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# EDITH WHARTON IN PARIS

A Special Issue

Guest Co-Editors

Katherine Joslin

Alan Price

*Over 120 people from ten different countries met in Paris on June 28 to July 1, 1991, to discuss Edith Wharton's expatriate life in France and the impact of Europe on her writing. "Edith Wharton in Paris" was held at the Mona Bismarck Foundation, a turn-of-the-century town house that belonged to a wealthy Kentucky-born expatriate woman who might well have served as a Wharton heroine. Seventy scholars and critics, including featured speakers Roger Asselineau, Millicent Bell, Shari Benstock, and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, presented papers that considered Wharton's interest in aesthetics, history, travel, politics, culture, literature and war. Noël Riley Fitch conducted walking tours of Wharton's Paris, and Scott Marshall introduced a private screening of Tony Palmer's *The Children at the American University of Paris*. Roger Gouze, the President of *La Mémoire des Lieux* hosted a ceremony to unveil a plaque honoring Edith Wharton at her home in the Rue de Varenne, followed*

(continued on back page)

# The Paris Circle of Edith Wharton and Henry Adams

by Viola Hopkins Winner

Charlottesville, Virginia

The friendship of Edith Wharton and Henry James was sparked, at least as far as Adams was concerned, when in 1891, and in Paris, he met her at an American diplomat's dinner party.<sup>1</sup> She "surprised" him, he said, "by her knowledge, especially of Paris on the literary and artistic side; she is very intelligent, and of course looks as fragile as a dandelion in seed; an American product almost as sad to me as M. Puvis de Chavannes."<sup>2</sup> As "an American product" himself, he found her "energy of culture" (Paul Bourget's phrase for American intellectual women) "sad" because she seemed to him all intelligence: bloodless, attenuated like the allegorical figures in Puvis de Chavannes' paintings. For Adams, the foundation of their friendship was laid in her intellectual qualities. In turn, for her, he was an eminent man of letters, global traveller, (he was in Paris in 1891 on his way back from a year in the South Seas), art connoisseur and collector, and one of the best talkers of his time. Cosmopolites with similar social backgrounds, they had numerous mutual friends and family connections; for instance, Nanny Wharton, Edith's sister-in-law, had been a friend of Adams' wife, Clover. (Interestingly, unlike the negative impression about her husband's family that one gets from Edith Wharton's letters, in Clover's letters, Nanny appears as witty and amusing, and Clover did not suffer fools or dull people.) In addition to other affinities, Wharton and Adams both enjoyed society. Although after Clover's death in 1885, Adams often posed as a recluse and was indeed bored and ill at ease in fashionable society, especially in the company of "millionaire women," he was remarkably sociable, if not a "society man" or a diner-out in the class of Henry James. (The chapter of *The Education of Henry Adams* titled "The Perfection of Human Society" indicates the extent to which he considered society in the narrow sense of the word important in itself and as an index of the culture of society in the larger sense.) Cultivating the amenities and the arts of living much as Edith Wharton did, he was not put off by her social inclinations or fashionable dress. Beginning with his brilliant expatriate sister, Louisa, he was drawn to stylish women who shone in company, like Clover, who had leavened her knowledge of Greek by wearing gowns designed by Worth.

Although Wharton and Adams met on and off in Paris and in Washington in the intervening years, it was not until about 1908 that their intersecting circles merged almost into one. Having discovered his ancestral spiritual home in French medieval cathedrals, Adams began from about 1899 to make Paris his physical home every summer and fall, returning to Washington for the winter-spring season. He published *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* privately in 1904. By 1907, Edith Wharton had found her "great good place" in the Faubourg St. Germain. It is helpful at this point to glance at what they individually and jointly sought and found in Paris.

Returning from the United States to Paris in 1907, Wharton experienced "the usual demoralizing happiness" of being back. "Dieu que c'est beau after six months of eye-starving! The tranquil majesty of the architectural lines, the wonderful blurred winter lights, the long lines of lamps garlanding the avenues & the quays — je l'ai dans mon sang!"<sup>3</sup> It was in her blood in the sense that six of her formative childhood years had been spent abroad, two of them in Paris. For her, Europe meant "stored beauty & tradition & amenity"<sup>4</sup>; "the invincible French passion for form and fitness"<sup>5</sup> appealed to some of her deepest needs, aesthetic and psychological. Rootless, restless, mired in an unhappy marriage, she sought unity, harmony, continuity. She was drawn to France because there "culture" was "an eminently social quality, while in Anglo-Saxon countries it might be called anti-social. In France, where politics so sharply divide the different classes and coteries, artistic and literary interests unite them." The French salon was based on the belief that "intimacy and continuity were the first requisites of social enjoyment."<sup>6</sup>

Henry Adams' love-hate affair with Paris began in 1860, an extended stop on his grand tour after graduation from college. Continuing to believe that Paris was "a necessary part of the education of everyone who has got to pass beyond his own township," he gave his nieces a long summer there in 1897.<sup>7</sup> Among the pleasures of Paris not the least was the anonymity and privacy it afforded him; on the boulevards he was just another flâneur, not Henry Adams of Lafayette Square. But unlike Edith Wharton what struck him on his strolls was

not symmetry and order, continuity, and social coherence, but decadence, the breakdown of culture. In 1898, in the midst of the Dreyfus case, he wrote, "Paris is so rotten that nothing coheres. Even its literary people don't form a class. The social particle is reduced as nearly as possible to the individual."<sup>8</sup> Money and the army were "the only cohesive force of society."<sup>9</sup> He declared Paris "a place for the elderly to prepare for Hell" and wouldn't recommend it even for the young. Everywhere he looked he saw the "grand negation."<sup>10</sup> The architecture of the Paris exposition of 1900 was "a paradise of French bad taste," which he attributed to the bourgeoisie, "who never knew society, or entered a drawing-room, or felt an artistic emotion, or had the minds or manners of gentlemen. The real French gentleman, of course, won't do anything intelligent. He considers art a bourgeois occupation."<sup>11</sup> Still, Paris even in its decadence was preferable to other places. He found it not only charming in August (when everyone was away) but "on the whole the easiest, the most natural, and the most ornamental sepulchre for the still living."<sup>11</sup> No other place in the world, he observed more soberly in the *Education*, approached it "for variety of direction and energy of mind."<sup>13</sup>

The difference between Adams' and Wharton's attitudes can be accounted for by age (in 1908 he was 70, and she, 46), temperaments, life histories, personal and artistic needs. In Paris, unlike in New York, Edith Wharton felt accepted both as a *femme du monde* and as a literary figure. In *A Backward Glance* she exaggerated the anti-intellectualism of her family and social class, presenting a view of herself that has become canonical. Her difficulties in starting and keeping up a career — her sense of isolation — were not so different, after all, from those of many American writers less well endowed financially and socially. And there were contemporaries of her own background who were cultivated and fostered the arts; if not exactly a salon, the 11th Street house of Mary Cadwalader Jones, her sister-in-law, was a gathering place of artists and writers. Intellectual life was not as impoverished as she implied nor were her beginnings so unappreciated. Her mother tried to record the stories she made up when she was a child and privately published her poems when she was sixteen. Her brother showed them to Allen Thorndyke Rice, who passed them on to Longfellow, and William Dean Howells published one of them in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Later, in 1898, Elizabeth Cameron reported that "all of New York is reading her book," meaning *The Decoration of Houses*.<sup>14</sup> Edith Wharton was considerably less deprived of encouragement than she pictured herself as being. This is not to question that she found in Paris as R.W.B. Lewis has said, "unmistakably a *center* for the exercise of her various faculties," but to remind us of the subjectivity of her responses to both American and French society.<sup>15</sup> Her Paris was an intellectual and social ideal, not a historical reality, as much an expression of her search for

solidarity, continuity, and roots as was Henry Adams' conception of the unifying force of the Virgin in medieval times as counter to the chaos of modern life. Adams and Wharton were drawn to Paris not only for aesthetic, intellectual, and cultural reasons, but for a "human communion" harder to obtain in the more centrifugal setting of American life. After Elizabeth Cameron and her daughter, Martha, who were Henry Adams' closest emotional ties, left Washington in 1897 and established themselves in Paris for part of the year, he followed suit; after the death in 1904 of John Hay, his closest friend and neighbor, he had even less incentive for full-time residence in the capital. Mrs. Wharton's entrée into various Parisian circles — the academic, the literary, the aristocratic — provided intellectual stimulation and a vantage ground from which, as a novelist of manners, she could judge and compare American and European social worlds. She enjoyed social prestige and recognition; Henry Adams noted, somewhat sourly, in 1905 that she "was getting quite the air of an elderly literary luminary."<sup>16</sup> But her marriage had become a nightmare, her family relations were limited and strained, her love affair was passionate but secret, and in the nature of things, impermanent. She looked to her friends for the warmth, intimacy, and stability missing in her personal, familial relations.

Both Adams and Edith Wharton, if not as cold and formidable as they were reputed to be, were prickly, difficult. But they had a great capacity for friendship. Friends were for them, for him perhaps more than for her, the family circle — indeed better than family, because they were freely chosen and rarely boring or emotionally wearing. Thus social life for both of them at its best centered on an intimate group of friends, "agreeably intelligent," often distinguished, meeting regularly, with infusions of new people, in a setting congenial to good talk.

The confluence of Henry Adams' circle of friends and relatives with Edith Wharton's can be traced in his letters from 1908 to 1910. "I have been playing more or less with Mrs Wharton who keeps a saloon now-a-days, and knows people," he reported in May of 1908. "Her tastes are eclectic enough — not quite so extensive as Miss Marbury's, but quite general. She took me yesterday to see a portrait of Henry James in Blanche's studio."<sup>17</sup> In 1910, he placed her at "almost the centre" of "our little American family group here," which he felt was "more closely intimate, and more agreeably intelligent, than any now left me in America. Our ambassador, [Robert] Bacon and his wife and daughter, are of it . . . The Walter Gays do the painting. Mrs Cameron fills in the action. Sturgis Bigelow, Walter Berry, . . . and I, run from one to the other. [Bigelow was Clover's cousin, a Buddhist scholar and collector of oriental art.] The Harry Whites need daily visitation. We are rather sufficient to ourselves, at least for the moment, and my only complaint is that I am the oldest, and have to do the sage. Damn *that!*"<sup>18</sup>

(He hated the part of the sage much less than he let on.) The degree of intimacy may be judged by his remark in June 1911: ". . . time tells constantly against Edith Wharton. Time and Teddy would kill a female archangel. Here in our little intimate society we feel our troubles personally, and most of us get into trouble like flies."<sup>19</sup> Close though they were, he was, however, probably unaware of her relationship with Morton Fullerton.

To list all of the "overlapping" friends would require conflating a good part of the indexes to their letters. Among the more notable were Bernard Berenson (Adams was instrumental in bringing him together with Edith Wharton) and the young poet George Cabot Lodge, known as "Bay," and his wife, Elizabeth Davis Lodge. Adams thought that Edith Wharton was harder hit by Bay's death in 1909 than he was himself, and he found her eulogistic piece on him "very sympathetic and appreciative." "Edith writes well — very well, — and never shocks our taste, either in expression or in thought."<sup>20</sup> (High praise from Henry Adams.) Other mutual friends not previously mentioned included Mary Cadwalader Jones and her daughter, Beatrice, Egerton Winthrop, Margaret Chanler, and of course, Henry James.

Yet as much as Henry Adams appreciated Edith Wharton's social efforts, he was negative about the French in what he called her "little suite"<sup>21</sup> and resisted her efforts to introduce him into the Faubourg aristocratic and literary circles into which she had found her way through her childhood friends and through Paul Bourget. He pronounced the Bourgets "Bourgeoises — very"<sup>22</sup> and was unimpressed by Jacques-Emile Blanche, whose conversational gifts were legendary, identifying him merely as having "perpetrated a rather brutal, Sargenty portrait of Henry James."<sup>23</sup> He described Comtesse Rosa de Fitz-James, whose salon was one of the most prominent in Proust's Paris, and whom he met at a luncheon at Mrs. Wharton's, as "a charming Jewess." On that occasion there was also "a very conversational Frenchman, who had the great merit of all French talkers, of amusing without requiring to be amused."<sup>24</sup>

To the French of the Faubourg St. Germain, Adams preferred those who gathered at the Versailles villa of Elisabeth Marbury, the American theatrical agent, and Elsie de Wolfe, the actress and later interior decorator. It was a semi-Bohemian atmosphere, "where somebody queer and MusicHally is sure to appear."<sup>25</sup> Marbury's actress friends Jane Hading and Rachel Boyer were "far from dazzling" off stage, and he had a hard time following them because "they talked fast enough, especially the Boyer," which interfered with his "intellectual enjoyment,"<sup>26</sup> but he liked theatrical people for their strong "community of feeling."<sup>27</sup> His interest in French drama, which he shared with Edith Wharton, was a continuing one from his earliest Paris days. At the instance of Elisabeth Marbury, he translated into English a detective melodrama, called *Vidocq*, by the popular playwright Emile Bergerat.

His French was colloquial enough for that purpose, but one of the reasons he shied away from the French social circles to which Edith Wharton tried to introduce him was that his spoken French was inadequate, or so he thought. Visiting French friends of another American friend, a group of "collectors, authors and talkers," he listened as best he could, "but such French people sputter when they talk." That one of them spoke more slowly in Swiss-French was "a relief."<sup>28</sup> His French was good enough for ordinary social communication, but not for intellectual exchange at the level he was accustomed to express himself in English. A brilliant conversationalist and the "sage" of his own circle, he would have found it, one surmises, frustrating and demeaning not to have the means to communicate with facility and flair. There was also perhaps an element here of personal and family pride and disappointed hopes: Edith Wharton was a "literary luminary"; he would be introduced as an eminent historian but he was hardly well known as such, not even in his own country. As the grandson and great-grandson of American presidents and ministers to France, he was theoretically the equal of princes, but experience had taught him that his equality would not be recognized. As American in his way as Edith Wharton was in hers, he denigrated the Faubourg society that she idealized: meeting duchesses and princess with historic names and the mingling of aristocrats with artists gave her the sense of coherence and continuity she found missing in American life. Adams, who identified the *belle époque* with *fin de siècle* decadence, stressed the social isolation of writers, artists, and university people. "Society is a totally disintegrated crowd."<sup>29</sup>

Although he himself remained aloof from aristocratic intellectual French salons, he valued the salon as a social institution and heritage of French culture. He paid Edith Wharton the compliment of comparing hers to Mme Récamier's, with Henry James cast as Châteaubriand and he himself in the role of the statesman and historian Baron de Barante. As Edith Wharton's notes and letters, in which she moved from addressing him as "Mr. Adams" to "Dearest Uncle" suggest, their social relationship developed into a loving friendship, one that endured until Adams' death in 1918. Despite temperamental, generational, and artistic differences, they found in Paris the conditions for society and solitude that nourished them as social beings and as literary artists.

#### NOTES

1. This may not have been their first actual meeting. Adams certainly knew of her, even if they were not as yet acquainted, as early as in 1885. The first reference to her in his letters occurs on March 30th of that year: he relayed to his wife, who was in Boston, the rumor that the recently engaged "Miss Jones Teddy Wharton hadn't anything like thirteen thousand a year." The Letters of Henry Adams, II, 596.
2. The Letters of HA, III, 594.
3. The Letters of Edith Wharton, p. 125.

# Edith Wharton, Gertrude Stein, and France: The Meanings of Expatriation

by Judith Saunders  
*Marist College*

So Paris was the place that suited those of us that were to create twentieth century art and literature, naturally enough.

Gertrude Stein, *Paris France*

To think of Edith Wharton and Gertrude Stein together may seem strange, even forced, since the differences in their lives and their writings are so striking as to almost obscure any common ground. Undoubtedly the most obvious common ground the two share is, literally, the ground of France: the geographical and psychological dislocation/relocation of the expatriate experience binds these two American women writers together as nothing else can. Each chose to spend in France a significant portion of her adult life: Wharton thirty years, from 1907 until her death in 1937, Stein forty-one years, from 1903 until her death in 1944. The notable lack of other commonalities, whether personal or artistic, renders a comparison of their comments on their adopted homeland all the more interesting.

As Benstock usefully points out in her book, *Women of the Left Bank*, differences in class, income, and sexual preference helped to shape Stein's and Wharton's lives in distinctly different ways both before and after the move to Paris (8-10). In the face of such sweeping contrasts, however, a few smaller similarities in background and taste do emerge. Both women were returning to a country where they had spent several years in early childhood, learning to speak French while very young, and both were to make other extended visits to Europe before finally settling in France as residents. Thus they enjoyed the advantage of an early won familiarity with the place they were to adopt as a permanent home decades later. Both describe themselves in their autobiographies as passionate, omnivorous readers; both were exhilarated by that new invention, the automobile; both loved dogs. They sought and found in Paris select groups of friends; each surrounded herself with a warm circle of people interested in art, ideas, and conversation. As Benstock

notes, these circles were in both cases comprised principally of men (15, 64). Finally, both Wharton and Stein became intensely devoted to France in general and to Paris in particular. They responded with personal grief to the devastation of France in WW I, and both engaged in war work, Wharton on a large scale as fundraiser and project director, Stein as a volunteer driver offering direct, hands-on services. For reasons well explained by differences in their American backgrounds, the two never met during the thirty overlapping years they spent in France, where they moved in almost entirely different social milieus (Lewis 440, Benstock 88).

Obviously the two women shared a common bond in their commitment to a literary career, but the details of those careers could hardly diverge more sharply. As writers, they approached their medium in diametrically opposing ways: Wharton's fiction demonstrates masterful engagement with traditional narrative and linguistic structures, while Stein's radical experimentation with language and form produced writings that often resist generic classification and ordinary exegesis. In consequence, at least in part, of these fundamental differences in aesthetic principles and practices, Wharton enjoyed a wide popular readership, a solid critical reputation, and marked financial success as a writer. Stein's work, in contrast, remained largely unpublished during her lifetime and never became a significant source of income for her. She enjoyed some notoriety as an innovative theorist, but won little critical respect and no broad base of readers for the bulk of her work. She never achieved anything like the degree of recognition she sought. Characteristically, the two women's public assessments of their talents and accomplishments also sound completely different notes: Wharton speaks of her achievements with modesty, whereas Stein repeatedly proclaims herself the leading literary genius of the century.

Both Wharton and Stein articulated their reactions to French life and culture quite elaborately in their published writings, most particularly in two pairs of books that seem

very naturally to invite comparison. Both women published memoirs almost simultaneously: Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, which finally brought her some portion of the popular response she craved, appeared in 1933, and Wharton's *A Backward Glance* just one year later in 1934. Both books comment on the motives behind the writers' expatriation and describe their lives in a foreign place. The second two books, Stein's *Paris France* (1940) and Wharton's *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919), are separated by twenty years in publication date, but their purposes are essentially similar: both set out to analyze for an American audience characteristic behaviors and values of the French people. It goes without saying that references to France and, indeed, to Europe in general, crop up frequently in other works by both writers, but these two pairs of books, similar in genre and in general purpose, provide a well balanced departure point for comparing the two writers' often antithetical, yet sometimes parallel perceptions of themselves, of France, and of the lives they made there.

*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *A Backward Glance* offer reminiscences quite different in scope and emphasis. Stein's highlight the Paris years heavily (1903 through 1933) — everything before 1903 is merely prelude to the great new beginning — while Wharton's cover her whole lifespan more evenly. Wharton writes as a woman of seventy-two reflecting on her past; many of the friends and acquaintances who figure in her recollections are dead, and she herself speaks as one whose life will soon be coming to a close. Like Wharton, Stein describes many lost friendships, but in her case the losses were sustained chiefly through quarrels rather than death, and she recounts these episodes with almost as much gusto as regret. Stein writes from the perspective of a vigorous fifty-eight-year-old still ambitious for accomplishment and recognition. Her memoirs convey her strong sense of living in exciting times, of being part of important new aesthetic experiments. Her book vibrates with energy and anticipation, despite some nostalgia for a vanished, pre-war Paris. In addition, Stein's book deliberately, if disguisedly, celebrates her twenty-five-year relationship with Alice Toklas, dwelling on their emotion-charged first meeting in Paris and its romantic sequel. Wharton hints at no corresponding love story, nor is her work charged with the excitement that comes from identifying with great new shifts in cultural and intellectual history. She identifies, rather, with a way of life that has largely disappeared and that she in any case cannot celebrate unambivalently. She pays tribute to many cherished friends, but for the most part she does not hail them as innovators. Loss of various kinds figures prominently in her book, in contrast to Stein's exuberant cataloguing of wondrous events still unfolding.

Stein's book obviously derives considerable vitality, as well as charm, from its playfully masked point-of-view. Posing as Alice Toklas, Stein is able to write her own life

story in the third person, deftly moving the character of "Gertrude Stein" to stage center. The putative author, Stein's narrating "Alice," happily complies, consistently directing attention away from herself and toward her more important companion. The on-going narrative spoof at the heart of the book exercises appeal and, more importantly, it allows Stein to make admiring remarks about herself indirectly; what otherwise would be construed as egotism and vanity now passes as part of a huge, delicious joke. And because Stein's focus is on the rebirth associated with the move to Paris and her friendship with Toklas, her chronology keeps circling back to the critical year of 1907, underlining the happy moment when the right two persons met in just the right place (Wickes 62, Benstock 162). Wharton's autobiography, in contrast to Stein's, is straightforward in point-of-view and traditionally chronological in structure. She moves the reader deliberately, conscientiously, through the events of her life. Since her literary fame has provided the *raison d'être* for publishing her memoirs, her task, as she sees it, is to explain her own development as a writer. Speaking in serious and measured tones, the "I" of *A Backward Glance* creates a mood utterly unlike the chatty, jocular spirit of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. It would be easy, perhaps, to perceive Wharton's book as flat or stodgy in the context of this comparison with Stein's whimsical tour de force, but clearly the differences in tone can be attributed in large part to circumstantial differences in the lives of the authors.

Both books become list-like at times, as Wharton and Stein enumerate their many friends and associates. Recognizing that public interest in her circle of artist and writer friends will attract readers to her book, Stein revels frankly in gossip, regaling her reader with anecdotes about figures such as Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Rousseau, Anderson, Hemingway. Serious attempts to explain aesthetic ideas are punctuated with stories about wives and mistresses and fallings out. Wharton is much more circumspect in her revelations, as we would anticipate. She gives prominent place in her book to her friends *as friends*, to acknowledge their human contributions to her life. Like Stein, she is aware that a number of her intimates will be well known to her audience as people of historical importance, e.g., George Trevelyan, Henry James, Percy Lubbock, but her first concerns are to detail her affection for them and to add deserved praise to their memory.

Each book highlights one particular friendship, a friendship important for both personal and historical reasons: Stein's with Pablo Picasso and Wharton's with Henry James. Both women glory in their close association with a man of recognized genius but, typically, they show their friendships in very different lights. Wharton is deferential in her portrait of James, who was, after all, twenty years her senior and a literary figure of established fame by the time they became well acquainted. She feels privileged to enjoy his friendship, and she speaks

of him from a distance inspired by respect. Stein depicts a more easy-going give-and-take between herself and Picasso, who was four years younger than she and still unknown when they met. Living in the same city, they established a more frequent and more casual companionship than that between Wharton and James, who rarely resided even on the same continent. Unlike Wharton, Stein assumes complete equality with her friend; indeed, she argues that her writing represents a form of literary cubism and that she herself is as important to the world of letters as Picasso is to the visual arts (see also *Picasso* 12-16). She records in her book the meteoric rise of her friend's reputation without expressing resentment at her own comparative failure to achieve fame, content to pronounce herself his equal. Because she truly believes her genius is comparable to Picasso's — and clearly he persuades her that he believes this too — Stein associates herself with his success unhampered by envy. Wharton, for her part, maintains her deferential posture toward James, even while his work is falling steadily in public and critical opinion and her own selling extravagantly well.

Illuminating many of the obvious contrasts between Wharton and Stein in terms of background and character, their autobiographical books indirectly reveal the importance of still another factor at work shaping expatriate experience — age — the point in each woman's life when she transplanted herself from America to France. Wharton, twelve years older than Stein, made the move in middle age. In *A Backward Glance* she identifies 1907 as the year in which her annual visits to France (which had been increasing in length and significance) were transformed in her mind, at least, into permanent residency. Forty-five years old, Wharton had already lived through twenty years of an emotionally stultifying and now rapidly decaying marriage. Certainly the move to Paris represented an attempt at emotional and erotic release, but she sought freedom in the spirit of one who has been long imprisoned. Divorce from Teddy Wharton — a belated and somewhat bitter liberation — and passionate awakening in the arms of Morton Fullerton inevitably meant something different to her than such an ending and beginning might mean to a younger person. Professionally, by 1907 Wharton had completed her literary apprenticeship and achieved a strong reputation with publication of *The House of Mirth*.

The younger Stein was only twenty-nine when she made Paris her permanent home. She had romantic disappointment and a professional false start behind her, but for her, life in Paris represented a first real beginning, both emotionally, as she met Alice Toklas and established a domestic partnership with her, and professionally, as she claimed literature for her metier and began a lifetime of almost ceaseless writing. By the time Edith Wharton came to Paris, many things about the shape of her life had already been decided, but Gertrude Stein arrived in a much more unformed state; she stood just on the

threshold of mature adulthood. Consequently, her new life in Paris offered Stein more significant opportunities for self-transformation than Wharton's did her. Stein's book rings with the triumphant exuberance of one who has seized a great chance in the nick of time and forged a whole new destiny for herself; Wharton's book literally *looks backward*, reflecting on the problematic value of a past from which the writer cannot and will not wholly extricate herself.

In most respects, thus far, the two writers appear to be inverted images of one another; whatever one does, or thinks, or says, we find the other doing, thinking, and saying just the opposite. We might well expect to discover that their impressions of France and their reasons for living there would be poles apart but, intriguingly, this is not the case. Predictably, their books (Wharton's *French Ways and Their Meaning* and Stein's *Paris France*) are marked by radical differences in style, structure, and tone, differences much of a piece with those already noted in connection with their autobiographies. Examining the substance of the two books, however, we find significant overlap: on the subject of their adopted homeland, Wharton and Stein demonstrate remarkable unity of thought and feeling.

Prolific and committed writers both, Stein and Wharton rejoice to find in French culture a thorough-going appreciation for artistic and intellectual life. Wharton praises the French for the intense value they place on "poetry and imagination" as among the "higher and more precious elements of civilization" (*FWM* 149). Always the French are committed to exchange of ideas and to aesthetic achievement more than to "business efficiency" or to "telephones and plumbing" (149). Addressing the same point, Stein states that because the French "respect art and letters," living in France affords her unique "privileges" (*PF* 21). She recounts an amusing, illustrative anecdote about wanting to park in a garage already "more than full." The attendant moves some automobiles out so that Stein's, along with one belonging to "Monsieur the academician," can be accommodated. "Even in a garage," she notes jubilantly, "an academician and a woman of letters takes [sic] precedence even of millionaires and politicians . . . it is quite incredible" (21).

To reside in a place where they and their deepest interests earn respect offers Wharton and Stein clear personal and professional rewards. Both explain in great detail, moreover, that expatriation in France offers them more profound gratification than mere privilege. Because a feeling for the arts permeates the fabric of ordinary life in France, artistic and intellectual concerns are not isolated from other human affairs. "They have instinctively applied to living the same rules that they appl[y] to artistic creation," Wharton avers (*FWM* 40). Apparently mundane matters, such as cooking and clothing, thus can be understood as extensions of the French artistic impulse. The French "do not care for the raw material of sensation," Wharton explains; "food must be exquisitely

cooked, emotion eloquently expressed, every experience must be transmuted into terms of beauty" (138). Stein supports this insight, noting for instance that, in the preparation of food, French sensibility has "turned perfect elaboration into perfect simplicity" (51). Both writers also explore at considerable length connections between art and ladies' hats: "There is no pulse so sure of the state of a nation as its characteristic art product," Stein observes. "Two years ago everybody was saying that France was down and out . . . And I said but I do not think so because not for years . . . have hats been as various and lovely and as french as they are now" (12). Wharton corroborates the point authoritatively: "The artistic-integrity of the French has led them to feel . . . that there is no difference in kind between a woman's hat brim and the curve of a Rodin marble" (39). Again and again in their two books, Stein and Wharton delight in observing how the French commitment to the arts manifests itself in details of everyday living.

France also nourishes the artist's spirit in less obvious ways. Both these writers thrive on a fundamentally paradoxical quality they perceive at the heart of French culture. Repeatedly, and in a variety of contexts, they characterize France as a place where basic contradictions co-exist. They express the bottommost layer of the paradox as a clash between freedom and confinement. The French are a people confined, on the one hand, by the dictates of an old, highly evolved and complex cultural tradition. They live with social forms and procedures so restrictive and so unbending as to become at times absurd. On the other hand, even in their unwavering allegiance to established conventions, the French possess an interior spirit which is somehow untrammled, free to indulge in the most radical kinds of speculation. As Wharton puts it, "the French are traditional about small things because they are so free about the big ones" (30). They feel connected to "natural sources of enjoyment" and to "unashamed . . . instinct" at the same time that they are "enslaved by social conventions, small complicated observances based on long-past conditions of life" (148). Stein speaks similarly of the "fixed and inevitable" quality of social interactions in this place also famous for innovation and experimentation: "Paris was where fashions are made" precisely because the French preserve "the background of tradition and of profound conviction that men and women and children do not change" (11). "And so," Stein concludes, "France cannot change it can always have its fashions but it cannot change" (33).

The French devotion to tradition provides special opportunities for the foreign resident, who lives amidst these social complexities without actually suffering under their grip. If the French themselves derive important psychic freedom from certain kinds of external constraint, how much more freedom might such an environment not offer the expatriate? Stein and Wharton both take obvious

delight in recounting some of the absurdities to which French conventions can lead, e.g., dinner parties spoiled by rigid rules governing precedence and seating arrangements (*FWM* 25-27). One of the most charming anecdotes in Wharton's book concerns the irrational refusal of the French to eat blackberries, which grow plentifully in the countryside: "they'll give you the fever!" (20). The belief that this fruit is unwholesome is a collective *idée fixe*, unsupported by medical evidence or common experience. Yet this "ancient taboo," this "queer conviction" nevertheless shapes the behavior and opinion of an entire nation (20, 22); the otherwise "thrifty" and "fruit-loving" French abandon "to birds and insects" a nutritious and tasty food (20). Wharton seems more gratified than exasperated by this triumph of cultural dogma over verifiable fact. The pervasive allegiance to seemingly unreasonable traditions provides a foreigner in France with what Stein calls "a background of unreality" that liberates creative energy (*PF* 13). Surrounded by odd and fiercely guarded conventions — an "unreal" external environment — Wharton and Stein achieve more complete immersion in their own interior worlds.

Thus these two expatriate writers derive comfort from their own alien status. "Foreigners should be foreigners," Stein states emphatically, "and that they inevitably are in Paris and in France" (20). Wharton exults in like vein: "As a stranger and a newcomer, not only outside all groups and coteries, but hardly aware of their existence, I enjoyed a freedom not possible in those days to the native-born, who were still enclosed in the old social pigeon-holes" (*BG* 258). The very impenetrableness of French culture rendered these Americans in some essential sense perpetual outsiders, however much *at home* they came to be. The paradox that is France thus helps explain the healing paradox of expatriation itself: the country where one lives but does not "belong" ensures a "separate[ness]" for the artist "to be free in" (Stein 2-3). The counterpoint created between qualities Stein names "peace" and "excitement" (1, 2, 5, 51) — or, as Wharton phrases it, "the endeavor to strike a balance between seemingly contradictory traits" (147) — offered these two very different writers just the right combination of human satisfaction, social autonomy, and artistic freedom. In embracing France as their home of choice, Wharton and Stein for once echo each other with almost eerie fidelity.

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# Imaginative Encounter: Edith Wharton and Emily Brontë

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Interpreters have commonly associated the theme and tone of *Ethan Frome* with events in Edith Wharton's private life: with her preception of marriage as a trap and with the conflicting emotions of guilt and liberation that she experienced during her adulterous love affair with Morton Fullerton.<sup>1</sup> *Ethan Frome* is also regarded as being the cosmopolitan Wharton's "most American" work. To illustrate: "For this strict moral tale she went back to her American roots, to the fabalistic strain of Hawthorne and Melville, even to the snowbound Berkshire Hills where *Ethan Frome* is set."<sup>2</sup> Wharton's own claim for her novella supports this general line of argument. Herself a woman of wealth, privilege, and social position, but also an intimate observer of the region about Lenox, Massachusetts, where she had a summer home, Wharton says that she wished to draw a realistic portrait of rural nineteenth-century New England: "For years I had wanted to draw life as it really was in the derelict mountain villages of New England, a life even in my time, and a thousandfold more a generation earlier, utterly unlike that seen through the rose-coloured spectacles of my predecessors, Mary Wilkins [Freeman] and Sarah Orne Jewett."<sup>3</sup> Wharton was at pains throughout her life to insist that her story derived from firsthand observation.<sup>4</sup>

But there is yet another way of perceiving *Ethan Frome*, as the product of a cataclysmic imaginative encounter between two writers, an adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, an act of appropriation and rewriting whereby Wharton could assert her own claims to mastery and autonomy as a writer, even in the face of Emily Brontë's towering masterpiece. So regarded, *Ethan Frome* can be described as a reinterpretation of Emily Brontë's great romantic work by a realist. Or again, one can say that the aspects of *Wuthering Heights* most useful to Wharton have to do with domestic realism and narrative strategies. Or yet again, that Brontë's two generations of principal characters merge in Wharton's imagination: Her own principals are counterparts to Hareton Earnshaw and the younger Cathy, scaled to the ordinary world, but their plight is that of the heroic forebears, of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw. In Wharton's fiction the image of Ethan as an heroic ruin owes something to the image of

Heathcliff, living only for his death. And the commonplace Mattie, when she urges Ethan to an act of suicidal abandon, manifests the reckless initiative of a heroine greater than she, of Catherine Earnshaw.

Charlotte Brontë, in her "Editor's Preface" to *Wuthering Heights*, must have reassured Wharton that she could write of the derelict villages and the "sad slow-speaking people" (BG 15) of rural New England without intimate knowledge:

I am bound to avow that [Emily] had scarcely more practical knowledge of the peasantry amongst whom she lived, than a nun has of the country people who sometimes pass her convent gates.... Though her feeling for the people round was benevolent, intercourse with them she never sought; nor, with very few exceptions, ever experienced. And yet she knew them: knew their ways, their language, their family histories; she could hear of them with interest, and talk of them with detail . . . ; but *with* them, she rarely exchanged a word.<sup>5</sup>

So, too, Wharton was qualified, by her attitude of sympathetic interest in the hill-people, to enter imaginatively into their impoverished lives. She, too, could avail herself of hearsay, and talk over these people with fellow observers, such as the local rector. She could on motor trips scrutinize "the snow-bound villages of Western Massachusetts . . . grim places, morally and physically: insanity, incest and slow mental and moral starvation were hidden away behind the paintless wooden house-fronts of the long village street, or in the isolated farm-houses on the neighbouring hills" (BG 293-94). But only years after the publication of *Ethan Frome*, her own achievement recognized, would she identify her Lenox environs with Brontë's Yorkshire.

If Wharton found a license for her proposed endeavor in Charlotte Brontë's Preface, she found also a perception of character congenial with her own perception of New England rustic types. Charlotte writes metaphorically of Emily at work as a "statuary," a sculptor, fashioning a human form out of a "granite block" found on a

"solitary moor." "With time and labour, the crag took human shape; and there it stands colossal, dark, and frowning, half statue, half rock" (WH 322). Wharton's Starkfield, her own *Wuthering Heights*, her Thornfield of the imagination, is to be populated with just animate stones: "They were, in truth," she writes in her Introduction, "these figures, my *granite outcroppings*; but half-emerged from the soil and scarcely more articulate."<sup>6</sup> Her characters are but broken stones compared with Brontë's granite crag, and yet akin. Her metaphor realistically fixes on the hill-people's strength to endure, their austerity, and their inertness as human beings.

Having imagined such characters, however, she encountered the problem of their inarticulateness and immobility. Such characters must be interpreted. The self-expressive language of a Heathcliff and a Catherine is poetic and transcendent. But Ethan Frome, like Hareton, is a tree dwarfed by ill winds. He has no language to express his emotions. Hence Wharton is launched upon the problem in narrative technique which occupies much of her Introduction. She gained confidence as a writer, I believe, by trying to use, but also to improve on, Emily Brontë's narrative scheme to solve her own problem of dealing realistically with inarticulate people.

In Brontë's novel Lockwood is the outsider, whose presence provides an occasion for the story to be told. Nelly Dean is the intimate witness and also the primary narrator. Wharton reverses these roles. The outsider, an engineer, becomes the primary narrator, and the intimate witness, Ruth Varnum Hale, becomes a listener. At the end of the tale, assessing the engineer's "conjectures" as being near the mark, she enters into a concluding dialogue that has the effect of affirming his discovery of the love triangle involving Ethan, Mattie, and Zeena. By inverting the narrators' roles, Wharton tacitly raises and answers perennial criticisms of *Wuthering Heights*: Wharton's narrator does not degenerate into a mere listener after the opening chapters. Her intimate witness does not have to repeat verbatim conversations that occurred over twenty years ago. Yet in both works the narrative apparatus is so contrived as to permeate toward the center of a mystery, one involving an adulterous passion and its painful consequences. And these consequences, these sufferings, are augmented by their being represented as persisting over years.

Apart from improving on Brontë's apparatus Wharton again pursues her own aesthetic objectives: By endowing her narrator with sympathy, education, and perspective, she can render Ethan articulate through the narrator's imaginative re-creation of Ethan's inner life, as Joseph X. Brennan was first to remark: "The narrator who presents himself as an engineer in the realistic framework of the novel is actually a writer in disguise with the technical skill of a professional novelist and the sensibility of a poet; and his imaginative reconstruction of Ethan Frome's story, in view of what little he had to go by, is really no more than a brilliant fiction."<sup>7</sup> The

narrator becomes an authorial surrogate realized within the fiction. Hence by this narrative strategy Wharton can communicate the poetry of Ethan's feelings about nature, about Mattie, about the world beyond, without violating her criterion of verisimilitude, that he be a wordless man. Having knowledge, herself, of so fruitful an adaptation of Brontë's narrative scheme, Wharton could understandably resist the adverse criticism of her friends and celebrate her own achievement, as she does do in her Introduction: "my scheme of construction . . . I still think justified in the given case" (Intro., xx).

Once we associate the two books, Wharton's conversion of Brontë becomes fascinating to observe. For Wharton persistently adapts memorable aspects of *Wuthering Heights*: A snowstorm entraps Lockwood at *Wuthering Heights*, as another snowstorm causes Wharton's engineer to stay over at Ethan's farm. Both narrators are housed in rooms frequented by ghosts of the dead past: Brontë's Lockwood sleeps in Catherine's panelled bedchamber. Wharton's engineer sleeps in the little room apart, where Ethan cherished the hope of a life with Mattie on the night before their attempted suicide. In both works the house, buffeted or maimed, is an index to its human occupants, to the tormented, wasted lives within. Both works end in contemplation of the graveyard, and both play intermittently on the idea of the living dead's seeking fulfillment in actual death. For death signifies escape from intolerable circumstance, and uninhibited union with the woman.

Wharton brilliantly adapts details of chapters 32 and 33 of *Wuthering Heights* to serve her own purposes. Hareton uproots Joseph's currants and gooseberry bushes to make way for a garden for Cathy (WH 240). Wharton transplants the gooseberries to the back of Frome's house (EF 51), and leaves Ethan space to "make a garden" of geraniums for Mattie (EF 67). Cathy breaks Hareton's pipe in an attempt to win his attention (WH 237), as Mattie is responsible for the cat's breaking Zeena's pickle dish in her own attempt to please Ethan (EF 127). Mattie *Silver* beguiles Ethan by singing while she works (EF 67, 100), as Cathy both sings and cajoles Hareton with "a voice, as sweet as a *silver bell*" (WH 233, cf. 237, 239; emphasis mine). Zeena, discovering the broken dish, "[comes] back into the room, her lips twitching with anger, a flush of excitement on her sallow face" (EF 125). "Joseph appeared at the door, revealing by his quivering lip and furious eyes, that the outrage committed on his precious shrubs was detected" (WH 251).

Joseph's anguish at possessions violated gives birth to Zeena's, and Joseph's accusation of Cathy and Hareton, to Zeena's accusation of Mattie:

Joseph: "Aw thowt Aw'd lug my books up in-tuh t' garret, un' all my bits uh stuff, un' they sud hev t' kitchen tuh theirseln....Bud nah, shoo's taan my garden frough me, un' by th' heart,

Maister, Aw cannot stand it!....

"It's yon flaysome [frightful], graceless quean [brazen girl], ut's witched ahr lad, wi' her bold een, un' her forrard ways till — Nay! It fair brusts [breaks] my heart! He's forgotten all E [I] done for him, un made on him, un' goan un' riven up [torn up] a whole row ut t' grandest currant trees i' t' garden!" And here he lamented outright, unmanned by a sense of his bitter injuries, and Earnshaw's ingratitude and dangerous condition.

(WH 241-242)

Zeena: "You wanted to make the supper-table pretty; and you waited till my back was turned, and took the thing I set most store by of anything I've got, and wouldn't never use it.... You're a bad girl, Mattie Silver, and I always known it....I tried to keep my things where you couldn't get at 'em — and now you've took from me the one I cared for most of all —" She broke off in a short spasm of sobs that passed and left her more than ever like a shape of stone.

"If I'd 'a' listened to folks, you'd 'a' gone before now, and this wouldn't 'a' happened," she said; and gathering up the bits of broken glass she went out of the room as if she carried a dead body . . .  
[Wharton's ellipses] (EF 127-128)

Joseph's accusation explicitly articulates a sexual animus, like that behind Zeena's charge of ingratitude and the violation of property rights. In this proximity Edith Wharton's final metaphor in this passage suggests that the pickle dish is Zeena's dead hopes for marriage — the dish was a wedding present (EF 86) — or that for her it symbolizes a child unborn of that marriage. But Wharton represents Zeena as "a shape of stone," as one who, pressed to the limits of emotion, cannot articulate the truth of her sexual jealousy (e.g., EF 35, 36, 38-39), just as Ethan cannot articulate his love to Mattie: "He looked at her hair and longed to touch it again, and to tell her that it smelt of the woods; but he had never learned to say such things" (EF 155; cf. 154). Instead, reciprocal acts of writing will finally establish communication between Mattie and Ethan (130, 157), as reciprocal acts of reading establish understanding between Hareton and Cathy (WH 238-239). "Don't trouble, Ethan," Mattie scribbles on a bit of paper after this painful confrontation scene (EF

130). And next morning Mattie attains certain knowledge of Ethan's love for her when she finds his undelivered letter repudiating Zeena and confronts him with her knowledge (EF 132, 157).

Here Wharton parts company with Brontë and pursues her own inexorable premise, her unflinching sense of the irony of life, to its bitter end. After their suicide attempt Mattie's paralysis of the body becomes a counterpart to Ethan's paralysis of the will. And Zeena, freed of a sexual rival, again achieves meaning in her otherwise barren life by becoming nurse to a person who sustains a childlike dependency upon her.

Personal experience (her own distressed marriage and adultery) sensitized Wharton to a certain kind of theme. Then her development of that theme proceeded with analytic detachment manifest in two respects. One is her ability to apply the theory and practice of other writers to her own ends. She says as much in her Introduction, however much she leaves unsaid. In this work she came of age as a writer by entering self-consciously into the problems of her craft. Retrospectively, she would remark, "It was not until I wrote 'Ethan Frome' that I suddenly felt the artisan's full control of his implements" (BG 209). Wharton's perception of herself as an artisan crafting a fiction recalls Charlotte's image of Emily as a sculptor fashioning a stone figure.

Secondly, Wharton's detachment is manifest in her impulse toward generalizing her vision of human suffering. This tendency is most apparent in her treatment of Zeena, surely a most unsympathetic character, and yet, one whose longing for significance and fulfilment is there too, beside the more explicit claims of Ethan and Mattie. If Wharton enters wholeheartedly into Ethan's detestation of Zeena when she thwarts his desire for escape (e.g. EF 117-18), she enters equally into the pathos of Zeena's own stifled claims to affection and nurture. Wharton's imagination, like Brontë's, embraces opposites. These two ways of seeing Zeena are integrated in her prized possession, which is at once a pickle dish and a bright symbol of life in a hopeful aspect: Blood red, color of life, color of passion, it associates Zeena with Mattie and her red fascinator, red ribbon, red geraniums, sun-lit face. (EF 82, 125; 30, 82, 67, 57). This double vision pertains to all three principals in *Ethan Frome*, all of them limited human beings, stunted by circumstance, and yet all of them inviting our compassion.

Brontë's editor, Willilam Sale, remarks that "*Wuthering Heights* must have seemed to Emily's contemporaries an English novel without ancestors, and it seems now to be almost with descendants."<sup>8</sup> *Ethan Frome* is a most remarkable descendant of Brontë's great novel, because its vision is fixed on the lesser rather than the heroic characters. If we grant that Zeena is first cousin to Joseph, then we gauge the full measure of Wharton's ability, like that of Emily Brontë, to discern human rights and human sufferings in little people, in those total-

(continued on page 27)

# Italian Foregrounds and Backgrounds:

## *The Valley of Decision*

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In *Italian Backgrounds* Edith Wharton refers to Italian religious paintings of the early Renaissance where the foreground is conventional, while in the background the artist finds himself free to express his personality, depicting "what he actually sees about him. . . . One must look past and beyond the central figures, in their typical attitudes and symbolic dress, to catch a glimpse of the life amid which the painting originated."<sup>1</sup> She continues by mentioning examples of real life represented in the backgrounds of works by such diverse painters as Bellini, Ghirlandaio, Crivelli, Carpaccio. In particular "no painter" seems to her "more prodigal than Carpaccio of these intimate details, or more audacious in the abrupt juxtaposition of devotional figures with the bustling secular life of his day. His Legend of Saint Ursula, in the Academia of Venice, is a storehouse of fifteenth-century anecdote, an encyclopaedia of dress, architecture and manners" (p. 175). She then goes on to apply this distinction to Italy itself, where the foreground is the image presented by guidebooks, while the background is that of the dreamer and the serious student of the country. Wharton sees very clearly how "the famous paintings, statues and buildings of Italy are obviously the embodiment of its historic and artistic growth," but also how "they have become slightly conventionalized by being too long used as the terms in which Italy is defined." She concludes that "since they cannot be evaded, they must be deconventionalized" (p. 177). This is what she attempts to do, not only in *Italian Backgrounds* and in *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* but also in her fiction, from her first novel *The Valley of Decision* to a late short story like "Roman Fever." The conventional foreground is not completely absent from her pictures, but it points the way to more secret backgrounds and their intense relation to life.

I am not going to follow Wharton's argument as she develops and exemplifies it in her travel essays. Instead I would like to start at this point and investigate how her original outlook informs *The Valley of Decision*, her historical novel set in eighteenth century Italy. In this well documented work,<sup>2</sup> Italian foregrounds and backgrounds come to life in a rich intermingling of art, architecture, music, literature, theater, geography and history. Moreover, the novel explores in depth the social tensions

and intellectual conflicts of the period, in particular, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff has pointed out, the conflict between progressivism and traditionalism.<sup>3</sup> In fact, as Wharton admitted in a letter, "there is too much explanation, too much history," because "the period (in Italy) is one so unfamiliar to the reader that it was difficult to take for granted that he would fill out his background for himself." Wharton meant "the book to be a picture of a social phase, not of two people's individual history, & Fulvia & Odo are just little bits of looking-glass in which fragments of the great panorama are reflected."<sup>4</sup> The characters then are not the main subject of the novel: they are "reflectors" for a panorama that might at times be too detailed and didactic, but in most cases comes to life with a vividness similar to that recognized by Wharton in the Italian religious paintings. I would like to pursue this analogy and explore these backgrounds and foregrounds, concentrating on the artistic and architectural ones.<sup>5</sup>

In the passage quoted above as well as in others,<sup>6</sup> Wharton talks about the book as an attempt "to picture Italy." Looking back at *The Valley of Decision* in *A Backward Glance*, she thinks of it as "a romantic chronicle, unrolling its episodes like the frescoed legends on the palace-walls which formed its background" (p. 939). The pictorial metaphor becomes here more explicit, establishing a strict relation between form and content, narrative technique and visual arts. The classical "ut pictura poesis" formula finds validation both as a critical analogy and as a structural device. The novel is in fact rich in visual descriptions explicitly or implicitly connected with painting, as well as in direct descriptions of specific paintings which form a sort of personal *musée imaginaire*. It is quite common to find passages like the following:

The scene was such as Salvator might have painted: wild blocks of stone heaped under walnut-shade; here the white plunge of water down a wall of granite, and there, in bluer depths, a charcoal burner's hut sending up its spiral of smoke to the dark raftering of branches. Though it was but a few hours since Odo had travelled from Oropa, years seemed to have passed over him, and he saw the world

with a new eye. Each sound and scent plucked at him in passing: the roadside started into detail like the foreground of some minute Dutch painter.<sup>7</sup>

The mountain scenery is compared to a painting by Salvatore Rosa, one of the most appreciated seventeenth century landscape painters and creator of suggestive atmospheres. The natural background, first seen at a certain distance, comes to the foreground through a process of focusing similar to that employed by certain Dutch painters. Background and foreground stand for two ways of looking at and representing reality, while the movement from one to the other underlines a recurrent pattern in the novel. The passage opens with one type of pictorial reference and closes on another. In the middle is the protagonist, who constitutes the point of view, the perspective through which the scene is perceived and presented.

It would be impossible to illustrate the pervasive presence of pictorial similitudes in the text. I shall mention just a few more. The first time Odo goes to the theater, the curtain rises on a scene of "Claude-like loveliness," where the reference to the seventeenth century painter (Claude Lorraine) is followed by an accurate description suggestive of some of his idealized classical landscapes: "A temple girt with mysterious shade, lifting its colonnades above a sunlit harbor; and before the temple, wine-wreathed nymphs waving their thyrsi through the turns of a melodious dance" (p. 97). In Naples nature explodes in all its splendor "to eyes subdued to the sober tints of the north," suggesting "the boundless invention of some great scenic artist, some Olympian Veronese with sea and sky for a palette" (p. 356). Once again it is through the eyes of the protagonist that the "great panorama" is reflected.

This is often the function of the main character, whose visual and artistic education is very much part of his development. His taste, formed by "his early association with the expressive homely art of the chapel at Pontesordo and with the half-pagan beauty of Luini's compositions," undergoes a long process of initiation in order to enter "on the great inheritance of the past" (p. 107). One early step in his education is his pilgrimage to the sanctuary of Oropa, one of the "backgrounds" presented in Wharton's travel book as an example of how "in Italy, nature, art and religion combine to enrich the humblest lives."<sup>8</sup> The description is indeed very close to the one in the essay, but richer in detail and effects. Moreover the procession and religious ceremony, as well as the more secular aspects of the celebrations, introduce the crowd as a very important and recurrent aspect of the novel, as one of the backgrounds that animate the whole picture.<sup>9</sup> Opera isn't usually given much space in the typical tourist guidebook, but is a place of popular art, only partially enriched by Juvara's facade and marble portico. The chapels of this Sacred Mount, with their groups of "terra-

cotta figures representing some scene of Passion," make a strong impression on the protagonist: "These figures, though rudely modelled and daubed with bright colors, yet, by a vivacity of attitude and gesture which the mystery of their setting enhanced, conveyed a thrilling impression of the sacred scenes set forth; and Odo was yet at an age when the distinction between flesh-and-blood and its plastic counterfeits is not clearly defined, or when at least the sculptured image is still a mysterious half-sentient thing, denizen of some strange borderland between art and life" (p.68).

The protagonist is only at the beginning of his educational journey and still has to learn how to differentiate between reality and its representation. The next important stage will be his contact with Count Benedetto Alfieri, (the writer's uncle), who is the first to respond to his "eagerness to see and learn" (p. 106). In his palace, Odo is exposed to an antiquarian collection of art objects that arouse his "curiosity as if they had been the scattered letters of a new alphabet": casts of the Vatican busts, a marble copy of the Apollo Belvedere, fragments of Roman mosaic and Pompeian fresco-painting, Piranesi's Roman etchings, Maffei's Verona Illustrata. Here he becomes familiar with the major trends in eighteenth century critical views and concepts of beauty, as well as with art history. When he goes back to Pianura after an absence of nine years, he will have the basic knowledge necessary to appreciate the different layers of history and beauty around him. The narrator insists on this educational process: "Life, in childhood, is a picture-book of which the text is undecipherable; and the youth now revisiting the unchanged setting of his boyhood was spelling out for the first time the legend beneath the picture" (p. 180).

The place Odo is returning to, the imaginary duchy, modelled on Parma and Mantova, is a sort of prototype Italian citadel, an exemplary synthesis of history, art and culture, from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century. An organic metaphor is employed very effectively to convey this idea: "Like the most dwellings of its kind in Italy, the palace of Pianura resembles one of those shells which reveal by their outer convolutions the gradual development of the creature housed within" (p. 240). The architects supposedly involved in the building of the palace and adding to it are among Wharton's favorites: Laurana, the planner of the palace in Urbino ("città in forma di palazzo"/City in form of a palace, as Castiglione would say); Vignola, builder among other things of the Villa Farnese at Caprarola and Villa Lante at Bagnaia, (both of which Wharton was to visit and love<sup>10</sup>); and finally Francesco Borromini (Wharton calls him Carlo), the master of baroque, who adds a wing, a theater, and beautiful gardens. The result would have been very composite and eclectic. Moreover, Wharton tells us that famous painters were involved in the decoration — "Correggio painted the walls of one room, Giulio Romano the ceiling of another" — while the portrait

gallery hosts a long line of faces, from a Piero della Francesca's portrait of the first Duke to a bishop painted by Caravaggio.

In his travels Odo will discover other versions of Italian beauty and culture. In fact his travels are quite extensive, a sort of Grand Tour, with many backgrounds and foregrounds in the various senses Wharton gives the expression. When Odo gets to Rome, Wharton avoids the conventional, postcard type of picture, nor does she propose the unconventional version she will use in *Italian Backgrounds*, of Rome as "the most undisturbed baroque city of Italy" (p. 182). Instead she insists on the first impression the protagonist receives, "of a prodigious accumulation of architectural effects, a crowding of century on century, all fused in the crucible of the Roman sun, so that each style seemed linked to the other by some subtle affinity of color" (p. 374). The rather short description that follows is in fact a disordered accumulation of quick images seen in passing. "Afterwards, as order was born out of chaos, and he began to thread his way among the centuries, the first vision lost something of its intensity; yet it was always, to the last, through the eye that Rome possessed him" (p. 375). Once again meaning emerges from time and history, but the spacial and chromatic elements establish the supremacy of visual perception.

It is in Venice, though, and in the villas on the Brenta, that "beauty ministered to every sense" (p. 387) and "sensation ruled supreme" (p. 399), with a sort of "science of pleasure" to which "the greatest artists had collaborated" (*ibidem*). The essay in *Italian Backgrounds* can serve as a sort of guideline in understanding the diffuse descriptions in this part of the novel. There Wharton says that in "Venice the foreground is Byzantine-Gothic, with an admixture of early Renaissance" (p. 189), but behind this foreground celebrated in literature with vehemence and profusion, there is a background Venice which she identifies with the city of the eighteenth century. It is this scene that she endeavors to represent in all its lively spirit and beauty: she tries to capture the atmosphere of an astonishing setting where "the Venetians seemed to keep perpetual carnival," while the more obvious foregrounds like Saint Mark's square receive only a passing and hasty mention. Much of the description is devoted to the entertainments in the villas on the Brenta, with their magnificent gardens peopled with statues and flights of marble steps descending to the river, and the ceilings decorated by "the divine Tiepolo." For Wharton Venice "proclaimed, in every detail of life and architecture, her independence of any tradition but her own" (p. 397), while the writer proclaims her own independence of any rigid rule of taste.

As it becomes a *Bildungsroman*, the protagonist of *The Valley of Decision* goes through his cultural initiation. He learns from seeing the world around him, landscape, art and architecture: in fact "to see" is the most frequent verb of introduction to the descriptions. He also learns from

talking, in long and didactic conversations, with the intellectuals he is attracted to, discovering the world of ideas which constitutes another important level of the novel, which I have chosen not to explore here. However, he tends to become one of those conventional figures in the foreground, while the background takes over the imagination of the reader. Abandoning one Wharton image for another, we might say that he tends to disappear from the picture, becoming just the point of view from which the scene is depicted, or a mirror for the great panorama. As Blake Nevius has pointed out, "the setting was what absorbed her; the characters and story had to get along as best as they could." While this is seen as appropriate in travel essays where "the professional devotion to landscape and architecture could be indulged with the utmost leisure and her interest in background isolated from demands of story and characterization,"<sup>11</sup> it is in general perceived as detrimental in a novel, which has different structural requirements.

However, the pictorial quality of *The Valley of Decision*, the ability to portray a whole "chronotope," to use Bakhtin's expression, that is the ability to give form to the interrelationship of time and space, cannot be denied. Monuments and landscape become protagonists or, to quote Wharton again: "Italy is my hero - or heroine, if you prefer."<sup>12</sup> For an Italian reader, it is an extraordinary experience to "rediscover" a forgotten Italy in her pages. In a letter she writes: "I think that it is almost a pity to enjoy Italy as much as I do, because the acuteness of my sensations makes them rather exhausting; but when I see the stupid Italians I have met here, completely insensitive to their surroundings, and ignorant of the treasures of art and history among which they have grown up, I begin to think it is better to be an American, and bring to it all a mind and eye unblunted by custom."<sup>13</sup> When one thinks that *The Valley of Decision* has never been translated into Italian, one wonders if the "stupid Italians," are not also insensitive to the treasures of Wharton's art," since the novel succeeds, among other things, in the visual representation of Italy. Perhaps Vernon Lee was right when she wrote, in an unpublished preface for the novel, that she doubted whether it would be appreciated in Italy because the nationals of a country often cannot appreciate what their country can arouse in the imagination of foreigners.<sup>14</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Edith Wharton, *Italian Backgrounds* (1905), New York: Ecco Press, 1989, p. 174.
2. In *A Backward Glance* she denies having studied hard for the writing of the book, but rather talks of the "gradual absorption into my pores of a myriad details - details of landscape, architecture, old furniture and eighteenth century portraits, the gossip of contemporary diarists and travellers, all vivified by repeated wonderings guided by Goethe and the Chevalier de Brogues, by Goldoni and Gozzi, Arthur Young, Dr. Burney and Ippolito Nievo, out of which the tale grew. I did not

(continued on page 27)

# Edith Wharton's Last Weeks and the Garden at St. Brice

by Carol J. Singley  
*The American University*

After suffering another stroke at the beginning of June, 1937, Edith Wharton was transported by ambulance to Pavillon Colombe, her home in St. Brice, where she was joined by her dear friend, Elisina Tyler. Elisina Tyler was in constant attendance through the summer, until Wharton's death in August. The doctors held little hope for her recovery; nevertheless, Tyler bestowed comfort and encouragement, and, "astonished to see how the habit of feigning comes easily,"<sup>1</sup> affirmed to Wharton that she had suffered only a temporary setback and might soon resume normal activities.

On a nearly daily basis, Elisina Tyler recorded each change in Wharton's condition; bits of conversation they shared; and her reflections on her friend's waning health and impending death. The garden is a clear motif throughout the diary. Although Wharton was in no pain, she became partially blind, and her mental faculties gradually deserted her. Musing that eventually even her art must be "foregone," Tyler observed that Wharton nevertheless "lives in a world of her own creation. Summer in this lovely place, and winter in her southern garden, are the two halves of a charmed circle of time, and both speak of her attainments and gifts and the warmth of understanding that makes flowers and trees and birds rejoice in her keeping."

On days when Wharton was well enough, the two walked in the garden, although Wharton rarely could manage more than a few steps. She was visited by John Hugh Smith, Kenneth and Jane Clark, Beatrix Farrand, Robert Norton, the Louis Bromfields, and William Royall Tyler. These friends often sat outside amidst the lush vegetation of the garden while Wharton rested within. The summer, Tyler writes, was one of the loveliest she could remember.

Reading the diary, one can visualize the layout of the garden at St. Brice, appreciating the beauty that Wharton had created and feeling, with Elisina Tyler, the poignant delicacy of those last, touching weeks of Wharton's life.

On June 14, Elisina Tyler walked in the garden at twilight with Robert Norton after his six-minute visit with Wharton: "the light waned very very slowly and softly, the garden seemed to fold its wings. Edith lay with closed eyes, dreaming quietly perhaps of former journeys . . ." The next day, Elisina was encouraged by the improve-

ment in Wharton's condition, using a garden metaphor to express her relief: "It is as if the lowering sky had opened and a brilliant shafting sunshine transformed the whole landscape. Edith almost looked herself again, and though she is still very weak, the change in manner, in the tone of voice, in the clear and steady linking of ideas, makes the past ordeal seem months away."

On July 6, Wharton was improved enough to take tea in the garden, which Tyler describes in lovely detail:

The lilies lying on the face of the pool, and the coming and going of the big goldfish, and the sing-song of the watersprout soother and interested her.

Today was sultry, but the wind kept the air in motion, and we sat again in the shade of the trees by the pool, and talked quietly together at intervals. After the tea the gardener, Emile, who is a peaceful *géant*, wheeled her down the worn path of the flower-garden, and across the trimlaw of the cherry orchard, down to the gate of the rose-garden. She was lifted into the chair and stepped down two steps, then was put back into the chair, and so paid a visit to each rare rose, to the tall hedge of lilies, and to the buds of the yellow waterlily in the long pool.

Overwhelmed by the moment, Edith Wharton commented gracefully, "I might be just an old woman taking the air on a bench in a public garden, with the children knocking their hoops into me—and why was so much beauty given to me instead?" That evening, Wharton rested peacefully in bed while evening fell. "The breeze rushed in from time to time, and after the sun had faded, the song of the tree toads and the cricket's note came up from the garden. The trees were massed together, high up against the sky. The long lines of the high boxhedges carried one's eye to a bright spot beyond the glitter of the water, where a mass of red roses caught a gleaming light—."

By July 9, Wharton had weakened again, a decline which signalled the gradual course of things to come. She continued to find contentment in "the beauty of her faultless garden," and when well enough, was wheeled by her nurse around the reflecting pool. She and Elisina

Tyler sat "listening to the soft rushing sounds of the wind in the tree-tops, watching the high shaft of water that broke with a sob, a gurgle over the carpet of water-lily leaves." Wharton had rare specimens in her garden. Tyler notes that they stopped to appreciate the "five perfect bell-shaped flowers" of a rhododendron brought back from China. Wharton's eyesight had so diminished by this time that Tyler could only wonder whether she actually saw the blossoms. She writes that they fed bread-crumbs to the "ancient goldfish that made their home under the water-lily leaves; grave stately slow-moving goldfish which we knew well."<sup>2</sup>

Tyler also provides a vivid description of the garden's design and special joys:

Two pillars of ivy closed this part [the pool] of the garden, that was all shade and cool fragrance in the hottest hours. Beyond the pillars right and left, a great world of flowers lifted their faces to the sun. This garden was a blend of freedom and discipline, a masterpiece of the gardener's art, a triumphant display of the docility of nature in her yielding hands. There was a blue garden, in orderly courtly style; a long covered way hung with clusters and festoons of roses; velvety turf under the dappled sunshine of the orchard; a garden of water-plants;—and last and loveliest, the inner rose-garden. Three shallow steps led through the opening, framed and hung with clusters of mermaid roses.

The gardeners built a ramp over the steps so that the wheelchair could pass by more easily. After Wharton's death, however, the ramp was not removed, "so bitter does the finality of acceptance seem in such trifles."

Edith Wharton's eyesight waned to the point that Tyler wondered at the patience with which she bore her affliction, but she came to understand that Wharton's "thoughts were turned all inward, that she lived with her memories as her constant preoccupations, and that a gentle radiance came to her from the lovely living world she had herself created." Struggling with lapses of memory and bouts of incoherence, Wharton recalled events from her past: Henry James's death, her mother's failure to understand her urge to write; her father's sympathetic, private publication of her adolescent poems; her joy at Scribner's first acceptance of her work; Teddy's fear of her literary ambition; and Walter Berry's perfect understanding. Reflecting in one instance on a friend's comment that all of her books are "the history of a soul in pain," Wharton responded that "but then, if you delve deep enough into any human feeling you always come to tears."

Such were Edith Wharton's thoughts "while twilight fell and deepened over the quiet lawns and over the bird-haunted trees. We would watch the slanting shafts of light

touch lightly the [trees] that marked a pause in the long line of a clipped boxhedge; we would notice the light lingering on the highest tops of the linden-trees. And we would wonder every evening afresh at the starry glistening of the orange-blossoms."

Edith Wharton died peacefully on August 11. The garden continued to be a solace for Elisina Tyler, who, grieving for her friend that summer, found in its fullness, beauty, and order, a metaphor for understanding the process and passing of life itself.

1. I am grateful to William Royall Tyler for allowing me access to his mother's diary.

2. Wharton herself described the goldfish and the garden in *A Backward Glance*, published in 1932: "At last I was to have a garden again—and a big old kitchen-garden as well, planted with ancient pear and apple trees, espaliered and in cordon, and an old pool full of fat old goldfish; and silence and rest under big trees!" (New York: Scribner's, p. 363).

### Paris Circle

*continued from page 4*

4. The Letters of EW, p. 84.
5. *Edith Wharton, A Motor-Flight through France*, p. 97.
6. *Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance*, in Edith Wharton, *Library of America*, 979, 980.
7. Letters of HA, IV, 499.
8. Letters of HA, IV, 525-526.
9. Letters of HA, IV, 593.
10. Letters of HA, V, 127.
11. Letters of HA, V, 123-124.
12. Letters of HA, V, 13.
13. The Education of Henry Adams, in Henry Adams, *Library of America*, p. 1088.
14. *Elizabeth Cameron*, quoted in *Arline Boucher Tehan*, Henry Adams in Love, p. 146.
15. *R.W.B. Lewis*, Edith Wharton, A Biography, p. 165.
16. Letters of HA, V, 664.
17. Letters of HA, VI, 144.
18. Letters of HA, VI, 394.
19. Letters of HA, VI, 450.
20. Letters of HA, VI, 298.
21. Letters of HA, VI, 146.
22. Letters of HA, VI, 142.
23. Letters of HA, VI, 146.
24. Letters of HA, VI, 245.
25. Letters of HA, V, 132.
26. Letters of HA, V, 37.
27. Letters of HA, V, 40.
28. Letters of HA, V, 675-676.
29. Letters of HA, VI, 398.

### ALA MEETS IN SAN DIEGO

The third annual conference of the American Literature Association will be held at the Bahia Resort Hotel on Mission Bay in San Diego on May 28-31, 1992. A roundtable discussion session, "New Feminist Myths and Edith Wharton" will be moderated by Annette Zilversmit. Initiating panelists will be Teresa Gómez Reus, Julie Olin-Ammentorp, Carole Shaffer-Koros and Clare Colquitt. Conference fee is \$30 (\$10 for students, independent and retired scholars), and conference room rates are \$74 (single) and \$80 (double). Write to Prof. Alfred Bendixen, Dept. of English, California State Univ., Los Angeles, CA 90032-8110.



# International Responses to Edith Wharton

Edited by Alan Price

*Pennsylvania State University, Hazleton*

*It is always instructive to learn how others see us and by extension the authors with whom we identify. Many of us feel as if we have a personal interest in the literary stock of Edith Wharton. We can assess how well she is doing in the United States by counting the number of the articles on her in scholarly journals and assess her future in the dissertations written by graduate students. We can watch the frequency with which her works are discussed at professional meetings and (for a popular audience) the distribution of television and film adaptations of her works. At the international literary conference "Edith Wharton in France" last summer we asked four international scholars to tell us how Wharton was regarded in Europe and in Japan.*

*Professor Keiko Beppu from Kobe College notes that in Japan Wharton's popularity suffers from a traditional*

*masculinist approach to American writers and from some unpleasant academic political in-fighting. In France where one might assume that Wharton would have her largest foreign audience, Professor Jean Méral of the Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail points out that her subjects and very familiarity with the country mean that she is not exotic enough to capture the interest of French readers. Professor Teresa Gomez Reus of the Universidad de Alicante measures Wharton's success according to the success of translations and the re-examination of the canon now taking place in Spanish university literature departments. And Professor Gaetano Prampolini of the Univerisita di Firenze demonstrates that while Wharton wrote frequently about Italy, Italian readers do not always recognize themselves in her portraits of them.*

## Is Edith Wharton Read in Japan?

by Keiko Beppu

"Edith Wharton, the *grande dame* on both sides of the Atlantic, a friend of Henry James's, was born in the high society of old New York; she is the author of *The Age of Innocence*, which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1921."

Cursory introductions of this kind followed by the synopses of her major novels and stories which one finds in literary histories of the United States published in Japan hardly do justice to Edith Wharton the writer, who has received (and continues to receive) serious critical attention and reappraisal in her own country. The publication of R.W.B. Lewis's biography (1975) seems to have been instrumental, along with the upsurge of feminist criticism, to the renewed scholarly interest in Wharton. Yet Japanese scholars in general seem to have been im-

mune to the critical activities on the other side of the Pacific. Or more properly, the fact is many of our scholars are hunters of so-called "big-game" — *Moby Dicks* and the incorruptible Old Bens — and not connoisseurs playing "a game of chess" with society ladies.

Now in view of the remarkable scholarly achievements, both in quantity and quality, made by our scholars and professors of American literature the reception of Edith Wharton is quite meagre. Articles written in the sixties are, as has been mentioned earlier, general or at best extended commentaries of Wharton's life and of her all-time favorites, *Ethan Frome* and *The Age of Innocence*. The tight tragic structure and rigorous moral implications of the novella, and the celebration of the social norm and preservation of appearances *The Age of Innocence* seems to promise are the reasons for their popularity among Japanese readers. Toshiko Okoso's entry in *An Encyclopedia of World Literature* (1962) edited by Yukio

Suzuki, Kimi Ishimoto's "In Praise of *The Age of Innocence*" (1963), and Miyoko Aomi's "A Study of Edith Wharton: The Characteristics of *Ethan Frome*" (1965) are earlier such attempts to introduce Wharton to a Japanese audience. Of necessity these are not more than introductory studies, drawing upon biographical materials based on Irving Howe, Louis Auchincloss, or Millicent Bell. Now it's been some time since the publication of Lewis's biography in 1975 and of Cynthia Griffin Wolff's *A Feast of Words* in 1977, yet so far very little scholarly research, which may supplant those earlier introductory studies, has been done.

Miyoko Sasaki's *Frisson and Raison: The World of Edith Wharton* (1976) is a Japanese translation done by the author of her doctoral dissertation (Yale University, 1973). The book was well received by *American Literary Scholarship 1976: An Annual*, but received a scathing review in *SELit*, the prestigious Japanese scholarly journal. Thus, whatever influence this Japanese book-length study of Wharton might have generated was abruptly curtailed by an unfair review. Certainly, the adverse criticism is not the sole reason for Wharton's critical unpopularity in Japan. Yet since foreign writers need a good agent, who can well represent them to an audience other than those of their own countries, it cannot be denied that Wharton has lost quite a competent and promising interpreter due to the unfortunate fate of Sasaki's book.

Other reasons for her unpopularity are not far to seek. One is that Wharton is a woman writer, even though this has now become a positive rather than a negative factor for re-construction of the American canon. But as has been noted earlier, Japanese scholars are hunters of "big game," and our academe is still predominately male, and values inherent in male chauvinism are a determinant factor in the formation of a literary canon.

The other factor is the peculiarity of Wharton's fictional world. Unlike Willa Cather with whom comparison/contrast is often made, to most Japanese readers Edith Wharton appears to be quite aloof and esoteric. The old New York society portrayed in her novels and stories strikes them as severely limited. Her imaginative world is far from the image of America as "the Sacred Land of Liberty" indelibly imprinted upon the Japanese mind since the beginning of our encounter with the land of democratic ideals. Rather, Wharton's old New York is very much like the traditional Japanese society in that both are historically hierarchical and patriarchal, ruled by their respective customs and manners. In reading American writers foreign readers look for something exotic and different that can be identified as uniquely "American." Therefore, Cather's pioneer women may appeal more readily to Japanese readers as belonging to the world of romance and exoticism; Antonia and Alexandra represent something they can quite easily associate with the vast tract of free land and with the history of westward movement. They enjoy imaginatively the romantic southwestern part of the United States depicted in

Cather's plain, yet provocative prose of *O Pioneers* and *My Antonia*, or even *A Lost Lady*. Japanese readers can more easily relate themselves to Cather's fictional world as typically American landscape.

Paradoxically, the very similarity between closed Japanese society and Wharton's old New York thus becomes a cultural hindrance for an appreciation of her works and her imaginative world. Yet just the same there is much to be investigated in this area of comparative studies for Wharton scholars in Japan. I myself have tried a tentative comparison — the mother-in-law as "the handmaid" of patriarchy — between Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense* and *Machiko* by Yaeko Nogami, a Japanese woman writer. Also, a Japanese writer/critic has pointed out the shared concern with social customs and manners observed in conventionally conditioned characters in both Wharton novels set in old New York — *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth* — and Tanizaki Junichiro's *The Makioka Sisters*, a much acclaimed masterpiece set in Osaka just before WW II.

To sum it up, then, Wharton needs a few good agents among Japanese scholars, who can regain the lost ground, as it were, due to the unhappy critical fate of Sasaki's *The World of Edith Wharton*. Articles written in the eighties are still no more than a formal introduction of the author; yet exceptions should be made for Toshiko Okoso's "Edith Wharton" in *American Women Writers* edited by Rikutarō Fukuda (1980) and for Takayoshi Ogawa's article "Wharton and the Finite World of Time" (*Eigo Seinen*, 1984). Okoso's "Edith Wharton" discusses in some depth a few Wharton novels including *The Custom of the Country*; her chapter offers a few interesting suggestions for further exploration in the Whartonian world. Ogawa's thesis is that Wharton has chosen the novel (rather than a story) to illustrate her idea of time as the nurturer of one's life and soul. Such is Ogawa's understanding of Wharton's concept of time as expounded in *The Writing of Fiction*. Ogawa contends that Wharton's use of time in her fiction is extremely modern, meaning that how to deal with time is the key to modern fiction. This the critic attempts to prove in his analyses of her works: time in *Ethan Frome* figures as the tragic agent of necessity engulfing all three; *The House of Mirth* traces Lily Bart's vain struggle with time as necessity and her eventual surrender to it; *The Age of Innocence* is presented as Wharton's reconciliation with time which brings the hero a certain sense of fruition in his life. The article is quite reasonable as it is, even though unbalanced in the space given to the respective works examined.

Since any reception study by its nature includes the question of translation, some remarks on the translation of Edith Wharton's stories and novels here are necessary. To reach a wider audience, writers need good interpreter/translators who make original works accessible to readers outside their cultures. Conversely, who or what is translated becomes a reliable index to critical and general reception of foreign literature. As a matter of

fact, publishing business in Japan thrives on translation, the number of translations done each year is exorbitant especially in the field of popular literature, and to some extent in the field of "belle lettres." Translations of the works of Melville, James, Faulkner, Hemingway, and contemporary writers such as Bellow, Malamud, Updike, or John Irving are in constant demand. Here too the list is clearly andro-centric, even though the works of black women writers — Toni Morrison and Alice Walker — are now on the market.

Of all the writing of Wharton *Ethan Frome* is the single translated work generally in print today; the original translation by Katsuji Takamura (1956) has been reissued, together with Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith*, in the series *Selected Works of Contemporary American Fiction* (1967). Thus, the novella is available in both collections, as it is the most frequently used of Wharton's works in colleges and universities. The well-made structure of the novella and its plain yet poetic prose with its message of rigorous "moral scruples" are, as has been mentioned earlier, the secret of the book's popularity among Japanese readers. More recently, in 1980, reflecting the

renewed interest in women writers, the 1960 edition of *False Dawn and Other Stories* was reprinted.

Also noteworthy here is the publication of *The Complete Works of Edith Wharton* in twenty-six volumes (1989) edited by Yoshie Itabashi and Miyoko Sasaki. The collection includes translations, nonfiction and works edited by Wharton as well as stories, novels, and poetry. The collection also includes uncollected reviews and articles; it is, to borrow from Lauer and Murry, "the only existing published collection of this scope." Within a year and a half of its publication 180 of the 250 sets have been sold; it is hoped that this unprecedented literary event may stimulate new interest in Wharton studies in this country. So we are catching up.

Now it has become clear, the answer to the question — "Is Edith Wharton read in Japan?" — is given the affirmative: "Yes, Wharton is read in Japan — by a select few scholars and readers." For as "a game of chess" requires the player's patience as well as genius in finesse, so does reading Wharton require genius in finesse and patience. Wharton has been and is taught in our graduate schools and universities.

Kobe College



## Why Wharton is Not Very Popular in France

by Jean Méral

By all rights, Edith Wharton should be a very popular novelist in France: she was a good technician, she was interested in psychological realism and in social comedy, she wrote in an elaborate, classical style that can be rendered effectively, though painstakingly in French, she even "thought in French" according to Roger Asselineau, and, last but not least, she was an ardent francophile. And yet, difficult as it is to evaluate a writer's popularity, one may be justified in thinking that her success in France is not what it should have been. In the index to *Le Temps* (which is available only to 1921) there is not a single entry concerning Wharton and neither was her death announced in that major daily. A rapid survey conducted in May 1991 during a national convention of English professors in France showed that not one work by Wharton was then being studied anywhere in France by French students. However, *The House of Mirth* was on the Agregation syllabus in 1961, and *The Age of Innocence* was recently taught two years in a row to sophomores at Toulouse le Mirail. Such a relative neglect is somewhat surprising.

One cannot possibly assume that Wharton's popularity suffered directly from what critics diversely describe as her snobbishness, her haughty bearing or her acid aloofness which seem indeed to have little to do with the favor or disfavor of the French public. Neither can we blame tardy or inferior translations or the mechanisms of international bookselling. *Ethan Frome*, *Fighting France*, *Summer*, *The Age of Innocence* and *A Son at the Front* were available in French in the year following their publication in English, whereas *The House of Mirth*, *The Mother's Recompense* and *The Children*, the French versions of which came out respectively in 1908, 1928 and 1931, were published within two or three years of original publication. Let us note, however, that *The Custom of the Country* was not translated until 1964 (by Suzanne Mayoux under the title *Les Beaux Mariages*), that *Madame de Treymes* has apparently not yet been translated, and that, perhaps because the first translation was unsatisfactory, Pierre Leyris retranslated *Ethan Frome* in 1969.

The reasons for Edith Wharton's limited popularity

must be found elsewhere in the sum total of facts, reactions, interpretations and judgments that one can imagine come into play to form the ideal French reader's opinion.

In the early twentieth century, the latent image of the expatriate artist, and particularly of the expatriate American artist, had not yet developed into the more recent myths now attached to the Lost Generation in the French unconscious. Yet rules and patterns had already been set and they were affected by the spirit of the *vie de bohème* which is filled with the hopes and despair of impecunious young people in search of their artistic identity. Such an atmosphere can be found in a poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes, in some stories and novels by Robert William Chambers and less known authors like Guy Wetmore Carryl and Frank Berkeley Smith<sup>1</sup> who had experienced Left Bank bohemia. Expatriation seems to carry with it uncertainty, strain and dissociation, and seems to be successful only if at some point in the artist's development it comes to an end naturally. Wharton's expatriation has little in common with such a pattern. When she finally chose France as her homeland, she had been famous for years, and consequently failed to gain the sympathy French readers grant to writers whose careers they think they have launched: Katherine Mansfield, Henry Miller and William Faulkner for instance. Perhaps, after all, when she began to live in France, Pussy Jones was too old to be unreservedly adopted.

She was also much too rich not to suffer from the national distrust of money, and her luxurious way of life and aristocratic connections were undoubtedly detrimental to her image as an artist. Many French readers would readily agree with Ludwig Lewisohn that "One cannot be an artist and a lady."<sup>2</sup> And indeed it must have been difficult for simple Cartesian minds to reconcile the many facets of Wharton's life — her prodigious wartime activity (for which she was awarded the Legion of Honor), her brilliant and hectic social life, her many trips to distant parts of the world, her official visit to Morocco as a guest of General Lyautey — with the patient exercise of the craft of fiction. Wharton entered the highest strata of the French establishment too soon after she had taken up residence in the country, if she is considered as an expatriate, or too early in her career if she is considered as an artist, not to be regarded, by French standards, as some kind of upstart. Wharton herself stigmatized "fashionable charity" and "wordly aesthetics" but at times she may have been guilty of both.

If French readers considered with mixed feelings what they imagined to be Wharton's social persona, they may also have been slightly put off by the narrowness and remoteness of the aristocratic milieu she described. Though Wharton covers about the same ground as Proust as far as the Parisian elite is concerned, she includes in her portrayal of its specific characters, situations and problems, relating for instance to national and cultural identities, which non-Americans must find difficult to apprehend. Such readers, besides, could not easily conceive

of a non-hereditary aristocracy like the American one, and, for instance, the distinction between old and new money in New York was for them a rather difficult one to make. One must remember today — and this is a hard thing to do in these times of American cultural colonization of Europe — that even as late as the 1930s the United States, which was just emerging as a world power, was by and large *terra incognita* to French people. What belonged to the comedy of manners in Wharton's fiction necessarily lost part of its significance and appeal because of its inherent ethnocentrism. Edmund Wilson once wrote that Percy Lubbock, because he was English and had never been to the United States, could not understand "the background and the significance of Edith Wharton's works."<sup>3</sup> What then of the average Frenchman?

Wharton's single-minded and willful approach to France should normally have endeared her to native readers. She made a point of perfecting her knowledge of the language and, in 1908, she wrote "*Les Metteurs en Scène*" directly in French, together with *A Motor-Flight Through France* which was written in English. From 1915 to 1923 she turned out four books about France: *Fighting France* (1915), *The Marne* (1918), *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919), and *A Son at the Front* (1923). But those among the French who could read in English *A Motor-Flight Through France* and *French Ways and Their Meaning*, to this day untranslated, must have had some grievances against their author. In *A Motor-Flight* she inventorizes the Gallic territory, as if she wanted to stake her claim to it, with self-assurance and at times a blithe disregard for facts. Did she not write, for instance, that the plain near the city of Toulouse — uninteresting architecturally in her opinion! — is swept by a wind called the Mistral, which everybody knows blows in the Rhone Valley?<sup>4</sup> The same reader must also have judged that *French Ways* was no great improvement on similar essays by Richard Harding Davis, Frank Berkeley Smith, or even Theodore Child,<sup>5</sup> and that it was rather inferior to her friend William Crary Brownell's *French Traits*. Its peremptory assertions and hasty generalizations were indeed likely to make French people cringe.

To speak of Wharton's war fiction is to reach a crucial aspect of the three-cornered relationship between herself, her French readers, and France, whose nature, it is suggested, limited her popularity. It has often been said, notably by Marilyn Jones Lyde<sup>6</sup> that the flaws of Wharton's portrayal of wartime Paris gave evidence of the spiritual crisis accompanying her decline as a writer, and that she had not been able, so to speak, to go beyond the year 1910, when an old literary spirit was dying and a new one was being born. It is true that the mawkishly idealized Francophile milieu of the Belknaps and the Camptons seem at best to come from an earlier age and could not engage native readers. Neither could the emotionalism of her viewpoint and the astonishingly ag-

gressive patriotic sentiment toward France as her adopted homeland which are to be found in *The Marne* and *A Son at the Front*. It would be unfair to quote out of context the puzzling eulogies of France and the purple passages of war propaganda that gushed from her pen at the time. What could be excused in the novella written when military history was still being made is less pardonable in the novel published in 1923 and available in French the following year. A comparative study of wartime Paris in the works of John Dos Passos, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, and Wharton shows widely different modes of perception. While the young Dos Passos has a revelation of a new world and Canfield experiences disillusionment leading to a near rejection of mankind, Wharton at a time when she was busy rejecting her native country, created the illusion that America and France were intimately linked in an ideal relationship.

The imperfect image which emerges from Wharton's war fiction touches off reactions of doubt as to her competence as a novelist. Since she was so much at odds with historical reality there, one feels that perhaps she could not be trusted thoroughly, and the misgiving carries over into many of her other works where France plays such an important role. The reader, then, may feel like denying to someone so conscientious in her approach to France and so eager to analyze its ways and their meaning, the right to take him as an object of study. He may reproach her, so to speak, for not respecting the reserve and neutrality required of a guest, and also for warping the image of France in order to suite her own purposes. On closer analysis, the French milieu she described appear not only narrow but also antiquated and immutable, as if she wanted to petrify them for all eternity, and to refuse the possibility of evolution.

One can go further, however, and suggest that, among American expatriates writing about France, Wharton is no exception after all, though her social status sets her apart. The manner in which she depicts the country, the intellectual and moral judgments she makes have meaning only in relation to cultural references and values that are essentially American. But her adopted homeland seems also to be caught in a process of autosuggestion related to the difficulty of being a foreigner and a writer. Wharton never took up French citizenship, never became a Catholic, never returned to the United States after 1923, and perhaps the way she is considered by French readers can be explained by reference to what Richard Harding Davis wrote about the American colony in Paris: "They are continually on the defensive; they apologize to the American visitors and to the native Frenchmen . . . The only way by which they can justify their action is either to belittle what they have given up, or to emphasize what they have received in exchange . . . no matter how long it may have been since they ceased to be American, they do not become Frenchmen."<sup>7</sup>

Wharton's attitude is somewhat similar, and one may

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consider that the manner in which the theme of France is treated in her fiction corresponds to her wish and need to deal with the problem of an alien cultural identity. The imaginary French reader posited at the beginning of this essay, whose special brand of patriotism causes him to resent Wharton's criticisms as well as her praise, may be disturbed by the rather unflattering therapeutic use his homeland is put to.

To conclude this presentation of these arguable and largely undemonstrated hypotheses let us stress the following facts. Wharton became a displaced person, both in space and time as early as the beginning of World War I, and while she was gradually losing her grip on the present, she chose to spend the latter part of her life in the country where in the 1920s the art of the future was in the making. Her social origin, her place in the Parisian aristocracy, the systematic and egocentric use she made of France in her fiction explain why she may have appeared slightly irritating to French readers both as a person and as an author. She did, in fact, interfere too importunately in the special relationship the French at large entertain with their country, and this may ultimately be the principal reason why Wharton is not very popular in France.

## NOTES

1. Alluded to here in particular are the following works: Oliver Wendell Holmes, "La Grisette," in *The Complete Works of Oliver Wendell Holmes*, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1885; Robert William Chambers, *In The Quarter*, Chicago and New York: Neely, 1894; Guy Wetmore Carryl, *Zut and Other Parisians*, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1903; Frank Berkeley Smith, *The Street of the Two Friends*, New York: Doubleday, Page, 1912.
2. *Expression in America*, New York: Harper, 1932, p. xxix.
3. "Edith Wharton: A Memoir by an English Friend," in Irving Howe, ed., *Edith Wharton*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1962, p. 174.
4. New York: Scribner, 1909, p. 117. She also writes on p. 118: "As the motor enters the hill-country to the northeast of Toulouse the land breaks away pleasantly toward the long blue line of the Cévennes . . ." which is a geographic impossibility.
5. The following works are alluded to here: Richard Harding Davis, *About Paris*, New York: Harper, 1895; Frank Berkeley Smith, *The Real Latin Quarter*, New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1901; Theodore Child, *The Praise of Paris*, New York: Harper, 1893.
6. *Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959, p. 168.
7. *About Paris*, New York: Harper, 1895, pp. 189-90.

Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail



## Responses to Wharton in Spain

by Teresa Gómez Reus

Wharton's complex feeling of interest in and reserve toward the Spanish culture parallels the critical reception she has had in Spain. During the first half of the twentieth century, the number of her works published in Spain was slight. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe that she was translated earlier than most of her contemporaries, like Henry James, Stephen Crane, Willa Cather, and Mark Twain.<sup>1</sup> The first work to appear was *The House of Mirth* (circa 1911). It was a carefully done translation whose title, *Los Millonarios de los Estados Unidos o el Pais del Placer*,<sup>2</sup> boldly stated the novel's critique of the new monied classes in America. There was an insightful review of the novel by Carmen de Burgos, a writer himself and translator of Ruskin and Leopardi in Spain. Anticipating contemporary criticism, the review

stressed Lily's "dramatic significance" and her destruction by a frivolous, irresponsible society that overvalued conventions and appearances.<sup>3</sup>

Wharton's significance was overlooked in the Modernist years. Between 1925 and 1934, Spain was undergoing one of the most creative periods in its literary history. Not only was there a *risorgimento* of a national literature, but also a strong *avant garde* that was opening the country to outside influences. While a great number of Anglo-Saxon writers were translated (Wilde, O'Neill, Poe, Joyce, Loos, H.G. Wells, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis), Edith Wharton was silenced and displaced. Unlike other writers, neither her works, nor her trips through Spain aroused interest.<sup>4</sup> One can easily speculate about the reasons for this unjust neglect. As it happened

in America, her association with the *ancient regime* and her detachment from Modernist aesthetic fostered Wharton's exclusion from the canon. In addition, the question of gender is another factor to be taken into account in evaluation of Wharton's criticism. For not only she but also other relevant women writers such as Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein or Willa Cather were misread or else placed outside the boundaries of cultural history. In the Spanish scopic male economy, literature was a gender-laden concept to such an extent that, as the novelist Margarita Nelken complained, in 1930 many critics still considered it "outrageous for a woman to express her ideas by means of a pen."<sup>5</sup> As A.E. Bordonada writes, in Spain "during the first third of the twentieth century, women writers were confronted by a doubly misogynist society. On the one hand, the misogyny based on deep popular roots, inherited from three cultures: the Middle-Eastern, the Roman and the Judeo-Christian. On the other, the misogyny derived from philosophers that decisively influenced the Spanish intellectuals: Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche."<sup>6</sup> The low esteem in which many critics held women's writing helps us read in Spanish Wharton's map of exile and the lack of critical attention she attracted in those years.<sup>7</sup>

Between 1925 and the 1970s, Wharton's works remained largely unknown in Spain. Except for some intellectuals like Unamuno,<sup>8</sup> she was overlooked by the new artistic circles, who were committed to social realism. In terms of the direction of Wharton's reputation in this country, it is significant that a translation, apparently unauthorized, of one of her works appeared in 1925 under the rather mystifying title *La Sonada Adventura*. The fact that it appeared in a cheap and moralistic series for young girls, *La Novela Rosa*, suggests a strong misreading of Wharton as a sentimental novelist. The translation of the "The Old Maid" in 1947 and J.L. Gomez Tello's prologue to this edition<sup>9</sup> also helped reinforce some of the old prejudices. A typical entry, for example, ran like this: "Edith Wharton has undertaken the task of describing the old families of New York and the slow, imperceptible changes that are taking place in their inner social structures. This book (*Old New York*) is both the saga of an aristocracy and the acknowledgment of the most intimate arteries of the big urban metropolis, a place which we had forgotten it was made not only of cement but also fleshed people with human feelings, frustrations and sufferings... Wharton's plots, her well-constructed characters and even the austere milieu of her works--rooms full of intimacy *a lo Van der Weyden*--, allude to an exhausted, refined society that is melting away like a piece of ice under the sun."<sup>10</sup> Although Tello's perceptions were interesting and acute in many respects, his presentation of Edith Wharton was limited to praising her artistry as social commentator, while overlooking the gendered imprint of the novel. Compromising with the strong censorship of the time, Gomez Tello also produced some distorted infor-

mation, for example, he concealed her divorce and presented Wharton as a writer still living and happily married.

The past ten years have witnessed the translation of an important selection of her works, like *Old New York* (1990), *The House of Mirth* (1984), *The Age of Innocence* (1984), *Ethan Frome* (1981) and a volume of ghost stories (1978).<sup>11</sup> *The Age of Innocence* has received intelligent attention in Antonio Alvarez's review,<sup>12</sup> where he provides useful background information about Wharton, and some original insights into the way the novel achieves a delicate balance between the timeless and the temporal. The importance of *Old New York* is also exemplified in another review which praises its refreshing moral relativism, and what David Godfrey has called "the elaborate vocabulary of evasion."<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, an anthology of her short stories is being edited, and she has been discussed also in several conferences and panels.<sup>14</sup>

Theses and articles on Wharton are beginning to appear more and more as parts of longer studies or in collections of essays devoted to American literature.<sup>15</sup> There are still universities which apparently do not consider Wharton to be important enough to merit inclusion in this canon. However, many seminars on women's literature and graduate-level courses have included her writings as part of the curriculum, and a number of critics are beginning to see her literary achievements as central to our understanding of American realism and modernism. The efforts of contemporary criticism have made us perceive that there are good reasons to read the works of that traveller who visited Spain, not just to "discover" us but also to add her own enigmas to the many that are still wandering there.

*Universidad de Alicante*

#### Notes

1. Henry James was translated in Spain for the first time in 1944 with *The Papers of Jeffrey Aspern*, followed by *Washington Square* (1952) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1958); Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, for example, appeared in 1954 and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in 1956.
2. Literally, "The Millionaires of the United States or the Land of Pleasure." Edith Wharton, *Los Millonarios de los Estados Unidos o el Pais del Placer* (Madrid: La Espana Moderna, n.d.).
3. Carmen de Burgos, *El Correo Literario*, Madrid, May 15, 1912, p. 17.
4. Unlike Edith Wharton's wandering through Spain, Aldous Huxley's and Albert Thibaudet's visits to the country, to name but a few authors, attracted the attention of the literary press. *La Gaceta Literaria*, Spain's most relevant cultural journal of the time, offered a long interview with Aldous Huxley on one of his trips in 1930. See *La Gaceta Literaria*, IV, 77, 1 March 1930, p. 6.
5. My translation. Margarita Nelken, *Las Escritoras Espanolas* (Madrid, 1930), p. 9.
6. My translation. Angela E. Bordonada, ed., *Novelas Breves de Escritoras Espanolas, 1900-1913* (Madrid: Castalia, 1989), p. 11.

7. Examples abound in this direction. Cesar Falcon, for example, wrote: "Literature in England and America is a woman's task — not due to its quality but due to its quantity. For each male writer there are one hundred female ones. Men take part in literature as much as in sewing. The best writers so far are men, just like the best fashion designers are men as well." (My Translation) Cesar Falcon, "La Literature, Oficio de Mujer, *La Gaceta Literaria*, 1, 7, Madrid, 1 April 1927, p. 5.
8. *Ethan Frome*, for instance, was one of the included books in his library. See *An Unamuno Source Book*, eds. Elena and Mario Valdes (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), p. 260.
9. Edith Wharton, *La Solterona*. Trans. Fernandez Barrerira (Madrid: Soria, 1947).
10. Gomez Tello, "Introduction" to *La Solterona*, p. 25. My translation.
11. *Relatos de Fantasmas*. Trans. Francisco Torres (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1978); *Ethan Frome*. Trans. J.M. Alvarez and A. Perez (Barcelona: Montesinos, 1981); *La Casa de la Alegria*. Trans. Pilar Giralt (Barcelona: Planeta, 1986); *La Edad de la Inocencia*. Trans. F. Gonzales Fernandez (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1984); *Viejo Nueva York* (Barcelona: Montesinos, 1990).
12. *La Edad de la Inocencia* reviewed by Antonio Alvarez, *Quimera*, 33, otono, 1990.
13. David Godfrey. "The Full and Elaborate Vocabulary of Evasion: The Language of Cowardice in Edith Wharton's *Old New York*," *Midwest Quarterly*, Autumn 1988, 30, pp. 27-44.
14. Barbara Ozieblo, "Why a Woman Should Keep Her Feet Firmly on the Ground: Thoughts on Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*," X National Conference AEDEAN, 16-19 December, 1986. Teresa Gomez Reus, "Gender and Spatial Imagery in Wharton, Chopin and Stuart Phelps," The City that Women Inhabit: An International Conference, Quinto Centenario Ciudad de Alicante, March, 1989. T.G. Reus, "George Eliot and Edith Wharton: The Literary Relation," XII National Conference AEDEAN, 18-22 December, 1990.
15. Jane Arnold Morgan, "Lords and Chattel: Men and Women in Edith Wharton's Novels," *Cuadernos de Filologia Inglesa*, Universidad de Murcia, 1987, p. 7-21; Teresa Gomez Reus, "The Parody of Sexual Differentiation in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*," *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 21 November 1990 (in press); "Edith Wharton's Portraits of Ingenues or Innocence as Artifice," *Homenaje a Patricia Shaw*, Oviedo, 1991 (in press).



## Edith Wharton in Italy

by Gaetano Prampolini

I will gladly offer a brief overview of the fortunes of Wharton's *oeuvre* with Italian readers. The first of her works to become available in Italian was *The Touchstone*, published as early as in 1929 — one year before the slim selection of stories through which the Italian reading public made its acquaintance with the fiction of her great and by her much revered friend Henry James. Before her death the translations of two other novellas were out while three novels were rendered in Italian between 1945 and 1974, the year in which Wharton first became known in our language also as a short story writer.

Toward the end of the '70s the publishers' interest in Wharton's work, till then rather slack, flared up, and continued unabated throughout the next decade, when a new translation or a reprint of her works appeared almost every year. Before the latest publication, that of Wharton's letters to Morton Fullerton in 1990, the Italian reader interested in Wharton's writings could choose from among four novels, three novellas, three collections of stories plus her autobiography and *Ville italiane e loro giardini*. But, notwithstanding this (somewhat belated) flowering of translations (which also found the support of a large number of favorable reviews), Wharton is still anything but a popular author in Italy. One could in fact easily list ten or fifteen American writers (some of them indisputably her inferior as to literary merit) with whom the general reader is more familiar. And as to that eloquent index of a writer's impact on a foreign culture (the

admiration she elicits in writers), I can think of only one Italian writer who has publicly manifested appreciation for Wharton: Rossana Ombres, a very fine poet and a novelist of great talent in the penetrating and ironic exploration of feminine psychology and changing mores, to whose pen we owe two insightful reviews of the translations of *Ghosts* and *The Custom of the Country*.<sup>1</sup>

As to scholarship proper the field does not offer a much richer crop. As late as the end of the '50s the prevailing tendency—as witnessed, for example, by two literary histories of very different scope and orientation<sup>2</sup>—was to see Wharton primarily as a disciple (albeit a very gifted one) "in the Jamesian school," a view which is suggested again in the title of Vittoria Sanna's judicious and still useful essay which came out in 1964 and was the first extended monographic treatment of Wharton.<sup>3</sup> Among the shorter studies published more recently, Emanuela Dal Fabbro's sagacious analysis of the "Beatrice Palmato" manuscripts,<sup>4</sup> a perceptive discussion of Wharton as expatriate by Andrea Mariani<sup>5</sup> and Alberta Fabris Grube's stimulating overview of Wharton's writings concerning Italy<sup>6</sup> appear to be those most worthy of consideration. To welcome the first book-length study of Wharton we had to wait till last year: written by Maria Novelli Mercuri (a former student of mine, I am proud to say), it consists in a painstaking and very convincing reevaluation of *The Fruit of the Tree*, *per se* as well as in relation to the Wharton canon.<sup>7</sup> So, rather sparse indeed has been



so far the attention devoted to Wharton by Italian scholars. What is really surprising, however, is their neglect—total, but for Fabris Grube's good if rather brief essay mentioned above—of sizeable and varied complex of works in which Wharton took Italy as her theme, subject or setting. Beatrice Giudice in her dissertation has made a significant contribution toward filling this gap, especially as she adds to our perception of *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* and *The Valley of Decision*.

Let me conclude by trying to answer three questions: 1. What did Italy mean in Wharton's life? 2. What does Italy represent in her work? 3. What is her importance in the history of American writers' travel in Italy? Because space is limited, the observations I am about to make will have to suffice as a kind of cumulative answer to all three questions.

That by 1904 "the Italian phase of Edith Wharton's life had in effect come to an end," as writes no less an authority than R.W.B. Lewis, would probably reflect the opinion of the majority of Wharton readers. Although it was still to provide the setting for a crucial and unforgettable episode in *The Custom of the Country* as well as for two whole novels (*The Glimpses of the Moon* and *The Children*) and that little masterpiece "Roman Fever," Italy, to be sure, no longer constituted the dominant feature in Wharton's work after 1905. But, then—it would seem more to the point to say—it was but a phase in her work (rather than in her life) that ended at that date. Italy, as a matter of fact, does not appear to have been merely "a phase," when one considers the whole of Wharton's life.

Professor Asselineau has argued most elegantly that Wharton "thought in French and wrote in English": nobody, for sure, could say that she "thought in Italian and wrote in English." (As a matter of fact, her use of Italian is likely to strike the Italian reader of her works as somewhat awkward.) Nor could it be claimed, for sure, that either in Florence or anywhere else in Italy she might have found anything resembling the Parisian *salons* on whose cultural and social merits, on whose pleasurable refinement, she was to enlarge with such gusto and so didactically in *A Backward Glance*. The Italians of her time do not appear to have appealed to her, and none of those she met sparked her famous gift for deep and lasting friendships. (One might point out, here, how in *Italian Backgrounds* Italians figure in two capacities only: either as picturesque, crib-like figurines adding to the picturesqueness of a scene or as the unwitting or, worse, careless keepers of matchless landscapes and art treasures.)

But, on the other hand, there is no dearth of evidence on which to affirm that Wharton's delight in Italian landscapes, her interest in Italian art, her enthusiasm about the ever-varying, unpredictable ways in which the inter-fusing of art and nature provide endless aesthetic enjoyment in Italy were not extinguished after 1905. Actually,

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they never flagged. She kept coming to Italy almost every year, even if only for a delightful week at I Tatti or a depressing fortnight at "Salso" (maggiore). She kept retracing old itineraries and revisiting places cherished of old. Till her death she kept planning trips to the few Italian areas still unfamiliar to her. And, after all, from 1920 on, she chose to spend her winters and springs in a part of France that, geographically and culturally, has very much in common with Italy.

In a letter to Fullerton, Wharton attributes two fundamental qualities to both her lover's and her own nature: "a radiant reasonableness" but also the capacity to feel "the natural magic", *au-déla*, dream-side of things." One is tempted to say that Italy (certainly not America), Italy possibly more than France, was the country that proved capable of bringing out the latter quality in her. It is much to be regretted indeed that she did not keep a diary during her travels through Italy, so that we have nothing comparable, as to immediacy and freshness of response, to, say, the Italian journals of Irving, Hawthorne or that master of the on-the-spot, exact impression George Berkeley. But the reader of *Italian Backgrounds*, in particular, will need to make no great effort to recall passages in which Italy appears to Wharton as the magic, momentary materialization of a mythic "elsewhere," dearly longed-for but never to be fully possessed, while, for years after 1905, telling evidence of her unwavering involvement and enchantment with Italy can be easily culled from her letters.

The continuity of Wharton's interest in Italy is made, however, most evident by those of her stories which have some bearing (no matter how marginal or indirect) on Italy—once one sees them as a whole and can thus realize how they constitute a little corpus virtually coextensive, from "The Fullness of Life" (1893) through "Roman Fever" (1936), with the whole of Wharton's literary career. Although they have so far received little critical attention, some of them (the two just mentioned, but also "Souls Belated," "The Duchess at Prayer," "The Eyes" and "False Dawn") must be counted among Wharton's most characteristic and best performances in shorter fiction. Here, in concluding, I would just like to emphasize two more aspects of their significance.

Reflecting Wharton's sense of entrapment in her own situation as woman, artist and wife, the earlier among them (the six stories written before 1901) all present women oppressed by some cruel, cynical, selfish or simply insensitive and unresponsive male figure (be it a husband, a lover or a father) and whose aspiration to a truly fulfilling life must inevitably reckon with the formidable forces of custom and current morals. One need only recall the Leonardesque setting of "The Fullness of Life" or, in the same story, the Orcagna tabernacle which brings the protagonist to her only epiphany of happiness, or simply "the jolly old villa" glimpsed at from a train-window by the outlaw couple in "Souls Belated" to realize how a study

of the imagery related to Italian landscapes, artworks and atmospheres might make these stories yield new valuable insights into a crucial stage of Wharton's life and career.

Our little corpus of stories, taken as a whole, fruitfully interacts with Wharton's three major and more widely read Italian works—complementing them, profiting by as well as enriching our perception of them (for instance, "The Hermit and the Wild Woman" most certainly contributes to our understanding of "What the Hermits Saw" in *Italian Backgrounds*) and finally, confirming that what makes Wharton such a key-figure in the history of American writers' travel in Italy is essentially; 1. her discovery of such phases of Italian history and culture as *il Seicento, il Settecento, il Risorgimento* (and her introduction of subjects connected with them into Italiante American fiction); 2. her discovery and exploration of the "Italian backgrounds" (at a time when the too celebrated "Italian foregrounds" had become utterly "conventionalized" by mass tourism), which resulted in the awakening of the cultivated English-speaking traveller to the appreciation of new Italian places and new aspects of Italian culture; 3. her clear vision of the successive shifts of her countrymen's approach to and taste for Italy, which in *Italian Backgrounds* as well as in most of her Italian stories makes her a commentator on American travel in Italy as perceptive as James in his *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*.

Universita di Firenze

#### NOTES

1. They appeared in the book review section of *La Stampa*, 28 February 1975 and 18 May 1985.
2. Cf. Rolando Anzilotti, *Storia della letteratura americana*, Francesco Vallardi, Milano 1957, p. 65 and Carlo Izzo, *Storia della letteratura nord-americana*, Nuova Accademia, Milano 1957, p. 471.
3. "I romanzi de Edith Wharton e las narrativa jamesiana," *Studi americani* 10, pp. 229-91.
4. "La 'Beatrice' de Edith Wharton," *Letterature d'America* 1, ii (Spring 1980), pp. 43-66. Dal Fabbro is also the author of the perceptive feminist-orientated "Afterword" to the 1983 translation of *Summer*.
5. "Edith Wharton" in Andrea Mariani (ed.), *Four American Fugitives*, Liguori, Napoli 1982.
6. "Edith Wharton's Italian Background," *Rivista de studi anglo-americani* 4-5 (1984-85), pp. 133-44.
7. *The Fruit of the Tree e la narrativa de Edith Wharton*, Edisud, Salerno 1990.

#### ERRATA

Margaret Murray (Fordham University) is the correct name of the reviewer of *Edith Wharton: A Descriptive Bibliography* by Stephen Garrison published in the Fall 1991 issue.

**Edith Wharton and Emily Brontë**  
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ly unlike herself, in persons rendered ugly, querulous, manipulative, and angular by servitude and deprivation. She would not have written *Ethan Frome* without the Lenox experience. Yet her knowledge of poverty, of isolated environment, of the characterizing potential of dialect; her sense of the peculiar frustration that inarticulateness may engender in persons undergoing intense emotion — surely such insights were advanced by Brontë's example. Wharton can write of Ethan, "By nature grave and inarticulate, he admired recklessness and gaiety in others and was warned to the marrow by friendly human intercourse." (EF 68). This very process of Mattie's warming Ethan to the marrow reenacts the younger Cathy's reclamation of Hareton from silence and from anger.

Twenty-three years after the publication of *Ethan Frome*, Wharton at last overtly associated her own locale with that of Emily Brontë, implying an aesthetic debt — tacitly challenging her illustrious predecessor, bigger game than Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett. In *A Backward Glance* she writes: "Emily Brontë would have found as savage tragedies in our remoter valleys as on her Yorkshire moors" (BG 294). So, too, Edith Wharton.

NOTES

1. See, e.g., Millicent Bell. *Edith Wharton and Henry James*. New York: George Braziller, 1965, pp. 166, 167; Richard H. Lawson. *Edith Wharton*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1977, pp. 73-74; R.W.B. Lewis. *Edith Wharton: A Biography*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975, pp. 308-310; Margaret B. McDowell. *Edith Wharton*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991, p. 65; Cynthia Griffin Wolff. *A Feast of Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 183-184.

2. Maureen Howard. *Seven American Women Writers of the Twentieth Century*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978, p. 29. R.W.B. Lewis, Cynthia Wolff, and Elizabeth Ammons have recently argued most insistently for the Americanizing of *Ethan Frome*, in *Edith Wharton*, pp. 309, 237, 93; *A Feast of Words*, pp. 163-164, and *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980, pp. 61, 76-77. My own reading reaffirms Blake Nevius' earlier view that Wharton is essentially European and classical in her orientation, even in this "most indigenous work." See Blake Nevius. *Edith Wharton*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953, pp. 24-25, 245-246.

3. Edith Wharton. *A Backward Glance*, New York: De. Appleton-Century Company, 1934, p. 293. Hereafter references to this autobiographical memoir will appear parenthetically in the text preceded by BG.

4. See, e.g. Daniel Berkeley Updike, quoted by Percy Lubbock in *Portrait of Edith Wharton*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1947, pp. 22-23.

5. Charlotte Brontë, "Editor's Preface to the New Edition of *Wuthering Heights* (1850)." *Wuthering Heights*. A Norton Critical Edition. Ed. William M. Sale, Jr., and Richard J. Dunn. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1990, pp. 320-321. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text preceded by WH. Initial and terminal ellipses are omitted in quotations here and elsewhere.

6. Edith Wharton. "Introduction." *Ethan Frome*. Intro. Doris Grumbach. New York: Penguin Books, 1987, p. xviii. Subsequent references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text preceded by EF.

7. "Ethan Frome: Structure and Metaphor." *Modern Fiction Studies*. 7 (Winter 1961-1962): 348.

8. William M. Sale, Jr. "Contemporary Reviews," in the second Norton Critical Edition of *Wuthering Heights* (1972), p. 278.

**Italian Foregrounds**

*continued from page 14*

travel and look and read with the writing of the book in mind; but my years of intimacy with the Italian eighteenth century gradually and imperceptibly fashioned the tale and compelled me to write it" (Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, in *Novellas and Other Writings*, New York: Library of America, 1990, p. 881). In fact in her notebook, now at the Beinecke Library, she lists a considerable number of books to consult in preparing for the actual writing of the novel (See Eleanor Dwight, *The Influence of Italy on Edith Wharton*, Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, p. 251 and chapter 5 in general).

3. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words. The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 95.

4. Edith Wharton, Letter to Sara Norton, Feb. 13, 1902 in *Letters*, ed. by R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis, New York: Scribner's, 1988, pp. 56-7.

5. The foreground/background relationship has been analyzed by John J. Murphy, who suggests that "the figures in the foreground drama originate and are nourished by the rich Italian background; that the background provides them with lifeblood, or fictionblood" ("Edith Wharton's Italian Triptych: *The Valley of Decision*," *Xavier University Studies*, IV, 1965, p. 85).

6. See for example her summary of the novel in a letter to William Crary Brownell, Feb. 14, 1902, in *Letters*, p. 58.

7. Edith Wharton, *The Valley of Decision*, New York: Scribner's, 1902, p. 77.

8. E. Wharton, "The Sanctuaries of the Pennine Alps" in *Italian Backgrounds*, p. 52.

9. See on this point also Janet Goodwyn, *Edith Wharton, Traveller in the Land of Letters*, London: Macmillan, 1990, p. 15.

10. Edith Wharton, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, New York: Century, 1904, pp. 131-133.

11. Blake Nevius, *Edith Wharton. A Study of Her Fiction*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961, p. 47 and p. 37. Some critics are more sympathetic to Wharton's character portrayal in the novel. Alberta Fabris Grube, for instance, defends Odo as a character "alive and ready to absorb whatever comes his way" ("Edith Wharton's Italian Background" in *Italy and Italians in America, Rivista di Studi Anglo-Americani*, III, 4-5, p. 137).

12. Edith Wharton, Letter to Terry Chanler, March 8, 1903, in *Letters*, pp. 77-8.

14. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton recalls that "the editor of the "Nuova Antologia," then the leading Italian literary review, proposed to me to bring out an Italian translation of my novel, and Vernon Lee at once offered to write the introduction. For a reason I was never able to fathom (probably a change in the administration of the review), the translation never appeared; but Vernon Lee's admirable preface is in my possession, and I still hope it may serve to introduce Italian readers to my book" (p. 884). Lee's piece, written in Italian, is now in the Wharton Archives at the Beinecke Library.

by a reception at the Café de Flore. On the final day the group travelled to St. Brice-sous-Forêt, where Jacques Fosse, the President of Les Amis du Vieux St. Brice, welcomed conferees to the village where Wharton had spent the last years of her life. After a day of papers and conversations with members of the community, some of whom had personal memories of Wharton, the group was received by Princess Isabelle of Liechtenstein at the Pavillon Colombe.

The Wharton Society sponsored the conference with generous support from Western Michigan University, the Mona Bismarck Foundation, the American University of Paris, Penn State University, The American University, Washington, D.C., and Charles Scribner's Sons. Katherine Joslin directed the conference along with Alan Price, the associate director, and Kathy Fedorko, Judith Saunders, and Carol Singley, members of the planning committee. William Cipolla, Vice President of the American University of Paris, Christiane Degueldre, Chargée de Relations Universitaires at the U.S. Embassy, Monica Dunham, Program Director of the Mona Bismarck Foundation, and Joan Templeton, Professor at Long Island University, Brooklyn, graciously provided advice and assistance in making local arrangements.

The following essays represent the wide range of topics and the high quality of papers at the conference. Viola Hopkins Winner discusses Wharton's early attachment to her fellow expatriate Henry Adams, and Judith Saunders draws parallels between Wharton and Gertrude Stein, compatriots with very different views from the Left Bank. Jean Frantz Blackall considers Wharton's response to Emily Brontë in her writing of Ethan Frome, an American version of the British romance. Gianfranca Balestra argues that Wharton's *The Valley of Decision*, like her study *Italian Backgrounds*, focuses attention on Italy and its history rather than on the protagonists thrust to the foreground of her novel. Carol Singley, who has read Elisina Tyler's diary accounts of Wharton's last days, provides a rare glimpse into Wharton's private world. Keiku Beppu, Jean Méral, Teresa Gómez-Reus and Gaetano Prampolini analyze Wharton's reception in Japan, France, Spain and Italy, respectively; Alan Price, who organized the session on foreign responses, introduces their work.

Other conference papers, including those of the featured speakers, will appear in *Wretched Exotic: Essays on Edith Wharton in Europe*, edited by Katherine Joslin and Alan Price, (forthcoming).

Katherine Joslin, Western Michigan University

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(The FALL 1992 ISSUE will feature a bibliographic essay 1990-1992 by Alfred Bendixen and book reviews of *Edith Wharton* by Katherine Joslin; *Edith Wharton: A Study of the Short Fiction* by Barbara White; *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton* by Gloria Erlich; *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction* by Marilyn Chandler and *Edith Wharton: New Critical Essays* by Alfred Bendixen and Annette Zilversmit.)