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**"Years Hence of These Scenes":
Wharton's *The Spark* and World War I**
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The Spark, one of the four novellas that comprise Edith Wharton's *Old New York*, is not considered part of Wharton's World War I corpus. In fact, she subtitled it "The 60's," overtly intending to capture the New York of her girlhood and, according to Catherine Rae, to fit the novella into a sequence with the other three *Old New York* novellas and facilitate their publication (55). As Paul Fussell remarks about World War I writing in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, however, "Not a few works written . . . about matters far distant from the war, carry

more of the war about them than is always recognized" (188). *The Spark's* many references to time and change thus should direct the skeptical reader's attention away from the Civil War—the apparent focus of so much of its attention—to World War I and the troubling questions that war raised for Wharton about her role as a writer. Shifting attention in this direction suggests that *The Spark* should be added to the body of writing in which Wharton was trying to untangle questions that had dogged her as a woman struggling to be heard in the male-dominated arena of writing about World War I. In this light, *The Spark* becomes a rueful self-critique of

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The Edith Wharton Society Dinner

Sunday, December 28th at 6:30 PM

Fish Market Restaurant

750 North Harbor Drive, San Diego
(Not far from the Convention Center)

Send reservations by December 23
to Clare Colquitt (colquitt@mail.sdu.edu)

Dinner will be about \$40, bring cash or check.

Details will also be posted on the website

BOOK REVIEW

Stephanie Lewis Thompson. *Influencing America's Tastes: Realism in the Works of Wharton, Cather, and Hurst*. University Press of Florida, 2002. 234pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN0-8130-2480-3. Cloth, \$49.95.

The title of Stephanie Lewis Thompson's book suggests that her study will show how three twentieth-century writers, each the author of best-selling novels, influenced, deliberately or not, their readers' opinions and tastes. Instead, in well-informed, illuminating analysis, Thompson focuses on the conflicting pressures upon Wharton, Cather, and Hurst, showing how they reacted to literary trends, marketplace forces, and the judgments of reviewers and critics. Thompson states that each of the three writers "clearly desired to shape her audience's tastes" (156), but she is more concerned with their struggle for recognition as serious artists against prejudices that identified women writers with sentimental domestic fiction, excluded women from the high culture of modernism, and stigmatized popular success as a sign of middlebrow taste, defined as feminine and therefore inferior.

The first third of Thompson's book, on the impact of gender ideology on nineteenth-century women writers, makes her emphasis clear. The first chapter examines the effect on Harriet Beecher Stowe, Margaret Fuller, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, among others, of "the rhetoric of women's influence," which extolled the power (i.e. duty) of women writers to enhance the moral and spiritual life of their readers, by endorsing women's socially approved roles as wives, mothers, teachers, and ministers to the poor and afflicted. The second chapter, on Louisa May Alcott, stresses the gap between Alcott's life and her fiction, which with a few exceptions forecloses "the possibility of fulfilled ambition outside of the domestic sphere for women" (69). Thompson astutely notes that Alcott was important to later writers, notably Wharton, as "an example to resist" (69) but it was Cather, in *The Song of the Lark*, who was inspired to "rewrite the narrative of the woman artist" (69).

Thompson identifies the three writers as realists, but she is primarily interested in their relation to literary modernism. Her book, she states, "examines the evolution of a modernist aesthetic in early-twentieth-century America, and its impact on women writers" (2). Her chapters on Wharton, Cather, and Hurst "consider their attempts to define themselves against modernism," to create "alternative aesthetic theories" (11) that would transmute the domestic and feminine into high art and avoid what Cather and Wharton saw as the fatal weaknesses of modernism: its uncontrolled naturalism, evident in its "intense delineation of detail" (81), and the egotism and self-absorption of its male proponents.

Thompson's approach is particularly valuable for

the study of Wharton, for it avoids the vexing question of how to place her. Depending on which aspects of modernism one considers, Wharton can be either a modernist or an anti modernist. Instead of engaging in this familiar argument, Thompson focuses on Wharton's search for "the literary aesthetic of transmutation" (91) that would enable her to preserve the order and harmony of the "classical style," yet deal unrestrained by "the Victorian repressions" (91) with such subjects as sexual passion, adultery, and incest. Thompson chooses *Summer* to show how Wharton represented the consciousness of her characters without recourse to the technique of interior monologue perfected by Joyce and Woolf. She analyzes *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*, to examine Wharton's criticism of middlebrow culture as well as the experiments of the modernists.

Thompson identifies the problem facing Wharton in *Summer*, to "develop a language for sexual desire" (96) which would create the subjectivity of Charity Royall as a "desiring subject who is in control of her actions" (100), give voice to feelings she could not articulate, and transmute her "disjointed perceptions" (97) into an harmonious whole. Making a good case for *Summer* as Wharton's "most experimental novel in many ways" (98), Thompson analyzes the re-creation of desire in the novel through the postponement of climaxes, achieved by using ellipsis to suggest "unspoken desire" (102); breaks in the narrative to sustain readers' anticipation; scenes of "displaced desire" such as the Fourth of July fireworks, expressive of the "pleasure of postponement" (100); and, at the end, Lucius Hamey's letter to Charity "impos[ing] an indefinite deferral on their desire" (104). In Thompson's reading, the repeated postponements culminate in a bleak death-like marriage, which promises only "a perpetual postponement of desire for both Charity and Royall" (105).

Thompson defends *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* against the customary dismissal of them as inferior works, arguing for their importance in showing the complex relation between prescribed gender roles and creative power, between modernist art and middlebrow taste. As Thompson notes, through the character of Vance Weston, who responds to every influence operating in his world, Wharton satirizes the "Kodak realism" of *Ulysses* and the vulgarity (as she saw it) of both the modernism he attempts to emulate, and the middlebrow culture that initially formed his taste. But she also endows the callow young artist with her own capacity to be moved to rapture by the language of great poetry, once he has access to an ancestor's library. Thompson recognizes Vance and Halo Spear, his mentor and guide, as "two halves of a creative personal-

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BOOK REVIEW

Dean, Sharon L. *Constance Fenimore Woolson and Edith Wharton: Perspectives on Landscape and Art*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2002. 268pp.

Sharon Dean walks a tightrope in her opening chapter as she relinquishes her original topic, her postulated conviction that Edith Wharton suffered an unacknowledged anxiety of influence in her literary relationship with Constance Fenimore Woolson, and the manifest topic of this book, which is an exploration of "the relationship between nature and ways of seeing, and between ways of seeing and the construction of art" (13). The "anxiety of influence" argument lacks conviction because it is wholly circumstantial and speculative. Dean's ground, ultimately, for juxtaposing Woolson and Wharton is this: "Placing Woolson and Wharton together in terms of landscape studies establishes a context for reading nineteenth and early twentieth-century women's writing that moves beyond issues relating to biography, gender, and class..." (13). Excluding human nature from her discussion, she has "centered on the idea of landscape, that is, on natural elements shaped by humankind either physically or through interpretations that are influenced by culture" (13). There follow chapters on landscape in different aspects: travel sites, "yard" (i.e., "a place to live within and interact with" [73] and "view" ("a place to see and to see from" [73]), seasonal landscapes, natural landscapes (e.g., mountains, water) as spiritual and social image, Europe as a social and physical landscape, and literary landscapes, i.e., works of art. This mode of organization illustrates the fact that Dean's focus is on landscape in a variety of aspects. It leads, however, to the discussion of individual works in different chapters and, as regards Dean's perception of the two writers, to repetitiveness in the arguments she advances.

The subtitle of this book might be interchanged with its title. Basically, Dean is writing an essay on American cultural and intellectual history, on nineteenth-century perceptions of landscape at home and abroad and on "visual icons of American identity" (52), in which Woolson and Wharton are foregrounded as representative figures. She sees Wharton as one who looked backward toward eighteenth-century criteria of taste and aesthetics, while Woolson looked forward, her point of view informed by scientific knowledge of botany and geology (71). For this reader the book recalls Henry Seidel Canby's study of Twain and James, *Turn West, Turn East* (1951) in so far as it contrasts two writers whose respective orientation was toward Europe and toward the new world. Woolson and Wharton are a useful pair for Dean because, as she interprets them, they are essentially a contrasting pair in their perceptions and uses of landscape.

Though she admits a personal bias in favor of Woolson, she asserts that she has "tried to uncover these

differences, not to value one view over another" (xi). Dean, who is the author of *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Homeward Bound* (1995), does, however, reveal a greater affinity for Woolson. Her treatment of Wharton is rather Procrustean since, deriving criteria nearer to Woolson's practices than to Wharton's for appropriate relationships between fictional characters and the natural environment, she then finds Wharton lacking. For example, juxtaposing *Summer* and *East Angels* as landscape novels (118), Dean remarks that "Woolson always embeds the landscape with a purposefulness or a fullness of life. She never uses it merely as symbol or merely as social commentary" (120). Woolson's heroine "is not a painting but landscape personified" (121). On the other hand, during Lily and Selden's sylvan walk at Bellomont "Wharton landscapes a harmonious work of art much as Lily attempts to create herself as a portrait painting. The landscape again becomes a backdrop as Wharton pictorializes the perfect Currier and Ives early fall..." (112).

Dean integrates a wide range of contextual reading into her own arguments; she is well grounded in historical and theoretical concepts of landscape and gardening. She is also conversant with the work of those scholars who have approached Edith Wharton both from this point of view and as artist and the producer of fiction about the artist, the principal subject of her final chapter. At times, however, one may feel that her own formulations have been made before and that her principal contribution consists in ordering this vast array of material according to her principle of contrast and her theme of landscape. An original argument, in the chapter on travel literature, is that Woolson has more to say to the modern reader than has Wharton. Dean grants Wharton's gifts as an observer and a writer (48), for instance, and admits that Woolson's reliance on story-telling as a device may pall, but concludes that "Woolson's openness to ambiguity, her recognition of multiculturalism and her own ethnocentrism, her refusal to be elitist, and her concern with environmentalism compel the modern reader..." (48-49).

Her study is wide-ranging in its reference to Edith Wharton's writings. In accordance with her topic, Dean gives particular attention to such works as *Ethan Frome*, *Summer*, "Mrs. Manstey's View," and to the travel writings, but there is reference to all of the major novels and to many of the stories when landscape figures (in its various aspects), e.g., the language of flowers in *The Age of Innocence* or the contrasted interior and exterior landscapes in *The Reef* and *The Children*. However, her conclusions about Wharton overall are repetitious: Edith Wharton emerges pretty consistently as being aloof, condescending, elitist, and didactic. She treats landscape pictorially or symbolically or uses it as a backdrop but does not integrate nature with character. "Because Wharton preferred cultivated landscapes and thought that exterior American

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BOOK REVIEW

Augusta Rohrbach. *"Truth Stranger than Fiction": Race, Realism, and the U. S. Literary Marketplace*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. Xvi + 153 pages. \$49.95.

In *"Truth Stranger than Fiction": Race, Realism, and the U. S. Literary Marketplace*, Augusta Rohrbach argues for a major new interpretation of the origins of American literary realism. Traditional treatments of the subject by critics such as Richard Chase and Edwin Cady have linked classic high realism with the work of W. D. Howells in the 1870s and 1880s; more recently, Sharon M. Harris, Joyce Warren, and others have called for a redefinition that acknowledges its earlier origins in women's writings. Rohrbach locates the origins of realism earlier, too, but in a surprisingly overlooked genre: the slave narrative, which, with its "use of authenticating details, money as a signifier of personal suffering, . . . [and] the use of dialect and a frank treatment of the body" (xiv) anticipates the principal conventions of realist fiction. Moreover, practitioners of this "humanitarian realism," as Rohrbach calls it, shared with the writers of slave narratives both a high-minded belief in the social purposes of literature and a canny sense of the demands of an emerging literary marketplace that allowed them to "do well" as they went about the profitable business of "doing good."

The first two chapters examine this process of establishing authenticity in the pages of William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* and in popular slave narratives. Beginning with the advertisements in *The Liberator*, Rohrbach shows that typography, appeals to social conscience, and claims of truthfulness served to constitute an actual as well as an implied community of like-minded readers. The demand for verisimilitude and authenticity that this audience brought to its consumption of slave narratives in turn fuelled strategies of authorship that promoted realism: a focus on money as a material signifier of slavery within the narratives; and a nearly obligatory inclusion of the portraits that formed part of the authenticating frame of most slave narratives. As Rohrbach shows, these much-discussed portraits served not only to identify the former slave by inscribing "the black body in the black text," as Robert Stepto has argued, but to "mark the former slave as author" (31)—and, in the case of Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and William Wells Brown, the author as celebrity. Particularly interesting are the examples Rohrbach discusses of lesser-known authors like Eleanor Eldridge or Thomas H. Jones, who, unlike Douglass, emphasized rather than obscured the financial motives for their narratives and appealed directly for sympathy and aid; and the white authors such as C. G. Parsons who sought to cash in on the form by writing imitation slave narratives.

The new "market for the real" (50) created by the

popularity of slave narratives also encouraged the rise of authors such as Rose Terry Cooke. Cooke's use of dialect, authentic details, and a "frank treatment of the body" (56) comprises her humanitarian realism, according to Rohrbach, and her stories of abusive marriages, such as the horrific "The Ring Fetter," inevitably recall the abuses of slavery to readers trained in the conventions of slave narratives. Similarly, Cooke's late allegorical story "A Hard Lesson," whose protagonist breaks out in black spots until he is perceived as a black man, recalls the slave narrative in questioning the nature of racial identity. Although Cooke, the subject of nearly a dozen articles over the past ten years, is less obscure than *"Truth Stranger than Fiction"* seems to imply, Rohrbach shows that Cooke's reputation has suffered because of her didacticism and use of direct address, strategies for which modern critics have failed to develop the kind of sophisticated reading practices now applied to slave narratives. Like Cooke, William Dean Howells, the subject of Chapter 4, was keenly aware of his popularity and its constitutive elements, as Rohrbach shows through a study of photographs of the public and private Howells: the public Howells at his writer's desk versus the private Howells seated beneath a tree or pictured without his mustache; the impatient, lackadaisical youthful diarist versus the careful middle-aged businessman committed to keeping accurate accounts of his authorship and travels, accounts that Rohrbach interprets in specific, informative detail. Rohrbach shows convincingly that, like the authors of the slave narratives, Howells consciously created a persona to authenticate both his position as author and the realism of his works. More information about whether and where the photographs of the poses that Rohrbach describes as the private Howells circulated in the marketplace would be helpful, however. Periodicals of the time and popular books such as *Poets' Homes: Pen and Pencil Sketches of American Poets and Their Homes* (1879) show that both kinds of photographs of Howells circulated in the literary marketplace; for example, a photo feature in a 1902 *Harper's Weekly* contains both the iconic public author-at-desk pictures of Howells and seemingly private pictures of Howells at leisure, lying hatless under a tree—a fact that complicates but does not invalidate Rohrbach's point.

"Truth Stranger than Fiction" provides a final example of the roots of realism in slave narratives in its provocative and exciting reading of *The House of Mirth*. Defining the tragic mulatta figure through its four principal characteristics, including extraordinary physical beauty, a divided nature, an "unsuitability for slavery, and an inevitable death" (101), Rohrbach interprets Lily Bart as a tragic mulatta figure and the novel as a type of race fiction. Reading Lily in this fashion illuminates a number of

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Wharton's effectiveness as a war writer.

Women's writing about World War I has received increasing scholarly attention and respect. Nevertheless, women who stayed at home, did volunteer work as Wharton did, and even women who served as nurses or ambulance drivers near the front have had a difficult time being heard by anyone other than feminist critics. Frequent conflation of male authors with "valid" male characters reveals the premise by which critics traditionally have judged women war writers: If you have not "been there" you cannot possibly understand—and thus you cannot write about—war.¹ The sense of the incommunicable that lies at the heart of much of Wharton's own war writing attests to this difficulty.

Wharton's fascination with the incommunicable appears as a frequent theme throughout her writings, not just about World War I. It reflects a lifelong terror of being silenced and a parallel sense of powerlessness that she captured in a diary entry in terms of her empathy for dogs: "'I think it is because of the usness in their eyes, with the underlying not-usness [emphases Wharton's] which belies it, and is so tragic a reminder of the lost age when we human beings branched off and left them: left them to eternal inarticulateness and slavery'" (Wolff 11). She makes effective use of the motif of silence in many of her ghost stories. For instance, in "Kerfol" the wealthy but unhappy wife Anne almost never speaks, and when she does speak her story is considered worse than unbelievable; it is considered boring—a kind of figurative silence.² The unsympathetic narrator's description of Anne's dogs unwittingly describes Anne, as well: "I had a feeling they must be horribly cowed to be so silent and inert. Yet they did not look hungry or ill-treated....It was more as if they had lived a long time with people who never spoke to them or looked at them: as though the silence of the place had gradually benumbed their busy inquisitive natures" ("Kerfol" 84). In "Mr. Jones," a wife is literally deaf and mute, which accounts for the face in her portrait that "looked out dumbly, inexpressively, in a stare of frozen beauty" ("Mr. Jones" 184). She can communicate with her husband only by writing him letters, but his butler intercepts them.

France, Wharton's adopted home, had freed and nurtured her gifts of expression, creating what Shari Benstock calls "a landscape across which the imagination might follow its own lead, its psychic space free of predetermined

expectations" (28). World War I, however, frustrated those gifts of expression because it simultaneously exacerbated her need to express herself while inhibiting her ability to communicate. As she wrote to her friend Gaillard Lapsley in September, 1914, "I am so shattered by this war. . .that I'm inarticulate even when I want to be most affectionately expressive." While she wrote to her publisher Charles Scribner in 1915 that the war was a "situation...so overwhelming and unescapable" (*Letters* 357) that it virtually compelled her to write about it, after finishing *A Son at the Front* in 1922 she realized that "the world I had grown up in and been formed by had been destroyed in 1914," making her feel "incapable of transmuting the raw material of the after-war world into a work of art" (*Backward* 369-70).

Motifs of interrupted expression woven through Wharton's wartime writing reflect this frustration. For example, the half-finished lace left behind by young girls fleeing the advancing German army in *Fighting France* is a sign of silenced feminine expression. *Summer's Charity* Royall barely can write a postcard to her unborn child's father, Lucius Harney. In "Writing a War Story," soldier-critic Harold Harbard rips apart nurse and aspiring writer Ivy Spang's story with, "'You've got hold of an awfully good subject...but you've rather mauled it, haven't you?'" (369). He then asks for a picture of her. Notwithstanding the fact that Ivy probably has in fact mauled the story, because she is trying to reflect a male soldier's war experience rather than her own, her inability to make the critic see past her gender is part of Wharton's point about how difficult it is for a woman to tell her own war story.³

Part of Wharton's difficulty with expression stemmed from the sense she shared with both men and women World War I writers of the rupture between past and present brought about by the war and the resultant questioning of historical progress. In her wartime letters to friends she referred to her sense of the irreparable damage the war had done to history's linearity. For instance, she asked Charles Scribner, "Did the adventures related in this book [the proposed *Literature*] happen before the war or did they happen since?" (*Letters* 425). Referring to the relatively idyllic years before the war, she exclaimed in a letter to Gaillard Lapsley, "We shall never lodge in *that* [emphasis Wharton's] summer hotel again" (*Letters* 342). Although *The Spark* is set well before World War I, its self-conscious attention to temporal linearity

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suggests that at the time of its writing Wharton was still troubled by this perceived rupture between past and present and the questions about progress—social, moral, and aesthetic—that the rupture implied.

"[Y]ou will see, by the last allusion, that we are still in the archaic 'nineties," (95) notes *The Spark's* narrator, referring to a four-in-hand carriage and using the present tense to refer to the past, his immediately post-college days. Passing back and forth through time, the novella moves fluidly through the narrator's life immediately pre-Harvard, back to his boyhood during the Civil War, and concludes when he is a successful banker, "an institution" (229) like Civil War veteran Hayley Delane. When Delane insists, "Oh, I believe in progress every bit as much as [my wife] does—I believe we're working toward something better" (71), Wharton undercuts that faith in progress with the elliptical phrase, "'If we weren't....' [ellipsis Wharton's]" (71). Delane's admonition to the narrator, "'[A]ll that old past is dead. It is [emphasis Wharton's] dead. We've got no use for it over here'" (70), reinforces this rupture. The phrase "over here" highlights the disjunction between past and present and implies both a geographic and temporal distance unlikely to be cited by a New Yorker referring to the Civil War. Equally interesting is the narrator's characterization of the time period for the bulk of the novella as "the dark time of our national indifference before our country's awakening" (202), which also seems to place the time of narration in a time subsequent to the Spanish-American War or World War I, not the Civil War.

On the other hand, the intersection of the life of the fictional character Hayley Delane with the life of poet and Civil War hospital volunteer Walt Whitman obviously places the action of that part of the novella during the Civil War. Wharton uses the Civil War and the poet-volunteer most closely associated with it to cloak her own role as a noncombatant in World War I who needed to respond artistically to the war that had so disrupted her world, but who felt incapable of doing so. She idealizes Whitman as the war artist who can both empathize with combatants and incorporate that empathy into art, the antithesis of the muted artist she felt she had become.

Wharton considered Whitman "the greatest of American poets" (*Backward Glance* 186). In fact, Abby Werlock calls *Summer*, written during World War I, "a brilliant prose response to the masculine confidence and sexuality found in

Leaves of Grass" (261) and cites numerous examples of Whitman's influence on Wharton's poetry. Wharton drew the title for her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, from Whitman's "A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads," and the epigraph for the war novel *A Son at the Front* from Whitman's "Something veil'd and abstracted is often a part of the manners of these beings."

Wharton's self-appointed task in writing *Fighting France* was to transform for her American readers her extraordinary (for a woman) visits to the French front into a picture that would convey war's "reality." Rich with elaborate detail, characterization, and figurative language, these transformations contrast with what she described apologetically to Henry James as the "artless shape" (James 325) of the observations conveyed in her letters. Mundane observations become heightened images, such as "great darkness full of fire and blood" (*Fighting France* 34) and "great subterranean struggle" (*Fighting France* 64). Faulting Walter Berry's journalistic accounts of his travels in Germany for the lack of imagination they display, she writes to Mary Berenson, "I can't see [emphasis Wharton's] anything he has seen...Solid facts in plenty, of course...[ellipsis Wharton's]" (*Letters* 344).

Metaphors of muteness, like those in her ghost stories, figure importantly in *Fighting France* as Wharton describes her journey from Dunkirk to Belfort with Walter Berry. She explicitly relates war's paralyzing effects to the muting of artistic expression when she compares war to the feeling of having a "torn cobweb" (89) over her mouth, so liberated does she feel when a conversation with a soldier seems to lift that web from her face. At Verdun, where the victims literally have been silenced by death, Wharton is struck by an atmosphere "silent, concentrated, passive" (72).

Her reaction to her experiences is to romanticize the war by reading it like a "story" (90), or a narrative pictorial art form, an "unfolding frieze" (89) of an army division's procession between towns. "All the story of a day's warfare was written in the spectacle of that endless silent flow to the front..." (*Fighting* 89-90). She compares the ruins at Rheims to something from "the Inferno, or some tale of Eastern magic" (185) and the troops on the beach to *The Song of Roland* (176). Writing in *Fighting France's* early pages about Paris, she exults in the "sudden flaming up on national life" that "made the spectator feel as though he were

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reading a great poem on War rather than racing its realities" (15).

Thus, her reading is subject to error because she is—admittedly—so susceptible to the "spectacular" nature of the war: "Sometimes, even to accustomed eyes," she writes in *Fighting France*, "these ruled-off fields and compact grey villages seem merely flat and tame; at other moments the sensitive imagination sees in every thrifty and even furrow the ceaseless vigilant attachment of generations faithful to the soil" (3). She further acknowledges that making symbols allows the artist to extract the more "brilliant" side of war "without the saddening suggestions of what, on the distance periphery, that energy is daily and hourly resulting in" (40).

Ironically, her aesthetic response removes her farther from the more direct participation she seeks. Her selectivity of detail is a luxury not allowed to the combatants or refugees. It undermines her role as an artist, even as it defines it, because it precludes her participation in and telling of the whole story. This limited sphere of participation defines her position with regard to the war as a feminine one. She tries to correct her enhanced readings with the more purportedly objective point of view usually conveyed to her by male soldiers. Yet for all her attempts to represent "the actual facts of war" (*Fighting* 87) truly yet vividly, the facts possessed by male combatants always seem removed from her. She finds herself a "bewildered looker-on" confronted by the "utter impossibility of picturing how the thing really happens" (*Fighting* 209).

In her portrayal of the memorably satanic German captain Oberst von Scharlach in the World War I story "Coming Home" Wharton paints a troubling picture of the war artist carried to the ultimate conclusion. Distinguished by his silver flute and his decorative paint box, von Scharlach enjoys painting pictures of the French villages he has devastated. He embodies the ultimate in masculine power and war experience, but Wharton perverts him into an artist who takes pleasure in the beauty of the suffering around him without any redeeming human qualities. In so doing, she generally questions the artist's role with relationship to war.

Unlike von Scharlach, however, Whitman embodies both moral and artistic agency. An important agent in Hayley Delane's moral development, he is a supremely moral character in Wharton's war universe. Although Whitman never fought in the Civil War, his regular ministrations—

which Lewis compares to Wharton's World War I volunteer activities (373)—and, one must surmise, his sex qualify him as having come close enough to meet Wharton's needs for experiencing the war. Furthermore, he embodies an aesthetic ideal, as well.

Judith Sensibar raises the comparison to Whitman in writing of another of Wharton's post-war attempts to create art from her war experience, noting the dialogic relationship between *A Son at the Front*, also written in 1923, and the homophobic "canonical war art" (250) discussed by Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory*. John Campton, writes Sensibar, "is an empty Whitman—empty because, unlike that great artist, he fails to understand and so cannot make creative use of the homoerotic and bisexual content of his fantasy life" (252).⁵ In his biography of Wharton R.W. B Lewis points out that "what especially interested her in major American writers was their treatment of the emotional life, their involvement in their work of their deepest personal feelings. Whitman seemed to her preeminently effective in this regard" (237).

Wharton uses Whitman as an artist who is able to create art out of his experience. The Whitman poem that the narrator reads to Hayley Delane, "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim," shows the poet gazing on three corpses, the first old, the second young, the third transformed—as if by the artist's gaze—into an ivory Christ figure. In the novella's world, in fact, the wounded Delane could well have been the subject for Whitman's "The Wound Dresser":

Returning, resuming I thread my way
through the hospitals,
The hurt and wounded I pacify with
soothing hand,
I sit by the restless all the dark night, some
are so young,
Some suffer so much, I recall the
experience sweet and sad,
(Many a soldier's loving arms about this
neck have cross'd and rested,
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these
bearded lips.) (60-66)

Wharton never portrays Delane as being particularly attractive—the narrator describes him as "a New York banker of excessive weight and more than middle age" (192)—but the juxtaposition of such descriptions with images such as "Guidoriccio da Foligno, the famous mercenary,

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riding at a slow, powerful pace across the fortified fresco of the Town Hall of Siena" (192) and "a martial figure on an armoured war-horse" (192) seem to transform Delane into a similarly beautiful art object.

In addition to being an aesthetic object, the combination of Delane's battlefield experience and Whitman's artistic "touch" render him a perfect objectification of war's moral value. Delane's moral growth has continued after the war and has even surpassed that of his friends, as evidenced by his kindly treatment of his dissolute father-in-law and his abhorrence of playboy Bolton Byrne's violent treatment of his polo pony.

Unfortunately, however, the war has marked the end of Delane's intellectual growth. Delane comes to stand in for the post-World War I reader, who figuratively has lost his ability to read in the war. Not even a poet like Whitman can revive it. Delane's concluding lines about Whitman—"I rather wish...that you hadn't told me that he wrote all that rubbish'" (234)—are a sign of the artist's diminished role. The narrator's ultimately unfulfilled longing to connect aesthetically with Delane mirrors Wharton's unfulfilled desire for expression that will connect with her reader.

Here then is Wharton's final conundrum: What good is the moral sense, and how has war benefited that moral sense, if artists who would interpret war cannot do so in a way that will touch their readers?⁶ In Delane's impassive face the narrator finds "no spark" (*Spark* 232), no shared appreciation for Whitman's art. That lack of aesthetic connection highlights Wharton's ambivalence about her own role as an artist and the feeling of powerlessness that gives her the ability either to feel or to write, but not both.

The generational distance between *The Spark's* narrator and Hayley Delane, and the narrator's inability to make Delane appreciate Whitman's poetry, place the narrator in a muted position like Wharton's with respect to her own war writing. Behind the narrator lies Wharton's own desire to break the gendered barrier between experiencing and expressing the war. This makes *The Spark's* ending highly ironic because Delane—the one who really "was there" at the front—considers Whitman's poetry rubbish, although he fondly remembers Whitman as a person and certainly continues to feel his moral influence. Disguising her question carefully within a male-dominated period story set "[w]hile the world of gain and appearance and mirth goes

on" (Whitman, "The Wound Dresser," 21), Wharton asks if the traditional feminine position with respect to telling a war story can ever be legitimized. Yet at the same time, by focusing on a male poet who nursed rather than fought, she ultimately leaves open a crucial space in which that feminine voice can be heard "years hence of these scenes" ("The Wound Dresser," 7).

Notes

¹ *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, edited by Margaret Higonnet et al.; *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation*, edited by Helen Cooper. Adrienne Munich, and Susan Squier; Claire Tylee's *The Great War and Women's Consciousness*; Alan Price's *The End of the Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the First World War*; Jean Gallagher's *The World Wars Through the Female Gaze*, and Deborah Williams' *Not in Sisterhood: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zona Gale and the Politics of Female Authorship*, among others, are beginning to complement, complete, or correct androcentric pictures of World War I literature, such as Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return: A Narrative of Ideas*; Stanley Cooperman's *World War I and the American Novel*; and Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*. In addition, a session of the Modern Language Association 2002 Annual Meeting focused on Wharton's war writing.

² Ironically, in the ghost stories a male character's silence often is a metonym for his power.

³ Obviously, as Claire Tylee points out, the war subjected non-combatants, often women, to less intense and less prolonged battle stress than it did combatants, who were almost always men (186). Eric Leeds suggests, furthermore, that the male combatants often experienced their own brand of silencing. Disillusioned, if not shell-shocked, and unable to communicate their experience to those they had left behind, many World War I soldiers never were fully reincorporated into society as they should have been. Citing Arnold Van Gennep's classic paradigm of the rite of passage, in *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*, Leeds divides that rite into three phases: "...rites of separation, which remove an individual or group of individuals from his or their accustomed place; liminal rites, which symbolically fix the character of the 'passenger' as one who is between states, places, or conditions; and finally the rites of incorporation (postliminal rites), which welcome the individual back into the group" (14).

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⁴ In *The Better Angel: Walt Whitman in the Civil War* Roy Morris, Jr. points out that Whitman actually was less a nurse than a regular visitor, who performed such kindnesses as writing letters and dispensing small gifts. Nevertheless, "in ['The Wound Dresser'] he imagines himself in the caregiver's role in order to make, perhaps, a more visceral connection to the wounded men" (121).

⁵ While the title of Wharton's 1934 autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, pays late homage to Whitman, her interest in Whitman pre-dates World War I. For instance, in 1908, according to R.W.B. Lewis, she was working on an essay on Whitman, although it was never published (193). In 1910 she wrote to Morton Fullerton of her admiration for Bazalgett's translation of *Leaves of Grass* and of her desire to read Bazalgett's Whitman biography (*Letters* 238). After the war she read part of Traubel's *Walt Whitman in Camden* and in 1923 lamented to Corinne Roosevelt Robinson, "...[T]here is no Whitman singing in this generation..." (*Letters* 466). Lewis thus calls *The Spark* "an act of imaginative piety" (458) to Whitman.

⁶ Comparing *A Son at the Front* with Willa Cather's *One of Ours*, Deborah Lindsay Williams writes that "Cather's experiments with structure and voice and Wharton's depiction of an artist struggling with questions about the place of art in the postwar world would seem to position these two novels squarely within the intersecting canons of modernism and war fiction, but this is far from the case. Instead, these novels are considered minor works that fail to do justice to their subject, a testament to the sturdiness of the gender-genre boundary, which precludes the possibility that a woman could write a 'good' war novel" (142). Williams sees John Campton asking in *A Son at the Front*, "During war does art become mere decoration? How can he, an artist, be of use to the war effort?" (154)

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**"Before the Country's Awakening":
Aesthetic Misjudgment and National Growth in *The Spark***

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The Spark, the last written of the four novellas collected as *Old New York* in 1924, is an underappreciated instance of Edith Wharton's fictive engagement with American cultural nationalism and the culture of modernism, two matters that preoccupied her to a greater extent than has been generally supposed in the last, post-war phase of her career. Though formally conventional, the *Old New York* novellas are at least thematically modernist: they take aim at the sexual repressiveness and hypocrisy of the Victorian milieu from which she had long extricated herself, and satirize a provincial blindness on the part of her genteel Americans to the art in their midst that would become national and international cultural treasure.¹ In *False Dawn* and *The Spark*, in particular, the third and fourth novellas in order of composition, John Ruskin and the pre-Raphaelite circle, Edgar Allan Poe, and Walt Whitman make direct or indirect appearances, enabling distinctions to be registered between the advanced few who recognize their value and the philistine majority who do not. *The Spark* significantly complicates this treatment of an aesthetic schism with a double-edged irony that returns upon her

culturally savvy narrator, thus coyly expressing Wharton's ambivalence, fueled by memories of the recent war, about modernism's overvaluation of aesthetic rebellion. There, the satiric jab she levels at the elder generation's aesthetic obtuseness is offset by a somewhat anti-intellectual recognition of other vital forces – martial and biological exigencies, in particular – that have perhaps played the greater part in transforming the province of her girlhood into the seed-bed of an imperial nation.

The Spark has generally been regarded as an anomaly in the *Old New York* quartet: it is closer to a long short-story than a short novel, and though supposed to represent the decade of "the Sixties," as its sub-title suggests, it is set in the nineties. Wharton's correspondence with Rutger Jewett, her editor at Appleton, suggests its initially projected length precluded it from "the plan of four small books issued in similar form, a series of *Stories of Old New York*" (Jewett to Wharton, 26 Jan. 1923).² Though it eventually developed enough beyond the scope of a short story to become the fourth "novelette," in Jewett's term, it remains the thinnest of the four in plot and character development, and in the realization of its milieu. The story's premise is somewhat strained: a nameless narrator, a young man with aesthetic inclinations who has come of age in the nineties, is fascinated by Hayley Delane, an elderly New Yorker whose "monumental" stature seems at odds with the frivolous life he seems to lead, a life spent playing cards and polo, and looking out for a flighty, philandering wife and her derelict father. As a friendship develops between the narrator and the older man, he discovers that Hayley served bravely through most of the Civil War, and that while recovering from a wound in the hospital met a remarkable man whose name he forgot, but whose impact upon him has been profound. The man revealed to Hayley a heterodox religious creed and ethical orientation that has sustained him through life ever since and accounts for Hayley's eccentric reputation amongst old New Yorkers. The story concludes with a chance meeting at the narrator's home, where Hayley comes upon a copy of *Leaves of Grass* and realizes that its author, Walt Whitman, was the man who changed his life. But when the narrator reads selected passages of the poetry to Delane, he is nonplused and disappointed to learn that his friend had written such "rubbish" (*Old New York* 234). In her correspondence with Jewett, Wharton initially referred to what became *The Spark* as "the Civil war (Whitman) tale" and later "the Whitman

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story" (Wharton to Jewett, 11 Jan. 1923; 26 July 1923), descriptions that are only superficially misleading. For the cross-generational relationship between the narrator and Delane is largely a vehicle for reflecting upon the meaning of the Civil War as a nation-forming event and the meaning of Walt Whitman as a national-cultural icon.

In one of the few studies of *Old New York*, Catherine Rae describes *The Spark* as "the most timeless of the stories" (55). I think it rather the most historically entrenched of the four, for it is self-reflexively about the relations and disjunctions between the three time frames it articulates: the 1890s, when the story takes place; the 1860s, when the mysterious "event" that accounts for Hayley Delane's difference transpired; and the 1920s, when the story is being told. More so than *The Age of Innocence* and the other novellas that comprise the quartet, *The Spark* foregrounds the contemporary moment in which it is written. The narrator addresses an ideal reader of a more modern sensibility than even he himself enjoys – having become in his turn "an institution" (*Old New York* 229). The keeper of Hayley Delane's memory in two senses, he self-consciously tells his story about the redemptive spark of originality and physical and moral courage revealed within a matrix of traditional, institutionalized blandness in an effort to bridge the divide between "old New York" and "young America."

The Spark's rhetorical investment in a new generation more idealistically nationalistic and culturally informed than the older comes across most explicitly in a passage that follows upon the narrator's sudden recognition of Delane's experience of the Civil War:

It seemed incredible that it should have come to me as a surprise; that I should have forgotten, or perhaps never even known, this phase of his history. Yet in young men like myself, just out of college in the 'nineties, such ignorance was more excusable than now seems possible.

That was the dark time of our national indifference, before the country's awakening; no doubt the war seemed much farther from us, much less a part of us, than it does to the young men of today. Such was the case, at any rate, in old New York, and more particularly, perhaps, in the little clan of well-to-do and indolent old New Yorkers among whom I had grown up.

(*Old New York* 202)

This passage frames the story in the aftermath of the country's "awakening," which has brought to a new generation of Americans both a proper recognition of the necessity of heroic sacrifice on the battlefield and a knowledge of their own cultural resources. The "young men of today," in effect, fresh from the experience of World War One and familiar enough with Walt Whitman's contemporary status that Wharton need never fully name him in the story, are already presumed to recognize in the Civil War and what we think of today as the literature of the American renaissance the origins of their national-cultural identity.

This appeal to a new national spirit, of course, belies actual sources of division, among them the lingering effects of contention over America's role in the Great War and arguments about the roots and character of the national culture. Wharton, unlike many younger American intellectuals, had been a steadfast advocate of American intervention in the war from the outset and expected the United States to assume a powerful international position in its aftermath. While working on *The Spark*, her war novel *A Son at the Front* was published, which she hoped "would help a little to keep [the war] alive in people's memories" (Wharton to Jewett, 1 Oct. 1923). Projecting the more recent historical issue back onto the Civil War era was an easy and conventional imaginative gesture to make. In a notebook entry outlining the basic idea for *The Spark*, she reminded herself to "[l]ay stress on N.Y.'s indifference during Civil War – flights to Europe, sneers at Abolition, etc., etc." ("Subjects and Notes"). The America Wharton idealistically invoked in the essays published in 1919 as *French Ways and Their Meaning* was post-isolationist, a junior partner with and possible successor to the imperial nations of England and France, a young nation "growing up at last" (*French Ways* 36). World War One was the catalyst, in effect, of the country's "awakening," though retrospectively the Civil War could be regarded as setting into motion the forces of unification that would transform provincial old New Yorkers into either Republican civic leaders or mere antiquarian specimens. Wharton likely agreed with what her friend Gaillard Lapsley wrote in his introduction to *The America of Today*, a 1919 essay collection based on a symposium at Cambridge: "slavery was not the cause of the bitter tragedy of the civil war nor the true issue that was decided in those dark

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years. That was rather the assertion of the unity of the American people, their common mind and common purpose" (xxiv). World War One channeled this idea of national unity into an internationalist vision of cooperative empires advancing the cause of enlightenment and liberty; in Lapsley's words, "the dominant idea that turned America toward isolation in 1823 and cast it into civil strife in 1861, led it back in 1917 into the community of free peoples fighting for a common end" (xxv).³ The narrator's proleptic perspective makes him a prospective sympathizer with this development as far back as the nineties, and accounts for "the spark" conveyed to him by Hayley Delane, whose own youthful rush to arms makes him a forerunner of an "awakened" national consciousness and thus peculiarly susceptible to "the spark" conveyed by Walt Whitman.

Less divisive an issue than America's role in the war was the matter of Whitman's cultural significance and artistic power, around which we find intellectuals and artists of the most disparate stripes converging. In his landmark 1911 essay, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy" and a follow-up piece on "Genteel American Poetry," George Santayana identified Whitman as leading the assault on the genteel tradition in letters that eventually rendered it obsolete, while signaling the advent of a democratic, nationalist, and modern literature that to his mind had not yet flowered (see *Winds* 202-03; "Genteel" 95). Given how axiomatic this view was among self-styled American modernists, Wharton's longstanding passion for Whitman's poetry was sure evidence of her own rebellion against genteel aesthetic culture. Probably as early as 1908 she outlined an essay on Whitman that in its emphasis on the virtues of Whitman's language and prosody might have marked a significant advance on such authoritative criticism as Bliss Perry's *Walt Whitman: His Life and Work* (1906) or the Whitman chapter in Barrett Wendell's *A Literary History of America* (1900).⁴

By the early 1920s, Whitman was an ideologically-charged cultural touchstone, a "precipitant of the modern," in Alan Trachtenberg's words: "Source, precursor, native genius, enfranchiser: Whitman looms as the single most revered and honored and idolized figure from the recent past in the minds of artists dedicated to 'making it new' from the turn of the century through the 1920s" (195).⁵ As such he figured easily as an artist-victim of American philistinism, misunderstood, scorned, or neglected by the many until posterity

be enlightened by the few. "What could have been more ironical than the solemn celebrations of Whitman's centenary that were carried off in various American universities in 1919?" asked H.L. Mencken in his 1920 essay on "The National Letters" (*Prejudices* 64). With the interest of more contemporary literary rebels at heart, Mencken reminded his readers that Whitman as well as Poe "were neglected by the Brahmins of their time, and both were regarded hostilely by the great body of right-thinking citizens" (57). But the solemn Whitman centenary celebrations at universities would have been further confirmation, for the narrator of *The Spark*, of the country's awakening. Again, Wharton's young aesthete reading Whitman in the nineties brings a proleptic awareness of the weight of symbolic meaning Whitman would commonly bear two decades later, the meaning we find, for example, in this passage from Van Wyck Brooks' cultural-nationalist tract, *America's Coming-of-Age* (1915):

Whitman – how else can I express it? – precipitated the American character. All those things that had been separate, self-sufficient, incoördinate – action, theory, idealism, business – he cast into a crucible; and they emerged, harmonious and molten, in a fresh democratic ideal, based upon the whole personality. Every strong personal impulse, every coöperating and unifying impulse, everything that enriches the social background, everything that enriches the individual, everything that impels and clarifies in the modern world owes something to Whitman. And especially of those American writers who have written preëminently for young men – and which has not? – Whitman alone, it seems to me, has pitched his tone to the real spring of action in them.

All this indicates a function quite different from that of a poet in any but the most radical and primitive sense of the word . . . , a man, that is to say, who first gives to a nation a certain focal centre in the consciousness of its own character. (62)

Whitman had become indisputably America's national poet: thus his verse serves as epigraph and his vision a guiding light for Waldo Frank's survey of America's spiritual potential, *Our America* (published to introduce America to the French in the same year that Wharton published her book introducing France to Americans). Regardless of

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whether Wharton read Whitman as a poet of cosmic unity or a voice of sexual liberation,⁶ she reveals in *The Spark* an awareness of the ways in which Whitman the cultural icon was circulating as both specifically "modern" and "American" cultural capital in the consciousness of younger contemporaries preoccupied with the pressing issue Brooks called "letters and leadership."

Whitman's significance as cultural capital is clearly indispensable to the story's irony, which as I have suggested cuts in two directions. On the one hand, the ideal readership addressed by the narrator is surely meant to laugh at Hayley for failing to respond properly to Whitman's poetry. His wife's outburst at Hayley in the very first words of the story – "You idiot" – becomes uncannily validated (*Old New York* 183). On the other hand, our narrator is also called an "idiot" at one point in the story (*Old New York* 198), and this seems corroborated when he mistakes Hayley's boredom and perplexity for aesthetic rapture, a mistake emanating from his assumption that the erosion of generational differences that have put him and Hayley "on terms of brotherly equality" (*Old New York* 230) makes for a communion of shared aesthetic sensibility. What he has been drawn to in Hayley from the outset is his certain "difference," but he is at a loss to specify where the difference inheres, especially given Hayley's common choice of a wife. For the only category of discrimination that makes sense to our narrator is aesthetic: "the difference in him was not in his tastes – it was in something ever so much deeper. Yet what is deeper in a man than his tastes?" (*Old New York* 185). "Taste," which in his preface to *The Golden Bowl* Henry James called "a blessed comprehensive name for many of the things deepest in us" (30), betrays itself as a source of division capable of suddenly reversing the story's seeming progression towards communion. For all Hayley's eccentric acts of compassion, his democratic sensibility, and his impatience with a written English more formal than vernacular speech, his taste remains set – limited to a handful of English touchstones and as such decidedly inhospitable to Whitman. He remains, in Santayana's formulation, an "average genteel person, with a heart, a morality, and a religion, who is after all in the majority, [and] left without any poetry to give him pleasure or to do him honor" ("Genteel" 95).

Wharton was doubtless aware of the paradox, emphasized with some irony by both

Wendell and Perry, whereby the self-styled poet of democracy was principally enjoyed by highly cultivated, self-styled elite or avant-garde readers (see Wendell 466-67; Perry 308). Even a radically democratic visionary like Waldo Frank does little to dispel this paradox by distinguishing between the "multitudes" Whitman idealistically sang for and the actual "herd" that remains deaf to his song (see Frank 209-12). Thus, insofar as the tale's irony falls upon Hayley for being at bottom a philistine, it depends for its effect upon a socially-produced notion of advanced or higher cultural literacy, upon a readership, more precisely, that has learned to recognize Whitman's real value, which, like the paintings in *False Dawn*, has been legitimized and even consecrated by that mysterious source of cultural authority whom Wharton simply calls "the man who knows" (*Old New York* 79). Wharton goes some length to reproduce in her own relatively accessible art modernist notions of value, which make popular neglect or conventional critical hostility a sign of aesthetic virtue.⁷ She engages an exclusive readership within her broader readership, in effect, that can take pride in forwarding (and benefitting from) a general cultural awakening to the extent that it recognizes past (mis)judgments as self-evidently wrong.

But however much Wharton may have "link [ed] her social and literary development with [Whitman's]," as Sharon Shaloo argues she did (81), she could hardly have shared with Whitman a common stake in having modernist criteria of aesthetic virtue prevail, at least without countervailing criteria to check them. Indeed, as a commercially successful, popular lady author, Wharton would have been threatened by these (which might explain the hostility she expressed around the time of writing *The Spark* to James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, both highly regarded in elite literary circles [see *Letters* 461]). And thus we have the story's ironic thrust at Hayley's shortcomings in taste recoil upon our young man of the nineties. The thwarted cross-generational communion with Hayley he imagines enjoying underscores a disjunction in the story between Whitman the man and Whitman the poet, between Whitman as an ethical force and Whitman as an aesthetic innovator. And this disjunction figures forth a more socially momentous rift between an ideal of classless cultural consensus (such as that envisioned by Brooks) and the inescapably fragmented bourgeois cultural sphere of modernism, as well as

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between a spiritualized homosocial cultural sphere and the messier realm of sex, warfare, and economic necessity.

Those who first read the story in the *Ladies' Home Journal* – where both *The Spark* and *False Dawn* first appeared – might have been drawn precisely to Wharton's insistence on Whitman's impact as a doer, as someone whose actions as a volunteer nurse among the soldiers spoke louder than his words. (Wharton undoubtedly saw parallels between Whitman's war work and her own.) And they might have more readily appreciated her insistence on the inexplicable power of the story's "idiot" woman to render Hayley so elusive as an object of the narrator's homosocial and possibly homosexual desire.⁸ Whitman the humanitarian is finally not the only spark that awakens Hayley. He is also fundamentally moved by Leila Gracy, who became his unruly wife soon after he decided to marry her upon first sight (see *Old New York* 184). Whitman's poetry may linguistically represent the vitality of the vernacular, of the natural, of experience itself; Leila, for all her foibles, virtually embodies it. Against the monumental, structural, institutional qualities the narrator attributes to Hayley, Leila suggests "something in the making, something just flowering" (see *Old New York* 186-187). Dim-witted she may be, but after bearing and raising two successful sons and outliving Hayley, she ends up marrying "the President of a rising Western University" (*Old New York* 229) and adopting intellectual pretensions. The satirical aspect of all this is obvious, but it recalls the national growth inadvertently issued in by May Welland's fertility in *The Age of Innocence*, and reflected in Undine Spragg's spectacular if incomplete success, and suggests that a national awakening comes not through taste alone but through acquisitive and sexual energies – which our bachelor narrator, an outwardly conventional aesthete working as a partner in a bank, seems conspicuously to lack. Having come of age in the nineties, "the dark time of our national indifference," he harks back yearningly to the Civil War and forward to World War One as to opportunities for diverting those acquisitive and sexual energies into the service of a homosocial idealism forged through martial courage and violence, underwritten by (and productive of) great poetry and art, but never identical to it.⁹ The "spark" conveyed to the narrator by Hayley awakens a desire to be physically present with him in the army camps of war, which the

shared experience of hearing Whitman's verses might have subliminally satisfied. It also makes him want to disavow the spectacle of an unseemly heterosexual marriage plot that renders his "monumental" old New Yorker all too common.

The Spark's narrator indirectly articulates numerous structures of division both within himself and the society whose changes he has witnessed over the decades – between self-consciously traditional and self-consciously modern generations, between ethical and aesthetic branches of experience, between the life of the mind and the drives of the body, between the habitual and the outrageous and daring. And yet he remains unable to discern how exactly the tension between them proves fruitful, short of recognizing a generalized national awakening after it has happened, and seeking for the immanent signs of that awakening in a past whose unsung, Whitmanesque hero is, however eccentric, still but a soldier, a lusty husband, a father, and a civic-minded provincial with conventional aesthetic taste. Wharton no doubt betrays considerable sympathy for her young aesthete's inclinations and perceptions. But these are finally insufficient in themselves to produce the sparks without which a society's expansion into something greater than itself would be literally inconceivable.

Notes

¹ Sharon Shaloo has written the most thorough essay to date on the interrelation of sexual and artistic themes in *Old New York*. Attending to the presence of Poe and Whitman in the collection, Shaloo sees Wharton developing the thesis "that inspiration lay in the territory where literary creativity and sexual fulfillment converge" (67). Her essay remains valuable, but overstates, I think, the extent to which Wharton was charting a new aesthetic path for herself.

² All unpublished correspondence cited in this paper is in the Edith Wharton Collection at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

³ For evidence of Wharton's admiration for this piece, see *Letters* 424.

⁴ Wharton's "Sketch of an Essay on Walt Whitman" (undated) is in the Edith Wharton Collection at the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library. For useful discussions of these notes and of Wharton's interest in Whitman, see Price 380-82, Singly 148-50, and Goodman.

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⁵ See Trachtenberg's essay throughout for a detailed discussion of Whitman's uncanny influence on modernism. Also see Price 398, n.16; and Miller 185, 192-93.

⁶ Goodman argues plausibly enough that Wharton was drawn to "the Cosmic Whitman," at least in 1908 (4). Her more speculative suggestion – that Wharton's claim "that Whitman's treatment of love and the lover was asexual" must be read as an act of lady-like concealment, particularly given her budding interest in Morton Fullerton (6) – is further substantiated by Price (380-89) and Singley (151-52).

⁷ For a critical genealogy of these modernist notions of value, and of the rise in symbolic capital which attaches itself to "revolutionary" literature or art (temporarily) aimed at a restricted audience, see Part I, Chapter 1 of Bourdieu's *Rules of Art*, especially 81-85.

⁸ As Price reminds us, Wharton's interest in Whitman grew in the context of her friendship with a number of sexually ambiguous intellectual men: "there was at this time a growing sense of homosexual consciousness to which Whitman contributed significantly" (384).

⁹ He elides mention of the Spanish-American War, oddly, which did so much for old New Yorker Theodore Roosevelt's career and image. One way of reading this elision is as evidence of a guilty conscience for having not done enough to forward the very awakening he celebrates.

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From Image to Text: Modernist Transformations in Edith Wharton's "The Muse's Tragedy"

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From the first line of Edith Wharton's "The Muse's Tragedy" (1899), the story is concerned with the question of who controls the image of the female "muse," Mary Anerton. The line reads: "Danyers afterwards liked to fancy that he had recognized Mrs. Anerton at once; but that, of course, was absurd, since he had seen no portrait

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of her—she affected a strict anonymity, refusing even her photograph to the most privileged" (50). Though Mary withholds her image from the public, wishing to maintain "a strict anonymity," Lewis Danyers cherishes the fancy that he has recognized her "at once." This recognition is made possible by Danyers's devoted reading of the works of the illustrious poet Vincent Rendle, who has immortalized Mary Anerton as "Silvia." Throughout the story, Danyers continues to see Mary through the lens of Rendle's texts; in doing so, he converts her into a visual object. Yet the story challenges the vision of Mary that Danyers has inherited from Rendle. "The Muse's Tragedy" tells Mary's story twice, first from Danyers's perspective and then from Mary's own. The final section of the story takes the form of a letter written by Mary, a letter that attempts to correct Danyers's misperceptions about her relationships both with him and Rendle. In giving the final section of the story to Mary, Wharton assists in her transformation from visual object to textual subject.

Critical analyses of "The Muse's Tragedy" have tended toward these two poles, typically viewing Mary either as visual object or textual subject. At one pole, Cynthia Griffin Wolff has argued that "Mrs. Anerton had been the perfect, passive incarnation of femininity," and that "The Muse's Tragedy" reduces Mary to "a convenient object" (103). At the other pole, M. Denise Witzig and Candace Waid have emphasized Mary's authorship, her subjectivity rather than her objecthood. Yet what both of these positions overlook is the necessary connection in the story between these two states. This paper argues that it is essential to recognize that Danyers's visual objectification of Mary causes her to reclaim her own subjectivity in language. At stake in this shift from object to subject is a larger critique of gendered forms of looking and the modes of aesthetic production to which they give rise. Calling into question the objectifying, apparently universal vision upon which so much Western art and literature are based, "The Muse's Tragedy" provides an alternative to it in the form of Mary's letter, a document that reveals her point of view to be fragmented and radically situated. In endorsing such a point of view, the story critiques and revises turn-of-the-century visuality in ways that, despite Wharton's overt criticism of modernist fiction, have distinctly modernist overtones.

In the first half of the story, readers' view of Mary is limited to Danyers's impressions of her. A

would-be poet and devotee of Rendle, Danyers ascribes Mary's failure to marry Rendle after the death of her husband to her delicate scruples. He believes that Mary is a woman of such "exquisite... perceptions" that, rather than "vulgarize" her relationship with Rendle through marriage, she "chose to go down to posterity as Silvia rather than as Mrs. Vincent Rendle!" (53). To elevate her to this position of extreme, indeed inhuman, sensibility, Danyers deifies Mary. He considers himself "merely one more grain of frankincense on the altar of her insatiable divinity" (55), and when their mutual friend, Mrs. Memorall, suggests that Mary ought to marry again, "Danyers winced at this rude fingering of his idol" (53). This idolization is part of a series of willful projections, which again are evident from the story's first line: "Danyers afterwards liked to fancy that he had recognized Mrs. Anerton at once; but that, of course, was absurd" (50). In Danyers's fantasy—which he acknowledges as "absurd"—he privileges his own preconceptions of Mary, gleaned from Rendle's poems, over his actual encounter with her. It would almost be more correct to say that he conjures Mrs. Anerton than that he recognizes her: "he had been thinking of [her] as he sat over his breakfast in the empty hotel restaurant, and... looking up on the approach of the lady who seated herself at the table near the window, he had said to himself, 'That might be she'" (50). Mrs. Anerton is a projection of Danyer's desire; pointedly, no "objective" visual record of her physical appearance is available in the story, for as the story's first line relates, Danyers "had seen no portrait of her" (50), and she "refus[ed] even her photograph to the most privileged" (50).

In recognizing Mary solely from Rendle's descriptions of her, Danyers endows Rendle's texts—and his reading of those texts—with a visual authority so powerful it competes with these withheld photographs. Danyers implicitly grants Rendle's poetry a perfect, mimetic transparency, through which, as a perfectly sympathetic reader, he is capable of seeing Mary. According to Karen Jacobs, this kind of faith in the transparency of language begins to erode in modernist literature. Jacobs argues that modernist literature is characterized by "a crisis of belief in the continuity between seeing and knowing, and a commensurate cognizance of the subjective mediations of embodied visuality" (19). In contrast to realism or naturalism, which depend on the metaphor of the camera lens as the purveyor of

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visual truth, modernist literature subordinates optical truth to an embodied, subjective point of view. Modernism situates knowledge in language, thus in a system with a more obviously "limited capacity... to carry the burdens of mimeticism than the photographic image" (20). As is well known, Wharton was critical of much modernist writing¹ yet "The Muse's Tragedy" exemplifies precisely the modernist response to visual culture that Jacobs describes. In establishing Danyers as someone who imbues Rendle's poetry with the mimetic accuracy of a photograph, "The Muse's Tragedy" evokes a nineteenth-century attitude toward language in order ultimately to question it through the device of Mary's letter.

Danyers's faith in Rendle's poems is figured through his association of them with photographs. However, when Danyers meets Mary—when he shifts his attention from Rendle's words to Mary herself—"The Muse's Tragedy" also shifts visual metaphors. To Danyers, photography connotes accuracy or objective truth, but his notion that Mary is poetry incarnate requires him to turn to a more aesthetic visual vocabulary. Danyers likens Mary to works of visual art; she becomes the visual correlative of verse. He recalls "the one impressionist phrase" (50) that their mutual friend, Mrs. Memorall, had offered about Mary: "'Oh, well, she's like one of those old prints where the lines have the value of color'" (50). Contemplating Mary's "lines," Danyers transposes her from the textual medium of the "lines" of Rendle's poetry to the visual medium of a print. Her "lines" have an illusionistic quality, suggesting color where there is none. As prescribed by this schema, when Danyers looks at Mary, he sees what is not there. He seems to prefer his imaginings to knowledge of the woman herself. Indeed, Danyers wants to preserve Mary as he knows her through Rendle's poetry, and he conceives of this nostalgic impulse again in terms of the visual arts. Learning from Mrs. Memorall that Mary Anerton didn't marry Rendle "when she had the chance," Danyers thinks, "Fancy Rendle 'making an honest woman' of Silvia, for so society would have viewed it! How such a reparation would have vulgarized their past—it would have been like 'restoring' a masterpiece" (53). In wanting to preserve "Silvia" as an unrestored masterpiece, Danyers prefers a faded and mythic rendering of "Silvia" to the living Mary. Danyers doubly embalms Mary in the media of art: once through Rendle's textualization of Mary, and

again through Danyers's visualization of the text. In fetishizing Rendle's "masterpiece," Danyers preserves the illusions about Mary that he has inherited from Rendle.

"The Muse's Tragedy" begins to reveal its criticism of Danyers's naïve posture by demonstrating the ways that his desire to find visual equivalents for Rendle's textual versions of Mary lead him almost always to miss the mark.² In regarding Mary as animated poetry rather than a human being, Danyers always misconstrues her, reduces her to two-dimensionality. The first time Danyers sees her in the hotel, she appears to him in the medium of a silhouette: Mary "had seated herself in such a way that her profile was detached against the window, and thus viewed, her domed forehead, small arched nose, and fastidious lip suggested a silhouette of Marie Antoinette" (54). Framed by Danyers's perception as much as by the window, Mary Anerton is reduced to a mere outline, for silhouettes are characterized by their lack of detail. Inexpensive alternatives to miniature or portrait painting (and precursors to photographic portraits), silhouettes sacrifice modeling and depth to the single black-and-white division between profile and ground. As a silhouette, Mary is also robbed of individuality, becoming interchangeable with Marie Antoinette. Mary later complains that Rendle's *Sonnets to Silvia* were "addressed to Woman, not to a woman!" (60); similarly, Danyers's vision of Mary as the silhouette of Marie converts her into a generic Woman as well.

If "The Muse's Tragedy" had ended with Danyers's inherited vision of Mary Anerton as Woman, Cynthia Griffin Wolff's observation that "Mrs. Anerton[...]had inspired great art; and she had been reduced, in the process, to[...]a convenient object" (103) would have been accurate. And if the point of view of "The Muse's Tragedy" were equivalent to Danyers's point of view, the story would fit the mold of any number of tales in which a male artist scrutinizes his muse, transforming her into a dead work of art and losing her in the process. Nineteenth-century examples abound, including Poe's "Oval Portrait" and Zola's *The Masterpiece*, or in a slightly different key, Hawthorne's "Birthmark" and James's "Daisy Miller." With various degrees of awareness and irony, these and countless other stories demonstrate the ways a gendered visual economy sacrifices the female body to masculine aesthetic production, objectifying women in the process. But Wharton's story does not end with

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Danyers's/Rendle's vision. "The Muse's Tragedy" deviates from this archetypal storyline, first because Mary outlives the poet who made her "immortal" in verse, and more radically because, as Elsa Nettels, Hildegard Hoeller, and M. Denise Witzig have recently argued, Mary Anerton's letter constitutes a significant challenge to this objectified version of femininity. Through the device of the letter, the story insists on re-presenting the muse, not as visual object but as textual subject.

One way that Mary's letter counters her status as visual object is by insisting on her desires as a flesh-and-blood woman: "I was part of his intellectual life. The pity of it was that I wanted to be something more....I was in love with him" (59), but "he had never made love to me; it was no fault of his if I wanted more than he could give me. The *Sonnets to Silvia*, you say? But what are they? A cosmic philosophy, not a love poem; addressed to Woman, not to a woman!" (60). With this shift in point of view, the story revises and corrects Danyers's false perception of Mary, converting her from idol and work of art back to human being. In doing so, it offers a pointed criticism of the objectifying vision that has led Danyers, and Rendle before him, to construe Mary as muse. Indeed, the story interrogates the long tradition of mimetic representation in Western art by uncovering the gendered rules of perspective on which they are based. In challenging this masculine point of view, "The Muse's Tragedy" employs decidedly modernist tactics.

In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton outlines the difference between realism and "the new methods" of fiction writing.³ Wharton cites the "early French realists" as "that group of brilliant writers who invented the once-famous *tranche de vie* [slice of life], the exact photographic reproduction of a situation or an episode, with all its sounds, smells, aspects realistically rendered, but with its deeper relevance and its suggestions of a larger whole either unconsciously missed or purposely left out" (10). As she would later and more succinctly put it, "the [realist] novelist exchanged his creative faculty for a kodak."⁴ Like the modernists of whom she is critical, Wharton clearly distrusts the realists' excessive reliance on the visual. Wharton is suspicious of what Jacobs calls the realist equation of text with camera, and of the accompanying realist faith in language's transparency. Turning to more recent trends in fiction, Wharton notes that the

realists' reliance on the visual has been supplemented by a new interiority: "the slice of life...has lately reappeared...re-labelled [as] the stream of consciousness....[It] differs from the slice of life in noting mental as well as visual reactions" (11-12). In theory, such "mental reactions" might supply the very "relevance" and sense of "a larger whole" that was lacking in the "exact photographic reproductions" aimed at by realist texts. For Wharton, however, "the new methods" threaten to undermine the coherence of modernist texts. Wharton is troubled by the tendency of the "new fiction" to "note down every half-aware stirring of thought and sensation" and to record "automatic reactions to every passing impression" (12). As Frederick Wegener has shown, Wharton faults stream-of-consciousness writing less in principle than for reproducing the very failing of realism: an inability to discriminate relevant from irrelevant detail. Indeed, in recording "automatic reactions to every passing impression," stream-of-consciousness narration potentially relocates the realist camera to the interior. As Jacobs has found, despite the desire of modernist texts to question the documentary vision supposedly epitomized by the camera, many end up replacing that vision with what she calls an "interior gaze," a gaze that "preserves...a positivist fantasy of the availability of visual truths by strategically conceding their difficulty of access" (19).

Wary of such positivist fantasies, Wharton avoids them in both of their incarnations in "The Muse's Tragedy," where she employs neither excessively photographic slices of life nor stream-of-consciousness narration. Yet Mary's letter, with its asides and evasions, its dashes and ellipses, arguably simulates some kind of uncensored thought. In offering this letter as a corrective to Danyers's oddly positivist vision of her, the story enacts at a structural level the very tension that characterizes modernist texts: the tension between seeing and knowing, between a faith in optical versus subjective truths. "The Muse's Tragedy" interrogates the realist representational model of text as mirror through its portrayal of Danyers, who holds Rendle's texts up to the living Mary and sees only their reflection in her; it then offers a modernist alternative, not through stream-of-consciousness but through Mary's letter.

To enable the silent muse to speak, Wharton violates what she considers to be one of the first

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principles in the composition of short stories including Mary's letter: adherence to the classical rules of perspective. In *The Writing of Fiction* she suggests that:

The short-story writer must not only know from what angle to present his anecdote...but must understand just *why* that particular angle and no other is the right one. He must therefore have turned his subject over and over, walked around it, so to speak, and applied to it those laws of perspective which Paolo Ucello called "so beautiful," before it can be offered to the reader as a natural unembellished fragment of experience. (48-49)

Ucello was one of the first painters of the early Renaissance to use foreshortening and one-point perspective to create a sense of depth. These techniques establish not only the relationships among figures and objects in a painting but also locate the viewer at a single point in space on a continuum with the painting's vanishing point. In the passage above, Wharton suggests that the fiction writers of her day are the inheritors of this system of representation. She notes the importance of viewing a "subject over and over, walk[ing] around it, so to speak," before deciding on the angle of vision from which to apply the laws of linear perspective on the story's subject. She continues by noting the importance, in short stories, of respecting a particular angle once it is chosen: "The non-observance of the optics of the printed page results in the same failure to make the subject 'carry' as the non-observance of the optics of the stage in presenting a play" (49). In other words, to violate the rules of perspective in fiction is akin to violating the theater's "third wall," to walking behind the proscenium and, by viewing it from backstage, exposing its illusionistic strategies.

However, "The Muse's Tragedy" makes clear that a too-strict "observance of the optics of the printed page" can produce disastrous consequences in readers; such a rigid observance has created Danyers, a reader unable to deviate from the angle of vision prescribed by Rendle's poems. Danyers epitomizes the type of visual subject that Martin Jay has argued is identified with the dominant Western "scopic regime," the regime of "Cartesian perspectivalism" (4). Cartesian perspectivalism describes a visual model derived

from the same rationalized geometrical space that practitioners of linear perspective such as Ucello sought to map. In this model, the subject is stable and unified, and typically bears a reifying male gaze. Wharton's textual "optics" rely on a similar visual model; by incorporating a single and stable point of view, they constitute a literary instance of Cartesian perspectivalism. These optics come under assault in modernist texts generally and in "The Muse's Tragedy" in particular. The only way to restore Mary back from art to life is to destroy Danyers's view of her, and in the process, to give readers an angle of vision radically different from his. The device of Mary's letter does just this. The first half of the story subtly undermines Danyers's vision and the texts that have guided it; the second half—constituted by Mary's letter—further ironizes his view, not only by revealing the "truth" about Mary's relationship with Rendle but also by deconstructing the myth of Rendle's genius, and finally by disallowing the mimetic transparency of the letter itself, the very medium of these exposures. In introducing Mary's story—in granting the view from backstage, so to speak—the story does not simply replace one vantage point for another but rather refuses the possibility of any unified point of view.

The first way in which Mary's letter counters Danyers's perspective is in its vision of Rendle. Where Danyers remembers Rendle reverently as "the great man" (55)—he uses the definite article and a lower-case g and m—Mary ironizes Rendle as "a Great Man" (61)—capital G, capital M. Just as Rendle transformed her from a woman to Woman, she transforms him from "the great man" to "a Great Man," to a recognizable, generalizable type. The capital letters and the demotion from "the" to "a" great man reveal that Mary considers Rendle's greatness to be a kind of a performance. His apparently noble and selfless pursuit of beauty in fact coincides with the somewhat foolish pursuit of an unattainable young girl. As Mary tells it, "he followed [the girl] to Switzerland one summer, and all that time that he was dangling after her (a little too conspicuously, I always thought, for a Great Man), he was writing to me about his theory of vowel combinations—or was it his experiments in English hexameter? The letters were dated from the very places where I knew they went and sat by waterfalls together and he thought out adjectives for her hair" (61). Though it is possible to read this passage as expressing simple jealousy, Mary's

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tongue-in-cheek references to English hexameter and vowel combinations—the implication is that it hardly matters which—self-consciously mock the exalted theories with which Rendle dresses up his desire. Rendle's formal concerns are clearly a dodge for his more pressing interest in the hair of the young girl. This view is confirmed by the superficiality of his attraction to the girl. Mary writes that Rendle later "talked to me about it quite frankly....She was perfectly beautiful and it had been a pure delight to watch her; but she would talk, and her mind, he said, was 'all elbows'" (61). In many ways, this girl had been the muse that Mary herself never was: an object best known by her exterior.

By contrast, Mary is all interior. Despite Danyers's scopic interest in her, we learn nothing about her looks. More importantly, her letter reveals that between Mary and Rendle there was an "almost complete" "intellectual sympathy" (59): "the world[...]thinks that his greatest poems were written during those years" when he and she were friends (59). "I am supposed to have 'inspired' them," writes Mary (59). The scarequotes around "inspire" throw doubt on Mary's role as muse and raise the possibility that she was closer to collaborator. Even to Danyers it is apparent that "she was no mere echo of Rendle's thought. Danyers began to see how many threads of his complex mental tissue the poet owed to the blending of her temperament with his; in a certain sense Silvia had herself created the *Sonnets to Silvia*" (56). This possibility is further developed through the parallels between Rendle and Danyers. When Mary flatters Danyers by telling him "you must write" (57), he thinks callowly, "how she divined him; lifted and disentangled his groping ambitions; laid the awakening touch on his spirit with her creative *Let there be light!*" (57). But again Danyers misconstrues her. She urges him not to write poetry but rather a book about Rendle, a book they both know he could not write without her. With Danyers, Mary implicitly insists on being collaborator rather than muse. And to the extent that Mary's relationship with Danyers repeats her relationship with Rendle, the strong suggestion is that she has once before consented to being a silent authorial partner. The myth of individual male genius comes under attack. The muse's tragedy is not that her love was unreciprocated but that her authorship was unacknowledged.

It is in publishing Rendle's letters that Mary

asserts her authorial privilege most boldly. At the core of her epistolary "confession" to Danyers is Mary's admission that she added "breaks in the letters here and there, just as they seemed to be on the point of growing a little—warmer" (60). In the name of protecting her privacy, she "put in a line of asterisks to make it appear that something was left out. You understand? The asterisks were a sham—*there was nothing to leave out*" (60). This "nothing to leave out" is not only Mary's most brilliant fictional creation, it is also the story's crowning modernist gesture. The text presents not a seamless view of reality but a series of dodges and evasions that convey only partial, subjective truths. As M. Denise Witzig has argued, the absence of salutation and signature—of opening or closure—in the letter signifies Mary's inaccessibility not only to Danyers but also to Wharton's readers. In its radical reframing and unframing of subjective vision, the letter does more than simply suggest that appearances are deceiving; it actually denies the transparency or referentiality of language. Mary's "self," the letter tells us, is ultimately not knowable through the text, for it is produced in the very absences and interstices of language. In effecting her transformation from visual object to textual subject, Mary's letter triumphantly violates the "optics" of the text and creates a space for a modernist—and feminine—point of view.

Notes

¹ See Shari Benstock's discussion of *The Writing of Fiction*, 389-90. For a reconsideration of Wharton's anti-modernism, see Wegener. See Cahir and Singley for discussions of *Ethan Frome* as a modernist text. Despite critical interest in the gaps and elisions of Mary's letter, critics have not taken the next step and argued that "The Muse's Tragedy" is a modernist story.

² The notion that there is some sort of equivalence between painting and poetry dates back to classical times and is often attributed to Horace, who famously wrote in his *Ars Poetica*, "*ut pictura poesis*." For a history of this idea, see the translator's introduction to Lessing, *Laocoön*. For a discussion of some of the gender implications of Lessing's attempts to elevate poetry over painting, see Mitchell, "Space and Time."

³ Wharton used this term in reference to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. See Wharton, *Letters*, 480; qtd. in Wegener, 116.

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4 Wharton, "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," 171.

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the novel's features, including the inevitability of Lily's death; readers are invited to see traces of the slave auction in the tableau vivant and to equate, as Selden does, Lily's sapphire bracelets with slave manacles. For Rohrbach, "Edith Wharton is also a race writer," one whose purpose is to "record and criticize" (108) and whose novels "turn on the kind of cultural code switching that often formulates the most crucial aspects of identity in what is usually considered race writing" (113). In conflating race and class, or in coding race in the language of class, Wharton addresses but leaves open the question of whether identity is inherent or socially constructed, itself a familiar concern of tragic mulatto and mulatta stories. That Wharton strategically analyzed this "racial topoi" (110) as part of her shrewd assessment of the marketplace and deliberately "turned to this style of representation" (104) to engage middle- or working-class readers who might otherwise be put off by the rarefied details of Lily's plight is simply stated as a fact, although evidence of her awareness of these forms is not established. Yet documenting Wharton's actual knowledge of such texts may be beside the point, for the real focus is the ways in which Wharton uses this trope of race to talk about class, and, equally significant, the ways in which contemporary critics like Rohrbach use both current discourses of and historical perspectives on race to talk about Wharton. Reading the well-researched, insightful, and always interesting "*Truth Stranger than Fiction*" resembles nothing so much as watching the missing pieces of a puzzle drop into place to reveal a newly altered and strangely exciting picture in place of what one has always known, whether the original portrait bears the familiar lineaments of Edith Wharton or the roughly sketched and lopsided outlines of American realism.

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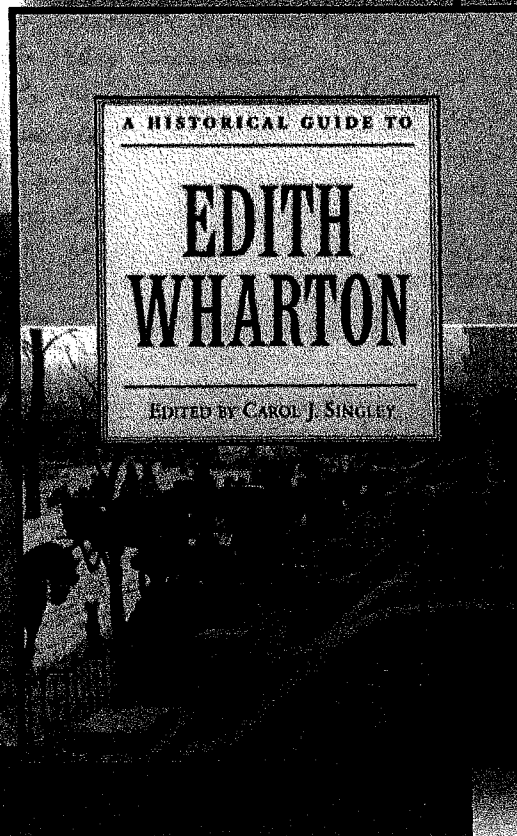
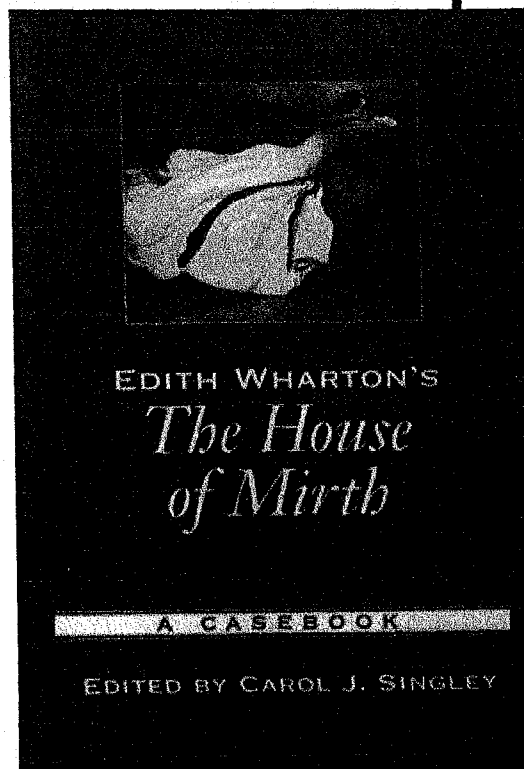
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BOOK REVIEW

(Continued from page 3)

landscapes lacked the cultivation of European ones, it is not surprising that her best work brings the landscape indoors" (122). If Constance Fenimore Woolson is a botanist, Edith Wharton is a florist (152). As regards Wharton, this book is best read as an essay in cultural history that creates a context for her works rather than as an interpretive work.

Jean Frantz Blackall
Cornell University

BOOK REVIEW

(Continued from page 2)

ity" (117), but she argues persuasively that the more significant character is not Vance but Halo, who expresses Wharton's ideals of harmony and order, shares her distaste for "modernist excesses," both in "style and sexuality" (118), but, like Charity Royall, confronts repressive codes that thwart women's quest for freedom and fulfillment. Thompson's analysis of Halo in *The Gods Arrive* illuminates as clearly as any reading of the novel Wharton's difficulty in portraying, or even imagining, a society able "to foster a creative, independent woman who nonetheless maintained the ideals of a traditional culture" (121).

Of the three twentieth-century writers Thompson studies, Hurst was the most receptive to Joycean modernism, using the stream-of-consciousness technique in her second novel, *Lummox*. Cather, who shared many of Wharton's opinions and preferences, nevertheless embraced an important tenet of modernism in her essay "The Novel Démeublé," which celebrates the power of words to evoke the unnamed and unsaid. In her late novels, essays, and letters, Wharton made the most detailed, explicit case against modernism, which Thompson examines more fully than anyone else to date. Thompson links these three distinctive novelists through their resistance to ideologies, including literary theories, which oppressed and denigrated women. Reading Thompson's book, one realizes anew that the three writers made their lasting form of resistance in their portrayal in fiction of women whose struggle for self-fulfillment sometimes ends in suffering and defeat, occasionally in triumphant success, and often in unresolved conclusion, like the final paragraph of *Summer*, which readers continue to interpret in diametrically opposing ways.

Elsa Nettels
College of William and Mary

MLA CONVENTION

December 27-30, 2003 San Diego, CA
Edith Wharton Society Sessions

Saturday, Dec. 27, 5:15-6:30: Wharton, History, and the Novel.

America's Cup A & B, Manchester Grand Hyatt.

Panelists include Martha Banta, Candace Waid, and Betsy Klimasmith; the panel will be chaired by Julie Olin-Ammentorp.

Sunday, Dec. 28, 1:45-3:00: The Business of Being Edith Wharton, The Edith Wharton Business.

Gregory A, Manchester Grand Hyatt.

Panelists include Susan Goodman, Gavin Jones, and Dale Bauer (respondent); the panel will be chaired by Augusta Rohrbach.

Please note that this session will include the Annual Business Meeting of the Wharton Society, including voting on proposed changes to the Wharton Society Constitution (please see the website), electing new members to the Executive Board, selecting panels for next year's MLA convention, and other important matters.

A rare opportunity at the MLA:

"High Tea with Edith Wharton"

A tea and performance being held on Monday, Dec. 29, at 5 p.m. at the Horton Grand Hotel, 311 Island Ave., San Diego.

A new opera based on the life and works of Edith Wharton has been created by Myron Fink (composer) and Don Moreland (librettist).

The event will include a discussion of the opera as well as excerpts sung by soprano Patricia McAfee (in the role of Edith Wharton) and tenor Richard Geller (in the role of Morton Fullerton).

Send checks for \$33 to Myron Fink, 9969 Cummins Place, San Diego, CA 92131, by Dec. 10; please include your name, address, telephone number, and email address. *A limited number of cash-only tickets will also be available at the door.*

For full details see the "Announcements" page on the Edith Wharton website.

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Annual membership in the Edith Wharton Society, including subscription to two issues of *The Review*, is \$20 and \$25 for institutions as well as countries outside the USA. Documented student rates: \$15 US and \$20 foreign members. Conference presenters must be members.

Please check your label for expiration of your current membership. Send check made payable to The Edith Wharton Society in *US dollars and drawn on a US bank only* to: Dale Flynn, Campus Writing Center, University of California-Davis, 1 Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616. Back issues are available from Dale Flynn for \$5 each.