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CONFERENCE NEWS

MLA CONVENTION IN TORONTO, DEC. 27-30, 1997

627A. Edith Wharton: Cultural Contexts

Program arranged by the Edith Wharton Society. Presiding: Carol J. Singley, Rutgers University, Camden

Tuesday, December 30, 10:15 - 11:30 a.m., 205B, Toronto Convention Centre

1. "The House of Mirth and the Politics of Interior Design," Melanie V. Dawson, Univ. of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh
2. "Marketing Inheritance in *The Custom of the Country*," Sara E. Quay, Kenyon Coll.
3. "The Loss of Custom and Innocence in the Age of Automobility," Deborah L. Clarke, Penn State Univ., University Park
4. "May's Story: Power and Prowess in *The Age of Innocence*," Karen Connolly-Lane, Univ. of Minnesota

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#### 517. Business Meeting and Cash Bar Arranged by the Edith Wharton Society

Monday, December 29. 5:15 - 6:30 p.m., British Columbia, Royal York

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Annual Dinner of Edith Wharton Society

Monday, December 29, 8 p.m. at La Marquette Restaurant, 111 King St. East, Toronto

Dinner is \$30. Send check to Carole Shaffer-Koros, 58 Normandy Drive, Westfield, NJ 07090-3432

AMERICAN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION ANNUAL CONFERENCE

May 28-31, 1998, Bahia Resort Hotel, San Diego, CA.

CALL FOR PAPERS:

Edith Wharton and The American Renaissance

Submit one-page proposals by December 15 to: Carole Shaffer-Koros,
58 Normandy Drive, Westfield, NJ 07090-3432

ART EXHIBIT OF "EDITH WHARTON'S WORLD" Washington, D.C., September 26-January 25, 1998

An exhibition, "Edith Wharton's World," with more than 100 paintings, miniatures, manuscripts, and memorabilia from Wharton's life is now on display at the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. (Eighth and F Streets, N.W.) The exhibit has been beautifully mounted and documented by co-curators and scholars, Eleanor Dwight and Viola Hopkins Winner.

Artfully arranged, the exhibit affords two simultaneous experiences of Edith Wharton and the milieu she personally circulated in both in New York and Paris. Beginning with early photographs and a self-sketch at age 14 through the larger oil portraits and publicity shots glimpsed in the many rooms of the exhibits, a visitor can follow Wharton from her babyhood innocence through her more awkward young adulthood to the elaborately adorned publicity poses to the final picture of the woman writer at work (right) with her comfortable cardigan, reading glasses, pen and paper. Each room contains selections from first editions of her many works of fiction and poetry, corrected manuscripts, early diaries, calling cards and stationery, and even gowns from her wardrobe.

Equally enriching and in some ways the largest part of this exhibit are the portraits and occasional scenic paintings of the people and places in Wharton's worlds, and the artists, the painters, who captured this society of friends and figures who both helped and hampered her. Wharton's family are all represented but the most luminous paintings are the portraits of other New York Society like Egerton Winthrop, Edward Robinson, and Mrs. Henry White (Margaret Rutherford) who sat for John Singer Sargent, Richard Watson Gilder who posed for Cecilia Beaux, Henry James rendered by Jacques-Emile Blanche and the beautiful but unfortunate Consuelo Vanderbilt sketched by Paul Helleu (left). Situating these elegant faces are the few but well chosen paintings of the locales Wharton and her circle moved in such as "Washington Square Arch" by Childe Hassam, "The Tenth Street Studio" by William Merritt Chase, and "The Louvre: Morning, Rainy Weather" by Camille Pissarro.



From the moment one enters the ornately arched, velvet upholstered and gently lighted interiors of this museum exhibit, the visual surfaces of this confident, affluent, and handsome world envelop one. Its more hidden wounds, its oppressions and repressions, the costs of inclusion in this upper-class American society are reserved for the words and images of the narratives this woman writer knew lie within and which she so courageously created in her now famous and well-interpreted literature. However, it is still easier to access Wharton's written *oeuvre* than experience this unique assemblage of complementary artistic creations. Go, if possible, before this exhibit disbands.

Annette Zilversmit

Publicity and Authorship in *The Touchstone*, or A Portrait of the Artist as a Dead Woman

by Mark A. Eaton

Looking back on the beginning of her writing career in *A Backward Glance* (1934), Edith Wharton recalls that "I had as yet no real personality of my own, and was not to acquire one till my first volume of short stories was published -- and that was not until 1899" (868). We can assume that the "personality" Wharton describes here has to do with her identity as a writer; after all, elsewhere in *A Backward Glance* she writes of the "systematic daily effort" and the "discipline of the daily task" that transformed her "from a drifting amateur into a professional" (941). Before becoming a writer, she could imagine "no other existence" than that of "wife" or "society woman" (868). Yet Wharton's new identity as a writer is only part of what she means by acquiring a personality. In addition to gaining a sense of personal identity through the discipline of daily writing, the personality Wharton goes on to describe is a decidedly public one, a personality such that, as she puts it, "[a]nyone walking along the streets might go into any bookshop, and say: 'Please give me Edith Wharton's book,' and the clerk, without bursting into incredulous laughter, would produce it, and be paid for it, and the purchaser would walk home with it and read it, and talk of it, and pass it on to other people to read!" (869). For Wharton personality, in other words, refers to something like what Michel Foucault called the author-function: not being a writer per se, but having her name on the cover of a book that can be purchased is what secures her personality.¹

"What is an author?" Foucault asked in a well-known essay of that title. His answer was that "author" is the name we give to "a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which

one impedes the free circulation...of fiction" (119). According to Foucault, the "coming into being of the notion of 'author'" as an "author-function" served to stimulate as well as regulate the commodification of literature. The term author, in his account, refers not to the "real and exterior individual who produced" the text but rather to a "particular image of the author" promulgated in the market (107, 105). While Foucault argues that the author function was institutionalized during the eighteenth century, his analysis is applicable to an analogous change in the notion of authorship at the end of the nineteenth century, when modern methods of advertising and publicity were used to market authors as personalities.²

Applying the notion of an author-function to the United States at the turn of the century, we can better assess how the emergent mass culture of the period affected the literary profession, especially the role of authors themselves. It seems clear that the "image of the author" became one of the key categories for marketing books within a burgeoning mass culture. Richard Brodhead contends that the "culture of letters" in the 1890s "made writing inseparable from a larger action of advertising, the media's creation of consumer desire that helps boost the publisher's profit" (2). Evidence from the period confirms Brodhead's assertion that literature was being commercialized. In a 1905 article titled "The Commercialization of Literature," Henry Holt claimed that authorship had "become a business to get rich in" (Culver 119). And publicity generated not only increased sales but also a new form of celebrity. As Walter Besant observed at the turn of the century, authors could easily "command an income and a position quite equal to those of the average

lawyer or doctor," yet they could also attain a level of fame surpassing that of either profession. Indeed, one literary critic titled his 1901 book about the profession *Fame and Fiction* (Wilson 86).³

Along with the commercialization of literature, another concomitant shift involved the increasing incompatibility between what Pierre Bourdieu has called economic and cultural capital. Throughout much of the nineteenth century women writers enjoyed greater popularity (read higher sales) with a largely female readership, whereas male writers from Hawthorne to Howells often felt underappreciated and even feminized in their chosen profession.⁴ By the end of the century a clear dichotomy had emerged: male authors were generally regarded as more significant, culturally speaking, than their female counterparts in official literary histories. The movement from romance to realism composed a high literary tradition of male authors, while a sentimental romance tradition was denigrated to low culture status by the literary-critical establishment. Thus economic capital--that is, market success--was separated from cultural capital--the measure of literary importance.⁵

This gendered opposition forms the institutional context in which Edith Wharton became, in Philip Fisher's phrase, "America's first successful high-cultural woman novelist" (xviii).⁶ Wharton fashioned her reputation as an important woman novelist neither simply by the force of her will, nor by writing admittedly great novels, but by carefully positioning herself in the literary field. At a time of shifting relations between strictly literary and other kinds of discourse, Wharton went on from her first book on interior decoration (co-authored with a male architect) to become one of America's greatest novelists. Within a decade of *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), she published three short story collections, two novellas, a historical novel, and finally, of course, her critically-acclaimed bestseller *The House of Mirth* (1905). This novel gave Wharton financial security and also made her reputation as a serious novelist all but secure.⁷ Official recognition of Wharton's place among great American novelists came in 1921 when she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Innocence* (1920). Nevertheless, the fact that her novels continued to be regarded by some as near-journalistic *exposes* of her own high society milieu while the author herself strenuously objected to this view indicates a struggle over the author's literary reputation.⁸

Wharton was fully aware of the subtle discriminations made between serious and society novelists, and she actively sought recognition as a serious writer rather than a society novelist. One of her earliest short stories "April Showers," which appeared in *The Youth's Companion* in 1900, concerns a seventeen year old girl who attempts to break into the

fiction market by modeling herself after the celebrated "society novelist" Kathleen Kyd. When the girl's manuscript is turned down by *Home Circle*, she is forced to reassess her goals: "Theodora recalled the early struggles of famous authors, the notorious antagonism of publishers and editors to any new writer of exceptional promise. Would it not be wiser to write the book down to the average reader's level?...The thought was sacrilege!...never would she resort to the inartistic expedient of modifying her work to suit the popular taste. Better obscure failure than a vulgar triumph" (191).⁹ Theodora mulls over the classic dilemma of being true to one's artistic ideals or pandering to popular tastes. She chooses the former course and accepts whatever consequences may come from her decision; either editors will respect her work for its high quality and aesthetic purity or they'll reject it for being too difficult and inaccessible. Expressing a by-now familiar idea that economic and cultural capital are mutually exclusive, Theodora aligns obscurity with artistic integrity and sees market success as a "vulgar triumph." The story raises a number of issues pertinent to Wharton's own situation at the time, not least the author's fear of being labeled a kind of Kathleen Kyd. Unlike Kyd, Wharton managed to achieve at once widespread popularity and high culture prestige, but this outcome was by no means predictable in 1900. And although she ultimately won the struggle over her authorial image, Wharton remained somewhat defensive about the implication that her novels traded on the public's voyeuristic interest in New York high society. In *A Backward Glance* she writes: "The low order, in fiction of the genuine *roman a clef* (which is never written by a born novelist) naturally makes any serious writer of fiction indignant at being suspected of such methods" (942). Wharton's disdain for the "low order" of literary *exposes*, as well as for mass culture more generally, is part of what I see as a conscious strategy to distance her fiction from low cultural forms such as society column, romance novels, and ladies magazines.¹⁰

Amy Kaplan has established that Wharton began her career "at a time when the aggressive advertising of a growing publishing industry first promoted the 'celebrity' and the 'best-seller' as new, marketable items" (82).¹¹ Yet I believe we still need a fuller picture of how exactly Wharton negotiated her public image to advantage within this institutional context. From early in her career, Wharton was remarkably savvy about how to boost sales figures through marketing and promotion. For instance, after publishing her first book of short stories *The Greater Inclination* (1899), she wrote her editor William C. Brownwell at Scribners to complain that, despite its "unusually favorable reception," the book was not being sufficiently promoted. She noted that the

major publishers "advertise almost continuously in the daily papers" and then concluded her letter with a threat: "Certainly in these days of energetic and emphatic advertising, Mr. Scribner's methods do not tempt one to offer him one's wares a second time" (*Letters* 37-38). That she could threaten to change publishers after just one book reveals remarkable self-confidence. Wharton understood that sales wouldn't (necessarily) come from the strength of her fiction alone, so she lobbied for increased advertising not only of her books but of herself as a public persona. Scribner's complied with her wishes and stepped up its efforts to promote both. One advertisement for *The Greater Inclination* in *The Book Buyer* featured a lithograph drawing of Wharton in a fur-lined overcoat.¹² The publisher also included advertisements for her earlier collection of short stories inside the front and back covers of her follow-up *The Touchstone* (1900). "By Edith Wharton/Author of *The Greater Inclination*" appears on the title page and inside back cover, along with "OPINIONS OF THE PRESS" from various newspapers and literary reviews, including *The New York Sun*, *The Bookman*, and the *NY Commercial Advertiser*.¹³ Here the author's name, in Foucault's words, "performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse assuring a classificatory function. Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others" (107). This practice is common enough, of course. Publishers understandably want to associate a writer's most recent book with previous, better known works.¹⁴ Still, it's worth pointing out the extent to which publishers try to create an aura of success around an author and her work, as if popularity were reason enough to buy the author's latest production. One advertisement for *The Touchstone* that appeared in the *N.Y. Commercial Advertiser* confirms the circular logic of such advertising: "The artistic success last year of Mrs. Wharton's other book, *The Greater Inclination*, has insured an expectant and discriminating public for this [one]" (WP).

Wharton's manipulation of publicity constitutes an impressive instance of female agency. As Millicent Bell has suggested, "She learned to look after her interests as well as any agent might have done for her, pressing her publishers for advertising and promotional effort, insisting on royalties commensurate with her market value, and shifting without any sentimental regrets to new publishers who maximized her earnings" ("Introduction" 12-13). Wharton actively lobbied for greater publicity, but it should be noted that she wasn't always happy with the publicity she got, and at times she seemed ambivalent at best about how her novels were being promoted. She vehemently objected to her publisher's marketing ploy on the cover of *The House of Mirth* (1905),

which announced that "for the first time the veil has been lifted from New York Society." As is well known, Wharton registered her disapproval at once: "I thought that, in the House of Scribner, the House of Mirth was safe from all such Harperesque methods of *reclame*....[D]o all you can to stop the spread of that pestilent paragraph, and efface it from the paper cover of future printings" (quoted in Lewis 151). While the offending line was removed, however, she could not prevent readers from perceiving *The House of Mirth* in precisely that way. Indeed, this was one of the hazards of what Wharton once referred to as the "publicity of print": "If one has sought the publicity of print, and sold one's wares in the open market, one has sold to the purchasers the right to think what they choose about one's book" (*A Backward Glance* 943).

The circumstances of promotion, publication, and sales provide one picture of Wharton's conflicted desires--on the one hand she wishes to guard her privacy and that of her friends in upper class New York society, but on the other hand she wants to write bestsellers and become famous. I have suggested that Wharton forcefully negotiated her literary image in the public sphere, yet it remains to be seen just how such negotiation was transmuted in her fiction. Wharton represents the construction of literary authority through marketing and publicity in some of her earliest fictions. In short stories like "Copy" (1901) and "Expiation" (1904), for example, she invents fictional female authors who try to negotiate their own success and consequent celebrity.¹⁵ "Expiation" is about an aspiring author Paula Fetherel, who in the course of the story publishes her first novel *Fast and Loose* and anxiously awaits the initial reviews to come in. Since the literary market is increasingly dominated by the "vocabulary of commerce" (450), the book's success hinges on a favorable reaction by the press. Fetherel claims that she's "not at all nervous about the success of my book"; in fact, she seems much more worried that it will be perceived as a "*succes de scandale*" instead of a serious novel whose real aim is to critique "the hollowness of social conventions" (439-40). Fetherel clearly wishes to position herself in the literary field as a serious, intelligent writer, but this desire is only partially realized, because very few people pick up on her intended social critique. To most readers the attraction of her work lies in its titillating glimpse of taboos. Fetherel knows only too well that one of the "consequences of authorship" will be the attendant publicity ("modesty strikes me as abnormal," one character says, "especially in an author" [439]). But she takes publicity perhaps too far and bribes her uncle, a Bishop, to denounce the book as scandalous, thus ensuring even greater popularity for her book. "Expiation" obviously satirizes the way publicity easily

shades into scandal mongering to generate public interest in certain novels.

Wharton's "Copy" also satirizes modern rituals of publicity involving two famous authors, Helen Dale and Paul Ventnor. Included among the rituals under scrutiny here are the traffic in celebrity autographs (Dale's sells for fifty pounds on the street), magazine interviews with accompanying photographs (*Woman's Sphere* and *The Droplight* have asked for interviews with photographs), and gossip columns that follow the comings and goings of famous persons (Dale informs Ventnor that the newspapers had already announced his arrival in town). Both authors seem weary of the constant publicity, and yet they are self-aware enough to realize that publicity is the engine of fame. "I'm so tired of it all," exclaims Dale with the studied posture of indifference to fame characteristic of the famous (276). Both authors express a longing for "the old days...when we were real people" (278)—that is, "[when] our emotions weren't worth ten cents a word, and a signature wasn't an autograph" (285). "I died years ago," Mrs. Dale only half-jokingly asserts. "What you see before you is a figment of the reporter's brain—a monster manufactured out of newspaper paragraphs, with ink in its veins. A keen sense of copyright is my nearest approach to an emotion" (278). In this passage, celebrity is figured as a kind of death or extinction of the self. The iconic personality of a star is seen as a figment of the media's imagination, no longer a flesh-and-blood person but a newsprint monster, with printer's ink instead of blood. While Wharton would later associate authorship with acquiring a personality in *A Backward Glance*, "Copy" signals her awareness that a public personality is something quite different from one's bodily person, for it involves the production and circulation of non-corporeal images, or what we might call imaged selves. Moreover, the production of imaged selves is quite often eroticized so as to generate vaguely sexual desires among potential consumers. We see such an erotics of publicity most clearly in the early movie industry, but it obtains across a spectrum of advertising discourses, including those of the publishing industry, which heightened interest in its authors' personal lives.

"Copy" parallels *The Touchstone* in that its plot hinges on whether either of the two authors will sell the other's personal letters for profit (or revenge?) and so bring to light their love affair. The story resonates with contemporary legal questions about whether the sender or recipient of a letter controls the right to publish it, and about whether copyright protection is sufficient grounds to block publication of such a letter. In a well-known 1890 *Harvard Law Review* article "The Right to Privacy," Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis argued that individuals should be able to block the publication of their

letters or diaries, and more generally "to fix the limits of the publicity which shall be given them" (198). Because gossip had become a "trade" or "industry," Warren and Brandeis warned that we must protect the "right of the individual to be let alone" (196, 205).

In several contemporary court cases, however, judges had ruled that "letters not possessing the attributes of literary compositions are not properly entitled to protection" (203). The courts felt that ordinary letters about, say, one's business affairs or one's intimate relationships could not be considered "literary" and were therefore not protected under then-current property laws. Brandeis and Warren believed that the lower courts had made a serious mistake by assuming that personal correspondence should fall under the category of private property, as literary manuscripts did. Literary compositions were different than ordinary letters in that "they are transferable; they have a value; and publication or reproduction is a use by which that value is realized" (200). Thus, the right to block the publication of one's personal letters "cannot rest upon the right to literary or artistic property in any exact sense" (202). The only law that could protect "personal writings and all other personal productions" from being published, according to Brandeis and Warren, was the right to privacy. And the right to privacy derived not from "the principle of private property, but that of an inviolate personality" (205). Under a vastly extended and generalizable right to privacy, personal writings were protected whether they were literary or not: "The same protection is accorded to a casual letter or an entry in a diary and to the most valuable poem or essay....In every such case the individual is entitled to decide whether that which is his shall be given to the public. No other has the right to publish his productions in any form, without his consent" (199).

The legal controversy discussed in Brandeis and Warren's article did not directly influence Wharton's fiction, but similar issues concerning the protection of privacy from unwanted publicity find expression in "A Copy" and, as we shall see, in *The Touchstone*. Wharton is particularly interested in how famous authors might be protected from having their private letters published without their consent. Throughout the short story, Dale and Ventnor threaten to sell each other's early love letters. What makes the letters valuable, of course, is the fact that the two authors have since become famous: "you were a celebrity already," Dale says when asked if she kept his letters. "Of course I kept them!" (279). By the turn of the century, it seems that the right of celebrities to block publication of their personal papers was being eroded by a widespread assumption that they somehow belonged to the public at large: "Celebrities...were not given such protection by virtue of their status as public figures; thus

they could not legally enforce an exclusive right of property in their well-known images" (Margolis 89). The two celebrity authors in Wharton's short story specifically dispute ownership of their letters. When Helen Dale "claims them" on the grounds that she was the one who "wrote them" (283), Ventnor replies that as recipient he owns them unless and until he relinquishes possession of them. Weighing whether to hand them over to a publisher, the authors ultimately settle on burning both sets of letters in the fireplace to secure their privacy: "let's sacrifice our fortune and keep the excursionists out!" (285).¹⁶ Wharton seems to pit her fiction against the inroads publicity had made into authors' private lives; by refusing to publish their letters Dale and Ventnor acquire a superior sense of having triumphed over vulgar publicity. However, the letters had already proven to be valuable even without being sold. Dale admits that she had plumbed his letters for material while writing a novel about an aspiring woman novelist, and Ventnor shoots back that he had been using her letters to write his memoirs. Despite burning the letters, the authors had already profitted from them in the form of a priceless literary currency, which they in turn converted into profitable literature. As Stacey Margolis suggests, "The letters that the two celebrities burn cannot be kept from the market because, as a kind of intellectual 'capital,' they have already been sold.... Their utopian dreams of escape are just that--pure nostalgia for a form of property that no longer exists and a world that has long since disappeared" (82-83). Wharton's story shows that the market determines the value of an author's productions, whether literary or personal. Not just "literary compositions" (in Brandeis and Warren's quaint phrase) but private letters and diaries will have value in a culture that fetishizes the personality of the author, especially if they expose something scandalous about the author's personal life.

Wharton had already explored the problems she associated with a publicity of print in her earliest novella *The Touchstone*, which is her most explicit fictional treatment of the profession of authorship. Wharton's novella mediates the connections between authorship and publicity she was then negotiating as an aspiring writer, thus providing yet another picture of how mass culture decisively altered the conditions for literary production. Because Wharton was enmeshed in the very publishing industry she takes as her subject matter, the novella's perspective on authorship and publicity is necessarily an embedded one. Even as *The Touchstone* exposes and critiques the erotics of publicity that govern the marketplace, Wharton was simultaneously negotiating them herself. In this sense, the novella can be read as an immanent critique of the publicity of print.¹⁷

The Touchstone gives a detailed account of the way mass

culture has altered the conditions for selling books--in this case, an edition of "letters" by a famous novelist--and how the author is consequently vulnerable to public scrutiny on an unprecedented scale. As Kaplan suggests: "*The Touchstone* imagines the consequences of such a voracious system of exchange that refuses to stop at the product of the book alone but extends to the identity of the author as well" (81). In this novella, the "lady novelist" Margaret Aubyn is transformed from a "person" into a "personage" through the mechanisms of publicity. *The Touchstone* testifies to the process by which an author ("a real and exterior individual") gets caught up in the discursive production of an author-function ("a particular image of the author"). And since Margaret Aubyn is already dead at the start of the novella, we might say it is a portrait of the artist as a dead woman.¹⁸

Much of Wharton's novella is focalized through the perspective of Glennard, a friend (and possibly lover) of Margaret Aubyn's. When he comes across a request for information concerning the now-deceased author, Glennard recalls that he had been "dazzled by the semi-publicity" (53) of her first book, and even more struck by the "fame that came to Mrs. Aubyn with her second book" (55). After her ascent in the public eye, he feels that she looked down on him from "her cold niche of fame" (54, 45). "In becoming a personage," the narrator tells us, Aubyn had "ceased to be a person" and become "the mere abstraction of a woman" (58, 128). Here Wharton inveighs against the apparent desecration of selfhood through publicity and analyzes the displacement of true human contact by a kind of erotics of publicity, whereby Madame Aubyn becomes a titillating but distant and unattainable icon to her growing legions of fans. As Glennard finds himself "losing a sense of her nearness" (129), his intimate relationship with Aubyn is replaced by the generalized--as well as sexualized--pseudo-intimacy that structures the relationship between a star and her fans.¹⁹

As it happens, Glennard still possesses a cache of letters sent to him by Margaret Aubyn, which he realizes had suddenly acquired value as if by "some alchemistic process." The process he deems magical is in fact simply the publicity that has made Aubyn a famous public figure, and therefore made her writings valuable. Glennard reassures himself that her celebrity made even the most intimate letters "as impersonal as a piece of journalism" (58-59). His comment expresses the growing sense around the turn of the century that celebrities relinquished their right to keep letters or other personal papers from being published, despite the best efforts of Brandeis and Warren to ensure that they could. As one character puts it, anything of "Margaret Aubyn's belongs to the world" (92). My sense is that fewer and fewer people would find anything objectionable about Glennard's decision

to make Margaret Aubyn's letters available to the public. Even traditionalists like Brandeis and Warren conceded that the recipient could not be held accountable for publishing a letter: "Indeed, it is difficult to conceive on what theory of the law the casual recipient of a letter, who proceeds to publish it, is guilty of a breach of contract, express or implied, or of any breach of trust, in the ordinary acceptance of that term" (211). Recall that for Brandeis and Warren the letters could only be protected by a putative right to privacy, not by property rights. Wharton appears to proceed on a similar logic in *The Touchstone* when she portrays Glennard's action as unethical if not illegal. By publishing the letters he has "laid bare" Aubyn's most private feelings and hence violated her right to privacy (90). Glennard's wife says that reading the letters is "like listening at a keyhole" (105). And Glennard himself is ultimately ashamed of his decision.²⁰ Wharton certainly encourages this reading, yet at least one contemporary reviewer asserted that Glennard had done nothing wrong: "If there is anything to criticize in the book, it is perhaps the undue stressing of Glennard's remorse.... We think that before the court of common-sense there is much that might be said for Glennard after all" (WP). Public attitudes about private letters were clearly changing at the turn of the century. The letters of famous people were suddenly regarded as fair game, since celebrity in and of itself justified satisfying the public's voyeuristic interest.²¹

We have seen that *The Touchstone* engages contemporary debates about the legality of publishing private correspondence, but Wharton's strongest cultural critique in this novella entails her treatment of commercialization and publicity within the book publishing industry. She focuses specifically on the mechanisms of publicity. One advertisement for the published letters reads thus:

MARGARET AUBYN'S LETTERS

Two volumes. Out To-day. First Edition of five thousand sold out before leaving the press.

Second Edition ready next week. The Book of the Year....(82) Capitalizing on the advance sales of the book, the publisher virtually guarantees a bestseller by focusing on its popularity. As Brodhead observes, publishers tend to market books not so much by their content but by their appeal, making "popularity the basis of their market identity" (57). Bookstores collude with the publisher's marketing strategy by displaying bestsellers much more prominently than other titles. Glennard passes a bookshop at which the "show-window was stacked with conspicuously lettered volumes. *Margaret Aubyn* flashed back at him in endless iteration...the name repeated itself on row after row of bindings". (95-96). So ubiquitous is the book that during Glennard's commute the very "air seemed full of Margaret Aubyn's name, the motion of the train set it

dancing up and down on the page of a magazine that a man in front of him was reading" (96). The publishers have clearly created a buzz about *Margaret Aubyn's Letters*, in part through sheer media saturation. Glennard remarks to himself that the "same advertisement would appear every day, for weeks to come, in every newspaper" (85). Later on when he sees a photograph of Aubyn on the cover of *Horoscope* magazine, Glennard recognizes it as the same one that once stood on his desk. Curiously, however, the proliferation of Aubyn's effigies in mass-produced media like magazines and newspapers makes her seem more real to him than when she was alive: the "unexpected evocation" triggered by the photograph "seemed to bring her nearer than she had ever been in life," and her "presence" appears to him as "the one reality in a world of shadows" (128-129). The passage evokes the psychodrama of a celebrity-obsessed fan, and Glennard is not the only one who worships Margaret Aubyn. The narrator tells us that her funeral was attended by scores of people who "knew nothing of the woman they were committing to the grave" (134). And later, a public reading of *Margaret Aubyn's Letters* by an up-and-coming actress is staged before a "packed" audience in "the big ball-room" of the Waldorf Astoria (114).

Wharton seems to take perverse pleasure in showing the dynamics of publicity; at the same time, she is careful to emphasize the impropriety of Glennard's deed. *The Touchstone* is poised between two rather contradictory impulses. As a critique of mass culture it verges on a jeremiad, but as an account of how to achieve bestseller status it exemplifies the very marketing strategies it repudiates. For the book is a virtual compendium of marketing strategies: start with a slightly scandalous text presented under the guise of respectable literature; advertise in all the newspapers; organize readings by up-and-coming actresses; and get the author's portrait on as many magazine covers as possible. Furthermore, *The Touchstone* was itself accompanied by advertisements for Wharton's earlier short story collection, so that it both represents and embodies the publicity of print. As such, Wharton's cultural critique in her novella is somewhat disingenuous. It's as if she tried to ensure her book's success by writing about a bestseller. And in a remarkable coincidence, her attempt to incite sales by writing about a bestseller appears to have paid off: like *Margaret Aubyn's Letters*, *The Touchstone* also sold 5,000 copies within a year of publication.

Critics tend to regard *The Touchstone* as a flawed work that lacks the power of Wharton's subsequent fiction. In her "Epilogue" to a recent edition of *The Touchstone*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff speculates that "some of the novel's weaknesses (an ending that seems inconclusive, for instance) may be the

result of her desire to eliminate all traces of 'self' from the novel" (163). What Wolff reads as inconclusiveness could instead be interpreted as ambivalence, and Wharton's indecision about whether to condemn Glennard's actions or celebrate Aubyn's success could be, if not exactly self-revelatory, at least indicative of the author's own conflicted stance towards publicity. "Having declined to reveal the author's past, "Wolff rightly points out, "[it] nonetheless foretold her future. It is a true *Kunstlerroman*, but in reverse: it is directly revelatory about the author's life, not as it had been but as it would be." Like Margaret Aubyn, Wharton eventually chose to live in Europe, and her affair with Morton Fullerton turns out to have produced a number of love letters that have since surfaced. Although she "destroyed Fullerton's letters to her, and...requested that he do the same with her letters," Wharton's letters were not destroyed as she wished (Wolff 166-68). *The Touchstone*, then, was curiously prescient: one of those rare moments where life imitates art. In her novella as in Wharton's real life, a woman author's celebrity made her letters valuable to a curious (one might even say prurient) mass public. Wharton was aware of this predicament: as a novelist of considerable stature, she was concerned about posterity: "Wharton understood (after the great success of *The House of Mirth*) that she could not control public interest in her work and that everything she wrote, if preserved, might one day be scrutinized" (Price and McBride 667). This feeling of vulnerability no doubt accounts for her request of Fullerton that he destroy her letters.²²

The account I've given of the construction of Wharton's authorship has been both external and internal to her literary texts. Outside the actual writing of the novels themselves, Wharton urged publishers to promote her works more vigorously and fully cooperated in promoting herself as an author. In fictional texts like *The Touchstone*, Wharton used her writing as a way to explore the complex dynamics of authorship and publicity in a literary field newly colonized by mass culture. By means of writing she worked to reposition herself as a prominent writer, but this repositioning necessarily involved her in the culture of publicity that she might otherwise have avoided. Margolis has argued that Wharton's fiction "reveals both an intense aversion to the culture of publicity and a deep interest in tracing the effects of such a culture on individual experience" (84-85). I would add that such ambivalence subtends her professional life as well, where we find her alternatively enthusiastic and anxious about the publicity that surrounds her. *The Touchstone* also serves as an important reminder of fiction's complex relations to the larger culture it inhabits, for Wharton's conflicted stance towards publicity results in a literary text that is neither entirely subversive of the culture of publicity nor

wholly complicit in it. Like most texts, *The Touchstone* is rather somewhere in between these two extremes, which have too often been portrayed within literary studies as mutually exclusive when in fact they form a mutual dialectic.²³ The tradition of cultural critique in early twentieth century literature is necessarily contingent upon, and sometimes complicit in, the nascent culture of publicity of the period. Starting with *The Touchstone* and then even more markedly in *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton's cultural criticism is belied by her own personal investments in publicity and celebrity, but I don't mean to imply that her critique is any less powerful because of its immanence. Indeed, I have tried to make exactly the opposite case: the uneasy dialectic between critique and complicity that forms the political unconscious of Wharton's work is what makes her novels so powerful.

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NOTES

¹ Gertrude Stein, whose own autobiography was published just three years after Wharton's, expressed a much more marked anxiety about the commercial viability of her work:

Before one is successful that is before any one is ready to pay money for anything you do then you are certain that every word you have written is an important word. ...And then it happens sometimes sooner and sometimes later that it has a money value...and it is upsetting because when nothing had any commercial value everything was important and when something began having commercial value it was upsetting, I imagine this is true of any one. (40)

Wharton in contrast did not feel uneasy about her success in the marketplace; on the contrary, she was elated by it: "I had written short stories that were thought worthy of preservation! Was it the same insignificant I that I had always known?" (868-69). The discrepancy between the two writers' attitudes is suggestive, for it points to the different ways in which women writers positioned themselves as authors in the early twentieth century. Both Stein and Wharton ultimately became important figures in literary movements that were associated primarily with male writers: the former in high modernism, the latter in late realism or the novel of manners.

² Foucault's phrase "image of the author" is telling in this regard. As Raymond Williams notes, the use of "image" to denote simply a mental conception "was overtaken by the use of image in terms of publicity," which reflected the proliferation of visual media, advertising, and public relations in the late nineteenth century. Thus, the advent of mass culture greatly increased "the commercial and manipulative processes of image as 'perceived' reputation or character" (158).

³ Christopher Wilson suggests that "publishers recognized the advertising value, and relative thrift, not only of existing news channels—say, newspaper tabloids which might carry a literary even—but of the author's celebrity itself. In place of putting all one's promotion into the title, the author, really, was the easiest 'property' to keep steadily in the public eye" (81-82).

⁴ My overly hasty sketch of the mid to late-nineteenth-century literary field relies on a large body of work on so called sentimental fiction, but see especially Jane Tompkins and the collection of essays edited by Shirley Samuels, *The Culture of Sentiment*. On the sense of emasculation felt by male authors of the period see Alfred Habegger, Chapter 7.

⁵ Although he never discusses these gender implications of the "field of

cultural production," Bourdieu's model for literary and artistic practice helps us understand how the usual economic hierarchy of business is inverted in the realm of culture by "seeing temporal failure as a sign of election and success as a sign of compromise" (40). In this sense, cultural capital accrues to individual writers or works of art according to an anti-economy in which the "loser wins" (39).

⁶ Wharton's achievement of classic American writer status is all the more remarkable given the fact that in the nineteenth century, as Andreas Huyssen suggests, "mass culture is somehow associated with women while real, authentic culture remains the prerogative of men" (47). This "ascription of femininity to mass culture always depended on the very real exclusion of women from high culture and its institutions" (62). By challenging such exclusion, Wharton negotiated a space for herself as a woman author who also produced high art and broke down the conventional gendering device.

⁷ For a helpful chronology of Wharton's life and publications see *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton* (ix-xiii). Wharton's literary income for 1905-06 was over \$50,000, but then fell dramatically the following year while *The Fruit of the Tree* failed to sell up to expectations (x-xi).

⁸ "[E]very literary field is the site of a struggle over the definition of the writer," Bourdieu writes (42). In Wharton's case, the struggle for definition entailed different kinds of writers.

⁹ All citations of this and other Wharton short stories are from *The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton*, Volume 1, edited by R.W.B. Lewis.

¹⁰ The struggle to define Wharton's status in a hierarchical literary field marks the criticism as well. Although she has always been considered part of a high culture tradition, the low "other" of popular forms has always shadowed her work; for instance, Irving Howe lamented what he identified as an "unfortunate tendency toward ladies' magazine rhetoric" in Wharton's novels, while Edmund Wilson pejoratively named her the "poet of interior decoration" (Howe 128, 23).

¹¹ According to Richard Ohmann, the bestseller list was first established around 1895 as book sales shot up exponentially (139). The publishing climate was also characterized by greater competition among available titles; Joan Shelley Rubin points out that between 1880 and 1900 "American book publishers produced a threefold increase in titles and adopted new, aggressive marketing techniques to peddle them to the public" (18).

¹² The drawing appears in a clipping among the Wharton Papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Subsequent references to materials from the Wharton Papers will be cited parenthetically in the text as WP.

¹³ The title page and advertisement from the back cover of the original Scribner's edition are reproduced in a recent HarperPerennial edition (39, 161-62).

¹⁴ The same strategy was used when Wharton published *Crucial Instances* a year later, where the title reads "By Edith Wharton, Author of *The Touchstone*, *The Greater Inclination*."

¹⁵ "Copy" is written in the form of a dialogue and bears a close relationship to *The Touchstone*. Lewis informs us that Wharton first wrote "Copy" in 1899, then revised it sometime in 1900 after completing *The Touchstone* (98). "Copy" was published in the short story collection *Crucial Instances* in 1901; "Expiation" appeared in the later collection *The Descent of Man* in 1904.

¹⁶ The authors' relationship in "Copy" bears an intriguing resemblance to Wharton's and James's own somewhat antagonistic yet overtly congenial relationship. Even more intriguing is the parallel fear about publicity evidenced by the fact that James "burnt many of his papers before his death, quite probably most of Edith Wharton's letters to him" (Bell, *Henry James and Edith Wharton* 9).

¹⁷ I derive this notion of Wharton's novella as an "immanent critique" from the work of Theodor Adorno. See, for example, his essay "Cultural Criticism and Society" in *Prisms*, where he defines immanent cultural criticism as a dialectical approach to "artistic phenomena" which seeks to grasp, through the analysis of their form and meaning, the contradiction between their objective idea and that pretension [to correspond to reality]. The idea here is that "contradictions" or "aporias" in a given work are indicative of certain unresolvable tensions in the larger culture (32). According to Adorno, the most successful work of art "is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the

contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure" (32).

¹⁸ In this sense, *The Touchstone* literalizes Roland Barthes' declaration of the "death of the author." Like Foucault, Barthes saw the reification of the author as "the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology": "The author still reigns in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines, as in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs" (143).

¹⁹ On the notion of pseudo-intimacy applied to more contemporary contexts, see Richard Schickel, *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity*.

²⁰ Indeed, Glennard's agony escalates in direct proportion to the book's success, and at the end of the novella he groans: "I deceived her, I despoiled her, I destroyed her" (160).

²¹ Perhaps this reviewer's sympathy for Glennard was anomalous, but surely it complicates Wolff's claim that "his insensitivity in dealing with Margaret Aubyn and his callousness in marketing their intimate correspondence will move most readers to an unvoiced but nonetheless powerful revulsion" ("Epilogue" 166).

²² Wolff contends that Fullerton sold them, though she doesn't say how she knows this: "For his part, Morton Fullerton was more than willing to trade upon Wharton's literary prominence" (169). Merely the fact that "a European bookseller surfaced in the early 1980s and announced that he was in possession of Wharton's letters to Morton Fullerton" does not explain how he acquired them, or when and how they left Fullerton's hands; it only indicates that he didn't bum them as Wharton requested. Some of these letters are reprinted in *The Letters of Edith Wharton* (1988).

²³ Critical literature on the so-called subversion/containment debate is enormous, yet some critics have begun to challenge the terms of the debate. In her book *The Ethnography of Manners*, Nancy Bentley wams against an oversimplified view of literature's relation to culture: "Literary scholars run the risk of lodging a tautology in our own critical practice when interpretations are determined in advance by an assumption that novels either irresistibly uphold or inherently critique...the society they depict...Fiction is not a static judgement on the society it depicts; it does not merely endorse or condemn a preexisting reality" (5, 8).

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Telling the Story That Can't Be Told: Hartley's Role as Dis-eased Narrator in "The Lady's Maid's Bell"

by Jacqueline S. Wilson-Jordan

Haunted by the invalidating voices of a fashionable New York society that fueled her own reluctance to see herself as a serious writer, Edith Wharton suffered from an "anxiety of authorship" that undoubtedly contributed to the periodic bouts of mental and physical illness that plagued her throughout her life. It was through writing, however, particularly the advent of a writing career, that Wharton finally found some measure of relief: in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, she explains that the 1899 publication of her first collection of short stories, *The Greater Inclination*, "broke the chains which had held me so long in a kind of torpor" (122). It is no surprise, then, that her fiction is often concerned with the problem of "recovering stories," both in the sense of finding--uncovering--and publishing them, and in the sense suggested by the Freudian notion of the "talking cure," whereby the patient's engagement in the act of telling provides a means for her "recovery" from sickness to health.

Such relationships between metaphors of writing, particularly women's writing, and disease or dis-ease have made up an important part of the feminist critical landscape since Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's publication in 1979 of *The Madwoman in the Attic*. For women writers particularly, "infection in the sentence" (according to Gilbert and Gubar's invocation of Emily Dickinson's metaphor) means that "every text can become a 'sentence' or weapon in a kind of metaphorical germ warfare" (52). Edith Wharton's wielding of the "infected sentence" to escape her infected sentence is most evident in the Gothic, a genre that, as Kathy Fedorko and Jenni Dyman have noted, became the vehicle for Wharton's most provocative investigations into gender and

sexuality. Kathy Fedorko points out that "the Gothic...became the ideal vehicle for Wharton's perception that hidden within social structures--families, friendships, marriages--are ugly secrets. Wharton uses the Gothic...to portray one 'secret' in particular: that traditional society, and the traditional home, with their traditional roles, are dangerous places for women" ("Haunted Fiction" 81). How does Wharton manage to confront these obviously taboo subjects, to, as Gilbert and Gubar have termed it, "say the unsayable"? (*No Man's Land* 159) The answer, in part, lies with Wharton's combined use of narrative strategies and tropes of gender, story-telling and disease.

Wharton's ghost story, "The Lady's Maid's Bell," published in 1902, becomes a particularly interesting subject for narrative study not only because Alice Hartley is one of only two female first-person narrators to emerge from the large body of Wharton's short fiction but because she is recovering from disease.¹ In recounting the very frightening (and very taboo) story of Mrs. Brympton, a woman who is trapped in an isolated mansion and subject to the psychological and sexual tyranny of her husband, Wharton chose to construct a narrator who, both a woman and diseased, could be read as doubly "invalid."² Indeed, a number of critics have read Hartley in this way. Ellen Powers Stengel refers to the story's "unreliable narration" (3), and Jenni Dyman argues that "as narrator of the tale, Hartley appears to tell her story honestly, but her interpretation of the events at Brympton Place is an unreliable one" (14). Kathy Fedorko contends that Alice Hartley, finally, is "no help...in clarifying the mystery of the house" and that "through her,

Wharton portrays female ambivalence: to see the horror of one's situation and not speak" (*Gender* 91).

What has not been taken into account, however, is Wharton's complex manipulation of tropes of storytelling and disease to create a narrator who can be read in seemingly contradictory ways. In "The Lady's Maid's Bell," tropes of disease do two kinds of work: first, they do inspire the reader to doubt Hartley's reliability. Secondly, and paradoxically, they serve as a source of Hartley's insight, contributing to the acute sensitivity that allows her not only to see the ghost that haunts Brympton Place but to see "through" it, finally, to the real horror, the brutal treatment of Mrs. Brympton by her husband. Further, Hartley's ability to serve as a witness to the horrors of Brympton Place seems to be undermined not only by her deliberate reconstruction of herself as an afflicted narrator but by her narrative reticence: her story takes on a sort of "text as puzzle" configuration that the reader is invited to assemble though several pieces are missing. Hartley's reticences do not, however, indicate her failure as an author but signify her "eloquence" (I borrow Leona Toker's term) and, ultimately, Wharton's genius.³ In Wharton's time, after all, stories of spousal abuse "can't be told," at least in the conventional sense, because, indeed, they are more frightening to most readers than stories about ghosts. And so tropes of disability and a strategy of narrative reticence serve Hartley (and Wharton) by potentially diverting the reader's interest away from what is unsayable because it is taboo.

Wharton's choice of the typhoid as the site of Hartley's struggle against invalid-ism to "say the unsayable" recalls her own affliction with the disease in childhood and her eventual association of the illness with emerging anxieties over self-expression that were to plague her well into adulthood.⁴ In the autobiographical fragment, "Life and I," Wharton explains that when she was nine years old the typhoid "formed the dividing line between my little-childhood, and the next stage" (qtd. in Griffin Wolff 23). Wharton characterizes the period preceding the disease as a time when she was burdened by "torturing moral scruples" that "darkened [her] life," and explains that the primary source of this agony was her awareness of an inherent contradiction between telling the truth and being polite: "Nothing I have suffered since has equalled the darkness of horror that weighed upon my childhood in respect to this vexed problem of truth-telling, and the impossibility of reconciling 'God's' standard of truthfulness with the conventional obligation to be 'polite.' Between these conflicting rules of conduct I suffered an untold anguish of perplexity" (quoted in Griffin Wolff 22-23). Although this fear broke when Wharton nearly died from the typhoid fever, her reading of a "'robber story' ...brought on a serious relapse" from which she emerged only "to enter a

world haunted by formless horrors" that left her "the prey to an intense and unreasoning physical timidity" (qtd. in Griffin Wolff 22-23). A conflict between telling the "truth" and maintaining a standard of social decorum precisely describes the typhoidic Alice Hartley's dilemma as narrator of the "unsayable" events at Brympton Place. And although Hartley's reticence in telling the story recalls the timidity that plagued Wharton in the wake of the same disease, the reader who presses the analogy between the two authors will remember that Wharton, like her narrator, not only eventually overcame her anxiety of authorship to write, but that she eventually discovered an inextricable connection between disease and her writing gift.

As I have argued earlier, however, the connection between Hartley's dis-ease and her identity as author is a paradoxical one, and Hartley's early references in the narrative to the problem of her illness call attention to her disability and potential unreliability. Hartley's opening sentence, "it was the autumn after I had the typhoid" (6), and her subsequent recognition that her "weak and tottery" (6) appearance has prevented her from getting a job, reveal her perception of herself as both marked and displaced by disease. Having been discharged from the hospital to continue her recovery, she finds promise of a new situation with an acquaintance, Mrs. Railton, whose niece is looking for a lady's maid. Ironically, the juxtaposition of Mrs. Railton's observation that Hartley looks so "white" with the claim that she has "the very place" (6) for her suggests that, in Mrs. Railton's mind, Hartley's suitability for the job is contingent upon her ill health. Indeed, Mrs. Railton confirms that though "a year ago" she would not have suggested such a position to the "rosy active girl" that Hartley was then, the "big and gloomy mansion" would seem to perfectly accommodate her now. (6) The hurried, nervous, and vacuous nature of Mrs. Railton's subsequent account of the details of Brympton Place, particularly of Mr. Brympton himself, suggest her reason for finding Hartley's disability so attractive. Clearly, there is something "wrong" with either the house or with him, and Mrs. Railton, either unable or unwilling to communicate what that something is, seems to hold out hope that a sick employee will not be curious enough to ask now or investigate later. The reader later learns that Mrs. Brympton has been unable to keep a lady's maid since the death of Emma Saxon, her devoted servant of twenty years.⁵

Although the details of the exchange between Hartley and Mrs. Railton emphasize the former's disease and potential unreliability, Wharton complicates the picture by presenting (again through Mrs. Railton) characteristics of Hartley that seem to oppose these traits. Aside from her interest in Hartley's illness, Mrs. Railton's judgement of the lady's maid

rests on her recollection that she is a woman "educated above [her] station" (6) who can "read aloud" (6). The position of reader thus becomes a metaphor for Hartley's first task as narrator: to "read" her surroundings and make meaning from them. The fact that Hartley is an educated reader extends the metaphor to suggest an observer who will note absences of information and understand their significance, qualities that Wharton, in her "Preface" to *Ghosts*, claims to desire in her own readers.⁶ Wharton's conflation in Hartley of the paradoxical roles of "diseased woman" and "reader" creates a narrator who is either invalid or valid or both, a complication that forces the reader to draw her own conclusions.

This valid/invalid paradox continues throughout the story as Hartley's repeated references to her disabled condition are problematized not only by evidence that she is a keen observer but by the corroboration of her observations by a character who lives outside the confines of Brympton Place. Hartley often pauses in her narrative to communicate feelings of self-doubt, attributing her suspicions to a "disordered fancy" (20) or "dreaming" (16). These incidences, as the reader might expect, are usually associated with Hartley's sense that Brympton Place is haunted, and assume a more dramatic quality during her encounters with the ghost of Emma Saxon. Attributing her dis-ease to the lingering effects of the typhoid, Hartley believes that to escape she must get "out of [her]self" (13). The assumption that the problem exists within her, and that to get well she must escape the confines of the self, reflects the patriarchal notion of woman's disease as an expression of narcissism. Hartley begins to change her mind when she encounters Mrs. Ansey ("and sees"), a friend from the outside who tells her that Mrs. Brympton has "had four maids in the last six months" because "nobody could stay in the house" (13). In terms of the narrative, it is significant that the friend, who not only comes from outside Hartley's confinement but outside Hartley's text as well, enters both. The words that she leaves are not only "stuck in" (14) Hartley's head but in the text as well, and their presence lends a measure of objectivity to Hartley's sense that "something" (14) is truly wrong with the house.

The question of narratorial validity/invalidity reaches the height of its ironic pitch when, during her second and third encounters with the ghost of Emma Saxon, Hartley's most crippling self-doubts are attended by her most powerful visions. In the second encounter, Hartley is awakened in the night by the ringing of the supposedly defunct lady's maid's bell. As she begins to prepare herself to answer the call, the noise of the opening and closing of the door to Emma Saxon's room causes Hartley to wonder at the vagaries of her senses. The juxtaposition of her hearing with a quick denial of its significance, "then I came to my senses" (15), suggests

that at this point Hartley can only heed the voice of common "sense," invalidating as she does so the information that has come to her through her ears. The practical voice that tells Hartley she "must [be] dreaming" (16) is the voice of common "sense" spoken by the pragmatic Hartley who, apparently, does not believe in ghosts. Hartley's (and the reader's) lack of faith in her vision is checked by the words of the "red and savage" (16) Mr. Brympton as he meets Hartley at his wife's bedroom door: "How many of you are there, in God's name?" (16). His words not only objectify Emma Saxon's presence (as Mrs. Ansey's knowledge has objectified Hartley's sense of foreboding about the house) but lead the reader to the inevitable conclusion that three "vaporish" (Mrs. Railton has used the word to describe Mrs. Brympton[6]) women and a female code that is inaccessible to men have conspired to rob Brympton, both man and house, of power.

In their third and penultimate meeting, Emma Saxon leads Hartley to the home of Mr. Ranford. Emma Saxon's purpose, as the denouement of the story later reveals, is to use Hartley as a mouthpiece; Hartley's role in the transaction is to warn Mr. Ranford of Mr. Brympton's impending return to Brympton Place, an event that will (and eventually does) thwart Mr. Ranford and Mrs. Brympton's plan to run away together. Although Hartley sees that Emma Saxon is trying to get through to her, the message becomes nothing more than a "dumb prayer" (21) and Hartley can finally only express herself in terms of physical symptoms: "my heart shriveled up within me, and my knees were like water" (23). When Mr. Ranford comes to the door, Hartley is only able to attribute her presence there to an attack of "giddiness" (24), an explanation that she understands to be an invalidation even as the words leave her lips: "yet I never felt more like a liar than when I said it" (24).

In both of these encounters with the ghost, Hartley's tendency to distrust her own senses constitutes a self-invalidation that the reader may be tempted to accept without question. The irony, of course, is that Hartley is "sensible" according to another definition: she has the power of insight. Borne not only out of her ability to see the ghost when others cannot, Hartley's vision makes her "sensible," as well, to the notion that Emma Saxon has something important to tell her. Hartley's initial failure to interpret the message, foreshadowed in the story by her inability to recover the meaning behind the "asking look" (18) that reaches out dumbly from Emma's photograph, does not, however, constitute complete failure on Hartley's part. Hartley's vision is a glass half-full rather than half-empty: her ability to "sense," albeit without initial understanding, eventually leads her to fully "recover," and then write, the story of Brympton Place. The doubling of the sensible/sensible metaphor can be

applied to Wharton's task as writer as well: oppressed women, like ghosts, are not easily "sensed" within the signification system we have inherited from the patriarchy. And when the concept of women's oppression becomes "nonsensical," the suffering of women like Mrs. Brympton becomes unreal, or a product of our allegedly overactive imaginations. To construct such a woman, the writer must call upon strategies of silence and subterfuge--"eloquent reticences."

In order to understand Wharton's use of eloquent reticences in "The Lady's Maid's Bell," it is necessary to examine the reticent posture that Hartley assumes, first, as reader/interpreter, and, later, as writer/recorder of Brympton Place's mysterious signs and signals. Throughout the story Hartley frequently professes a reticent attitude with statements such as "I never was one to get my notion of new masters from their other servants: I prefer to wait and see for myself" (7) and "not being one to ask questions I waited to see what would turn up" (8). Although it is true, as critics have noted, that Hartley fails to ask the questions that might have saved Mrs. Brympton's life, it is also true that even the most benign of Hartley's role as a questioner, however, is her role as an observer and interpreter. And if her later failure to understand Emma Saxon's message does force her to an unwilling silence (and Mrs. Brympton to an untimely death), the reader who is left with an impression of Hartley as a failed speaker overlooks the essential fact of Wharton's choice of a narrative strategy for this text: Alice Hartley finally speaks through her story.

Hartley's skill at observation and interpretation is evident from the time she arrives at Brympton Place and quickly discovers the household (the edifice itself as well as the people who reside there) to be comprised of a labyrinth of diseased signals--failures of speech and interpretation. The other servants seem afflicted with the inability to sense or to commit sensory information to language, and it is clear from the beginning that Hartley, as educated reader, has the power to either sense what they cannot or to acknowledge sensing what they will not. As Hartley is shown to her room, for example, she notes that the housemaid who escorts her is not able to detect the presence of a silent woman (whom we later learn to be the ghost of Emma Saxon) in the hall. A more willful blindness is exhibited by the aptly named Mrs. Blinder who, when questioned by Hartley about the locked room across the corridor from her own, first grows confused and then, after going "white" (10), admits that the room belonged to the former lady's maid. When Hartley (making the connection between the woman she has seen in the hall and the dead lady's maid) asks about Emma Saxon's appearance, Mrs. Blinder's look becomes "an angry stare" (10). Her words

as she flees, "I'm not a great hand at describing...and I believe my pastry's rising" (10), suggest that Mrs. Blinder's professed limitation, like the dough she has left in the kitchen, is built on air.

Throughout the story, Hartley's observations and reactions to Mr. Brympton's arrivals and departures indicate that the apparently "unsayable" truth about Mr. Brympton is expressed through a language of dis-ease that infects the entire household. Mr. Brympton's power, suggested by the mere "word" (10) that he is going to arrive, manifests itself in the manner and speech of the staff. For example, although Mrs. Blinder makes careful preparations for dinner, Hartley observes that she "snap[s] at the kitchen maid" (11). Mr. Wace, the butler, a Bible reader who ordinarily has "a beautiful assortment of texts at his command" (11) expresses himself through "dreadful language" (11). Indeed, Hartley notes that Mr. Brympton's arrivals and departures are always preceded by Mr. Wace's quoting of "the most dreadful texts full of brimstone" (14) and that "whenever the master came, Mr. Wace took to the prophets" (11).

Just as language fails when Mr. Brympton comes home, so Hartley notes that the "healthy" signification patterns of the household are restored when the master leaves. It is significant that Mr. Ranford, Mrs. Brympton's friend, is introduced in the master's absence, and Hartley's "reading" of him provides a kind of metaphorical antithesis to Mr. Brympton. If Mr. Brympton represents the confinement that sickens Mrs. Brympton because it threatens her physical and emotional security, Mr. Ranford represents the revitalizing atmosphere that may restore her, though momentarily, to health. Indeed, Hartley's reading of his smile, which she says, "had a kind of surprise in it, like the first warm day of spring" (11-12) associates Mr. Ranford with the warm metaphorical climate that he brings into the house. During his visits, Mr. Ranford engages Mrs. Brympton in books, and his reading aloud to her not only recalls Mrs. Railton's words about the activity her niece most enjoys but associates Mr. Ranford with more philosophical pursuits: his life of the mind suggests an antithesis to the red, fleshy and carnal Mr. Brympton's life of the body. Mr. Ranford's position as reader can, like Hartley's, be understood in metaphorical terms: able to interpret meaning that lies below the surface, his penetration of "the big dark library" (12) of Brympton Place allows him, through a text pulled from the shelf, to take Mrs. Brympton "away" from the psychological confines of the house.

Though Mr. Brympton may leave in body, the power of his symbolic presence in the house (signified by the use of his own name to represent it) persists: even in her husband's absence, Mrs. Brympton remains a prisoner in his jail.

Predictably, then, Mrs. Brympton's state of health varies according to whether she is inside or outside the house: Hartley remarks that when the lady returns from an outing, "fresh and rosy" (11), that "for a minute before her color faded, I could guess what a pretty young lady she must have been, and not so long ago, either" (11). This change in Mrs. Brympton's condition allows Hartley to reinterpret her own persistent symptoms as a product of atmosphere rather than disease. She notices, for example, that when she is in the house she feels "still languid from the fever" (12) and "never quite easy in [her] mind" (12). When a walk outdoors improves her spirits, she originally attributes the change to a need to get "out of [her] self" (13); however, the moment Hartley again moves within sight of the house, her "heart drop[s] down like a stone in a well" (12). Mrs. Brympton's symptoms, then, provide Hartley with a means for explaining, and validating, her own. Further, Hartley's allusion to her own "disease of the heart" likewise serves to illuminate her subsequent analysis of Mrs. Brympton's condition: she thinks, "from a waxy look she had now and then of a morning, that it might be the heart that ailed her" (13). Heart disease, of course, serves as a metaphor for heart dis-ease, emotional pain that is wrought by confinement, isolation, and violation. And though Hartley is not able to speak with her mistress about this condition, her powers of inference ultimately bring her to a fuller understanding of it.

Hartley's attempts to apprehend the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Brympton also depend upon her ability to look beneath the surface. Noting Mr. Brympton's physical qualities, he is "bull-necked" and "red-face[d]" (11), Hartley defines him as "the kind of man a young simpleton might have thought handsome and would have been like to pay dear for thinking it" (11). The "simpleton" might, she suggests, read Mr. Brympton's complexion as handsome and fail to look beneath it. Further, the allusions to the bull, an actively sexual male animal given to violence, and the color red, a symbol for anger as well as sexual passion, suggest that the "young simpleton" may "pay" through sexual victimization and abuse. Hartley's reading of Mr. Brympton as potential sexual aggressor begins to be confirmed when she interprets Brympton's look at her and concludes, "I was not the kind of morsel he was after" (11). Hartley's choice of the metaphor of food consumption for sexual appropriation helps to explain her ability to distance herself from Mr. Brympton: it is her "consumption" by disease (to borrow the metaphor associated with tuberculosis) that makes her an unappealing "meal." Hartley's statement that "the typhoid had served me well enough in one way: it kept that kind of gentleman at arm's length" (11) affirms that her disease, having already allowed her a place as lady's maid, also enables her to keep her place

as both an employee and a woman in control of her own body.

Further, Hartley's notion of her own illness as a weapon against Mr. Brympton's sexual advances suggests an analogy to Mrs. Brympton's circumstances: "white" and "chill to the touch" (11), the reader can assume that she, also, might not provide to sort of tempting "morsel" that Mr. Brympton hungers for. Although Hartley's later remark, "I met him coming up the stairs in such a state that I turned sick to thing of what some ladies have to endure and hold their tongues about" (12) does not "spell out" what it is that Mrs. Brympton must endure, Hartley's suggestion allows the reader to associate Brympton's behavior with sexual violence, or, to invoke the terminology that would have been unsayable in Wharton's day, marital rape. Hartley's lack of specificity here can hardly be attributed to a lack of understanding and, although she doesn't put a name to the offence, her suggestion of the horror, which allows the reader to fill the gaps, provides a much more meaningful, more powerful, articulation than can Mrs. Brympton, who seems to have no voice at all.

Ultimately, Hartley's complex manipulation of metaphors of sexuality and illness set the stage for a feminist reading of Mrs. Brympton's circumstances. Although in patriarchal terms Mrs. Brympton's being "chill to the touch" might suggest frigidity (Hartley notes later that her mistress is "a trifle cold" and "a little offish" [12]), Hartley's use of the metaphor of consumption to explain her own safety from Mr. Brympton's advances makes an alternative reading of the couple's relationship possible. Mrs. Brympton is not frigid; rather, her husband leaves her cold. She is sick because he is sickening. Challenging the patriarchal connotations of frigidity as a woman's sexual control over a man, this interpretation admits the possibility that women can be sexually victimized, even by their husbands. Further, the designation of the mansion as "Brympton" rather than "Brympton Place" carries the irony of Mr. Brympton's notion that his wife makes "the place about as lively as the family vault" (15). The words not only foreshadow Mrs. Brympton's death in the place that bears her husband's name but signify her death-like existence while she is trapped there in life.

Mrs. Brympton's victimization is, to an extent, interrupted by the intermittent ringing of the lady's maid's bell, a signal that, in serving as a tripartite link between herself and the two lady's maids, constitutes a kind of subversive female code. When Hartley arrives at Brympton Place she is instructed that, although all the bells in the house are in working order, she will never be summoned by the lady's maid's bell, the only direct communication link between Mrs. Brympton and the lady's maid that the house provides. To signal the lady's maid, Mrs. Brympton will first ring Agnes the housemaid;

Agnes will then walk the full length of the house to summon Hartley, and Hartley will walk back (again, the full length of the house) to wait upon her mistress. The pattern is reminiscent of the word game in which one person's message, whispered to a chain of listeners one at a time, inevitably emerges at the other end in a different form. Presumably, Mr. Brympton has devised the pattern to even more fully insulate his wife, perhaps particularly from Emma Saxon, the maid who "had been with her twenty years and worshipped the ground she walked on" (6). Since Brympton Place's system of bells does not acknowledge the lady's maid's bell, the link that it creates between Mrs. Brympton, Hartley, and Emma Saxon is both literally and figuratively subversive, in the first case because Mrs. Brympton does not ring it, and in the second because it serves as a call to rescue Mrs. Brympton from her husband. The story's failure to make clear who rings the bell, or indeed that anyone rings it, reinforces the story's message that women's survival depends upon a kind of extra-sensory perception, the ability to read and respond to signifiers that are not recognized by the social and familial institutions that confine them. Powers Stengel's title "Edith Wharton Rings 'The Lady's Maid's Bell'" reminds us, finally, that the sound (and the subversive message that is "read" by women) originates with Wharton.

On the level of experience, Hartley traverses a borderland between sickness and health, self-doubt and self-trust, symptoms and vision. In her moments of greatest dis-ease, however, she maintains a level of curiosity and a respect for her readerly, interpretive self, and it is this Hartley who begins to overcome invalidism by coopting it as a useful metaphor. On the level of the story, Hartley, now an author, deliberately calls upon these metaphors of disability to wield the "infected sentence," to say the unsayable, to tell the story that cannot be told. The story, finally, serves as a measure of Wharton's faith (perhaps unrealized in her own time) that readers would be capable, as she expresses in her Preface to *Ghosts*, of "filling in the gaps in my narrative with sensations and divinations akin to my own" (2). Truly, only the reader who trusts a sick woman to tell a story can "break through" the silences of the text. And Hartley's "recovery" of the story, suggesting as it does at least some measure of "recovery" from the typhoid, cannot help but remind us of Wharton's struggles with dis-ease and her discovery that writing could be curative.

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NOTES

1. In *Edith Wharton: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Barbara White notes that "of

the many first person narrators in her eighty-five stories, only two are female" (62). White suggests that one explanation for the disparity might lie with Wharton's understanding of readers' inability to take women's words seriously: "the observation...that a male point of view legitimates a narrative applies even more strongly to first-person narration: here the uncertain tones of the 'authoress' can be concealed in the 'authoritative' voice of a man" (62-63). In "Gender and First Person Narration in Edith Wharton's Short Fiction," Elsa Nettels also makes the point that male narrators give credence to Edith Wharton's "vision of the woman as a victim of a male-dominated society which seeks to suppress or deny the truth of her words" (258). Nettels further maintains that "without male narrators, Wharton's fiction implies, women's stories would be lost" (258) and that Wharton's use of the legitimizing male narrator "foreshadows the modern scholar's recovery of forgotten women's texts" (258).

2. In the introduction to *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940*, Diane Price Hemdl explains her use of the term "invalid" rather than "ill" to describe the sick woman: "Invalid...carries traces of its etymology and suggests the not-valid. Invalidism is therefore the term that best describes the cultural definition of women in the nineteenth century (and perhaps in the twentieth) and the ill woman's (and maybe all women's) desires: not valid" (1).

3. In the introduction to *Eloquent Reticences: Withholding Information in Fictional Narrative*, Leona Toker notes that "in information theory the absence of a message is a message in its own right;...in personal relationships evasions are signs more loaded than words. Silence speaks..." (1).

4. In addition to Cynthia Griffin Wolff's *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, R.W.B. Lewis' *Edith Wharton, A Biography*, and Shari Benstock's *No Gifts From Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton*, treat relationships between illness and expression in Wharton's life.

5. Wharton's association of the supernatural with Germanic traditions suggests her choice of the surname "Saxon" for the ghost that haunts Brympton Place. In her diary, Wharton characterizes the fear she experienced as a child as an "intense Celtic dread of the supernatural" (quoted in Griffin Wolff 23). In "Telling the Short Story," she explains that the supernatural "seems to have come from mysterious Germanic and Armerican Forests, from lands of long twilights and wailing winds; and it certainly did not pass through French or even Russian hands to reach us...the spectral apparition walks only in the pages of English and Germanic fiction" (30).

6. Although in her chapter "Telling the Short Story" Wharton claims that "one of the chief obligations, in a short story, is to give the reader an immediate sense of security...[e]very phrase should be a sign-post (37), a statement she makes in her "Preface" to *Ghosts* indicates that, not only might some of these "signs" be gaps, but that she depends upon the reader's ability to construct meaning from what the text doesn't say: "I was conscious of a common medium between myself and my readers of their meeting me halfway among the primeval shadows, and filling in the gaps in my narrative with sensations and divinations akin to my own" (2).

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'Pecking at the Host': Transgressive Wharton

by Barbara Comins

About her younger years, Edith Wharton wrote of her fear and religious anxiety over "God's standard," asserting that it would have been "difficult to imagine how the sternest Presbyterian training could have produced...more depressing results. I was indeed 'God-intoxicated,' in the medical sense of the word" ("Life and I" 1074). Her experiences abroad worked in part to cleanse her of what she seems to have viewed as a poison. Life in France, the land deemed by one literary critic to be that most unreligious of Catholic countries, afforded her the perspective to look even at religion with a certain distance and ironic dissonance. In *A Backward Glance*, she recounts with delight an anecdote her friend Abbé Mugnier told her.

We were speaking one day of the difficult moral problems which priests call *cas de conscience*, and he said: "Ah, a very difficult one presented itself to me once, for which I knew of no precedent. I was administering the Sacrament to a dying parishioner, and at that moment the poor woman's pet canary escaped from its cage, and lighting suddenly on her shoulder, pecked at the Host."

"Oh, Monsieur l'Abbé - and what did you do?"

"I blessed the bird," he answered with his quiet smile. (BG 279-280).

Wharton's novella *Summer* transgresses in ways other than its richly erotic Whitmanian language or its incest motif suggested by Charity's marriage to her guardian, both topics much-discussed by Wharton's critics. The novel mimics religious allegory in such character's names as Royall, Charity, Mary (Charity's mother), Ally (spelled like the word

ally betokening her function as Charity's friend and accomplice), and Miss Hatchard (made to seem ludicrously naive). As Angus Fletcher points out, in traditional allegory the writer simplifies, "treat[ing] real people in a formulaic way so that they become walking ideas...[that] remain philosophically distinct" (28, 30). But in *Summer*, what are we to make of Royall who seems, with his drinking and whoring, at times not to embody his particular "Idea"? And what of Lucius Harney, whose first name corresponds to Lucifer and whose family name in its resemblance to the word "horny," conjures up both the state of sexual excitement and, according to the *OED* (785) another moniker for the devil? Lucius is not totally a prince of darkness, made apparent by Wharton's description of Charity's response to him: "Under his touch things deep down in her struggled to the light and sprang up like flowers in sunshine" (S 184). To be certain, at times the descriptions of Lucius do bear mephistophelean overtones. Bicycling underneath Charity's window, Lucius waves to her, "his black shadow dancing merrily ahead of him down the empty moonlit road" (S 189). After Royall has caught Lucius and Charity in the dilapidated abandoned house which is their trysting place, again the description of Lucius bears overtones of the devil's visage: "...the candle on the table...threw up a queer shadow on his frowning forehead, and made the smile on his lips a grimace" (210-211) and at this point Charity feels that they are "being sucked down together into some bottomless abyss" (S 211). Further confusing the issue, is *Summer's* resonance with the "Prodigal Son" story but both Charity and Royall could be interpreted as prodigals who return home, in Royall's words,

"for good." Obviously, *Summer* is no simple illuminating allegory, tending instead toward inversions of traditional iconography, defying exegetical analysis.

Moreover, the prostitute's name, Julia Hawes, suggests *Summer's* affinity with the moral ambiguities contained in Nathaniel Hawthorne's works. (A "haw" is the berry or seed of the hawthorn.) Wharton, herself, in *A Backward Glance*, scoffs at the reviewers and readers who took umbrage that *Summer* was not a "reflection of rose-and-lavender" New England life that they had come to expect and bemoans the fact that they "had forgotten to look into Hawthorne's" pages (BG 294).

Some of *Summer's* scenes transgressively mimic the sacred. The first time that Charity and Lucius retreat to the abandoned house, they participate in an odd communion. Lucius fetches her some "tablets of chocolate from his bicycle-bag, and fill[s] his drinking-cup from a spring in the orchard" (S 167). In a sense, this rite consecrates their love nest. Moreover, in the scene where Mary, Charity's mother has just died, it is significant that twelve of the lawless mountain people, like some unholy group of disciples, sit "sprawling about a table made of boards laid across two barrels" (S 247) evoking a distorted rendition of "The Last Supper."

Like her mountain progenitors who do not subscribe to traditional marriage ceremonies, Charity scoffs when she discovers that, for the Old Home Week celebrations, Ally has set out her white attire like bridal wear upon the bed. Further, Charity cares nothing for "Mr. Royall's black leather Bible" save as an implement to prop up a mirror in which she checks her appearance in her new straw hat with its erotic "cherry-coloured lining" that makes "her face glow like the inside of the shell on the parlour mantelpiece" (S 124). The vulgar imagery of the "cherry-coloured lining" and the glowing "shell" transgressively outshines the dark-colored Bible.

The first time Charity attempts to flee to the Mountain toward her roots, she spots a Gospel Tent and encounters a young evangelist who "put[s] his hand on her arm," asking "insinuatingly," "Sister, your Saviour knows everything. Won't you come in and lay your guilt before Him?" Charity shrugs him off with, "I on'y wish't I had any to lay!" (S 161) This is a bit of prelapsarian foreshadowing for at this point Charity has yet to experience carnal relations with Lucius, other than a kiss at the Fourth of July fireworks.

The funeral scene for Charity's dead mother, significantly named "Mary," denies any transcendence. Wharton counterpoints Mr. Miles' scripture reading with Charity's thoughts and the Mountain people's drunken interjections. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton asserts that she derived the details of this scene from the rector at the nearby church at

Lenox: "The rector had been fetched there by one of the mountain outlaws to read the Burial Service over a woman of evil reputation; and when he arrived every one in the house of mourning was drunk, and the service was performed as I have related it" (BG 294).

As rendered by Wharton, the gruesome funeral scene underscores what Carol Singley claims was Wharton's "uneasy relationship both to genteel Episcopalianism and popular sentimentality" (9). The "gaping mouth" and "stony eyes" of the corpse recall medieval gargoyles. Charity is glad that her mother's face is covered as the clergyman reads:

"I am the Resurrection and the Life...he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live...Though after my skin worms destroy my body, yet in my flesh shall I see God...."

In my flesh shall I see God! Charity thought of the gaping mouth and stony eyes under the handkerchief, and of the glistening leg over which she had drawn the stocking...

"We brought nothing into this world and we shall take nothing out of it..."

There was a sudden muttering and a scuffle at the back of the group. "I brought the stove," said the elderly man with lank hair, pushing his way between the others. "I wen' down to Creston'n bought it...n' I got a right to take it outer here...n' I'll lick any feller says I ain't...." (S 251-252).

More bickering over the provenance of the stove interrupts the clergyman's words until someone quiets the drunken assemblage and beckons Mr. Miles to continue.

...Behold, I show you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump....For this corruptible must put on immortality. So when this corruption shall have put on incorruption, and when this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in Victory...." (S 252-253)

Fracturing *The Book of Common Prayer*, omitting phrases and inserting a number of ellipses, Wharton subverts scripture into double-talk. One thinks of Wharton's difficulty in finding a way of "harmonizing the dissecting intellect with the accepting soul" (BG 159).

As two of the younger men begin to raise the mattress to transport the body to a makeshift grave, the coat with which Mary has been covered slips away "revealing the poor body in its helpless misery" (S 253). The scene has the same anti-transcendent finality as modernist poet Wallace Stevens'

description of the dead woman in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream": "If her horny feet protrude, they come/To show how cold she is, and dumb" (64). When Charity tries to imagine her mother, already figured as an inarticulate beast, "a dead dog in a ditch" (S 250), flying upward to meet God she thinks, "What a long flight it was! And what would she have to say when she reached Him?" (S 258).

Wharton allows one scene to resonate meaningfully with another when Charity, who by story's end succumbs to marrying her guardian, thinks to herself that the words of the marriage ceremony have "the same dread sound of finality" of those heard the night before during the burial of her mother (S 278):

The clergyman began to read,... "I require and charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgement when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment whereby ye may not be lawfully joined together..." (S 278).

The meaningful ellipsis cutting off the words of *The Book of Common Prayer*, punctuates the "impediment," the overtones of incest in this union about which so many Wharton scholars have commented. The marriage aborts both Charity's nascent sexuality and the novel's lush erotic imagery, as though Wharton retreats from the literary transgression of inscribing female experience.

Earlier, Wharton finds correspondences for Charity's awakening sexuality in the "hints of hidden riches" in the wares of Nettleton's shop windows:

In some, waves of silk and ribbon broke over shores of imitation moss from which ravishing hats rose like tropical orchids. In others, the pink throats of gramophones opened their giant convolutions in a soundless chorus...(S 133).

Here the eroticized description of the "pink gramophone throats" harkens back to the scene in which Charity, as voyeur, watches an agitated Lucius, through his bedroom window. What she remembers most from this taboo scene (after all, aren't women usually the object of the erotic gaze?) is his "bare throat rising out of his unbuttoned shirt" (S 120). Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out the "subtle, phallic strength" in this image (272). Wharton's choice of the word "throat" rather than "neck" in this picture of Harney allows the earlier description to resonate with the later. Harney's phallic throat metamorphoses into the vaginal gramophone "throats" which bear a certain resemblance as well to the "bursting...calyxes" that Wharton uses in an earlier passage to describe Charity's budding sexuality. The erotic passages and such playful morphing of images at first seem sheer *jouissance*. Consider, however, the fact that these gramophone throats, in

Wharton's description, open their "giant convolutions in a soundless chorus" (133), conceiving a legacy of silence in these aphonic throats.

Summer's tale of a young girl's seduction and abandonment by a young man from the city parallels what Wharton could have viewed as the seduction of American society by materialism and subsequent "moral impoverishment." That Wharton was keenly aware of the impact of technology and materialism upon mores is evident in a passage from *A Backward Glance* in which she recalls being "born into a world in which telephones, motors, electric light, central heating (except by hot-air furnaces), X-rays, cinemas, radium, aeroplanes and wireless telegraphy were not only unknown but still mostly unforeseen." (BG 6-7). Wharton hints at the negative impact of technology upon morality when she describes the trolleys roaring out of the small city of Nettleton as "great luminous serpents coiling in and out among the trees" (S 144). Wharton neatly contrasts the scene of the quaint Old Home celebrations held in a church with that in which Lucius treats Charity to her first moving picture show. The Old Home celebrations with their live public oration and homespun decorations fabricated by North Dormer's maidenhood differ from the scene in the crowded movie theatre in which everything seems to "glitter" and where the experience is portrayed almost as a modern communal religious rite.

In a later scene, Wharton has Royall mimic God's commanding act in "Genesis" that there be light. Wharton makes much of the fact that the hotel to which Royall spirits the dazed Charity after marrying her is equipped with electric lights with which she is unaccustomed. Alone in the room, Charity contemplates Nettleton lake, one of the sites recalling her summer affair with Lucius, and gazes out of the window at "the last fires of sunset." When Royall returns, he replaces the natural light which Charity has been enjoying with artificial, emphasizing Charity's change of state. He wonders what Charity has been doing in the darkness, pulls down the blind, and puts his finger on the wall, flooding the room "with a blaze of light from the central chandelier" (S 281). Significantly, when Charity and Royall return to the red house after the wedding, the final words of the novella echo God's assessment of his creation in Genesis, "And God saw that it was good." Royall declares to Charity, "You're a good girl, Charity" (S 290). Charity, however, gets the last word though it is equivocal and derivative as she responds, "I guess you're good too" (S 291).

Summer clearly evidences Wharton's problematic relationship to religion. Early in the novel, Wharton uses bird imagery to portray Charity flying in the face of traditional mores. Bicycling to meet her lover, Charity is pictured as a

hawk in flight. After her experiences on the mountain, however, she feels forsaken like a "mere speck in the lonely circle of the sky" (S 264). Spotting a sparrow on the branch of a thorn above her mother's grave, she listens for a moment "to his small solitary song..." (S 263). It is as though she, like Robert Frost in "The Oven Bird," is trying to understand "what to make of a diminished thing" (120). Later, having acquiesced to mores and married Royall, Charity is momentarily tempted to give in to "the old impulse of flight," which is now aborted as "only the lift of a broken wing" (S 280). Significantly, the bird imagery in the latter portion of the novella betokens a broken spirit, transcendence denied.

Iconoclastic though Wharton may be, she stresses the influence of her "early saturation with the noble cadences of the *Book of Common Prayer*" (BG 10). "I want the idols broken, but I want them broken by people who understand why they were made..." claims Wharton ("Subjects and Notes" 1918-1923, in Wolff 287). At first, the transgressions of *Summer* seem simply to peck at these idols. In the end, Harney cannot actually blow "a hole in the mountain" (S 50) to ventilate North Dormer's stuffy library, an apt metaphor that suggests renovating literature by opening up a female space. The novella's ultimate transgression, its resistance to interpretation, its refusal to provide coherent answers to the

difficult moral issues it raises, may lie in this space. Any attempt to perform an exegetical analysis of *Summer* as allegory merely leads the reader in a circle forced like Charity in the end, to return to the beginning, home.

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The Glimpses of the Moon and Tiepolo's Fresco, *The Transportation of the Holy House*

by Adeline R. Tintner

When in *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Nick Lansing, while being a guest with Susy at the Vanderlyn Palazzo in Venice "wandered up the nave under the whirl of rose-and-lemon angels in Tiepolo's great vault" and sees Coral Hicks "applying her field-glass to the celestial vortex,"¹ the reader is not told what Coral is using her "open manual" for, nor what Nick is looking at. From the passage in the book, we do not know that the ceiling fresco by Tiepolo is a painting judged by art critics to be "perhaps Tiepolo's most stunning ecclesiastical decoration."² The fresco no longer exists, but, in a lecture on Tiepolo and Edith Wharton's appreciation of the eighteenth century painter in her travel essays, Rosella Mamoli Zorzi, professor of American literature at the University of Venice³ projected on the screen a slide of the fresco later destroyed by an Austrian bomb in 1915. As I had just finished reading once more *The Glimpses of the Moon*, I was fascinated by seeing what that fresco was all about.

The subject of Tiepolo's fresco represents the legend of the Transportation of the Holy House of Mary from Palestine to Loreto. The Virgin's small house was carried away from Palestine by a flock of angels to protect it from Muslim armies during the Crusades. Carried through the air, the house was finally deposited at Loreto in Italy. The Carmelites became custodians of Mary's shrine in Loreto. On the Feast of the Transportation of the Holy Home in 1650, the Church of the Discalced Carmelites in Venice was founded. From 1743 to 1745, Tiepolo worked on the fresco in the church. In the finished version, the "Virgin, shown against an immense silver moon -- her most enduring apocalyptic attribute...sits on the roof of the house with the Christ Child on her

shoulder."⁴

The passage from Wharton's *Italian Backgrounds* cited by Zorzi shows the American novelist's precocious enthusiasm for the great ceiling decorator who was, at the time of her book, 1905, not yet appreciated by English-speaking spectators. Edith Wharton's description reads as follows:

On the soaring vault of the Scalzi, above an interior of almost Palladian elegance and severity, the great painter of atmosphere, the first of the *pleinairistes*, was required to depict the transportation of the Holy House from Palestine to Loreto. That Tiepolo, with his love of ethereal distances, and of cloud-like hues melting into thin air, should have accepted the task of representing a stone house borne through the sky by angels, shows a rare sense of mastery; that he achieved the feat without disaster justified the audacity of the attempt....The result is that the angels, whirling along the Virgin's house with a vehemence which makes it seem a mere feather in the rush of their flight, appear to be sweeping through measureless heights of air above an unroofed building.⁵

But Wharton's use of the Scalzi fresco in her novel, *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922), seems to be more important than these appreciative lines of her admiration of Tiepolo. In *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Nick Lansing goes to the Scalzi Church and sits under the Tiepolo fresco and then "wandered up the nave under the whirl of rose-and-lemon angels in Tiepolo's great vault." He sees a young woman "applying her field-glasses to the celestial vortex, from which she

occasionally glanced down at an open manual." This is Coral Hicks who emulates Edith Wharton herself looking at the fresco. The scene is important because Coral, here, in her conversations with Nick, makes it quite clear that "I am in love" and that it is Nick himself with whom she is in love (GM, 92-91).

We know how important certain scenes are for Wharton when the main characters meet in front of art in a museum or a church. In *The Age of Innocence* when Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer meet in the Cesnola collection of antiquities in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City we know how the idea of "change" will have a symbolic effect in the novel and the everyday appurtenances for living which are shown in the museum correspond to the table settings and utensils which have been set out when the Archers give a dinner for Ellen Olenska.

Encounters in the novels of Edith Wharton among people in front of works of art in museums, private houses, or churches are symbolically and iconographically important to the meaning Wharton wishes to attach to her novel. However, the use of the Scalzi ceiling raises certain questions. In the first place, when Edith Wharton published her *Italian Backgrounds* in 1905, the fresco was in place, but, in 1922, when *The Glimpses of the Moon* appeared in print, the fresco had been destroyed. However, Nick and Coral are characters who, some time before 1914 and the outbreak of war, are looking at a fresco that was still there. Another question is why does not Wharton explain the subject, the rescue of the Holy House by angels, for the reader? Does she think the reader would remember the description from her *Italian Backgrounds*, simply assuming that? Since the fresco itself is considered one of the most famous of Tiepolo's ceiling paintings, Wharton may have felt the reader was familiar with the subject. Only an informed student of Edith Wharton today would be likely to remember that she had described the subject in her essay in *Italian Backgrounds* in 1905.

Does the knowledge of the subject of the fresco make any difference to how one reads this book? The subject of the book throughout is the "honey-moon" of the young couple, Nick and Susy Lansing, who had made a bargain that, although penniless, they would risk their marriage by taking advantage of their rich friends' offers of rent-free occupancy of various houses and that, after a year, if either one feels she or he could do better, they will give each other their freedom to make comfortable new marriages with wealthy mates. This pre-World War I new social set has hard-boiled values which the reader soon finds out neither one of the young persons involved really believes in. Throughout the book one notices that the rich members of the fast, international set who own more than one house, rarely stay in their houses and they can

be considered peripatetic, homeless persons. The absence of the young couple's own home is an ever-present subject. Even the more admirable impecunious couple in the set, the Fulmers, he a painter and she a talented violinist, with their five children, are rarely at their inadequate house in Passy. However, it is the closest to a home because the Fulmer family has not been broken by divorce as the other families in the novel have been.

We must try to account for the scene's importance to the meaning of the novel. The subject of the Tiepolo fresco, the rescue of Mary's house by angelic support with Mary herself presiding, stresses the importance of the house as a permanent place, as a home. In the fresco, the Virgin is shown against a very large silver moon, "her most enduring and apocalyptic attribute,"⁶ and we see the connection as another source for the title of the novel, in addition to the lines from *Hamlet*.⁷ The repetition of scenes in which Nick and Susy meet under a sky in which we, as readers, see the glimpses of the moon, repeats that element in Tiepolo's fresco where the Virgin is backed by a silver moon. Only glimpses of this moon are given to the young couple, until they finally realize how their love for each other has to throw off their social parasitism. When Nick Lansing sees the Scalzi fresco, he has been living in the borrowed Vanderlyn Palace in Venice owned by Nelson and Ellie Vanderlyn, for he and Susy are social parasites and have to sing for their supper in a manner that has become increasingly irksome for Nick. When he wandered "up under the whirl of rose-and-lemon angels in Tiepolo's great vault" (GM, 91), he sees that Coral Hicks, the plain daughter of an American millionaire, appreciates Tiepolo as well as he himself. Both Nick and Coral would like a real home of their own, but both have no such homes. Nick and his wife, Susy, have only houses, not homes, which are lent to them for limited periods of time for certain services rendered. Their "home" depends on the caprices of the rich people who lend them houses, for they are traveling back and forth to their other houses. The only person with a real home is Strefford, who, on becoming Lord Altringham, finally returns to his ancestral castle. The other places, even the Fulmer's place in Passy where they can park their children, are not basically homes. The lack of the concept of home is an affliction of this social set. This flaw in the life of the Lansing couple is made clear by having the legend of the rescue of Mary's poor little home in Nazareth dropped into the story's plot. Mary's house, so holy and cherished, although humble, transported by angels as if it were light as air itself, is the unexpressed ideal of a home: lowly but loved. When Susy realizes that she cannot keep her bargain with Nick, (that each will opt for freedom in a better marriage with someone else), she learns that life with the Fulmers's children

constitutes a home because it has a family in it.

The critical estimates of the novel have not grasped its prime message of the importance of having a home of their own for a newly married couple. Cynthia Wolff, in 1977, felt that Edith Wharton had not been able to "re-create the psychological complexity of human nature."⁸ She criticized Nick's reaction to seeing at the end his wife, Susy, appearing "with a red-cheeked child against her shoulder through the veil of the winter night," when he saw her as "the eternal image of the wife and child" (GM, 319). "Why these worldlings," writes Wolff, "should be moved by this experience escapes us" (FW, 347), and she concludes that Edith Wharton's "increasing interest in families" allows "this saccharine conclusion to stand" (FW, 347). When Cynthia Wolff writes that the sight of Susy appearing to Nick as "a thing apart, an unconditioned vision" (GM, 319), "the eternal vision of the woman and child," which bears no relationship to anything in the novel that has preceded it, she thought so because apparently she did not know what the Scalzi fresco was about, and that it showed the painting of the Virgin with the Christ Child against her shoulder sitting on top of the simple little stone house which had been her home in Palestine and now is being transported to Loreto, where it would become her shrine. It seems plausible that she would too have noted that Nick's seeing Susy in a position like that of the Virgin and Child makes the ending of the book less a "saccharine conclusion," and more a symbolic one which gives the book an added dimension.

It is interesting that Helen Killoran, who has so much to say about Edith Wharton's use of art and allusion, has so little to say about the role of the miracle of the Holy House in the Scalzi fresco. She never tells us what the subject of the picture is and, since the fresco has been destroyed, did not consult Edith Wharton's own description of the fresco in *Italian Backgrounds*. She does not know that the rescue of the Virgin's home with its stress on the importance of a "home" has symbolically much to do with the plot of *The Glimpses of the Moon*.

By 1922, Edith Wharton had her own two "homes," first, St. Brice-sous-le-Forêt, where she moved in 1919. It was just before she wrote *The Glimpses of the Moon* that she settled in by the Christmas of 1920 at Ste. Claire, Hyères, but it was at St. Brice, during the summer of 1921, that Edith Wharton was busy with *The Glimpses of the Moon*.⁹ For the first time since the sale of The Mount in 1911, Edith Wharton had her own home, split into her winter and her summer houses. So, as she wrote her novel, we can assume that she was aware of the importance of a home, and for eight or nine years had considered herself homeless. Even before, the war, with its refugees, had made Wharton very much aware of the hoards

of homeless people and led to her editing *The Book of the Homeless*, which contained contributions from celebrated authors and artists published by Scribner's in 1916, a date when she began *The Glimpses of the Moon*. Her work with the refugees of Belgium and other war-torn places affected her entire attitude to the notion of a home and to those dispossessed of their homes. The war and its activities occupied her until the Armistice and then she began to look for a home for herself. Given her working habits and her social responsibilities, she needed a home; in fact, she needed two homes because of the climate in France and her home had to be in Europe. Knowing the presence of the idea of a home and the emotional insecurity which comes with homelessness, we can understand how the fresco of the Virgin regaining her home through angelic intervention brings an important parallel to the homeless young Lansings. Since it graphically illustrates the idea of homelessness with its corrupting influence on society, we are shown that this novel is not a frivolous attempt on Wharton's part to write a bestseller with a mechanically achieved happy ending for the young couple. Nick and Susy are shown as the innocent victims of society without a sense of "home," which the two young people must regain in order to save their marriage.

The Glimpses of the Moon, when seen in the light of the subject of the Tiepolo fresco, certainly seems to be built around the idea of the need to have a home. Nick and Susy only knew homes by "living...in the frame of other people's wealth" (GM, 193). When Susy contemplates marrying Strefford, now Lord Altringham, she realized that instead of his castle she would have preferred "a little house on the Thames" (GM, 208). The Hicks family, having left their home in America, now live in luxurious Palace Hotels and Coral's suitor, the Prince of Teutoburger-Waldhain, and his mother enjoy being guests at such hotels. Violet Melrose's "little place in Versailles" is not a home. It is simply a house she owns.

The house in the Tiepolo fresco is holy. The houses that Nick and Susy have borrowed were unholy. In fact, the silver moon behind the Virgin's little house, whose roof's overhang can be seen extending over its walls, acts as a halo for the house itself. That house becomes less of a thing and more of a presence because of the halo. The Holy House and its divinity places the Virgin, Child and House into an original trinity. Joseph has not been included in that trinity, for we see him outside the circle of the moon on the right, praying to God the Father. It is a complex and beautiful pictorial invention regarding a theme rarely treated in painting.

Once one is alerted to what the fresco in the Church of the Scalzi is about, one has to reread the novel and see how the subject of this unusual fresco can determine the mechanics or



the idea behind the plot. The two striking icons, which are both announced on the first page of the novel, which stem from the Tiepolo fresco, are that of the moon and of the house. The very first page shows us the young couple on their honeymoon in the evening under the moonlight on Lake Como in their first house borrowed from Strefford.

Susy and Nick discuss how many houses, which Susy numbers as five, have been offered to them to lengthen their honeymoon and to save their wedding cheques. "Houses were being showered on them" (GM, 24). Houses, as such, belonging to other people, and either rented or owned by these people, are only temporary and seasonal houses of the rich. They so dominate the book that they might even be called presences or characters in their own right. The second house in Nick and Susy's life is the Nelson and Ellie Vanderlyn palazzo in Venice, which again is only one of their homes, elaborate as it is, for Nelson's big house on Fifth Avenue has been exchanged for an equally sumptuous house in Mayfair (GM, 87). The third house is the house on the moor "let for the season" (GM, 189) to Fred Gillow and the price for the young couple's living in the house is the same as it had been for living in the Venetian palazzo -- to cover for Ursula Gillow's affairs as they had for Ellie Vanderlyn's. The fourth house offered to them is Violet Melrose's "little place at Versailles" (GM, 141), "an artless ingenuous little house," which Susy arrives at after Nick leaves Venice, since Violet is supposed to be in China. However, Susy finds her there with Nat Fulmer, the painter, whose wife, Grace, the violinist, and their children are now in a Paris pension. The fifth house was one in the Adirondacks which they do not go to, but the fifth house which they do occupy is more like a home than the others. It is at Passy where Grace and Nat Fulmer have parked their five children. The other type of house is rented by the Hicks, the rich Americans from Apex City. First they are antiquated old palaces since the Hicks family is interested in archeology, and then they advance to modern Palace Hotels, where they can put up their titled friends, the reigning Prince Teutoburger-Waldhain and his mother.

In regard to this group of presences or characters, Edith Wharton even uses proliferating architectural metaphors. The Princess's "eyes perched as high as attic windows under...a pediment of uncleaned diamonds" (GM, 238) and Coral Hicks looks herself like "an old monument in a street of Palace Hotels" (GM, 238). The metaphors continue with house images: "Like a man whose house has been wrecked by an earthquake" (GM, 243). The making of character "was as slow and arduous as the building of the Pyramids" (GM, 243); it was "the Pyramid instinct" which "caused these fugitive joys to linger like fading frescoes on imperishable walls" (GM, 244).

In Part 3 of the book, Susy stays with the Fulmer children because she has a feeling that the small house at Passy "was beginning to greet her with the eyes of home," uncomfortable as it was (GM, 302), and the architectural metaphors continue: "One watchtower of hope after another, feverish edifices demolished or rebuilt" (GM, 304); "her flag continued to fly from the quaking structures." Then there is Nick's "domicile" for the divorce (GM, 314), "a Home and a House desecrated by his own act! The Home to which he and Susy had reared their precarious bliss, and seen it crumble" (GM, 314). But the whole idea of having to rent such a place for the conditions of getting a divorce disgust Nick. He goes out to Passy and, without being seen, sees Susy at the door with "a rosy-cheeked child against her shoulder" (GM, 319). He sees her "transfigured by the new attitude in which he beheld her...the eternal image of the woman and child" (GM, 319). It is here in this final scene in the book that, as we think back to Tiepolo's fresco, we see a reproduction of its iconography. Susy, with the rosy-cheeked child against her shoulder, shares her posture with the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child and, although, at this point, Nick thinks she is about to marry a rich, English aristocrat, he says to himself, "But she looks poor!" (GM, 320). The moon, which had disappeared from the book after the first part, now returns; the young couple feel "as on the night of their moon over Como" (GM, 353).

After it becomes clear that both Nick and Susy do not want their so-called fiancés, but they want each other, and decide to have a second honeymoon in Fontainebleau, the "little house became the centre of a whirlwind" (GM, 354) and the resemblance to the fresco now shows itself in similar details. The five Fulmer kids in their activity resemble the angels supporting the Virgin's house in the fresco. Young Nat Fulmer and his motor horn, which is referred to a number of times, resembles the angels on the right of the fresco with their horns. Susy's hair has "a ruddy halo" behind it (GM, 361). As the novel ends, as they are on their second honeymoon at the hotel, they look out at the night and watch "the moon," which had "cast her troubled glory on them, and was again hidden." Like their moon, their happiness comes and goes, but the moon behind the Scalzi Virgin is always a full moon, exposed and untroubled. Their's is not.

When the little house became "the centre of a whirlwind" (GM, 91), we are sent back to Nick in front of the Scalzi fresco where he sat "under the whirl of rose-and -lemon angels in Tiepolo's great vault." We also are sent back to Edith Wharton's travel essay in *Italian Backgrounds*, where she describes "the angels, whirling along the Virgin's house with a vehemence which makes it seem a mere feather in the rush of their flight" (IB, 194) (my italics).

The other icon which appears on the first page of the book is the moon, and, of course, it established itself in the title, which places itself as "their tutelary orb" (GM, 1) of the young, newly-married couple. The entire opening scene takes place in the moonlight at Lake Como. We are reminded of it on practically every page of Chapter 1. "Look...there, against that splash of moonlight on the water. Apples of silver in a network of gold..." (GM, 3). "The moon was turning from gold to white" (GM, 4). "She saw bits of moon-flooded sky encrusted like silver" (GM, 5). There is a break in the moon references as the young couple remembers how they met and what their courtship consisted of. The first chapter is bathed in moonlight and the happy thoughts about how they will be able to stretch out their honeymoon by taking advantage of their free use of various houses of their rich friends. Again, on page 60, they have "long golden days and the nights of silver fire" (GM, 60).

After they leave Como, the moon disappears. Yet they look forward in Venice to being "alone with the great orange moons -- still theirs! -- above the bell-tower of San Giorgio" (GM, 97). And the night that Nick leaves Susy because of her acceptance of the amoral conditions for their living at the Venetian palazzo, "There was no moon -- thank heaven there was no moon! --" (GM, 116). With that, the moon disappears from the book not to reappear again until the last page. Nick has left Venice for Genoa and the marriage seems to be over, and the moon does not return until page 353 when Susy appears as the Virgin with a small child on her shoulder and Nick finally embraces her "and the currents flowed between them warm and full as on the night of their moon over Como" (GM, 353). The moon reappears on the last page as they embark on their second "honey-moon," the spelling Wharton uses all through the novel.

There are more echoes of the Scalzi elements. "The celestial vortex" (GM, 92) referred to as Nick and Coral look at the Scalzi fresco, is another description of the feeling of a "whirlwind" (GM, 356). If we are to accept Helen Killoran's concept of primary allusions, secondary allusions and autoallusions to literature and art as a conscious endeavor on the part of Edith Wharton, we cannot ignore these parallels between the Transport of the Holy House fresco and what goes on in this novel. Without the accident of my seeing this fresco as a slide as part of Professor Zorzi's lecture on Tiepolo, I too would never have realized what the fresco looked like. But the sight of this fresco from the Alinari photograph made before its destruction alerted me to the part it seemed to have played in Wharton's novel, for, throughout the novel, there seems to be a subtext from the story in this fresco. Like it, the houses the couple borrow are small, although they are not precious to the couple because they do

not belong to them. The Virgin's house, though humble, was her own. And it seems as if Wharton wished to keep this fresco before our minds because there are at least two places later in the novel where Nick remembers seeing that fresco (GM, 185 and 188).

Yet, again we must ask why doesn't Edith Wharton tell us the subject of the fresco. Is it simply an autoallusion which refers the reader back to the description in her travel essay? Is it a subtext because the reader knows the fresco so well, which, at the time of Wharton's beginning to write *The Glimpses of the Moon*, had been destroyed recently and probably was known as a great disaster to the rest of the world? From reading it as a subtext, does the lack of explanation seem to indicate that it was less important than I have stated? The reason no scholar has commented on the subject of the picture, is probably that no one has seen it or reproductions of it. There is only one other reference to museum art when Susy looks at Mantegna's *Crucifixion* in the Louvre, but where Nick regards other pictures that are more cheerful. But this seems to be just a random introduction, made merely to suggest Susy's sensitivity to tragedy. It appears to have no echo in the rest of the novel.

Susy's activity at the end of the novel, when she nurtures and acts as a surrogate mother to the five Fulmer children, gives her a finer sense of ethical behavior, which now matches her husband Nick's, and prepares her to be ready for a real home and family.

New York City

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7. Helen Killoran, *Edith Wharton: Art and Allusion* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1996), p. 70. Future references indicated by AA and page number.
8. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words* (New York: Oxford, 1977), p. 347. Future references indicated by FW and page number.
9. R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 436 and 439.

ILLUSTRATION

1. Tiepolo, Giambattista. Detail from the Transport of the House of Loreto. S. Maria degli Scalzi, Venice, Italy.
Credit: Alinari Art Resource, N.Y.

Book Review

Elsa Nettels. *Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells, James, Wharton and Cather*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997. 214 pages. \$??

In *Language, Race, and Social Class in Howell's America* (1988), Elsa Nettels explored in incisive detail the encoding of dominant social and racial assumptions in the codification of American English between the Civil War and the first world war. Now, her third book extends the reach of that earlier inquiry in considering the relationship of language and sexual identity not only in Howell's works but also in those of other leading American literary figures of the period. One of the more striking aspects of *Language and Gender in American Fiction: Howells, James, Wharton and Cather* is, in fact, its focus on writers who were among the most prominent representatives of the very tradition (that of American literary realism) in which language is too often said to have been disregarded, typically bypassed as a transparency permitting unmediated access to social and economic domains supposedly external to any linguistic system. In her instructive departure from such a consensus, Nettels cogently attempts to elucidate one of the fundamentally constitutive functions of language: what she calls "the power of language to construct gender, to promote division and to circumscribe the lives of both men and women."

Observing that her quartet of writers "all...directly addressed issues exposing vital connections between language and gender," Nettels seeks to "examine the ways that these dominant figures of the literary establishment helped perpetuate or subvert," as she puts it, "their culture's ideology of language and gender." What Nettels demonstrates, in a carefully balanced analysis, is that both impulses often coexisted in each writer's work. Howells, for example, is presented as a novelist "whose fiction consistently supports the conventional assumptions about gender that he repudiated in his interviews and criticism," and "whose fiction subverts ideals of the equality of the sexes that he championed in his essays and interviews"; conversely, on the other hand, James "[I]n his literary criticism...seems to resist, even to fear, the promise of female variety and strength he embodied in his heroines." Nor is this the only paradoxical aspect of Nettels' subject, as she places such self-contradictions in a wide-ranging discursive context that also involves the work of "grammarians, linguists, philologists, sociologists," and "others engaged in the construction of gender" through the policing of language use in the United States.

In this effort, Nettels begins by showing how "nineteenth-century critics and reviewers...constructed literary gender by borrowing the grammarians' terms," like "masculine and feminine," and by applying those terms to the criticism of literary language in ways "which often reflect widely held views of the relation of the sexes and of the proper roles or spheres of men and women." Her first chapter offers a generous and entertaining (if rather dispiriting) compendium of such judgements from the late 1860s through the early decades of the twentieth century, as culled from newspapers, popular magazines, linguistics, books of etiquette, and grammar-books (especially helpful, according to Nettels, in illustrating "how successfully nineteenth-century Americans used language to construct gender and assert the worth of the masculine over the feminine"). Proving the rule among these lines are the few fascinating exceptions represented in her overview, including numerous contributors to the *Woman's Journal* and to *The Revolution*, or now obscure critics like Helen H. Gardner and Helen Gray Cone, whose essays of the early 1890s anticipated the views of someone like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, for whom "language...reflected and perpetuated the ideology that identifies the man with the human and the normal, the woman with the deviant and the inferior." Further complicating the picture one may derive from Nettels' account are the convictions of progressive men like Gilman's mentor, the sociologist Lester F. Ward (or James S. Metcalfe, who "attributed what he called 'the weaker characteristics of women' not to biology but to 'the errors of the centuries' which have perpetuated the belief that woman is inferior to man"), as well as the reactionary views of women like Amelia Barr and Florence Kingsland, whose prescriptions governing usage very much reinforced, by endorsing, various widespread doctrines regarding the proper use of language by women.

Among the literary figures in her study, perhaps the most complex and difficult to classify in this respect is in fact Edith Wharton, who "did not

regard the language of English literature as the creation of men" or "the English language itself as an instrument of domination," in Nettels' words, and whose views along such lines are plausibly traced to the male-oriented emergence and development that is by now a fixture of the biographical and critical record on Wharton's career. Most illuminating are Nettels' remarks on the paradoxes that consequently surrounded Wharton's understanding and treatment of language. Whereas she "found in women's speech an inviting target of her satire," for example, at the same time "Wharton's fiction refutes the conventional idea that women were more instrumental than men in perpetuating the [linguistic] codes that sanctioned evasion and denial" within a particular society. While it may be said that, in her references to language, "Wharton perpetuates assumptions and attitudes that reinforce the inequities her own characters eloquently protest," her fiction also consistently exposes what Nettels describes as "[t]he importance of a linguistic standard in creating or revealing the advantages enjoyed by men in a class society." Indeed, for Nettels, "the thoughts, words and actions of all Wharton's characters, male and female, are shaped by the roles their society assigns to men and women, concepts of gender too powerful for individual characters of either sex to escape," so that ultimately "language itself in Wharton's definition becomes one of the institutions most potent in protecting the social order from challenges to its authority."

Some readers might find this a rather extreme account of the power of language in Wharton's fiction, one likelier to be associated with a Barthes or a Foucault than with the mandarin sensibility of such a class-conscious novelist. At the same time, however, Nettels is candid in acknowledging the contingent social assumptions and constraints that shaped Wharton's view of language as a marker of privilege and exclusion. And Wharton scholars will find her chapter on the novelist an especially valuable part of Nettels' study, which uncovers a fundamental but still-neglected aspect of the novelist's accomplishment. One notes that no entry under "language" occurs, remarkably enough, in the subject index to Kristin O. Lauer and Margaret Murray's exhaustive bibliography of Wharton criticism, reflecting a scholarly lacuna that is surprising given the precision and discipline of Wharton's style, her own commentary on matters of diction and usage, and the extent to which language itself became a pervasive motif of her fiction. Citing a wide array of evidence from an ample cross-section of the novelist's work, Nettels thus redresses a serious and persistent oversight on the part of the conventional critical wisdom in Wharton studies.

A few reservations do come to mind as one follows Nettels' penetrating argument. As one can tell even from the few passages quoted above, a repetitiveness quickly overtakes her formulations as she moves from one stage of her argument to the next. Largely conflated throughout the book, moreover, are various phenomena (language and speech, speech and writing, language and literary style, and so on) between which certain necessary distinctions would appear to be needed. Indeed, much of the time, such terms seem to be used almost interchangeably in Nettels' analysis. While her attention to the impact of overlapping forces like that of class is most welcome (and considerably widens the scope of her approach), the social dimension of language often displaces the sexual to such an extent that Nettels' study occasionally drifts out of focus, and one is left feeling at times as if one were reading a different book on another topic. The many intriguing relationships that she detects, in the operation of language, between gender and categories like class, commerce, and morality might therefore have been more clearly defined and closely rendered in Nettels' presentation. And one wishes that more in the way of contemporary historical scholarship had been represented here; Kenneth Cmiel's *Democratic Eloquence* (1990), which quotes a number of the same sources and also discusses (albeit briefly) the issue of women and American English in the nineteenth century, seems a particularly conspicuous omission.

Ultimately, however, these remain minor quibbles that seldom detract from one's appreciation of such an informative and absorbing volume, restoring as it does a crucial element not only of Wharton's work but of a period that continues to undergo illuminating reappraisal in American literary studies.

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