For readings of the text as a novel of manners, see Nevius 55-61, Lindberg, and Tuttleton 122-40. Studies of the novel as a *Kunstlerroman*, a subgenre of *Bildungsroman*, derive from Wolff 107. The case for classifying the novel as naturalist is set out convincingly by Pizer. The novel has also been placed on both sides of the realist/naturalist divide, and is often invoked in efforts to define the shifting relation between these terms. See Kaplan esp. 88-103, Mitchell 11-12. For a detailed critical history of the novel, see Benstock "Critical History."

¹⁵ Discussions of Lily as a figure for the artist have focused on the *tableaux vivants* scene, which has been frequently associated with Lily's death. See esp. Bronfen 275 and Waid's brilliant reading of this scene (27-43). The philosophical and ethical implications of this way of reading the novel are developed by Loebel.

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The "Hotel Spirit": Modernity and the Urban Home in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Short Fiction

Betsy Klimasmith

University of Massachusetts - Boston

. . . what Poppel called society was really just like the houses it lived in: a muddle of misapplied ornament over a thin shell of utility.

—Edith Wharton¹

In one of *The American Scene's* most moving moments, Henry James visits the New York neighborhood where he grew up. As he looks at the site of his now-demolished childhood home, James feels "the effect . . . of having been amputated of half my history." Contemplating the erasure of his built past, James draws a parallel between the fate of his personal history and the fate of history itself in the modern metropolis:

[W]hereas the inner sense had positively erected there for its private contemplation a commemorative mural tablet, the very wall that should have borne this inscription had been smashed as for demonstration that tablets, in New York, are unthinkable. . . . the glory of any such association is denied, in advance to communities tending, as the phrase is, to 'run' preponderantly to the skyscraper.²

The "mural tablets" to which James refers are commemorative plaques noting the past uses of particular sites—common features in European cities. Because New York has become a landscape of flux and change, losing the "glory" of a past as it "runs to

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the skyscraper," the only places where permanence can be achieved are in James's memory and in his fiction. His memory of a past located in a particular space must recede further into his interior as what he terms the "hotel-spirit" comes to dominate New York. For Edith Wharton a similar "hotel-spirit" is embodied in Undine Spragg, the protagonist of Wharton's 1913 novel *The Custom of the Country*. Undine's narrative augurs the fate of a culture shaped by structures that have been constructed on the rubble of history; in the novel it is not simply exterior space that "runs to the skyscraper" or hotel, or apartment, but interior space—subjectivity itself—as well.

Most commonly seen as a narrative of the detestable Undine's social rise through serial marriage, *Custom* explores the intersections among space, time, and economics at a moment of societal change. The novel develops a logic of investment that is most clearly visible in the character of Elmer Moffatt, the Wall Street wunderkind who is also Undine's first (and fourth) husband. Moffatt understands the world in terms of potential. Scheming but patient, he sails through temporary setbacks—financial ruin, personal ridicule, political scandals, and even a divorce from Undine—buoyed by his belief in the future and his willingness to ignore, remake, or trade on the past as the situation warrants. Elmer's investment pattern is paralleled in Undine's rise from Kansas nobody to international socialite. But unlike Moffatt, who can mark his rise in terms of cash flow, precious objects (including Undine), and eventually, the power to control the values of commodities themselves, Undine's success must be measured in spatial terms. As a woman, Undine is barred from trading on Wall Street but can trade in settings. Her strategy is to find environments that she can manipulate in order to produce and project the self she wishes to convey. These manipulations of space come to represent a profound cultural shift; beyond evoking nostalgia for what has been and will be lost, the novel claims that the modern subject essentially becomes a person without a past. *The Custom of the Country* charts tradition's losing battle with progress; those who survive the battle are, like Henry James, figurative amputees. The struggle between historic and economic values is played out in domestic space.

In echoing James's anxieties about the fate of the past in a modern urban nation, Wharton differed sharply from her contemporary, Charlotte Perkins Gilman. While both authors trace history's dwindling force in a culture dominated by temporary, permeable spaces, Gilman's belief that architectural reform could give rise to a more advanced civilization stands in marked contrast to the anxiety about the loss of a spatial past to a transient "hotel" culture Wharton voiced in *The Custom of the Country*. Reading and representing domestic, historic,

and economic changes through architecture, each author constructs urban domestic settings as places where women can exert a cultural and societal power that exemplifies the best (for Gilman) and the worst (for Wharton) of the modern economy's possibilities. When the home is seen as an investment, as opposed to a family inheritance, women's power to transform this setting—and to transform themselves in the process—translates into a source of cultural agency. If for Gilman the outcomes women's spatial manipulations are revolutionary, for Wharton, they are dystopic.

A City of Apartments—A City of Homes?

The two decades spanning the turn into the twentieth century saw major changes in New York City's domestic architecture. While reformers campaigned for the abolition—or at least, the improvement—of tenements on the Lower East Side, other Manhattanites were profiting from a tremendous rise in real estate values as technology developed that allowed buildings to attain new heights. Luxurious high-rise "apartment hotels" began to appear on New York's skyline, bringing with them an urban domesticity that radically transformed the ways in which New Yorkers conceived of the home.³ Manhattan had seen the construction of its first apartment in 1869, and in the years that followed a few other successful experiments in apartment dwellings for the middle class developed.⁴ By the 1890's, this trickle had swelled into a bona fide river whose course would alter the ways in which bourgeois New Yorkers inhabited, evaluated, and understood urban space. By 1901, the *Architectural Record* could claim that "To-day New York is a city of apartments."⁵

As they transformed spatial conceptions of the urban home, apartments, hotels, and "apartment hotels," as they were known, changed the cultural meaning of urban domesticity. Though apartments and luxury hotels often alluded to the past through their names or designs, they stood as architectural symbols of the new. One observer noted nostalgically, "The old New York hotel was a spacious home where people returned year after year, where they knew the proprietor, clerk and the office boy. There was something personal and *gemütlich* about it. All that is now changed. The modern hotel is a great institution. Its keynote is impersonality."⁶ New hotels and apartments replaced a home-like sense of the personal with a modern model of technologically-networked domesticity, reframing the way in which the home was understood economically. Hotels revealed that the urban home was no longer a repository of history; instead it was a real estate investment, an impersonal institution.

The break from tradition exemplified by apartment buildings and hotels both exhilarated and

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dismayed onlookers. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's mind, such technological and architectural changes could make it possible for women to transform their living spaces—and thus, their lives—in ways that had never before been possible. Gilman was one of many "idealists [who] saw the era of industrial capitalism, when public space and urban infrastructure were created, as a time when rural isolation gave way to a life in larger human communities."⁷ And yet, observers of the apartment trend, including Gilman, had to ask whether or not the apartment or hotel, lacking history, privacy, and personality, could ever operate as a home. Noted one observer in *The Architectural Record*, "While the apartment hotel is the consummate flower of domestic co-operation, it is also, unfortunately, the consummate flower of domestic irresponsibility. It means the sacrifice of everything implied by the word 'home.'"⁸

Moving Walls, Evading History: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Theories of the Home

Yet even at this critical moment in its history, few observers attempted to theorize the spatial operations of the bourgeois urban home, except in fiction. Gilman was a notable exception. She most clearly articulated her assessments of the history and role of the home in two non-fiction texts: *The Home*, published in 1903, develops themes first articulated in her widely-read 1898 volume, *Women and Economics*, in which she explains that while people are shaped by the settings they inhabit, they may in turn have an impact on their surroundings. Environment is constituted, she argues, through human and architectural interaction. Gilman writes: "In spite of the power of the individual will to struggle against conditions, to resist them for a while, and sometimes to overcome them, it remains true that the human creature is affected by his environment, as is every other living thing."⁹ By using terms like "affected" instead of "molded," and by allowing for the possibilities of struggle, resistance, and eventual triumph over the environment's force, Gilman articulates a theory that bridges the notions of architectural determinism—simply put, the "belief that spatial environments determine the social arrangements, daily behaviors, and political status of those who inhabit them"¹⁰—and environmental agency. Whatever the setting, in Gilman's view individuals can transform the architecture that so profoundly shapes them. With this spatial agency comes the potential for social change.

While many Progressive Era reformers defined the detached home as the only proper crucible for the production of a moral populace, Gilman felt differently.¹¹ As she argues in *Women and Economics*, "anywhere in lonely farm houses, the women of to-day, confined absolutely to this strangling cradle of the race, go mad by scores and hundreds. . . . In the cities, where there is less 'home life,' people seem to stand it better."¹² In Gilman's

view, detached homes and the isolated domesticity they engendered and enforced kept women from participating in a modern culture characterized by the excitement and energy of connection, change, growth, and discovery. If American women ignored the modern possibilities for radically remaking the home with amenities like communal kitchens, shared housekeeping, and community child-care, they would remain tied to an increasingly meaningless space, missing opportunities to participate in the work of the world beyond the home. However, by reconceiving, rearranging, and in extreme cases, rebuilding their domestic spaces, she explained, women could create transformative settings. Their revised homes could transform women and their relationships, opening up possibilities for radical political and economic reform. Many of the domestic arrangements Gilman valorized dispensed with the spatial organization of the detached home and acknowledged the networked nature of modern domesticity: "[O]ur houses are threaded like beads on a string, tied, knotted, woven together, and in the cities even built together. . . . The tenement, flat, and apartment house still further group and connect us; and our claim of domestic isolation becomes merely another domestic myth."¹³ Mobility, flexibility, and opportunities for connection could develop architecturally; Gilman saw in these connected spaces the opportunity for a fresh start unhampered by historico-spatial oppression.

Like Edward Bellamy, whose novel *Looking Backward* inspired her, in her theory and fiction Gilman sees potential for social progress in the very sites decried by other writers, like Wharton and James, as particularly destructive of the social order—apartments, apartment hotels, and professionalized boarding houses.¹⁴ She writes, "From the most primitive caravansary up to the square miles of floor space in our hotels, the public house has met the needs of social evolution as no private house could have done."¹⁵ For Gilman, the critical factor separating hotels from the traditional home is the very thing that aligns them with modernity—their transience. "The family home is more and more yielding to the influence of progress. Once it was stationary and permanent, occupied from generation to generation. Now we move, even in families. . . . move we must under the increasing irritation of irreconcilable conditions."¹⁶ The "irreconcilable condition" of containment within a generations-old design brings about a mobility requiring a new mode of and relationship to architecture. Modernity's influence is reflected in designs that allow for and express mobility. These networked spaces become models for transforming spatial, and thus social relations. In substituting transience for permanence, families sacrifice the historical—the family homestead and the

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weight of generations—for settings that reflect and produce new economic and social conditions.

While the connections between Gilman's non-fiction and constructions of space have been examined, the literary constructions of space in her fiction, where she pointedly articulates her spatial themes, have not been adequately explored.¹⁷ Like Wharton's, much of Gilman's writing concerns spatial practice, particularly the operations of domestic space. She animates her environmental theory through short stories in which her characters attempt to solve personal, social, national, and global problems by remaking the built environment. From the publication of her first short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," (1889) Charlotte Perkins Gilman consistently suggested that women who were constrained and debilitated by actual or symbolic restriction to the home could gain the agency to liberate themselves by transforming their surroundings. Accordingly, Gilman's protagonist in "The Yellow Wallpaper" rips the hideous paper from her bedroom walls, freeing the women she sees trapped there—and freeing herself. Changing the environment, as Gilman argues in this story and its fictional descendants, offers women a means to claim control over their lives and to participate politically, economically, and socially in a world beyond the home.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" both offers an early indictment of domestic oppression and begins to examine how women might transform the oppressive spaces of the detached home, a notion Gilman developed further in her later fiction. The short stories Gilman wrote and published in her magazine *The Forerunner* (1909-1916) position women as agents for spatial change who wield the potential to transform individuals and the world they inhabit.¹⁸ It was a powerful philosophy at a moment of profound social and architectural change in the American urban landscape. Gilman's narratives present no shortage of blueprints for reinventing domestic spaces and ideologies. Many of these stories are variations on a common plot: a woman dissatisfied with some aspect of her life—her marriage, her house, her children, her economic prospects, or a combination of these factors—gets an opportunity or is forced to change her circumstances. Often in the absence of her husband and children, or as a result of a husband's death, work, maturity, or extended foreign travel, the woman reinvents her surroundings. Among other projects, her heroines sell their homes, take in or eject relatives, design and build new houses for new or reconfigured marriages, develop collective farms, and run guest houses and community centers. In short, they bring to fruition a range of architectural projects that all result in greater happiness for the individual, the family, and the community. Loveless marriages regain their romance. Destitute women become economically

successful. Determined artists find creative ways to unite love and career.

Gilman's short stories are didactic; most of the stories teach women to see their surroundings as transformable—and as investments. In story after story, she outlines the potential psychological and economic profits that may accrue to women who possess the creative ability to produce a vision of home that extends beyond its four walls. One of her most appealing stories, "Making a Change" (1911), centers around a family who all share a small apartment in an unnamed city. The harried husband, Frank, suddenly notices that his depressed wife, testy mother, and cranky infant have been transformed into a model family. What could have caused such a change? The short answer is transformed domestic space. His mother has taken over the adjacent apartment and the building's roof to start a "children's garden," a prototypical day-care center where the son has blossomed, and which has allowed the wife to happily return to her career as a musician in her child-free time. Gilman's fictive representation of this transformed space highlights that the family can choose either to be passively shaped by, or to become active shapers of the urban landscape. That choice allows women a degree of agency that benefits society at large.

The equilibrium achieved in these urban spaces is always beneficial to men as well. "Making a Change," for instance, is written in part from the perspective of the husband, Frank, who, naturally, is quite pleased with the changes that occur, even before he figures out precisely what has happened. And while Frank is initially taken aback by the women's arrangements, the story ends with his acceptance of the new situation. "'If it makes all of you as happy as that,' he said, 'I guess I can stand it.' And in after years he was heard to remark, 'This being married and bringing up children is as easy as can be—when you learn how!'"¹⁹ Although there may be initial disappointments, Gilman presents manipulation of setting as a strategy for improving the world for both sexes. But these improvements require abandoning old notions of space and gender in order to develop and profit from new economic and spatial arrangements.

Gilman's work argues that women must escape the home as a repository of history if they are to claim agency in a new era characterized by rapid change. Gilman's theoretical and fictional assessments of the modern home share a critical assumption about subjectivity: that it is relational, and is always formed in relation to environment. The heightened mobility and flexibility that Gilman claims for women both structure and reflect the modern city they inhabit. Many of Gilman's contemporaries shared the idea that a landscape increasingly characterized by connections

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and mobility would shape a new urban subject. Among them was Edith Wharton, who, like Gilman, associated the modern American woman with architecture and economics. Like Gilman's short stories, *Custom* explores the ramifications of turning the home as a repository for history into a space where women wield economic power.

In much of Wharton's work, homes figure as sites where the objects that constitute individual and family histories are stored and displayed. In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, for instance, Wharton details the objects and settings central to her family's identity; her particular sensitivity to interiors makes domestic spaces critical to Wharton's conceptions of self and culture. She writes, "My photographic memory of rooms and houses—even those seen briefly, or at long intervals—was from my earliest days a source of inarticulate misery."²⁰ Remembering the details of housekeeping is painful to Wharton for two reasons: first, each object she recalls evokes memories of a departed time and people, and second, few of the houses she recalls ever lived up to her fastidious standards for beauty and taste. Recapitulating Gilman's claim that "the home is an incarnate past to us. It is our very oldest thing, and holds the heart more deeply than all others," Wharton's novels become the articulation of this memory and its meaning.²¹ The idea that a home might be transformed from a site where history, especially family and class history, is preserved into a site for conspicuous display both fascinates and repulses Wharton.²²

Home and History in *The Custom of the Country*

The conflict between history and economics in the home is central to *The Custom of the Country*; it becomes the device through which Wharton both asks what becomes of history itself in the face of a rising tide of consumerism and marks this social sea change. Undine's marriages dramatize the novel's warring paradigms of the home as a site of living history and as a consumable commodity. Undine Spragg, a native of Apex, Kansas, comes to New York with her parents, hoping to trade her unusual beauty and some of her father's wealth for a marriage into New York's socially elite class. As the requirements for membership in the elite shift from family associations to net worth, Undine divorces and remarries accordingly. Undine's husbands, Ralph Marvell, Raymond de Chelles, and Elmer Moffatt trace these evolving conditions through their differing conceptions of the home's role in constructing culture.

Ralph Marvell offers the clearest parallel to James's amputee persona in *The American Scene*. Like James, Marvell's sense of self revolves around a notion of history that has been shaped in large part by his

childhood home. Marvell's relationship to his family home also mirrors Wharton's construction of home as a repository for history, a space where physical and spiritual pasts blend, producing the present. Before he marries Undine, Ralph lives in the Marvell family home in Washington Square, a site that embodies a familial past. "Ralph Marvell, mounting his grandfather's door-step, looked up at the symmetrical old red house-front, with its frugal marble ornament, as he might have looked at a familiar human face" (76-7). Just as the house becomes almost human to Marvell, the people who live there merge with the structure. "'They' were his mother and old Mr. Urban Dagonet, both, from Ralph's earliest memories, so closely identified with the old house in Washington Square that they might have passed for its inner consciousness as it might have stood for their outward form" (77). Wharton constructs a bodily connection between home and self that emphasizes rootedness and connection to the past. In this space that blends together past and present, Ralph constructs his life among the "dim portraits of 'Signers' and their females" that dominate the spaces of his old New York home (91). In the process he develops a subjectivity that is itself outmoded. Christopher Gair points out that "Wharton explicitly links the disappearance of the 'old' families with the earlier passing of other American cultures," and Ralph Marvell is a vestige of just such a disappearing past.²³ The deep interplay between history and subjectivity in the Marvell home makes it, like Ralph, a living relic.

Unlike his modern, mutable contemporaries, Undine and Elmer, Ralph possesses an inner essence, a fixed interior that links him to a type of subjectivity no longer advantageous in the modern city:

[T]here was a world of wonders within him. As a boy at the seaside, Ralph, between tides, had once come on a cave—a secret inaccessible place with glaucous lights, mysterious murmurs, and a single shaft of communication with the sky. . . . And so with his inner world. Though so coloured by outside impressions, it wove a secret curtain about him, and he came and went in it with the same joy of furtive possession. (80)

Like Henry James in *The American Scene*, Ralph's interior is at odds with the moving, changing city that surrounds him. His sense of detachment from the outside world is ultimately untenable. Undine, of course, is indifferent to this kind of detachment. Even Clare Van Degen, the cousin whose "light foot had reached the threshold" of Ralph's interior, is herself entwined in the same networks of economics and consumption that Undine more obviously represents. Maintaining his "world of wonder" in the modern city can only lead to isolation and destruction for Ralph

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Marvell.

A vestige of an earlier type of subjectivity defined in part by his conception of intact interior space, Ralph cannot acquire the mutability and mobility necessary to survive in the modern city. When his friend Charles Bowen recognizes this, Bowen feels "the pang of the sociologist over the individual havoc wrought by every social readjustment: it had so long been clear to him that Ralph was a survival, and destined, as such, to go down in any conflict with the rising forces" (249). And indeed, after his marriage to Undine disintegrates, Ralph Marvell commits suicide. The rising forces to which Bowen alludes are of course consumption and mobility, the very forces that will eliminate history—and a unified subjectivity—from the American home.

Undine Spragg: The Hotel Spirit

In *The Custom of the Country*, the home without history emerges as a distinctly American invention. It indicates that every aspect of the culture may be bought and sold. And significantly, the mobility and rootlessness associated with this commercialization of the home is consistently linked with the hotel. "It was natural that the Americans, who had no homes, who were born and died in hotels, should have contracted nomadic habits," Wharton's French characters think (441). Mobility is here figured as a disease "contracted" from the architecture Americans inhabit. Clearly, the modes of living that accompany certain architectural practices have, at least in the eyes of outsiders, the potential to shape a culture that reflects the structures it builds. As a writer in *The Cosmopolitan* noted, "The children of hotel residents become precocious, wayward, and self-assertive, and learn from strangers many things the knowledge of which should be kept from children."²⁴ The notion that children might be imbued with the "hotel-spirit"—that in a single generation a conception of the past could be wiped out—is clearly as alarming to these authors as it is inspiring to Gilman.

In *Custom*, hotel and apartment culture come to represent a uniquely American lack of concern for the past that is exemplified in and enforced by the ever-changing, always temporary American architecture. The hotel-ness of American life is precisely what is at issue in the scene that marks the disintegration of Undine Spragg's next marriage. Raymond de Chelles, whom Undine marries after Ralph Marvell's death, is a French aristocrat whose title and wealth are legacies of a past entirely foreign to Undine. After Undine suggests selling the Chelles family château, Saint Désert, the shocked Chelles responds:

You [Americans] come among us from a country we don't know, and can't imagine, a country you care for so little that before you've been a day in

ours you've forgotten the very house you were born in—if it wasn't torn down before you knew it! . . . you come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven't had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they're dry, and the people are as proud of changing as we are of holding to what we have . . . (468)

Here, Chelles links an American pride in mutability to the scrim that passes for permanence in the United States. The "house you were born in" represents the past, which is continually obliterated before it has even had the chance to imprint itself on a child's psyche. It is a far cry from Ralph Marvell's youth. The only home Chelles can imagine producing Undine is a hotel that transforms a house into a town, a flimsy, unnamed structure that exudes only the new and will fade as soon as something newer appears. And of course, he is not far from right—Undine's hotel-influenced subjectivity represents the future of the urban nation.

Undine knows what she wants—"the appropriate setting to a pretty woman" (471). Like Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, Undine is highly attuned to environment, but in contrast to Lily, whose most appropriate setting is the ironically immobilizing *tableau vivante*, Undine's favorite settings are dynamic. Her mobile subjectivity requires "home" to resemble the caravansary Gilman advocates. Undine moves from one place to another on the assumption that the appropriate surroundings will both construct and project a particularly profitable version of herself. Thus, in *The Custom of the Country*, as in Gilman's work, the ability to manipulate environment emerges as the greatest societal power a woman can possess. In the American tradition, this idea harks back at least as far as notions of Republican motherhood and Catharine Beecher. But the way in which Undine mobilizes this tenet of femininity becomes an impulse far removed from Beecher's or Gilman's formulations. For instead of desiring settings appropriate to raising model families or radically remaking gender relations, Undine wants to inhabit settings that will elevate her social and economic standing.

Transforming the Setting: Space Becomes Capital

Undine spatializes a modern logic of investment in order to achieve her social and economic goals; her marriages operate as investments through which she may attain the settings she desires. Then, Undine shapes these environments on the assumption that once the setting is established, the reality she desires will develop. In other words, in order to transform herself, Undine must create the setting that makes the transformation possible. This spatial dialectic links many of Wharton's works to one another. *The Age of Innocence*, for

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example, charts the transformation of a social class through the decisions they make about domestic spaces. Ellen Olenska's decision to inhabit a bohemian neighborhood uncharted by the Fifth Avenue "tribe" prefigures her ostracism from that tribal world; Catherine Mingott's move to the "wilderness" near the nascent Central Park marks her as a maverick and Ellen's lone ally; May and Newland Archer's reconsolidation of their wealth and class position by building a house that replicates and reinforces the spatial arrangements and relations of their own childhood homes cements their position within the family and class. Similarly, in *The House of Mirth*, Lily's ability to adapt to the setting she inhabits is her salient feature. Like Undine, Lily knows which settings will suit her and she blends in accordingly. Wharton writes, "There were moments when she longed for anything different, anything strange, remote and untried; but the utmost realm of her imagination did not go beyond picturing her usual life in a new setting. She could not figure herself as anywhere but in a drawing room, diffusing elegance as a flower sheds perfume."²⁵ Unlike Lily, Undine can think beyond her current circumstances. The advantage that allows Undine to avoid Lily's demise is her ability to conflate spatial and economic skills and align Wall Street with Fifth Avenue. Undine sees settings not as static backgrounds, but as mutable environments that will in turn change her.

Undine's own mutability allows her to adapt to the settings she enters, but her insatiable desire leads her to seek out ever-more fashionable milieux within which to move. Having joined the smart expatriate set in Paris, Undine stands out to "sociologist" Charles Bowen as strikingly adaptable: he notices that Undine "isolated herself in a kind of soft abstraction; and he admired the adaptability which enabled her to draw from such surroundings the contrasting graces of reserve" (247). Ever changing, Undine has used her skills as a mimic and her facility for selecting and adapting through contrast to environments so that she embodies the "flexible and diaphanous" members of the upper class. Throughout the text, Wharton emphasizes that this environmental dialectic of selection and adaptation cannot be separated from the economic relations of investment in structures and mirrors.

This investment logic transforms all of Undine's homes, a pattern that is established during Undine's marriage to Ralph Marvell. Within the Washington Square house, Ralph's his "old brown room" has become his psychic sanctuary. And yet, by the time of Ralph's death this inner sanctum is dominated by Undine, or at least, by her image. "The walls and tables were covered with photographs of Undine, effigies of all shapes and sizes, expressing every possible sentiment dear to the photographic tradition" (297). The photograph, that

modern, reproducible form of portraiture, has replaced for Ralph the family portraits that dominate the rest of the house. History has been consumed by the multiple images that represent the collage of modernity.

The transformation of Ralph's room foreshadows the powerful impact Undine's approach to environment will have upon her marriage to Raymond de Chelles, during which Undine comes to inhabit domestic spaces that enforce far more regimented gender and family roles than those with which she is familiar. Although the clippings-obsessed Mrs. Heeney confuses the Hôtel de Chelles with an American hotel: "oh, they call their houses hotels, do they? That's funny: I suppose it's because they let out part of 'em," of course the French ancestral home is the American hotel's opposite (420). It is steeped in history, structured by tradition, and imbricated in economic relationships that approach the feudal. In both Saint Désert and their Paris hôtel, the Chelles's family honor and responsibilities structure domestic space in ways that Undine cannot understand. For instance, Undine believes that as the wife of the eldest Chelles son she should wield a powerful influence in determining the uses of the family property. And yet, decisions about who should occupy which apartments of the hôtel become transactions in which "she did not weigh a feather" (436). Even so, into this space dedicated to "the huge voracious fetish they called The Family," Undine finds a way to introduce the forces of the market (442).

The problem with Saint Désert is that as a repository for history—and in particular, family history—it does not register on Undine's internal ledger. She must convert the home into a consumable product in order to comprehend and thus exert power over it. Undine is practiced at such transactions. During her marriage to Ralph Marvell, for example, she decides to have the jewels from a pair of family rings reset. Undine gives the ancient stones a more modern appearance, wrests them from the incalculable valuation system of family and history, and returns them to the logic of the market, the hotel-spirit that organizes her perceptions of the world. In the case of the Marvell jewels, Undine also removes the stones from the bodily, human connection they once signified. Out of the physical settings that gave the rings familial meaning, the stones become pure commodity. A similar evisceration of history occurs with the de Chelles tapestries.

Before Undine arrives, the tapestries that decorate Saint Désert's long grey hallways are imbued with three sets of value: familial, historic, and aesthetic. While the most famous tapestries were gifts from Louis XV, the majority have been stitched by the generations of women who have inhabited the chateau: "The innumerable rooms of Saint Désert were furnished with the embroidered hangings and tapestry chairs

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produced by generations of diligent châtelaines, and the unfiring needles of the old Marquise, her daughters and dependents were still steadily increasing the provision" (442). This familial tradition inscribes a history that goes beyond nation, and, it is ironically implied, almost beyond memory. "Dynasties have fallen, institutions changed, manners and morals, alas, deplorably declined; but as far back as memory went, the ladies of the line of Chelles had always sat at their needle-work on the terrace of Saint Désert" (443). Through their intensely physical connection with the women of Chelles, as well as their centuries-old presence within the château, the tapestries function as living relics of the family history, shaping the current inhabitants' perceptions of the past and present, and reinforcing the home's function as a site of history. Family heirlooms become metonyms for a nostalgic connection to the family home. Together, home and heirloom become history. As Sara Quay notes, "the narrative with which heirlooms are attributed includes the story that the family tells about itself through its possession of the inherited thing."²⁶ And as aesthetic pieces, the "splendid" tapestries are without peer (423). Containing "the fabulous pinks and blues of the Boucher series," they are the kind of rare work that reduces even a practiced dealer to a series of "Ah—"s (455).

Even though they possess complex value within and outside of the family, by Undine's logic the tapestries are worthless until they are converted to the monetary value they represent. From the moment when Undine first sees them, they become the distinguishing feature of a desirable setting. After her first visit to the château, she reports to a friend: "Chelles said he wanted me to see just how they lived at home, and I did; I saw everything: the tapestries that Louis Quinze gave them, and the family portraits, and the chapel, where their own priest says mass, and they sit by themselves in a balcony with crowns all over it" (256). Clearly, these elements of the de Chelles existence—tapestries, portraits, and chapel—are the very aspects the family considers highly valuable. History, lineage, and religion are central to their identity. But in her report to her friend, Undine transforms the château into a stage set, describing it as a "real castle, with towers, and water all round it, and a funny kind of bridge they pull up" (256). The tapestries, the portraits, and even the priest become mere set decorations. As with everything in Undine's universe, eventually the value of her choice must come down to its value on the open market. Because the tapestries form a part of the setting she considers to be desirable and appropriate, Undine assumes that they must be worth millions. As she points out to the horrified Raymond, "There's a fortune in this one room: you could get anything you chose for those

tapestries" (453). The setting Undine considers so appropriate to her beauty slips from the mesh of the multiple meanings that construct it and becomes a site for profiteering.

Undine's modern move to eviscerate history from the home at last succeeds when she is reconnected with Elmer Moffatt, the once and future husband she has concealed from everyone except for her parents. Undine's kindred spirit, Moffatt embodies a mutability similar to her own. When Undine sees him she notes that "something in his look seemed to promise the capacity to develop into any character he might care to assume; though it did not seem probable that, for the present, that of a gentleman would be among them" (107). Like Undine, Elmer can reinvent himself in order to profit from new opportunities in rapidly changing environments. He is also highly mobile; his gender and lack of personal history allow him to move from place to place far more rapidly than Undine can. When together, the couple never stay in one place for very long. Both of their weddings are preceded by rapid train rides to new states where marriage is famously temporary. But even more significant than this shared mobility is their shared fascination with interior space. While Gilman argues that if the home has been the site of woman's economic and personal demise it can also be the site for her rejuvenation, Wharton does not gender the ability to remake settings for economic reasons. Both Undine and Elmer are practiced decorators. For Wharton, the transformation of a setting's function from historical truth-telling to consumer good emphasizes that skill in manipulating setting is a quality of modern subjectivity.

To Undine, Elmer represents settings: "While he talked of building up railways she was building up palaces, and picturing all the multiple lives he would lead in them" (461). Highly modern, Undine's vision of success departs completely from the unifying ideals of family and history and lights instead on the multiplicity that plenty of money can buy. In fact, Moffatt's ability to construct settings becomes a large part of his appeal for Undine.

She liked to see such things about her—without any real sense of their meaning she felt them to be the appropriate setting of a pretty woman, to embody something of the rareness and distinction she had always considered she possessed; and she reflected that if she had still been Moffatt's wife he would have given her just such a setting, and the power to live in it as became her. (471)

As she sits in Saint Désert, a setting she chose precisely because it seemed particularly appropriate for an earlier vision of herself, Undine reflects that there is something lacking in her marriage to Raymond de

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Chelles. She now seeks a power that only someone like Moffatt can bestow; his sheer wealth will allow her actively to move from place to place and inhabit the settings she chooses. To remain among the chateau's artifacts is one thing, "the power to live in [a place] as became her" quite another. Undine wants the opportunity to adapt herself to the beauty and monetary worth of her surroundings.

Like Chelles, Moffatt wants to surround Undine with beautiful and valuable objects, but to Moffatt these objects' value depends upon their status as commodities. He has the power not simply to purchase objects but to set their value, creating a new matrix of worth to replace historical, familial, and aesthetic measures. As the country's "greatest" collector, Elmer Moffatt repeatedly enacts the modern deracination of objects from their pasts. Every object he collects shares that fate, especially the Saint Désert tapestries, which he initially wants to remove from their centuries-old resting places and assign to perpetual transit throughout the Continent in his private railroad car. In creating settings for himself and eventually Undine, Moffatt revalues the objects he chooses. The "Railroad King" uses a fortune gained in mobility in order to make valuable objects portable. No longer historicized, they are thoroughly commodified.

This erasure of historical contexts is painfully legible to Paul Marvell, Ralph and Undine's young son. Paul, like his father, has grown up in homes that embody history and family. He has been surrounded by familial artifacts throughout his life. In Washington Square, of course, there were the family portraits that mirrored not only the house's ancient inhabitants, but Paul himself. When he moves to Saint Désert to live with Undine and Chelles, he enters "a drawing-room hung with portraits of high-nosed personages in perukes and orders," and meets "a circle of ladies and gentlemen, looking not unlike every-day versions of the official figures above their heads" (413). Attuned to these resemblances, Paul is clearly struck by the differences between these settings and the one Moffatt has constructed. After his mother remarries Elmer Moffatt, Paul wanders Moffatt's new Paris hôtel, "wondering whether the wigged and corseleted heroes on the walls represented Mr. Moffatt's ancestors, and why, if they did, he looked so little like them" (497). The portraits, like the tapestries and objets d'art in Moffatt's office have all been converted from a familial meaning to an economic one. Elmer and Undine display ancient portraits, but of course they are not ancestral; they are trophies that announce the victory of economics over history. The reconfiguration of the family that accompanies the reconstruction of the urban home is highlighted in these objects. But the evisceration of history from the home leaves a wound, an absence marked by desire.

The Moffatts' ultimate home is appropriately temporary; they divide their time between a new Paris hôtel and a Fifth-Avenue mansion that is "an exact copy of the Pitti Palace in Florence" (502). These structures reveal that the space of home has become mobile, transplantable, and ultimately transnational. More than anything else, the homes parallel Moffatt's art collection, as the term *hotel* signifies. While the de Chelles family's hôtel carries the French meaning of an ancestral urban home, the Moffatts use their Paris hôtel as if it were an American hotel:

Mr. and Mrs. Moffatt had hastily established themselves, a few weeks earlier, on their return from a flying trip to America. They were always coming and going; during the two years since their marriage they had been perpetually dashing over to New York and back, or rushing down to Rome or up to the Engadine; Paul [Undine's son] never knew where they were except when a telegram announced that they were going somewhere else. (495)

"Home" becomes mobile, ahistorical, temporary. It is a hotel in the most American sense. Thus, in *The Custom of the Country*, domestic space unfolds; the history and specificity of place are subsumed as the home crosses boundaries of space and nation. In depicting a culture in which domestic spaces are not simply permeable but literally mobile, Wharton links the development of a modern subject to new perceptions and configurations of space and time. In doing so, she solidifies Henry James's suggestion in *The American Scene* that the "hotel-spirit" may be the American spirit—a mobile spirit without a history, whose spatial practices destroy the past. As such, the works help to show how a modernist conception of self develops in the realism of early twentieth-century depictions of urban life.

For both Wharton and Gilman, domestic settings allow women to exert a spatial power that exemplifies the best (for Gilman) and the worst (for Wharton) of modernity. Although the authors differ as to what removing history from the home will mean for American—and global—culture, they share a similar vision of the relationship between setting and subject. When the home is seen as an economic investment, instead of a familial inheritance, women's power to transform settings and transform themselves in the process becomes a source of social agency that links public space to private. If for Gilman the social outcomes of this change have revolutionary potential, for Wharton—as for James—they raise alarming questions about the fate of history and selfhood in a modern world.

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Notes

- 1 Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country* (1913; New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1997), 77. All subsequent references to this text are cited parenthetically.
- 2 Henry James, *The American Scene* (1907; New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 71.
- 3 "Apartment Hotel" was the term used to describe an apartment building that provided meals and other hotel amenities (telephones, laundry services, etc.) to its customers. Rooms in both luxury hotels and apartment hotels were arranged *en suite*. For a further discussion of the amenities possible in a luxury hotel, see Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1994).
- 4 This first apartment building, the Stuyvesant Apartments, was designed by prominent nineteenth-century architect Richard Morris Hunt. See Elizabeth Hawes, *New York, New York* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), for a history of early apartments in New York City.
- 5 Charles H. Israels, "New York Apartment Houses," *Architectural Record* 11(1901): 477.
- 6 William Hutchins, "New York Hotels," *The Architectural Record* 12 (1902): 621.
- 7 Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1981), 11.
- 8 "Over the Draughting Board: Apartment Hotels in New York City," *Architectural Record* 13 (1903): 89.
- 9 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (1898; Berkeley: U of California Press, 1998), 1.
- 10 Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1999), 9.
- 11 See especially Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890; New York: Dover Publications, 1971), *The Making of an American* (1901; New York: MacMillan, 1924), and *The Peril and Preservation of the Home* (Philadelphia: G.W. Jacobs, 1903).
- 12 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (1898; Berkeley: U of California Press, 1998), 267.
- 13 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Home* (1903; Urbana: U of Illinois Press, 1972), 330.
- 14 Bellamy's novel had both intellectual and political appeal; it influenced thinkers like John Dewey and Thorstein Veblen as well as the platform of the Populist Party. Erich Fromm, foreword to Bellamy, *Looking Backward* (1888; New York: Signet Classic, 1960), v-vi.
- 15 Gilman, *Women*, 265.
- 16 Gilman, *Women*, 265.
- 17 See Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 28;
- 18 Gilman wrote everything in *The Forerunner*, including personal testimonials for her advertisers' products.
- 19 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Making a Change," *Herland and Selected Stories by Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, Barbara H. Solomon, ed. (1911; New York: Signet Classics, 1992), 275.
- 20 Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (1934; New York: Scribner's Sons, 1964), 28.
- 21 Gilman, *Home*, 29.
- 22 After all, Wharton was adept at acquiring and constructing new settings for herself throughout her life. See R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*. (New York: Harper, 1975).
- 23 Christopher Gair, "The Crumbling Structure of 'Appearances': Representation and Authenticity in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*" *Modern Fiction Studies* 43: 2 (1997): 354.
- 24 Everett N. Blanke, "The Cliff-Dwellers of New York," *The Cosmopolitan*, 15 (July, 1893): 356.
- 25 Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905; New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 79.
- 26 Sara Quay, "Edith Wharton's Narrative of Inheritance," *American Literary Realism* 29:3 (1997): 28.

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Here and in her chapter on the war novels—Wharton's *A Son at the Front*, Cather's *One of Ours*, and Gale's *Heart's Kindred*—Williams makes no comparisons in terms of literary merit; she treats the three writers as equals, of equal stature as artists. She not only defends each writer against the charge that women can't write authentic fiction about war; she argues for the importance of the war novels as a breaking of the "gender-genre boundary" that enabled each writer to move from her "critically sanctioned niche" fashionable society, the prairie, the village) to explore new subjects and methods.

Williams is a strong writer and a keen, incisive critic. Her comparison of the careers and novels of Wharton, Cather, and Gale yields penetrating insights in every chapter. The reader, however, may question whether the writers' relations with other women writers are quite as determinative as Williams maintains. She argues that Gale's obscurity shows "the consequences of choosing sisterhood as a model for literary authority," while Wharton's and Cather's refusal of such a model "means that their contributions and individual artistic identities are still acknowledged." Does Williams's argument fully account for the differences in literary reputation? Would Gale have fared better with critics if she had followed Cather's and Wharton's example?

Such questions do not diminish the importance of Williams's book. In addition to her stimulating analyses of each writer's novels, she restores a significant episode to the biographies of Wharton and Cather in making known their friendship with Gale. Her chapter on Gale's career as writer, social reformer, feminist, friend and mentor to many writers at the University of Wisconsin, where she was a prominent figure, portrays a remarkable woman who deserves the attention that Williams gives her. If Gale regains a place in American literary history, much will be owed to the work of Deborah Williams.

Elsa Nettels, *College of William and Mary*

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2. "Edith Wharton and Ernest Renan," Carol J. Singley, Rutgers Univ., Camden
3. "Nietzsche, German Culture, and Wharton," Carole M. Shaffer-Koros, Kean Univ.
4. "Habit and the Pragmatics of Thinking in Edith Wharton," Renee Tursi, Coll. of Charleston

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