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This issue is dedicated to the writers of the winning and honorable mention essays of the second annual Edith Wharton Essay Prize. The judges were: Editor, Carole M. Shaffer-Koros; Co-Editor, Linda Costanzo Cahir; and EWS Secretary, Margaret Murray. The winner received an award of \$250. There were 19 entries.

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THE EDITH WHARTON 2006 ESSAY PRIZE WINNER

Ascendant Obtuseness and Aesthetic Perception in *The House of Mirth*
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This attribute was common to most of Lily's set: they had a force of negation which eliminated everything beyond their own range of perception.

—Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*

i. Early in *The House of Mirth* (1905), Edith Wharton's narrator observes an odd sort of double consciousness in Percy Gryce. We learn that discussion of his Americana collection provides Percy with a pleasure both "exquisite and excessive," allowing him momentarily "to remember himself without constraint, because he was at home in it, and could assert a superiority that there were few to dispute" (21, 20). The commentary seemingly suggests that Percy enjoys nothing more than the sort of doubled awareness and self-reflexivity that comes from simultaneously seeing himself, "remember[ing] himself," and knowing how he is seen by others. Yet, of course, it's fantasy Percy desires, not reality: he desires, even if temporarily, to inhabit a belief that others see in him a glorified and fantastic Percy, and even more so, he longs to see this Percy himself. His doubled yet uncritical consciousness—the opportunity to witness others witnessing the actualization of his ideal self—provides such tremendous value for Percy that it serves as "compensation" for the socially inept self from which he seeks to avert attention, both his own and that of others (21). Indeed, Percy reaches this heightened state of self-fantasy not only

by entering into conversation on his "art of accumulation," but also when seeing his own name in print, and he tailors his reading selection to maximize such an occurrence (23).

Critics of Wharton's novel most frequently focus on the lack of self-consciousness demonstrated by its heroine, Lily Bart. Yet Lily's inability to comprehend or contemplate herself are of a different sort entirely from those we find not only in Percy, but also in the rest of the social world in which Lily longs to permanently abide. Whereas Percy willfully blinds himself to his own appearance, Lily cannot contemplate herself except as others see her. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, for instance, notes that Lily "has learned so thoroughly to experience herself as an object that is being observed by others—not directly as an integrated human being—that her sense of 'self' is confirmed only when she elicits reactions from others" (34). Similarly, Joan Lidoff argues that "Lily's glow feeds on the absence rather than the abundance of internally animating energies. . . . Isolation is terrifying to her: her whole sense of being requires another's presence" (187).¹ The novel generously supports Lidoff's and Wolff's conclusions, noting Lily's failures of self-knowledge time and again. We hear, for instance, that "her faculty for adapting herself, for entering into other people's feelings . . . hampered her in the decisive moments of life" (53). We know also that Lily must maintain vigilant subservience in order to exist among the New York aristocracy: a state that Wharton aptly labels "enforced compliance" (76). Toward the novel's end, we are in no way surprised to hear that Lily "had never learned to live with her own thoughts" (178).

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This critique of what we might call Lily's un-self-consciousness, staged by both the novel and its critics, hints at the positive potential of a certain brand of double consciousness, one that remains for Lily consistently unreachable. Missing in Lily's life is the ability to form her own subjectivity—or, in Wharton's terms, her circumstances—into an object of potentially transforming inquiry: in short, to enter an experience of critical self-consciousness. Such consciousness, the novel suggests, depends not on the ability to "know" a stable "self," but on the ability to mediate between the shifting contingencies of one's encounters with a shifting self as it is perceived by others and, in Lidoff's terms, one's multiple "internally animating energies" (187). Worlds apart, Percy and Lily are nevertheless to some degree united through their failures of critical self-consciousness. Yet while Percy's temporary moments of doubled consciousness lead him to see a fantasized, idealized version of himself, Lily's permanent double consciousness prevents her from seeing any version of herself that is not mediated through another. Of course, this is not to say that Lily lacks critical awareness. Indeed, she has ability that the novel stresses time and again others of her set lack. She can manipulate situations and individuals by forming herself into whatever shape or manner will most please those around her. Her knowledge of how she appears or will appear to others is hyperaware and accentuated by her equally hyper awareness of just what type of reaction to her those others most desire—what version of themselves they most long to see. Lacking money, her value to Old New York is that she forms herself into what they consider the perfect sort of artwork: an attractive and expensive decoration that reassures, comforts, and reaffirms already held beliefs.

We see Lily's role acutely when she describes just how she will make herself a valued possession to Percy, more valuable even than his cherished Americana:

[S]he was aware that such a guarded nature [as Percy's] must find one huge outlet of egoism, and she determined to be to him what his Americana had hitherto been: the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it. She knew that this generosity to self is one of the forms of meanness, and she resolved so to identify herself with her husband's vanity that to gratify her wishes would be to him the most exquisite form of self-indulgence. . . . Her beauty itself was not the mere ephemeral possession it might have been in the hands of inexperience: her skill in enhancing it, the care she took of it, the use she made of it, seemed to give it a kind of performance. (49)

As an object whose beauty rises to the level of "performance," Lily will forge herself into a reflection that nurtures her potential husband's vanity and egoism. Just as discussion of his Americana gives to Percy a false sense of his own superiority, so too Lily will mold herself into exactly the sort of reflection that allows Percy to take his glorified sense of self all the way to the grave. Lily will

forever allow Percy to appear to himself as he most desires to appear to others. Like his Americana, she will give to him countless moments of exquisiteness and exhilaration. Indeed, the ease with which Lily already begins to succeed in this endeavor is clear from the moment she first meets Percy onboard the train and serves him a cup of tea: "He would never have dared to order it for himself, lest he should attract the notice of his fellow-passengers; but, secure in the shelter of her conspicuousness, he sipped the inky draught with a delicious sense of exhilaration" (19).²

Lily's genius extends not only to anticipating exactly what Percy will need in order to feel self-affirming joy in her presence; she also anticipates just how the attention others pay her will become valuable to Percy and his world. She fills this role—and, it must be said, fills it breathtakingly—throughout the novel. Take, for instance, the moment Bertha Dorset's guests first discover that Lily desires to forge a match with Percy. They react with delight: "Her friends," the narrator sardonically informs, "could not have shown a greater readiness for self-effacement had her wooing been adorned with all the attributes of romance" (46). But, of course, it is precisely the lack of romantic attributes that make Lily's quest so valuable to her "friends." Her desire to marry even the dullest and most ridiculous of wealthy men reaffirms to those friends that their luxurious life is indeed the fullest and most desirable state of existence, that even Percy Gryse cuts a glorious and attractive figure. Making wealthy New York seem to itself blessed, worthy, and ideal, Lily acquires value because she reasserts and naturalizes appearances.

And it goes without saying that *The House of Mirth* is most notably a novel about characters who are meticulously conscious of appearance, which is to say, of the way they appear to others—other members of their fashionable New York set and even others more broadly, the spectators who flock to gaze upon their weddings and public celebrations. Yet as Percy Gryse exemplifies, the novel is just as importantly about those who fail adequately to gauge their appearance—fail to know or see themselves as they are known by others; fail to know or see themselves through inquiry into their own subjectivity; fail, therefore, to call the very notion of their own "selves" into question, into anything less than absolute stability. As Lily herself observes, the failure to achieve self-consciousness is a requisite achievement, as it were, if one is to even begin acquiring position in the novel's Old New York social setting: "She liked their elegance; their lightness, their lack of emphasis, even the self-assurance which at times was so like obtuseness now seemed the natural sign of social ascendancy" (50).

To get at just what it means to succeed elegantly at obtuseness while failing, no doubt equally elegantly, at self-consciousness, I want to suggest a framework for successful self-awareness by approaching Wharton through Walter Pater and Virginia Woolf, writers and theoreticians for whom such awareness is primarily

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accessible through aesthetic perception. For Pater, heightened self-consciousness is the ideal aesthetic response to engagement with a work of art. Lily's performative labor in the novel connects to the aesthetic ideas of Pater because she so completely anticipates her viewer's desired reaction, foretells exactly how to bring such reaction about, and molds herself accordingly. Her success and attractiveness lie in her ability to craft moments of exquisite misrecognition; men, in particular, desire her precisely because they long to see the version of themselves she puts onto display. Indeed, Lily makes herself into what Pater might call anti-art, art that dulls sensations and produces sameness, rather than quickens through its production of friction and difference. This critique extends even to the novel's seeming outsider, Lawrence Selden, who, when measured by Pater's standards, becomes even more insidious than the novel's other elite New York characters because he defines himself as an aesthete, one who, like Pater, claims to open himself up to the many perceptions and sensations the world has to offer. Wharton depicts Selden in all his hypocrisy: as a chronic and stubbornly bad reader, one whose inability to perceive critically either Lily or art indicate an equal inability to think critically about himself.

Chances for some degree of critical self-consciousness in New York society, however, are not entirely hopeless. In its final section, this essay explores the possibility that *The House of Mirth* may itself have broken the inertia it depicts, producing Paterian responses in members of its Old New York audience. For Virginia Woolf, such a response would have been no less than Wharton's duty. Woolf figures critical self-consciousness as the writer's responsibility to her subject and her readers; by recording the mind's receptions of myriad impressions, the Woolfian writer creates in her readers an awareness of their own experience with sensations. Might, then, the critical self-consciousness at which the novel's aristocratic subjects fail have found actualization in those turn-of-the-century Old New Yorkers who read the novel? Certainly, Wharton's descriptions of *The House of Mirth* in both *A Backward Glance* and the introduction to the 1936

edition demonstrate her own guarded hope that this, indeed, may have been the case.

ii.

Walter Pater's "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* (1873), first published as "Poems by William Morris" (1868), combines a pedagogy of experiencing art with a pedagogy of living it. Art, for Pater, enables, exalts, differentiates, quickens, and enhances perceptions and sensations (which, given the seemingly anti-Cartesian nature of his project, perhaps amount to the same thing). Moreover, as art succeeds in bringing about this heightened state of being, it also produces a critical self-consciousness. He writes famously: "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end" (197). Reaching what Pater describes as "this hard, gemlike flame" requires us not only to accept the constant changes occurring in both the "physical life" and the "inward world of thought and feeling"; we must additionally alter our forms of experiencing the world, embracing a "speculative culture, towards the human spirit, ...[which aim] is to raise, to startle it to a life of constant and eager observation" (197, 196, 197, 196). Success in this endeavor yields the fruit of a "quickened, multiplied consciousness," expanding the interval of existence by increasing the number of moments or pulsations that one experiences in any given length of time (198). As Jonathan Loesberg writes in his book, *Aesthetics and Deconstruction*, "aesthetic perception . . . has as its epistemological purpose the capturing of sensation within a form that allows one to sense the act of sensation" (25). Such sensation is accomplished through the production of difference; aesthetic perception creates a newness of sensation or perception that rubs against or comes into intellectual tension with previous sensations, enabling the simultaneous observation and experience of what Pater calls the "perpetual flight" of impressions (196). In this way, aesthetic perception demands a heightened and malleable awareness of self, of one's body, one's sensory organs, one's framework for undertaking the world. For Pater, successful self-consciousness occurs when one sees oneself seeing, feels oneself feeling, knows oneself knowing, senses oneself sensing—all of which become possible only by seeing, feeling, knowing, or sensing somehow differently.³

In his reading of Pater's "Conclusion," Loesberg usefully animates what heightened self-consciousness might look like when characterized by such a multiplicity of perception: "art creates a continual series of different sensations, each of which in its own immediate, noninstrumental valve enacts a different version of the self-contradictory, foundational, dissolving self-reflection" (24). The self-reflection becomes "self-contradictory" because it does not describe reflection based on a mirrored or narcissistic encounter. Rather, Paterian self-reflection entails encountering and incorporating difference into self-reflection so that experiencing an art object, rather than observing one's

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image in the mirror, becomes the ideal form of experiencing the self. Loesberg's term "dissolving" helpfully points to self-reflection as a necessarily fluctuating process; the self-reflective moment exists as the continual production of its own absence. Pater writes: "It is with this moment, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations that analysis leaves off—that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves" (196). For Pater, the perception and self-reflection enabled by one sensation must immediately yield to its own difference, which will arrive in the form of a new sensation.

Pater's version of aesthetic perception creates a clear value system of experiencing art: a mere spectator is a bad aesthete, a bad reader, a bad intellect. Foremost among the ways Pater argues we risk failing at perception is the creation of a ways of living designed to produce sameness: "In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations seem alike" (197). Failure, for Pater, thus lines up neatly with the habits and stereotyped worlds Wharton both satirizes and critiques in *The House of Mirth*, a novel whose "fashionable" characters pride themselves on their own "obtuseness" and "eliminate everything beyond their own perception" (48). For Pater, the tragedy of Wharton's Old New York might lie precisely in the singularity of this "perception," a static and unchanging field that obstinately refuses to accept difference even as it travels from city to country, from party to fashionable party, from America to Europe.

Furthermore, Lily's role in abetting such sameness through the manipulation of her status as art object flies in the face of the work Pater most wants art to accomplish. Even her seeming rebelliousness results in the reaffirmation of Old New York's previously held values. For instance, the bold costume she dons during her tableau vivant succeeds not in challenging her audience, but in reaffirming their sense of Lily's indiscretion, and thus their sense in the very rightness of their own set of pre-determined discretions and codes. Ned Van Alstyne notes, "When a girl's as good-looking as that she'd better marry; then no questions are asked. In our imperfectly organized society there is no provision as yet for the young woman who claims the privileges of marriage without assuming its obligations" (157). Though Ned acknowledges that his society is imperfect and even cautions a vague guess that it might some day change (the guarded: "as yet"), the force of his statement is to discipline Lily publicly for her transgressions. This, of course, does not mean that Ned fails to value Lily's performance, which gives him both the pleasure of its status as spectacle and the no doubt equally pleasurable occasion to reaffirm his own morality. Indeed, as Jennie A Kassanoff notes, Lily's placement in the tableau vivant reaffirms her status as object. She becomes like an object in a museum, valued, like Americana, "for its rarity" (11). Lily's role in the tableau vivant, like her expressed desire to

play for Percy the role of his collection, thus restates, rather than questions or challenges, the work she performs for her Old New York audience. For the vast majority of Lily's audience, her tableau produces no difference, quickens no senses. Within a framework of Paterian aesthetic perception, then, *The House of Mirth* describes a self-sustaining system whereby "bad" perception leads to the desire to experience "bad" art, which desire, in turn, produces such badness in the all too malleable objects it demands to take the status of art in the first place. Moreover, even what Pater might consider "good" art—and Lily's work in her tableau might very well qualify—becomes "bad" art in the context of its reception by a crowd of "bad" perceivers.

iii.

The House of Mirth thus places under critical inspection the aesthetic perceptions of Old New York, even as it also frequently invites us to think differently about the aesthetic sensibilities and perceptive awareness of the man who fancies himself that world's critic from the inside, Lawrence Selden. We are told that Selden received educations in exquisite things early on. Both he and Lily picture him as a discriminating, even superior, Epicurean, to use Wharton's word. In a position that Lily observes with envy, Selden marks his own superiority by at least appearing to remove himself from the scene and turning the fashionable "set" itself into an object to be curiously studied; "he had preserved a certain social detachment, a happy air of viewing the show objectively, of having points of contact outside the great gulf cage" (54). In the racialized language that Wharton so frequently invokes, Lily concludes that Selden is an entirely different species from those with whom she spends her days. She remarks especially on his "keenly-molded dark features which, in a land of amorphous types, gave him the air of belonging to a more specialized race" (65). Though Selden has not quite the artist's hand in decorating his flat, Lily takes great joy in the sensations his things provide. Glancing over his bookshelf, we hear that "some of the volumes had the ripe tints of good tooling and old morocco, and her eyes lingered on them caressingly . . . with the pleasure in agreeable tones and textures that was one of her inmost susceptibilities" (10). Moreover, Selden himself is open to the potential alterations caused through effects of sensation. The novel's final chapter describes him "cut loose from the familiar shores of habit, and launched . . . on uncharted seas of emotion; all the old tests and measures were left behind and his course was to be shaped by new stars" (324). Thus the novel sets Selden apart from the crowd towards which it directs the full thrust of its satiric critique. And it does so in part by marking his appreciation for the fineness of objects, the exquisiteness of texture, and the richness of color that others—others with the means to steep their lives in such luxury—simply lack. Does this mean, the novel encourages us to ask, that Selden achieves a sort of critical self-consciousness unavailable to the novel's other, less perceptive and

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more mundane characters? Does Selden enter into the "hard, gemlike flame" of Paterian aesthetic perception and experience?

We learn of Selden's aesthetic education only late in the novel, following his favorable impression of the *tableau vivant*, after which he admits to both himself and to Lily that he loves her. We learn, for instance, that his childhood home was, "if . . . shabby," "exquisitely kept" (152). And we learn that from his mother Selden "inherited his detachment from the sumptuary side of life: the stoic's carelessness of material things, combined with the Epicurean's pleasure in them. . . . and nowhere was the blending of the two ingredients so essential as in the character of a pretty woman" (152). The description combines Selden's aesthetic perceptions with his expressed desire for Lily, his "pretty woman." If, then, the novel seeks to mark a difference between Selden and the novel's other characters vis-à-vis the treatment of Lily, the difference will be an aesthetic one. All of the novel's elite treat her as art object; perhaps Selden will be the one for whom the art object marks an occasion for dialogue. Yet, moments later, when Wharton details the substance of Selden's craving for Lily, it begins to sound suspiciously similar to that Percy has for his Americana:

Selden was in the state of impassioned self-absorption that the first surrender to love produces. His craving was for the companionship of one whose point of view should justify his own, who should confirm, by deliberate observation, the truth to which his intuitions had leaped. (153)

The passage answers questions about Selden's faculty for critical self-consciousness with an emphatic "no." Like his fashionable, New York set, Selden too seeks Lily as an object to reaffirm and propagate the sameness of his previously held beliefs and ideas. Indeed, as though he himself were a misreader of Pater, Selden is Epicurean to a fault: the pleasure of self-affirmation is his sole end, and pleasure hence loses its role as an instrument for quickening consciousness. Where Pater would have Selden "be forever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy," Selden seeks in Lily precisely the means by which to acquiesce (197).⁴ As Wai Chee Dimock observes (though she discusses Selden in a different context), "Lily's delicacy of feeling, her rectitude and generosity—all these are lost on Selden" (78).

The text thus notes Selden's detachment not only from the fashionable New York set of which both he and Lily are at least sometimes a part; it notes as well his detachment from Lily, his inability to engage with her in such a way that will allow him to gain the knowledge he at least nominally seeks. Wharton heightens the affective and formal tragedy of Selden's detachment by writing into her novel a romantic quest narrative that continually suggests Selden's potential to change, to view Lily as something other than an object. When, in the novel's opening scene, Selden is at first unable to fix on a metaphor that aptly captures Lily's qualities, he finally

settles to himself that it might just be "possible that the material was fine, but that circumstances had fashioned it into a futile shape" (5). The metaphor sets off what many critics have noted is Selden's quest to discover the "real" Lily Bart. This quest seems to take on new direction when Selden first thinks that he too may play a part in Lily's future. Whereas before that moment he treated her with "admiring spectatorship" and "found in her presence . . . the aesthetic amusement which a reflective man is apt to seek in desultory intercourse with pretty women," we learn that finding himself "to be the unforeseen element in a career so accurately planned was stimulating even to a man who had renounced sentimental experiments" (69). Perhaps in part because of this transition, the novel later notes the fineness of Selden's aesthetic mind: for only those with a "responsive fancy" will detect within the *tableaux vivants* "magic glimpses of the boundary world between fact and imagination," and "Selden's mind was of this order" (133). As a final touch in this romantic narrative, when Selden apparently falls ever more in love with Lily, Wharton notes "the touch of poetry in her beauty that Selden always felt in her presence yet lost the sense of when he was not with her" (135). The chain of descriptions would seem to reveal a progressive narrative by which Selden moves from spectator to participant, from seeking in Lily a confirmation of previously held beliefs to finding with her a Paterian quickness of life, the kind that Pater suggests can come not only from one's interaction with a work of art, but from "the face of one's friend" (197). Wharton thus would seem to place a feminist twist onto the traditional romantic narrative structure; the hero simultaneously falls in love with the heroine and undertakes a remarkable conversion whereby he also shifts his perspective, viewing his newly beloved as herself a full-fledged subject.

Yet Wharton's seeming twist quickly and tragically falls apart. For not only do the text's observations on Selden's apparent transition come before its claim that he craves Lily for her abilities to mold her own ideas into a reaffirmation of his, but they also come before he misreads the significance of her late evening meeting with Gus Trenor. If, indeed, Selden finds his competing aesthetic desires fully met in "the character of a pretty woman," then his stunning inability to apprehend Lily, his artwork par excellence, demonstrates an equally stunning failure at aesthetic perception. When Selden compares Lily's grace to poetry, therefore, he reveals far more about his own poor treatment of poetry than about his attitude toward Lily. In this sense, the novel's final scene emphasizes and reemphasizes Selden's incomprehension of Lily, the object of his supposed love. The full brunt of Wharton's satire, however, comes when Selden uses Lily's corpse to accomplish for him what he most had desired when considering Lily as a wife, self-affirmation. Thinking back onto Lily's farewell, though gazing upon her dead body, Selden reassures himself that "he could now read into that farewell all that his heart craved to find there; he could even draw from it

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courage not to accuse himself for having failed to reach the height of his opportunity" (329). Lawrence Selden, like Percy Gryse, uses Lily to convince himself to see a glorified, idealized version of Lawrence Selden, one who can accurately perceive situations, even one who thinks critically. The novel is explicit on this last point:

He saw that all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart; since his very detachment from the external influences which swayed her had increased his spiritual fastidiousness, and made it more difficult for him to live and love uncritically (329).

As he simultaneously congratulates himself for what we might consider a Paterian ideal—living and loving critically—Selden simultaneously takes the "conditions of life" as a static given, and in so doing, he exposes his own inability to perceive critically and, hence, the utter falsity of his empty claims.

iv.

Virginia Woolf might direct us to look for aesthetic perception, for the production of critical self-consciousness, not in the novel's characters (and certainly not in Lawrence Selden), but outside the novel, in the readers' interaction with the page. In "Modern Fiction" (1919), Woolf is concerned with the writer's ability to record the mind's experience of sensations. She seeks fiction, like that of Joyce and Chekhov, which records the "crudity and coarseness" found in the interiority of its characters (286). Indeed, at first it seems as though Woolf might condemn not only Wharton's characters, for their lack of interior richness and their shallow stasis, but also Wharton herself, for creating such a dim lot of characters in the first place. In her essay, for instance, Woolf lodges the following complaint against characters found in the fiction of H.G. Wells: "More and more they seem to us, deserting even the well-built villa in the Five Towns, to spend their time in some softly padded first-class railway carriage, pressing bells and buttons innumerable; and the destiny to which they travel so luxuriously becomes more and more unquestionably an eternity of bliss spent in the very best hotel in Brighton" (286). Woolf complains that, cushioned as they are by the conveniences of their richness, Wells' characters, like Wharton's, are unable to experience or even describe their own sensations, and it is precisely the experience of sensations Woolf most wants modern fiction to report: "let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" (288). Of course, *The House of Mirth* is hardly an uncritical inspection of its rich and famous subjects: Wharton uses the hardships of her heroine, Lily Bart, in part to expose what Woolf might describe as the "crudity and coarseness" of Old New York. And indeed, Wharton's scathing critique extends even to those such as Selden who seem to pride themselves on a certain aesthetic awareness and interior richness.

Wharton addresses the problem Woolf raises in *A Backward Glance* (1934), the reminiscences she

collected almost thirty years after publication of *The House of Mirth*:

In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the 'old woe of the world,' any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society can guess? The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart. (28)

While gestures to genre, preexisting form, or what an adamantly modernist Woolf might disapprovingly call "method" pepper Wharton's description ("dramatic significance," "tragic implication," and so forth), her comments seem to address what we might call the H.G. Wells problem. Indeed, Wharton suggests that her novel takes this problem as its very subject, writing as an object of scrutiny the cushioned elite's frivolity and its inability to experience its own sensations. As such, we might say that Wharton's novel itself demonstrates critical self-consciousness: it doubles the object of its inquiry. We read the novel both as an investigation into the turn-of-the-century's frivolous Old New York world and as an investigation into representation of that world, both as Wharton represents it and as it (mis)represents itself. Wharton thus simultaneously presents us with a set of characters similar to those hated by Woolf in the Wells' fiction, and she asks, along with Woolf, of those same characters, "Is life like this? Must novels be like this?" (Woolf 287).

Wharton describes her own choice to engage *The House of Mirth*'s most prominent subject, "fashionable New York," as itself an act of transgressive and critical self-consciousness: the animation of a "condemned category," which, "in all its flatness and futility, ... I had been steeped in ... from infancy, and should not have to get it up out of note-books and encyclopædias" (*Glance* 28). For Wharton, the novel functions as exposé; its appeal for both her and her readers lies in its invitation to enter a world that the novel painstakingly reveals very few can enter and, moreover, to find that world deliciously debased. Yet in a gesture that complicates our investigation of fashionable New York, *The House of Mirth* demonstrates that, as readers of the novel, we see into the world with far greater acumen and penetration than her world can see into itself. It is perhaps for this reason that in her introduction to the 1936 edition Wharton is at pains to position herself as both insider and, as she continues to satirize and poke fun, as outsider to the world she depicts:

This supposed picture of their little circle, secure behind its high stockade of convention, alarmed and disturbed the rulers of Old New York. If the book had been the work of an outsider, of some barbarian reduced to guessing at what went on behind the stockade, they would not so much have minded—might have laughed over its absurdities, or, more probably, not even have heard of its existence. But

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here was a tale written by one of themselves, a tale deliberately slandering and defiling their most sacred institutions and some of the most deeply revered members of the clan! (35-36)

Wharton's useful conjecture leads to curious conclusions: identical representations of Old New York institutions and manners would, in her mind, nevertheless produce two radically different outcomes; one in which, as readers of the novel, the "rulers of Old New York" engage themselves and one in which they luxuriously deflect such recognition.⁵ If, in 1936, Wharton delights in her unique ability to force double consciousness upon her former circle of acquaintances, then perhaps we might guess it is because she hopes to succeed where her heroine fails. The point would not necessarily have been for those acquaintances merely to recognize their own lives in the pages of her fiction. Rather, Wharton's success would have been attained when the combination of her authorship and the book's subject created that thing her acquaintances most sought to avoid: that art event from which they could not emerge the same, in short, the anti-America.

Notes

1. For more recent work on Lily's self-consciousness see Loebel.

2. Elizabeth Ammons makes similar commentary on this scene, though her focus is on the fact that Lily's efforts amount to labor rather than on the substance, compensation, and value that labor provides. She writes: "Lily is hard at work using the skills of her trade—charm, sex appeal, solicitude—to entertain and give pleasure to other people . . . and it is work in Wharton's opinion, however degrading" (31). Further, Cynthia Griffin Wolff takes head on what exactly goes into the labor Lily exerts: "She learns to evoke approval and appreciation in others by a subtle and ingenious series of graceful postures. It is an art she has practiced so well and for so long that she can no longer conceive of herself as anything but those postures; she can formulate no other desire than the desire to be seen to advantage" (34).

3. A useful comparison is to what Foucault calls "a critical ontology of ourselves" and conceives "as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time an historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" ("Enlightenment" 50). Foucault describes his "ontology of ourselves" as aesthetic, specifically as an "aesthetics of existence": "From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art" ("Enlightenment" 50; "Genealogy" 350, 51). Reading Pater suggests to me that we might revisit Foucault's well-known pronouncement that we create ourselves as art, which has been traditionally seen as advocating a kind of agency over the self, an act of self-creation and re-

creation. Placing Pater next to Foucault suggests a strong correlation between making oneself into a work of art and making oneself into an object of one's own inquiry.

4. For an alternate view of Selden, see Coulombe, who concludes that "Selden would deserve condemnation if he had forced Lily to conform to his wishes, if he had played what Wharton herself considered the false role of the brawny, always triumphant male hero. Instead, he remains on the threshold of society and rejects many stereotypical, and unrealizable, expectations for men" (8).

5. For an analysis of contemporary reaction to *The House of Mirth* that favors the latter option, see Blair. In her article Blair, who is more concerned with a middle-class reading public's response to the book than the response of Old New York itself, argues that reactions hardly demonstrated the kind of critical self-reflection Pater would have approved. Instead, they formed a pattern of what she calls "reading up," a process that "approaches all books as how-to manuals and rewards so-called misreadings that would enable vicarious participation in the lives of wealthy protagonists" (150).

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Chintz Goes to War: Edith Wharton's Revised Designs for Home and Homefront

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Edith Wharton is known as the author of New York high society and the Gilded Age in general, yet this is a truncated understanding of her legacy. Beginning in May 1915, writing initially from Paris, and later from the trenches, Wharton portrayed World War I for Americans in a series of Scribner's Magazine articles. Later these were collected in *Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belfort* (1918).¹ The collection included pieces on Paris, the Argonne, Lorraine, the Vosges, northern France, and Alsace, as well as relevant maps and stark photographs of the war's impact on domestic, civic, and religious structures. Critics have deemed her reports' attention to architectural detail, whether in the vaults of Chartres or the ruins of a living room, divested of humanity, classist and elitist. Annette Larson Benert describes the loss of French architecture itself as traumatic for Wharton, contending that "Wharton's most substantial contribution to the literature of World War I...[is] the way in which she concretized her concerns, the realism with which she portrayed French civilization in the actual physical structures that the Germans threatened and destroyed" (1). In *The End of the Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the First World War*, Alan Price writes that "the attack on French ways and their meaning was an attack on her own ability to make meaning imaginatively and to create hospitable and elegant spaces" (21). Price implies that the onset of World War I meant a dramatic transition for Wharton, as she departed from the world of manners and the "hospitable and elegant spaces" of Old New York to become involved with admirable large scale charitable and philanthropic work. Yet Wharton's writings on the war demonstrate an acute awareness of the human spectrum, not only in her descriptions of civilians and conscripts, but also in her writings about the designers and builders who contributed to the now-frayed fabric of France. These individuals, too,

would be sacrificed in the war. Along with her writings, Wharton's response to the disaster she watched firsthand was to create housing for war refugees.

Critical attention has focused on Wharton's considerable personal wealth and the implications of her class rather than her work. Most notably, in "Edith Wharton at War: Civilized Space in Troubled Times," Annette Larson Benert contends that Wharton "never inquired whether the civilized order she so valued might inevitably carry with it not only the physical and moral costs of construction but also the brutal shadow of enforcement. She never seemed to wonder whether the comfort and security of some is not usually purchased with the control and suffering of others" (343). It is true that Wharton's only interpellation regarded the United States' late entry into the war. Still, her reports from the front, considered in tandem with her relief work and her lifelong interest in interior design, indicate a continued compassion for the homeless first demonstrated in her fiction and make evident a novel, intimate and benevolent relationship with the disenfranchised. Her dual endeavors also demonstrate the changes the war wrought on Wharton's design principles and politics, causing her to welcome alternative constructions of domesticity as home and homefront were in peril. Wharton's wartime correspondence seems initially to reinforce ideologies of class. Yet its examination in the context of the author's work for refugees, wounded soldiers, women, children, the elderly, and infirm, reveals her battle against "the control and suffering of others" and hegemony on a number of levels. Wharton's literary reportage concerns the inhabitant, rather than the aesthetics of social order; it was never entirely about civilized or elegant minutiae but about the human condition, spanning class and country.

In 1914, after Germany declared war on France, Wharton utilized her hospitality skills to establish housing, sustenance, medical care, and employment for refugees in Paris and its environs. She instituted an *Ouvroir*, or workroom, for Parisian women who had lost their jobs with the war mobilization, while at the rest homes she offered a variety of trade courses such as lace making. Her charities also included the *Oeuvre des Enfants des Flandres*, which cared for hundreds of Belgian children and adult refugees, including the infirm; the American Hostels for Refugees, which cared for thousands of refugees, principally women, children, and elderly men; the *Maison de Convalescence Americaines*, which provided medical care for refugee women and children and treated tuberculosis and other chronic conditions; and the Tuberculosis War-Victims Committee. In 1916, Wharton conceived of and edited *The Book of the Homeless*, which featured contributions from writers, musicians, and artists, and raised fifteen thousand dollars for the hostel rescue organizations.² By 1917, the author had established independent rest houses and convalescent homes in Groslay and Arromanches. Ultimately, there were nineteen relief houses serving these assorted missions, throughout France and Belgium.

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As president of the war charities, Wharton dealt with housing refugees, fundraising and administering in France and the United States, acquiring clothing, arranging transportation and motor service, coordinating health care, and even procuring prosthetic limbs. A shrewd businesswoman, she thanked contributors in individual letters, taking the time to convey that new beds had been purchased or rest cures successful because of the donor's contributions—and because she was visually oriented, often sent photographs of refugees and lodging. This was in spite of the fact that she was often ill and had to dictate such missives, in addition to the fact that she received upwards of seventeen letters a day.³ As Price observes, "The way in which she had approached complex literary projects earlier and the way in which she soon would meet the daunting challenge of helping thousands of refugees were not at all dissimilar" (17). Building on this reflection, it was not only Wharton's approach to literary and charitable endeavors, but also the underlying subject matter that was remarkably similar. For Wharton, the domestic, normally associated with the private and privileged interior, became fiercely, determinedly public and inextricably linked with the politics of war.⁴

Tracing the history of Wharton's relationship with interior design illuminates the way in which architecture is integral to both her reportage and her presentation of class. Wharton's lifelong commitment to issues of architecture and interior design began with attention to gender and space on the domestic, and privileged, level. This is evident in her co-authorship with architect Ogden Codman of *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) and her books *Italian Villas and their Gardens* (1904) and *Italian Backgrounds* (1908). It is apparent in her occupation of eleven distinct residences, the majority of whose interiors she designed, and the significance of setting and interior to her writing, both fictional and non-fictional. As both a writer and interior designer, Wharton underscored the link between subjectivity and space, the importance of interiority (pertinent to notions of both self and home), and the privileged nature of domestic privacy.

The author first outlined her design philosophies in *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), published at the end of an American century that saw a rise in interiority. Interior decoration in the United States gained status with its publication, and the book became a reference for the creation of ideal domestic space for the upper class. Maintaining distinct uses for rooms, according to the authors, established proper patterns of domestic life. Wharton and Codman advocated clear distinctions between public and private space, as well as the organization of particular spaces within the home by gender, class, and function. The authors deemed proportion and harmony the most significant aspects of interior design and equated good taste with English, Italian, and French Renaissance styles, emphasizing the elegant simplicity of eighteenth-century French interiors.

The authors contended that interior design should be considered in tandem with architecture; a room's decoration should not merely be superficial or ornamental but also functional, contributing to the appropriate use of a room. Wharton lived in many places throughout her life, but all of her residences, whether in New York, Newport, the Berkshires, the Riviera, or Paris, where she settled permanently in 1910, adhered to the guidelines for tasteful living outlined in *The Decoration of Houses*.

At first glance, disjunctions seem to exist between Wharton's moneyed design interests, her war writings and subsequent refugee work. Jean Meral writes that "it must have been difficult for simple Cartesian minds to reconcile the many facets of Wharton's life—her prodigious wartime activity, her brilliant and hectic social life, her many trips to distant parts of the world, her official visit to Morocco... with the patient exercise of the craft of fiction" (20). While the examination of her personal interests and professional output before and during the war demonstrates a continued exploration of and commitment to housing the displaced, her initial descriptions of the structures of France and its displaced civilians tend toward architectural emphasis for the former and subtle disparagement for the latter. Wharton begins the first chapter, "The Look of Paris," by discussing the peaceful beauty of Chartres and the disbelief of reports of war.

The air seemed full of the long murmur of human effort... All day the sky had been banked with thunderclouds, but by the time we reached Chartres, toward four o'clock, they had rolled away under the horizon... Framed by such depths of darkness, and steeped in a blaze of mid-summer sun, the familiar windows seemed singularly remote and yet overpoweringly vivid. Now they widened into dark-shored pools splashed with sunset, now glittered and menaced like the shields of fighting angels. (*Fighting France* 4)

Wharton opens the passage with the "long murmur of human effort," alluding to the lengthy history of the cathedral's construction. Wharton's recognition of this cultural history allocates dominant space not only to the architect, but also to the builders, the working class in the Chartres composition Wharton frames for the reader. Chartres is a painting, a work of art soon to be marred. The architectural beauty is "framed by such depths of darkness," while the great windows are the "shields of fighting angels" that further emphasize the bellicose horizon. At the same time, she attributes the defense of the nation to the cathedral.

Wharton continues to relate the impact of the war through the architecture of France when she returns to Paris.

Under the heights of St. Cloud and Suresnes the reaches of the Seine trembled with the blue-pink luster of an early Monet... Below the Arc de Triomphe, the Champs Elysees sloped downward in a sun-powdered haze to the mist of fountains and the ethereal obelisk... The great city, so made for peace and art and all humanest graces, seemed to lie by her river-

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side like a princess guarded by the watchful giant of the Eiffel Tower. (*Fighting France* 5)

Wharton maintains the Impressionist metaphor she began in describing Chartres. By describing civic and religious structures, as well as cities, in the language of Impressionism—changing qualities of light with the passage of time, open composition, *en plein air* subjectivity—and in naming Monet, Wharton aligns her writing with a movement that rebelled against restrictions and conventions of academic art, and thereby against traditional hierarchies. In the context of war, *en plein air* relates not to the freedom of painting outdoors in natural light, but rather to the buildings and people exposed to the elements as a result of the destruction. Wharton's classical education and neoclassical tastes were linked to the traditional and conservative teachings of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts against which many of the Impressionists reacted. That Wharton aligns herself with Impressionism perhaps indicates the war's influence on her artistic sensibility and social allegiance.

She personifies Paris, the Seine, and the Eiffel Tower, standing watch over its environs. She notes later in the piece, "Every great architectural opening framed an emptiness; all the endless avenues stretched away to desert distances," indicating that all architecture frames its inhabitants, its focus on the interior life rather than only the exterior. The built world of Paris is made for "humanest" or "humanist" graces. The figurative language here precedes the more utilitarian vernacular that Wharton would take up in later articles, while in the throes of war. The onset of World War I meant both the widespread destruction of design and the devolution of Wharton's patois; with the assault on buildings she minimized and pared down her usual lexicon.

Though Wharton commences "The Look of Paris" with observations on architecture, she ends the piece with notes on her fellow man, and the reader realizes that the two are inextricably linked through the refugee crisis.

[O]ne sees these other people—men and women with sordid bundles on their backs, shuffling along hesitatingly in their tattered shoes, children dragging at their hands and tired-out babies pressed against their shoulders: the great army of the Refugees... No one who has ever caught that stare of dumb bewilderment—or that other look of concentrated horror, full of the reflection of flames and ruins—can shake off the obsession of the Refugees. The look in their eyes is part of the look of Paris. (33)

The refugees are "other people" who represent only a part of the city, seemingly marginal to its central monuments. Wharton describes "dumb bewilderment," "sordid bundles," and "tattered shoes" of a social stratum she clearly distinguishes as outside her own. She continues, "It is as though their great experience had purged them of pettiness, meanness and frivolity, burning them down to the bare bones of character, the fundamental substance of the soul..." (*Fighting France* 41). Here the war is characterized as the "great

experience" that raises them from baseness. These passages from "The Look of Paris" reveal initial ambivalence toward people marginalized by and sacrificed to Wharton's society, those most affected by the Great War—the injured, the homeless, and those lacking resources to leave.

Wharton's second chapter, "In Argonne," marks a transition, as she builds on the notion of architecture as human casualty, chronicling the interdependence of inhabitant and habitation for both civilians and soldiers. Wharton introduces Clermont-en-Argonne looking through the "torn traceries of its ruined church," framing her narrative with architectural components. She goes on to explore the interior of a hospice and its cheerful steward.

We found Soeur Rosnet, with her Sisters, preparing the midday meal of her patients in the little kitchen of the Hospice: the kitchen which is also her dining-room and private office. She insisted on our finding time to share the filet and fried potatoes that were just being taken off the stove.... (61-62)

In conveying the domestic routine of Soeur Rosnet and her offer of a home-cooked meal, the reader observes a change in Wharton's portrayal of the war. Gone is the condescension and generalized portrait of the masses, as she focuses on a brave individual's preservation of civilized domesticity. In *The Decoration of Houses* some twenty years earlier Wharton had asserted that each room have a distinct, designated use and decried multi-purpose spaces. Here, however, she observes the mobility and courage of Sister Rosnet, who by necessity conducts her affairs in a single hybrid space. Wharton follows the depiction of her group's warm reception with a description of what they subsequently witness: the Battle of Vauquois, and the Sister's somber anticipation of four hundred new wards after the conflict. In this way, Wharton credits the domestic with national importance: home and hospitality take on new, more profound connotations of peace and refuge from tyranny, across classes and backgrounds.

Wharton goes on to report from the front of the warm domestic arrangements in a cavalry hospital near Les Esparges.

Under the cobwebby rafters the men lay in rows on clean pallets, and big stoves made the rooms dry and warm...Each cabin was shut off by a gay curtain of red-flowered chintz. Those curtains must do almost as much as the hot water to make over the morale of the men: they were the most comforting sight of the day. (78)

Here there is a visible departure from the Wharton who condemned all things chintz in *The Custom of the Country*. In her fiction Wharton used chintz as code for lack of taste; here the splash of color is cheerful, the red flowers resilient in the face of the enemy. The circumstances of war wrought change in her design principles, the violence a catalyst for her increased appreciation of necessary design adaptations. Throughout *Fighting France*, Wharton chronicles many attempts, and successes, at

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acclimatizing domesticity in war-torn homes, hospitals, churches, and even battlegrounds—domestic microcosms determinedly independent of the perils outside.

"In the North" deals more directly with Wharton's exposure to battle, as she was close to danger herself. She reports matter-of-factly of visits to the second and even first trench lines, of watching enemy planes overhead drop fluttering tufts of luminous bombs, and running out of the Wild Man Inn at Cassel at four in the morning in response to the noise of bombs overhead. Wharton reserves her most graphic language for the sight of Ypres, laid naked with bombs:

Ypres...presents the distant semblance of a living city, while near by it is seen to be a disemboweled corpse. Every window-pane is smashed, nearly every building unroofed, and some house-fronts are sliced clean off, with the different stories exposed... Whiskered photographs fade on morning-glory wallpapers, plaster saints pine under glass bells, antimacassars droop from plush sofas, yellowing diplomas display their seals on office walls. (152-54)

The "stories" revealed are both literal and figurative; both the exposed interiors and exposed lives are anathema to a writer who heralds the distinction between public and private spaces in one's house, let alone in one's village or country. Wharton recognizes the particularized meaning of individual decoration, mourning the despoliation of each home. Gone is Wharton as interior designer or architectural critic; what remains constant is her compassion for and commitment to the unhoused. She also emphasizes these concerns in her portrayal of Poperinghe, Belgium where she searches for a particular type of lace-making cushion needed at her home and school for Flemish refugees. Wharton and her entourage come to an abandoned convent, "through rooms that smelt of linen and lavender" but are "cold and bare and blank" (156) with row upon row of deserted cushions, which Wharton deems "sadder than any scene of disarray" (157). Striking is her use of detail, her attention to the sensory impressions of the room. The arrest of work at the convent represents the disruption of domestic patterns and practices, as well as the larger paralysis of the nation at war.

Both her reports from the front and refugee relief endeavors sustained Wharton's passion for combating human and architectural desecration. Regarding the transition Wharton underwent in wartime, Price contends, "The convergence of historical forces that transformed Wharton from an ironic social satirist into a partisan war reporter provides one of the few periods in her life when she was not in control of what happened... For a novelist who made fictional worlds and for a woman who created aesthetic spaces (her houses and their gardens), the loss of control was potentially devastating" (xvii). However, Wharton's writing and charitable endeavors throughout the duration of the war enabled forms of spatial control, as

her interior design knowledge was helpful in establishing the relief houses and determining appropriate homes for her charities. Wharton engineered the donation and purchase of the buildings she needed. The American Hostels committee commenced with one thousand francs and a forty-bed residence loaned to the organization by Mr. and Mrs. Edward Tuck, American philanthropists in France, while Comtesse Berthier donated a second home. All of the residences were ultimately equipped with large kitchens and workrooms, along with areas designated as classrooms and dormitories for rest. In a letter to a real estate broker, dated 21 June 1917, Wharton's secretary decreed:

Mrs. Wharton asks me to say that she knows very well the property of the Parc de Mareil which has been repeatedly offered to her by Mr. Chaloub. Mr. Chaloub asks a price out of all proportion to the value of his own property and has no idea of making any reduction for a charity although he has repeatedly announced his intentions of doing so. Mrs. Wharton asks me to tell you that the property is entirely without interest.⁵

Wharton and her entourage clearly denounce Chaloub's attempt to profit from the war in this manner. Wharton's correspondence also shows her knowledge of material culture to aid refugees in accounts of the crisis. In a November 26, 1917 public relations letter, Wharton queried, "Would it be well to say that the Germans have taken all the linen, blankets and carpets at Antwerp, and torn off all the window-fastenings, door-knobs, bronze and brass fittings of every kind in the houses of Brussels? Or is it better to stick to the mere need of clothing?"⁶ Wharton herself is personally unaffected by the domestic losses suffered, but she is dedicated to describing what will most concisely and profoundly evoke horrible loss to others. Similar compassion is evident in an appeal to a Mrs. Scott to donate some warm clothes for an elderly Belgian lady dying of intestinal tuberculosis. "She needs very much a warm 'robe de chambre,' warm slippers No. 37, a black knitted shawl to be put over her shoulders and a warm petticoat."⁷ Wharton articulates the plea for the frail woman with compassion and sensitivity. Later in the same letter she mentions the loss of her young cousin, Newbold Rhinelander, shot down by the Germans; the letter encapsulates the war's intersection of classes, the amalgamation of home and home front.

Wharton's war correspondence offers insight into her burgeoning understanding of the functions and implications of class. Her reports from the front serve as cultural texts that chronicle an ultimate identification with the victims, rather than the perpetrators. Just as the Great War significantly changed the world order, the war ostensibly provoked Wharton to venture beyond writing about social order to advocate for those subjugated by the elite, on the scale of international militarism.⁸ The trajectory of her war writings, from a sole focus on color and line, to a detached and sometimes condescending chronicle of the classes most affected, to a fervent, compassionate defense of those displaced,

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disenfranchised, and disregarded, suggests an evolution of concern with these issues.

This is not to say that her own class is absent from her reportage at the front, or that suffering is a great equalizer. Reminders of Wharton's wealth are sprinkled throughout her personal correspondence, in which she mentions traveling with various servants, secretaries, and sometimes a party of friends. Her war correspondence and charity work were punctuated with rest cures on the Mediterranean and other trips throughout Europe, emphasizing her mobility.⁹ Yet she always returned, and endeavored through her reportage to instill this same sense of obligation in others. By 1920, though still committed to assisting remaining war charities not taken over by the American Red Cross upon America's entry into the war, Wharton was turning back to her own houses and her fiction and returning to private rather than public domestic concerns.

It is well-documented that Wharton stopped writing *The Age of Innocence* in order to concentrate solely on her various charitable efforts during the Great War. In *The End of The Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the First World War*, Alan Price characterizes this event as the end of Wharton's innocence, implying the beginning of a different set of concerns for the author. But the transition was perhaps not so dramatic. While Wharton's principles of design and architectural appropriateness evolved out of witnessing the violence of war, and grasping that the function of war necessitated new kinds of spaces, her humanitarian concerns continued in the war's intersection of classes, the amalgamation of home and home front. This was not the end of an era; Wharton had waged war before in her homes and texts, and she would continue her interior design and writing legacies during the war, because the author had participated in endeavors with such dual implications all her life. What had been implicit in her work all along, addressed in "The Fulness of Life" (1893), *The House of Mirth* (1905), and *The Custom of the Country* (1913), among other works, became explicit in the war. The war made literal the figurative advocacy for the marginalized and displaced, across a spectrum of houses, customs, ages, and classes, for whom Wharton fought in her life and work.

Notes

1. According to royalty reports from Charles Scribner's Sons, *Fighting France* sold comparatively few copies, whereas *A Son at the Front*, Wharton's only full length fictional portrait of the war, sold tens of thousands of copies years after the war. The discrepancy between the commercial success of her fictive and non-fictive portrayals of the war perhaps points to the way Wharton was perceived in America—as a novelist rather than a journalist, a writer of fiction rather than a crusader for human rights.

2. An exhibition and sale of the original manuscripts and artwork from *The Book of the Homeless*, at the

American Art Galleries in New York, January 22, 1916, raised almost seven thousand dollars for Wharton's charities, while sales of the book totaled fifteen thousand dollars.

3. In a May 11, 1917 letter to her niece, Wharton wrote, "I had set aside this morning to write you a long letter enclosing all the receipts for the last letter's point by point, but my mail brought me seventeen letters this morning, most of which must be attended to at once, and in order not to miss the bag I must write at a gallop as usual." Edith Wharton Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Box 40, Folder 1213.

4. Judith Fryer explores Wharton's relationship with space in *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather*. Fryer highlights Wharton's ambivalence regarding privacy and disclosure; at different times in her life she retreated from social situations and public obligations. I would suggest that the war, then, was a necessarily public era for Wharton.

5. Edith Wharton Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Box 40, Folder 1213.

6. Letter to Mr. Whitlock. Ibid. Box 40, Folder 1215.

7. Letter to Mrs. Scott, 16 October 1918. Edith Wharton Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Box 40, Folder 1220.

8. Stephen Kern writes in *Culture of Time and Space* (1983) that between 1880 and 1918 came the "leveling of traditional hierarchies. The plurality of spaces, the philosophy of perspectivism, the affirmation of positive negative space, the restructuring of forms, and the contraction of social distance assaulted a variety of hierarchical orderings" (132).

9. Sandra Gilbert notes in "Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War" that women who reached the front had the freedom to leave, "the delight of (female) mobilization rather than the despair of (male) immobilization" (200), so on levels of both class and gender, Wharton occupied a privileged position.

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**The Influence of the Bunner Brothers
on Edith Wharton's
"Bunner Sisters"**

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While reading the works of Edith Wharton, I came upon an early New York novella entitled "Bunner Sisters." It is the story of two poor, working-class sisters, Ann Eliza and Evelina Bunner, who live in the basement of a Stuyvesant Square tenement house. An object of seemingly little importance, a mechanical clock, sold to them by an impoverished German immigrant, comes into their lives, changing their world irrevocably. What starts off as simple kitchen drama turns quickly into the surreal and then deepens into ultra-realism.

Excited by the material, my theatrical instinct was alerted, and I began to adapt the work for the stage. But the more I worked on the piece, the more I kept seeing the words as pictures. What slowly emerged was not simply a story about two New York women, but something larger. I began to suspect that Wharton was using the piece as a statement about the death of the values of the Hudson River School of Painting and the rise of those of the Ashcan School of Art.

Indeed in the very first paragraphs, Wharton describes how "New York's traffic moved at the pace of the drooping horse-car and basked in the sunsets of the Hudson River School on the walls of the National

Academy of Design" (225). Wharton goes on to write about the "fissured pavement" of the Stuyvesant Square side street where the Bunner sisters lived with its "mosaic of coloured handbills, lids of tomato-cans, old shoes, cigar stumps and banana skins, cemented together by a layer of mud" (225).

Both artistic disciplines embraced the notion that guided the American everyman, and in this case everywoman, through a heightened aesthetic awareness of ethical beliefs as they applied to daily living. The Hudson River School sought to find God and solace in nature; the Ashcan School discovered beauty and consolation in the very gutters of the city streets.

Why did the socially prominent Edith Wharton turn to the lives of immigrants to portray American moral values? Why did she choose the groundbreaking style of "words as pictures," to structure the story? Where did the name, Bunner, come from? I believed the name was fictitious since I had never heard of it before, nor, to my knowledge, had anyone connected that name with someone Wharton might have actually known.

At the New-York Historical Society, which houses a collection of artwork from the era, I visited its galleries, looking for just the right paintings as backdrops for the play. In an index I discovered the name Bunner. Not once but twice., and not as sisters, but as brothers: Rudolph F. Bunner and Andrew F. Bunner, painters. Was "Bunner Sisters" inspired by these two Bunner brothers, I wondered?

After extensive research I uncovered works of art by Rudolph and Andrew: paintings, watercolors, and drawings that had been packed away and forgotten in the storage bins of the New-York Historical Society and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, never seen by the public or examined by curators in over a century. There was little information about the personal lives of these two men, only that they were born, bred, and died in New York. Inquiries at the Salmagundi Club, the National Academy of Design, and the Pennsylvania Museum of Art, where the two painters had been affiliated, proved fruitless. Finally, the truth became apparent at the New York Society Library where a copy of *The Life and Letters of Henry Cuyler Bunner* by Gerard Jensen was housed.

I had remembered briefly reading biographical descriptions about this writer-editor of *Puck Magazine* during the early phases of my research. But they made no mention of either a brother or of painting, so I hadn't bothered to look any further. But there on the very first page of the preface was the line "Bunner's brother Rudolph" (x). The citations in all the biographies were incorrect. Henry Cuyler and Rudolph Francis were the Bunner brothers. Andrew Fisher was their cousin. H. C., as Henry Cuyler liked to be called, was considered a literary

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Conference Announcement

Edith Wharton at the Mount : June 27-29, 2008. Call for Papers forthcoming in the *EWR* and on the *EWS* website

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light of American letters.

Searching into the past of Wharton and Bunner unearthed an uncanny similarity in their early lives. Both had been born into wealthy, landholding, powerful American families. Edith Wharton, a direct descendant of the Rhinelanders. The Rhinelanders were among the city's great real estate developers. Interestingly, Bunner's uncle Henry Cuyler, after whom H. C. was named, was responsible for the building of the Rhinelander Sugar House in lower Manhattan; originally it was known as Cuyler's Sugar House back in 1763 (Rhinelanders).

Henry Cuyler Bunner (1855-1896) was a direct descendant of the sons of the American Revolution. His grandfather "Rudolph Bunner I (born 1779), married Elizabeth Church, the daughter of John B. Church, commissaire in France during the Revolution, and Angelica, the daughter of General Philip Schuyler. She was the niece of Alexander Hamilton and of Catherine Cockran" (Slosek 227). As a lawyer and graduate of Columbia College, Rudolph Bunner was considered one of the richest men in the country. He managed over 40 thousand acres of land in Oswego, New York, which he had inherited from Alexander Hamilton's land holdings. He was a

political philosopher [who] liked to write.... and was elected representative to the Twentieth Congress in 1826 as an Adams Democrat.... His intimate friend Andrew Jackson, knowing of Bunner's literary faculty, and conscious of his own disability as a writer, is reported to have engaged Bunner to write the inaugural address of 1829. (Jensen 3)

By the time Wharton and Bunner were teenagers, both their family's fortunes were severely diminished. Both focused on the education of their minds; and both were given permission to roam about an enormous private library in New York City, where they soaked up literary classics, art, architecture, history, science, and religion in the home of a family relative. For Wharton it was at the house of her father George Frederic Jones who loved to travel to Europe to immerse himself in art and architecture. For Bunner it was at the residence of his uncle Henry Theodore Tuckerman, a writer of some fame, known for the "production of poems, travels, biography, essays, criticism, and ceaseless contributions to the daily press and the reviews and magazines" (Jensen 5). He was one of the only non-artists allowed to rent a room at the Tenth Street Studio Building.

It was the writing of poetry and short stories that first brought pleasure and recognition to both Wharton and Bunner. Richard Watson Gilder, a founding member of the Authors Club in 1882 at 330 East 17th Street, Stuyvesant Square, was then the assistant editor of *Scribner's*. He would later become editor of its successor *Century*. Gilder professionally recognized each one of them as an important writer of verse and prose and published their works consistently. In a letter written from Marion, Massachusetts, on August 17, 1885, Gilder wrote to H. C. Bunner:

I have had a revival this summer – with two copies of your poems. I began you a letter to say that your verse wore well, and that you seem one of those who must carry on this torch – not only to others – but to your own genius – that all you had to do was to be true to your talent, and America would not only have, but be aware of having a genuine poet to help keep us from the shame of materialism – of worldly success and none others...Yours always. (Jensen 112)

As for Wharton, she corresponded regularly with Gilder about the form, syntax, remuneration and merit of her work and also "traded talk on houses and gardens" (Dwight 130).

Wharton's world of writing was inspired by and linked to the myths, poetry, and art of the classics in the 1880s. *Atlantic* co-founder and contributor Henry Wadsworth Longfellow published her early poems. Coincidentally, Longfellow was also a good friend and fellow poet of Henry Theodore Tuckerman, as well as Richard Watson Gilder and H. C. Bunner. But by 1890, Wharton was focusing on the shifting lives of immigrants, the poor, and the lower middle classes residing in and around New York City. This was the very world H. C. Bunner had exploited, and for which he had gained prominence and worldly success.

By 1878, Henry Cuyler Bunner, age 23, was already editor-in-chief of *Puck Magazine*—America's first successful political comic weekly. Thanks to Bunner's wit and Joseph Keppler's incomparable cartoons, *Puck Magazine* picked up the "lance of satire" to prick the boils of corruption, greed, and excess then dominating the culture. The outcome was a brilliant sophisticated display of "literacy and art" not seen before in American journalism. "Color, lighting, costumes! Elephants, presidents, paupers! Apocalypse, redemption, a cast of thousands!" (Borgman x). Over 80,000 readers, from all walks of life, were purchasing the publication on a weekly basis. Its power as a political force spawned the Independent Party.

As a lover of nature and the untouched landscape, Bunner was instrumental in creating an "American Bloomsbury" in bucolic nineteenth-century Nutley, New Jersey. (Called "Enclosure," it exists today as an historical site.) There, for the last nine years of his life, Bunner lived with fellow artists and writers, exchanging artistic accomplishments and examining intellectual issues while commuting to New York City by train each morning. Frank Stockton, "dean of American humorists" (Palatsky 11) and associate editor at *St. Nicholas Magazine*—a children's publication that printed not only Bunner's stories but also those of his elder brother Rudolph, as well as the accompanying artwork, "was an Enclosure pioneer, the first of the literati to discover Nutley's nineteenth-century bucolic charms—using the setting for his novel *Rudder Grange*. According to local legend, Stockton's famous short story 'The Lady or The Tiger?' was originally intended as entertainment for an Enclosure party" (Weinstein 139).

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It was Bunner who first brought to the forefront the radical concept of New York City as a creative resource for fiction in a letter, "New York as a Field for Fiction," published in *Century Magazine*, September 1883. He even laid out the format on how to write it. In his essay he asked his fellow writers:

May we find a field for character-study in New York as Thackeray found in London and Augier in Paris? Must we not import our character, like our fashions, and our dressing-cases, and our wine? Mr. Howells...find[s] [his] accounts in Boston.... Mr. James devotes himself to settling international complications of taste and affection...but his "Washington Square" might as well have been the smokiest of sparrow-haunted London parks as that fair old spot that was once the Potter's Field. (786-88)

The quintessential New York writer, Bunner had already accepted the challenge he put forth to others by establishing this new literary form, the "New York story." Though he worked night and day as the magazine's editor, his need to express himself in other writing forms beckoned. He was so highly regarded in the literary community that his publishers begged him to

give up some of his editorial labors to write the stories that reflected so much of the literary glory of their weekly...[and to] write stories of twenty-five hundred words especially for *Puck*...in this manner his 'Short Sixes: Stories To Be Read While The Candle Burns' was composed and printed...the experiment was successful far beyond their wildest hopes. (Jensen 201)

Not only was the serial installment form incorporated into the magazine for the first time, but the public's insatiable appetite for Bunner's works was so strong that Schwarzmann and Keppler Publishing was born as a separate entity to satisfy the reading public. Among his devoted and admiring friends were Mark Twain, Robert Louis Stevenson, and William Dean Howells.

Bunner's unique literary genre was conceived and written from the perspective of his own back yard, the small alleyways that bordered the Puck Building. His tales focused on the shifting lives and atmosphere of the nation's foremost metropolis and its environs: vignettes of Manhattan, outlines in local color from Greenwich Village to the French quarter, from The Bowery to Chelsea, along the Hudson River up to Spuyten Duyvil.

Bunner recognized the worth and importance of this immigrant community in building a new American culture. He used his magazine as a forum to integrate these individuals into the fabric of American life and in doing so gave rise to and made popular distinctly new forms of American politics, literature, and art. He received an honorary degree of Master of Arts from Yale University (1895), and every year Columbia University awards a student the "H.C. Bunner Gold Medal" for the best essay written about American literature.

Puck Magazine under Bunner's guidance is arguably the template from which *The New Yorker* emerged, a

magazine of politics, satire, cartoons, poetry, and literature, with its emphasis on everyday events. Both H. C. Bunner and Harold Ross saw their respective magazines as a likeness in words and pictures of New York City life. Other contemporary magazines such as *Harper's*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Mother Jones*, and the *Partisan Review* owe him and *Puck Magazine* a major debt.

As influential as H. C. Bunner was, it was important to learn more about his brother Rudolph and, just possibly, the role he played in Wharton's early artistic development. I recalled an article pertaining to Rudolph in *Quarterly Illustrated* 1893. In "Making Masterpieces," Edgar Mathew Bacon had interviewed thirty-seven prominent American artists. As he observed, "[it is a] difficult task for the illustrator to pick out from the mass of his black and white productions that drawing which, from every point of criticism, may be said to be his best pictorial attainment" (299).

In the above named essay was a tiny picture the text for which read: "A little picture, low in tone and aglow with a quiet charm of color, is Rudolph F. Bunner's *In Doors*, exhibited at the Academy some years ago" (301). This was the perfect rendition of either Ann Eliza or Evelina Bunner, sitting alone, lost in a cold empty room where no curtains covered the windows and no flames emanated from the fireplace. Here was a Bunner drawing that could easily be the model of a Bunner sister.

Bacon continued, "Mr. Bunner says it is his best production up to the moment. It belongs in the class of subjects, which particularly appeal to this painter" (301). This "class of subjects" was exactly what Wharton's novella focused on. Could Wharton have come across this particular drawing at the Academy and been so inspired by it that she named her novella after him? Or was it the personification of what she was already writing, so that the image gave her idea even more credence? Wharton had written that she "'always saw the visible world as a series of pictures'" (Dwight 8).

In Bacon's essay, there was an illustration of another small drawing by an artist named C. A. Burlingame. Oddly enough, Edward L. Burlingame was H. C. Bunner's and Edith Wharton's editor at Scribner's. E. L. Burlingame, editor par excellence, carefully chose all literary works for *Scribner's*. During those years, the public clamored for a Bunner sensibility, a Bunner style, and a Bunner point of view. Here were New York stories built on Bunner's ability to flesh out and focus in "words as pictures" the drama and hope of the immigrant, the poor, and the new middle class as they attempted to eke out meaningful lives in the gray stone tenement houses of the city. The very houses possessed a soul and a voice equal to the voice and soul of those who dwelled within them, as beautifully exemplified by Bunner's *Story of a New York House*.

A new appreciation for urban life was occurring as Bunner's literature moved into the mainstream of American society. Bunner stories also became the midwife for a new art form: the Ashcan School of Art. Its movement

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was not far from becoming both a symbol of rebellion and a leader in American modern art.

Epitomized by the character of Evelina Bunner, the Hudson River School of Art symbolized social stability and happiness, the divine in nature, beauty, and the sublime. Central Park, the physical achievement of this art form, plays a significant role in the novella as well as the play. But at the end of the nineteenth century, a major shift took place in society. A sense of alienation, dissatisfaction with American life, and a longing for self-expression began to take root. The new zeitgeist, symbolized by the Ashcan Movement and depicted by the character of Ann Eliza Bunner, emerged with revelations in "found art" and a fascination with the beauty of common things. Real life filled with the toughness of modern times, and the achievement of an authentic self with appropriate values and goals is looked at head-on. An existential modern leap is made. As Wharton wrote to Sara Norton after reading Nietzsche, "I should like to get up on the housetops and cry to all who come after us: Take your own life, every one of you!" (Wolff 152).

Ironically, Edith Wharton's writing style and success were later to be based on her ability to entertain and inform readers of the aristocracy of the city, not of the poor and disenfranchised. But as a young aspiring writer, Wharton, in her possible need to reflect the times, might well have been motivated to emulate the literary light of the moment: H. C. Bunner. Thus, when she submitted "Bunner Sisters" to Burlingame in 1891 after he had published her first story "Mrs. Manstey's View"—based on the disenfranchised living in New York City—one could imagine her bursting with a sense of achievement. Her desire to become a known, powerful, and successful writer was right at her fingertips. Did she think she could capitalize on her own success by using the success of the Bunner name in her title? Or was she just trying to emulate H. C. Bunner and his brother by using their artistic styles? She wrote of herself later in life, "I had yet no real personality of my own [in the early 1890s], and was not to acquire one till my first volume of short stories, [*The Great Inclination*] was published — and that was not until 1899" (Wolff 80).

What disappointment must have followed for Wharton when Burlingame informed her that he was returning the manuscript of "Bunner Sisters," calling it not yet ready for publication. As Wharton biographer R.W. B. Lewis wrote in *Edith Wharton: A Biography*:

Burlingame was warily complimentary: "I like and admired much of it quite unreservedly," but "the motif and the admirable detail and color of the story fail to carry its great length"—it ran to about thirty thousand words. He concluded that he could not accept it for Scribner's; it was too long to print in a single issue, and it would be fatal to divide it — the effect of each half on the other would be one of "dreariness." (66)

Nonetheless, he would publish her third story "The Fullness of Life" (1893), based on her own unhappy marriage.

Burlingame's son Roger reveals in his book *Of Making Many Books* that his father never would tell a beginning author "that his work was hopeless. He was not told this in words; he found it out for himself, so there was no room for hurt feelings" (210). Was "Bunner Sisters" not good enough? H. C.'s "Story of a New York House" and the "Midge" were huge successes for the magazine. Bunner was one of its most celebrated contributors. Everyone recognized his name. Did Burlingame feel she was competing with him? Or that she had the temerity to ride on his coattails? Had Wharton's longing to become a part of the new writing community, the Authors Club, grown so fervent that she thought in publishing her novella a professional dialogue could be established between the two of them? Or was her piece an attack on H. C.? Was Wharton's "Bunner Sisters" an audacious retort to Bunner's "Sisterly Scheme" — a humorous story that had been published earlier in his *Short Sixes*? Both stories centered upon two sisters who are emotionally and sexually starving; both secretly fall in love with the same man, vie for his affection, and go to any length to get what they want. Wharton wrote back to Burlingame on November 25, 1893:

I need hardly say how much I am flattered by Messrs. Scribner's proposition to publish my stories in a volume. I have several more, which you have not seen, & also the longer one called "Bunner Sisters" which you may remember my sending you a year or two ago. You then pronounced it too long for one number of the magazine, & unsuited to serial publication, but you spoke otherwise very kindly of it, & though I am not a good judge of what I write, it seems to me, after several readings, up to my average of writing. I will therefore send it to you, if you approve, with the shorter stories you have not read. Shall I send them all at once? (Wharton *Letters* 31)

But an eerie silence was to fall between Wharton and Burlingame regarding this piece. He would never correspond with her about this work again, as his letters at the Firestone Library attest. "Bunner Sisters" was not to be published until 1916, long after Edward L. Burlingame had retired from Scribner's, Edith Wharton had found fame, and H. C. Bunner was dead. Strangely enough, in the same year Scribner's issued this volume, it also reissued H. C. Bunner's *Collection of Short Stories: Series I*, an anthology that contained "Sisterly Scheme."

The story's title, writing style, and genre reflect the actual lives of the Bunner brothers. Wharton honors Stuyvesant Square, the same locale H. C. and the Authors Club resided in, and St. Louis where Puck cartoonist Joseph Keppler lived as a young bohemian artist. She honors the bucolic environs of New Jersey, where both the Bunner sisters and the Bunner brothers sojourned when they were in need of "a breath of real country air" (258). Evelina writes a letter extolling the spiritual union of marriage, as had H. C. Bunner in his extraordinary short story "The Letter and A Paragraph" (279-280). And fascinatingly, the doctor who appears in "Bunner Sisters"

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turns out to be inspired by a real life physician who married into the Tuckerman side of the Bunner family. The daughter of H. C.'s cousin Bayard Tuckerman, May Appleton, married the son of Dr. Francis Parker Kinnicutt. He was an old friend of Wharton's husband Teddy and treated him for his physical and mental afflictions. Dr. Kinnicutt turns out to be the grandfather of Sister Parish, one of the great interior decorators of the twentieth century. As Sister's daughter, Apple Parish Bartlett wrote in the memoir *Sister*, "When he wasn't curing them he was likely to be off hunting with them. . . . Edith Wharton. . . managed to include him as the distinguished doctor in almost every book she wrote" (8). And like Ann Eliza, the elder sister in "Bunner Sisters," Rudolph, the elder brother of the Bunner brothers, sacrifices a good portion of his life for the success of his sibling. Both became the caretaker of an ailing and dying loved one—in Rudolph's case his mother and in Ann Eliza's her sister Evelina. Each experienced the death of a sibling to tuberculosis at an early age. For them, as well as for Edith Wharton, existence became a quest to capture a unique and authentic self within life's limitations.

The themes of Wharton's "Bunner Sisters" still resonate in society today. Although Burlingame had feared that "it would be fatal to divide it" (Lewis 66), at two staged readings of *Bunner Sisters*, my play/adaptation of Wharton's novella at The New York Society Library and the

Salmagundi Club, the New York audience found the two-act production absorbing and dramatically relevant. As the Society Library wrote, "Everyone who was there is raving about it. . . And. . . what a nice touch it was to have the Bunner-related items in the exhibition cases. It was really just ideal overall."

Henry Cuyler Bunner and Rudolph Francis Bunner are virtually unknown today. But it is my hope in presenting this material to expose for the first time their influence on one of the great writers of their era, Edith Wharton. H. C. Bunner died of tuberculosis at the age of 41. His brief life ought to be regarded as a tragic and untimely loss to American letters.

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The Edith Wharton Listserv

Wharton-I is your best electronic source for timely information about the Wharton Society and its activities (prizes, grants, conference calls for papers, the EWS dinner at MLA, and so on). It is also a list for questions and discussion of Wharton's works.

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Book Review

Ohler, Paul J. *Edith Wharton's "Evolutionary Conception": Darwinian Allegory in Her Major Novels*. New York: Routledge, 2006. xviii + 212pp.

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"If you do, could I understand it, even in bits?", Edith Wharton asked Morton Fullerton, tongue firmly in cheek, in June 1908, about Yves Delage's *L'Hérédité et les grands problèmes de la biologie générale* (1903), after having read and digested Robert Heath Lock's *Recent Progress in the Study of Variation, Heredity and Evolution* (1906), Charles Dèpéret's *Les Transformations du monde animale* (1907) and Vernon Kellogg's *Darwinism To-Day* (1907) in quick succession. Today, we can no longer credit Wharton's teasing mock-modesty, nor can we harbour any doubts about her comprehension of scientific ideas. Despite this, Paul Ohler's *Edith Wharton's "Evolutionary Conception": Darwinian Allegory in Her Major Novels* comes as a welcome reminder of the astonishing breadth, assiduousness and engagement of her reading in the evolutionary sciences, and its relevance to our understanding of her art.

Building upon the work of earlier studies, such as Claire Preston's *Edith Wharton's Social Register*, Carol Singley's *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit*, and

Bert Bender's *The Descent of Love*, Ohler's book provides a detailed reading of Darwinian influences on Wharton's fiction. Three novels are selected for particularly close analysis: *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920). Ohler's approach is both original and rewarding. He investigates Wharton's use of Darwinian concepts (natural selection, competition for resources, speciation, inheritance, atavism etc) not just in terms of their importance in determining the plot, but also as metaphor and allegory shaping both style and characterization. For example, he suggests that Lily Bart's repeated encounters with Rosedale represent the biological ubiquity of "chance variations in nature" (55), strongly countering the New York elites' conviction that their ordered, purposive, society has reined in both instinct and contingency.

In his reading of *The House of Mirth*, Ohler notes the proliferation and coexistence of the words "instinct" and "inheritance" in the novel, deliberately "conflating class values and capital...with biological heredity" (55). Darwin himself had remained uncertain about the possibility of the inheritance of acquired rather than innate characteristics, and Wharton clearly drew upon this ambiguous and heavily contested aspect of his legacy. Ohler notes Wharton's allegorical use of "Darwinian language to serve her response to social Darwinists" (23) as well as her seemingly indeterminate, but richly provocative, yoking together of ideas from science and culture, most clearly demonstrated in the cultural heredity (and *hereditary culture*) ubiquitous in her fiction.

Ohler's reading of Darwinian allegory in the fiction leads him to some fascinating and original conclusions. For example, he views Lily's refusal to use Bertha Dorset's letters as a manifestation of her "non-adaptive interest" (63) in social solidarity, recreating the evident "tension between competition and interdependence" (63) outlined by Darwin in *The Origin of Species*. This suggests once again Wharton's complicated (and partly heretical) use of Darwin to criticize the rise of Spencerian social Darwinism in American thinking. Lily's interest in interdependence is directly contrary to the trajectory – competitive struggle leading to moral, economic and personal evolution—championed by social Darwinists at the time. In a similar vein, Ohler sees Undine Spragg's untrammelled success in *The Custom of the Country* as a violation of the "Darwinian interdependence of species" (91). While Ohler (like Preston before him) notes the possibility of Lily Bart as a "non-viable mutation" (50) and views Undine Spragg as a mutation subject to "ideological selection" (93), it is intriguing to consider the presence or relevance of the *viable* mutation in Wharton's fiction. Evolutionary change is dependent, after all, on the survival of individual mutations to maturation and reproduction, in order to constantly enrich the gene pool; these are the very apparent biological imperatives that Lily Bart, for example, so resolutely shakes off. In keeping with his tight brief, there are important non, or perhaps even, *post-Darwinian* thinkers who are occluded in Ohler's otherwise very detailed analysis. It would have been fascinating to know how Wharton's close reading of Hugo de Vries's pioneering Mendelian work *Plant Breeding* (1907)

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shaped her thinking about heredity and its ubiquitous presence in her fiction. As a passionate gardener and prolific novelist, Wharton would have been interested in both the literal and the allegorical repercussions of selectively cross-breeding genera. Similarly, the implications of Wharton's reading of August Weismann (she owned, and had read, J. Arthur Thompson's 1904 translation of his *The Evolution Theory*) are not adequately considered, despite the fact that Ohler's own analysis of Charles Bowen in *The Custom of the Country* as a champion of cultural "continuity and choice" wonderfully mirrors Weismann's hypothesis of the unchanging continuity of the germ-plasm through the generations. Weismann was the first biologist to offer a mechanism for inheritance that excluded the transmission of acquired (rather than innate) characteristics through successive generations; the Lamarckian belief in the transmission of individual adaptations was dealt another blow by the rediscovery of Mendel's work in 1900. Despite this, as Peter Bowler has demonstrated in *The Eclipse of Darwinism* (1983), the debate between Neo-Darwinian and Neo-Lamarckian camps (encapsulated in the Spencer-Weismann contretemps of 1893) remained both vital and unresolved in the first decades of the twentieth century. Wharton's comprehensive reading in the field registers both sides of the debate; she read the Neo-Lamarckian Samuel Butler's *Note-Books* in 1915 with increasing

incredulity, but this did not deter her from reading George Bernard Shaw's even more alarmingly Neo-Lamarckian fantasy of purposive evolution, *Back to Methuselah* (1921).

While it would have been useful to acknowledge their ubiquity and importance, examining the significance of these non-, anti- or post-Darwinian thinkers upon Wharton's fiction would have resulted in another book, something that Ohler concedes in his study. "Wharton," Ohler writes, "invokes Darwinism at a moment in this history when it was being reassessed in the light of Mendel's work on genetics" (183). Wharton's comprehensive engagement with evolutionary science in this period is always worth considering in any estimation of her fiction, and Ohler's book is a welcome addition to a growing body of scholarly work. Sharon Kim's fascinating recent article "Lamarckism and the construction of transcendence in *The House of Mirth*" (*Studies in the Novel* 38:2, 187-210), John Bruni's "Becoming American: Evolution and Performance in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*" (*Intertexts* 9:1, 43-59), and Judith P. Saunders's "Evolutionary Biological Issues in Edith Wharton's *The Children*" (*College Literature* 32:2, 83-102) provide ample evidence of the burgeoning academic interest in this field. Ohler's *Edith Wharton's "Evolutionary Conception"* offers a stimulating and entertaining reading of the intimately "entwined discourses of literature and science" so prevalent in her writing (xv).

Announcement

The Edith Wharton Essay Prize

Instituted in the fall of 2005, the Edith Wharton Essay Prize has been awarded annually for the best unpublished essay on Edith Wharton by a beginning scholar. Graduate students, independent scholars, and faculty members who have not held a tenure-track or full-time appointment for more than four years are eligible to submit their work. The winning essay will be published in *The Edith Wharton Review*, a peer-reviewed journal, and the writer will receive an award of \$250.

All entries will be considered for publication in *The Edith Wharton Review* as well as for the Edith Wharton Essay Prize. Submissions should be 15-25 pages in length and must follow the new 6th edition MLA style, using endnotes, not footnotes. Applicants should not identify themselves on the manuscript, but should provide a separate cover page that includes their names, academic status, e-mail address, postal address, and the notation "The Edith Wharton Essay Prize."

To submit an essay for the prize, send three copies by October 1, 2007, to either of the editors of *The Edith Wharton Review*: Prof. Carole M. Shaffer-Koros, Dean, School of Visual and Performing Arts, VE-114-A Kean University Union, NJ 07083 or Dr. Linda Costanzo Cahir Willis 105-K Kean University Union, NJ 07083.

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CONGRATULATIONS!

To the newly elected Executive Board members of The Edith Wharton Society: Meredith Goldsmith, Ursinus College ; Katherine Joslin, Western Michigan University; Gary Totten, North Dakota State University; and Laura Saltz, Colby College (re-elected) as At-Large-Members, and to Margaret Murray (Western Connecticut State University) as Secretary.

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