



EDITH WHARTON REVIEW

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Tourism and War: Edith Wharton's Explication of *French Ways and Their Meaning*

Hildegard Hoeller
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"Yes, we have it. It's in the travel section," the clerk in the Harvard Bookstore pointed me to the left corner of the store. And there it was, Edith Wharton's *French Ways and Their Meaning*, standing amongst Michelin Guides, Baedekers, and *Let's Go Europe*. An odd place for this book that Wharton understood as one of her many war efforts? Perhaps not, since *Tourism and War* are two central and often surprisingly intertwined aspects in Wharton's understanding and explication of France.

In her fiction, we may think of Troy Belknap in *The Marne* whose cursory experience of French culture through his tutor makes him want to go to the front. Or George Campton, an accident of tourism, one might say, who becomes "a son at the front" because his parents could not return to America quickly enough for him to be born there. In her non-fiction, the affinity between tourism and war can be seen in even a cursory comparison be-

tween *Fighting France* and *A Motor Flight Through France*. One written in war, the other in peace, their structures and images are rather alike; it is striking how much, in the conventions of its narrative, *Fighting France* is a work of tourism, a tourism of war. In entries *en route* it describes vistas, monuments, and impressions, often guided ones, abandoned when the tour moves on and strung together to assemble into what Wharton calls in the last chapter the glory of France. She concludes that "this is then, what 'France is like.' The whole civilian part of the nation seems merged in one symbolic figure" (237) and the entire nation is fighting against the "extinction of their national ideal" (238).

When Wharton writes to Barrett Wendell about *French Ways and their Meaning*, she seems to think of this volume as a very similar book—a book about the meaning of French ways after all, and one out of which—despite its fragmented nature—Wendell "should reconstruct the little monument to the glory of France that my scattered bricks were meant to build" (*Letters* 423). Wharton understood *French Ways* as one of her many war efforts.¹ After America entered the war, she

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BOOK REVIEW

Solitude and Society in the Works of Herman Melville and Edith Wharton. By Linda Costanzo Cahir. Westport: Greenwood P. 1999. xv, 155pp.

Perhaps the most startling facet of Linda Costanzo Cahir's splendid monograph is that she accomplishes exactly what she says she will. Unabashedly declaring Melville and Wharton America's greatest male and female writers, Costanzo Cahir promises in her introduction, "An American Diptych," a "contemplation of each separate panel [which] becomes enhanced, perhaps deepened when set beside its contrast; and in the process a third insight is yielded." *Solitude and Society in the Works of Herman Melville and Edith Wharton* is the literary reification of that third panel.

The author boldly compares Wharton the "ethician" and Melville the "metaphysician," discovering in each a similar emotional unfeathering in their respective relationships with Morton Fullerton and Nathaniel Hawthorne. The subjects' biographical similarities, such as their literary coming-of-age, emotional disorders, relationships to their social class, spouses, parents—particularly their mothers—foreground Wharton's epistemological sympathies with Melville, which leads to the conclusion that they were "kindred spirits...fundamentally human and fundamentally American" united in the belief that "isolation is an ontological dimension of their being human." In support of her conclusions regarding Melville's influence on Wharton, Costanzo Cahir has discovered a considerable cache of Melville's works in Wharton's library, and finds that the Grande Dame of American Letters was reading Melville in 1910-12, when he was decidedly out of literary fashion.

In her chapter "The Devil's Children: The Isolation of Self-Reliance," the author fires a devastating shot across the bow of Emersonian self-reliance. With Ahab, Undine Spragg and Lawrence Selden as templates, the reader is forced, ironically, into that moment of Emersonian genius, which is recognized in rejected thoughts. How could one not apprehend in these characters the authors' similar delineation of "a rapacious self-absorption that takes reality and gulps it down into the all-consuming belly of ego"? As Costanzo Cahir moves seamlessly between texts that formerly seemed so disparate—*Pierre: or The Ambiguities*, *New Year's Day*, *The Confidence Man*, *False Dawn*, *Billy Budd*, "Kerfol,"—how can the reader not see, as Melville did, that the protagonists are, indeed, "cracked across the brow"?

Moving from Emersonian criticism to more modern commentary, *Solitude and Society* is a valuable complement to and expansion on Carol Wershoven's seminal study, *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton*. In the chapter "The Mysterious Stranger," the Melvillean

and Whartonian stranger always "dramatizes the split between the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*, between humankind's impulse to solitude and to society." "The Sociable Isolato" introduces the fascinating paradigm of the "Whartonian Ishmaelite, [such as Ellen Olenka, Justine Brent and Lily Bart] an orphan and an outsider who searches and wanders for a meaningful place in the social order." This paradigm's solidity proves itself when applied to the Whartonian text most in need of explication: *The Buccaneers*: What would it have been? Is Laura Testvalley's character an organic outgrowth of so many other Wharton heroines, or is she a new Wharton woman? As a sociable isolato or Whartonian Ishmaelite, Testvalley "is consistent with her literary caste... composed of wanderers and social exiles, characters who are openly gregarious, yet profoundly alone, infused with moral weight because their decisions affect the lives of other people." These wanderers often attempt to establish a "solitude à deux," an impossibility in a social world, whether that milieu is the deck of the *Pequod* or Mrs. Mingott's drawing room.

"The Sexual Transgressor" manages to be intellectually provocative without the sensationalism that has dogged so many studies of allegedly transgressive sexuality in Wharton's writings. This restrained but frank exploration of sexuality could not be further from "The Oprahization of Wharton Studies," as discussed at the Paris conference. The author maintains that homosexuality and heterosexuality are morally neutral topics to Melville and Wharton. "Both writers argue that the pursuit of sexual passion and pleasure will prove vastly alienating and cannot be morally valid when it constitutes a violation of another's basic right to dominion over his or her body... or when its end is exploitation and control [such as in the case of incest]."

To a reader, such as myself, who has condescended to read Melville only with a dispensation from worship at the Howellsian altar of Realism, the third panel that is *Solitude and Society in the Works of Herman Melville and Edith Wharton* offers an intellectual density relieved by stylistic grace in the service of seminal scholarship. This volume is a necessary addition to the shelves of anyone interested in Edith Wharton, Herman Melville, American literature or, simply, solid thinking and good writing.

Margaret P. Murray

Notes and Queries: New Feature

If you have a brief note or question about Edith Wharton or her work, please send it to the Editor for possible publication in this new column.

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was asked to "[make] France and things French more intelligible to the American soldier" (*Backward Glance* 357)² by "help[ing] the American fresh from his own land to overcome [his initial difficulties of understanding French culture], and to arrive at a quick comprehension of French character"; in this cultural explication she saw "one of the greatest services that Americans familiar with France can render at this moment." She feels particularly qualified to make this war contribution since she believes that "it takes an outsider familiar with both races to explain away what may be called the corned-beef-hash differences, and bring out the underlying resemblances; and while actual contact in the trenches will in the long run do this more surely than any amount of writing, it may nevertheless be an advantage to the newcomer to arrive with a few first-aid hints in his knapsack" (17).

Wharton's book, a wartime Baedeker and soldier's handbook, thus too combines tourism and war to offer an explication and celebration of France. Yet, it tries to explicate France for the tourist/soldier without a tour, without the spatial and temporal linearity of the motor-flight and its sequence of events. And unlike in *Fighting France* or *A Motor-Flight*, in *French Ways* Wharton does not conclude that this is what France is like but rather that she cannot explicate what French culture "really means." Perhaps too easily linking this little volume to her other writings of France, critics have overlooked the complexity of this small handbook and the ways in which it allows us to re-think the relationship between Wharton's allegiance to France and her national identity as an American. Exposing the nervous relations between tourism, war, and cultural explication, *French Ways* offers us the intricate and fascinating journey of a writer from confidence in her role as tour guide, explicator, translator to a nervous collapse into exoticism and "blood-and-kinship-based" nationalism that leaves the ally permanently Other.

Wharton's "first-aid hints" about French culture were, as she admitted herself, not much more than fragments about a culture itself fragmented beyond legibility. "It is unfortunate that at this moment France should be in so many superficial ways, unlike the normal peace-time France" (6), she writes. In a country, "more or less topsy-turvy" (5), describing its culture amounts to cultural description without easy referentiality. Yet, she surmised, perhaps this allowed for a deeper cultural reading:

The world since 1914 has been like a house on fire. All the lodgers are on the stairs, in dishabille. Their doors are swinging wide, and one gets glimpses of their furniture, revelations of their habits, and whiffs of their cooking, that a life-time of ordinary intercourse would not offer. Superficial differences vanish, and so (how much oftener) do superficial resemblances; while deep unsuspected similarities and disagreements, deep common attractions and repulsions,

declare themselves. It is of few fundamental substances that the new link between France and America is made, and some reasons for the strength of the link ought to be the suddenly bared depths of the French heart. (xviii)

As war reveals these "bared depths of the French heart," Wharton tries to deepen political ties through cultural explication and to give the American soldier an insight into his ally; yet she is also utterly aware of the theoretical problems of such mediation. Wharton immediately questions the rhetoric of "depth" and "fundamental meanings" just employed:

There are two ways of judging a foreign people, at first sight, impressionistically, in the manner of the passing traveler; or after residence among them, 'soberly, advisedly,' and with all the vain precautions enjoined in another grave contingency. Of the two ways, the first is, even in ordinary times, often the most fruitful. The observer, if he has eyes and an imagination, will be struck first by the superficial dissemblances, and they will give him his picture the sharp suggestiveness of a good caricature. If he settles down among the objects of his study, he will gradually become blunted to these dissemblances, or, if he probes below the surface, he will find them sprung from the same stem as many different-seeming characteristics of his own people. A period of confusion must follow, in which he will waver between contradictions, and his sharp outlines will become blurred with what the painters call 'repentances'. (xviii-xix)

Wharton weighs tourism and caricature against explication and confusion. She suggests a play between the impressionist view of the passing traveler (a form of tourist linearity) and the contrasts an immersed studious observer might find (comparison and explication). Current anthropological theorists have hardly been more apt in describing the dilemma of cultural description—"this twilight" as Wharton calls it—the treacherous meandering between surface and depth, difference and similarity: "Race differences strike so deep that when one has triumphantly pulled up a specimen for examination one finds only the crown in one's hand, and the tough root still clenched in some crevice of prehistory. And as to race-resemblances, they are so often most misleading when they seem most instructive that any attempt to catch the likeness of another people by painting ourselves is never successful" (xix). Wharton expresses here something quite similar to what K. Ludwig Pfeiffer asserts in a recent essay in *Translatability of Culture*: "comparative enumeration of cultural characteristics runs into its deepest trouble exactly when it seems to encounter its greatest chances....The stronger the case for the assertion appears, the more it takes on aspects of national and cultural jokes altogether too familiar" (197).

Aware of the problems of cultural description, Wharton calls for a self-conscious, self-reflecting mode, one that "apologizes" for its very use of labels such as Anglo-Saxon

or Latin and one that manages, "once ... [having gone] beyond the happy stage when surface differences have all their edge,... to keep the traveler's way, and still see [its] subject in the light of contrasts" (xx). Wharton, in other words, suggests a play between the linear and impressionist view of the passing traveler, the contrasts and the comparative view of the studious observer, between definitions and denial of terms, between innocent reception and sober study. Hardly, one might add, an easy "first aid" recipe for cultural knowledge.

We are readily reminded of the hermeneutical quagmires recent anthropological theorists like Clifford Geertz or Renato Rosaldo describe when they negotiate familiarity and difference, judgment and description, surface and depth, light-hearted self-doubt and serious, methodical inquiry.³ Wharton's book--fragments about a fragmented society at a complete upheaval of all boundaries--is a dazzling and problematic negotiation of cultural difference. And despite (or because of) her theoretical self-consciousness, her text is best described, as Geertz once described a cultural description of a Danish writer Helms observing a Balinese suttee ritual in 1880:

deep equivocality emerges in virtually every line. As we read it, a series of instabilities of perspective, of meaning, of judgement--is set up, the one pressing hard upon the next, leaving us in the end, not quite sure where we stand, what position we wish to take up toward what is being said to us, and indeed uncertain about just what has been said". (*Local Knowledge* 42)

As becomes clear from Wharton's reflections on the trade-offs of both linearity and comparison in cultural description, explaining French culture is concomitant with defining national identity. Here, too, lies an inherent paradox of Wharton's venture: explaining the ally means posing it as Other, or the avenue for understanding France presupposes France as mystery in the first place. Cultural translation, in other words, entails (even as or precisely because it seeks similarity) the assumption of difference, the description (naming) of difference, and the translation of difference. As such, it inscribes the referentiality of difference itself--or, in Pfeiffer's words, it sees differences as given (191) as existent before description and translation.

How does Wharton combine linearity and comparison, similarity and difference? "The most interesting and profitable way of studying the characteristics of a different race is to pick out, among them, those in which our national character is lacking"(17) explains Wharton, who defines national identity in terms of absence.⁴

This is what I propose to attempt in these articles; and I have singled out, as typically 'French' in the best sense of that many-sided term, the qualities of *taste*, *reverence*, *continuity* and *intellectual honesty*. We are a new people, a pioneer people. A people defined by fate to break up new continents and experiment in new social conditions; and therefore it may be useful to see what part is played in the life of a nation by some of the very qualities we have had the

least time to acquire. (19)⁵

As Wharton tries to define presence in French culture and absence in American culture (contrasts), she orders her book as a narrative of growth (a temporal rather than spacial form of linearity and a usual anthropological trope): America is the young nation and France the mature nation. It is time for America to grow up.

Yet, Wharton's discussions of the four qualities around which she structures her cultural explication are often astonishingly counterintuitive and even comical and destabilizing of the narrative of growth. Indeed, they take on the tone of "borderland hysteria" as Renato Rosaldo describes it in *Culture and Truth*--he gives the example of the hysterical laughter of his Mexican father when an American nurse in a veterinarian office asks for the name of the "patient," by which she means his dog (28). In *A Motor Flight*, Wharton, in the role of the passing tourist, explains reverence in light and sight of the cathedral of Amiens as "the most precious emotion that such a building inspires... the desire, in short, to keep intact as many links as possible between yesterday and tomorrow" (11).

In *French Ways*, on the other hand, she describes reverence through the fact that French people won't eat blackberries even though the berries are harmless and French people know that blackberries are not poisonous. She prepares the American soldier who might want to pick such berries that he will be warned by a French peasant: "The blackberry has been condemned untried because of some ancient taboo that the French peasant dares not disregard" (22)--even though "an hour away, across the Channel"(21) people habitually spread blackberry jam on their morning toast. Contemplating her example--rather than leaving it behind like a cathedral on tour--Wharton has to admit that it is "curious to have chosen the instance of the blackberry as the text of a homily on 'Reverence.' Why not have substituted as a title 'Prejudice'--or simply 'Stupidity'?" (29). Considering examples that appear "incredibly childish," she reverses the maturation narrative at the surface of her book to ask us, the Americans, to be understanding parents to the childish French. Yet, Wharton continues, reversing the roles of child and mature adult once again: "'Reverence may be a wasteful fear of an old taboo; but it is also a sense of the preciousness of long accumulations of experience" (31).

Now speaking about Americans, she adds: "we are growing up at last; and it is only in maturity that a man glances back along the past, and sees the use of the constraints that irritated his impatient youth. So with races and nations; and America has reached the very moment in her development when she may best understand what has kept older races and riper civilizations sound. Reverence is one of these preserving elements, and it is worthwhile to study it in its action in French life" (36). In other words, rather than French reverence being at times childish, it is the observer's labeling of reverence as childish that is childish itself. Wharton's cultural explication moves from the descriptions of mature versus immature cultures to the issue of what it means to describe maturely; cul-

tures mature in their outlook on other cultures, in the very explication of culture itself. Lacking the ability to move on as the tourist perspective allows, Wharton's explication becomes more and more confusing and self-referential, leaving the American soldier without an easy understanding of either surface differences or deep-rooted similarities and rather with a treatise on cultural explication itself.

The astonishing conclusion of Wharton's book proceeds in two steps. First, regaining her confidence, Wharton affirms: "One of the best ways of finding out why a race is what it is, is to pick out the words that preponderate in its speech and literature and try to define the special meaning it gives them" (122). Wharton chooses "glory, love, voluptuousness, and pleasure" (122) as such central terms.

Before the Puritan reflex causes the reader to fling aside the page polluted by this statement, it will be worth his While to translate these four words into *la gloire, l'amour, la volupte, le plaisir* and then (if he knows French and the French well enough) consider what they mean in the language of Corneille and Pascal. For it must be understood that they have no equivalent in the English consciousness and that, if it were sought to explain the fundamental differences between the exiles of the Mayflower and the conquerors of Valmy and Jena, it would probably best be illustrated by the totally different significance of "love and glory" and "*amour et gloire*." (122-23)

Here, we are at a moment of utter tautology, even absurdity: Wharton suggests that we translate the terms in order not to dismiss but to consider cultural difference; yet such consideration depends on knowledge of the difference (if you know French well enough); and the translation illustrates (rather than explains) that difference—a difference we can know in the first place only if we know French well enough. Wharton's tautological "logic" here is exclusively linguistic and textual—without reference. What Wharton considered the best way to understand culture now appears an impasse. Wharton recognizes the absurdity and writes: "we must resign ourselves to the fact that we do not really know what the French mean" (123) when they use their own language. Perhaps, Wharton tries a page later, "one might risk defining [*gloire*] as duty with a panache. But that only brings one to another untranslatable word" (124). Translation leads to nothing but untranslatability, search for meaning leads to nothing but substitution. The world of cultural translation is not made up of a world and two dictionaries and a translator, someone living with and between both cultures; it is lost in between two dictionaries that cannot speak to each other but only within themselves.

In her final conclusion then, Wharton can only return to tourism and recalls—in light of her own writing—an absurd entry in a guide-book about the primitive Mainotes: "the inhabitants are brave, hospitable, and generous, but fierce, treacherous, vindictive, and given to acts of piracy, robbery, and wreckage." Perhaps the foregoing at-

tempt to define some attributes of the French character may seem as incoherent as this summary. At any rate the endeavor to strike a balance between seemingly contradictory traits disposes one to indulgence toward the anonymous student of the Mainotes:

Of no great people [than the French] would it be truer to say that, like the Mainote tribesmen, they are generous and brave, yet fierce and vindictive. No people are more capable of improving greatness, yet more afraid of the least initiative in ordinary matters. No people are more skeptical and more religious, more realistic and more romantic, more irritable and nervous, yet more capable of long patience and a dauntless calm....Such are the deductions which the foreign observer has made. It would probably take kinship of blood to resolve them into a harmonious interpretation of the French character. (148)

In *French Ways* the French nation does not merge into one "symbolic figure" as it did in *Fighting France*, but it remains strange, even exotic, contradictory, and unknowable. Despite her residency in France, Wharton is barred from unifying knowledge through blood and kinship. And despite her fluency in French, Wharton lacks the knowledge of the native speaker. Thus she cannot explicate French culture to the American soldier and instead becomes the "foreign observer."

Ludwig Pfeiffer writes that "assertions of identity and difference are violent, or as Edgar Morin might put it, quasi-hysterical overreactions" (199). Wharton's surprising collapse as a translator in the final pages resonates with these statements. Rather than writing the American soldier into knowledge, Wharton writes herself out of knowledge and into being something rather like the soldier—an American. Rather than revealing links between the Frenchman and the American soldier, Wharton links the Frenchman to the stereotypical Other—the fierce and incomprehensible Mainote tribesman. In the same move, she links her own explication of France to the exoticizing language of the tourist guide-book about the Mainotes. Paradoxically, it is in the act of cultural explication between allied nations that Wharton becomes torn between her cultural allegiance to France and her national allegiance to America. Deprived of the linearity of the motor-flight and its drifting narrative of surface impressions, Wharton's cultural explication of France, with all its anthropological self-consciousness, declares its failure; Wharton announces that her war time effort of cultural translation has fallen into the traps of the worst exoticizing language of Baedekers. In the end, she can only assert blood and kinship nationality—a space of "racial" isolation, caricature, entrenchment; and that "first aid"—the opposite of what she set out to provide—comes at the price of making her political and personal ally the Other.

Notes

1. Edith Wharton is well known for her charitable work during World War I: her institution of a sewing room to give

unemployed seamstresses work, the American Hostels for Refugees, her distribution of medical supplies to the front for the French Red Cross, the Children of Flanders Rescue Committee, and her convalescent homes for tubercular refugees and soldiers. For these efforts, in 1916 France made her a Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor. Amidst all these charities, Wharton worked on one other--and largely less appreciated--war effort: cultural essays on the relationship between France and America. For a detailed discussion of her war efforts see Alan Price, *The End of the Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the First World War*, New York: St. Martin's, 1996

2. It took two years for her to write the book *French Ways and Their Meaning*, and only two chapters appeared as articles during the war. Somewhat ironically, *French Ways* was not published in its entirety until 1919, when the war was over.

3. For example, quite similar to Wharton's ruminations, Geertz ponders in *Local Knowledge* how the ethnographer can find the right middle position between familiarity and difference: "confinement to experience-near concepts leaves an ethnographer awash in immediacies, as well as entangled in vernacular. Confinement to experience-distant ones leaves him stranded in abstractions and smothered in jargon" (57). And critiquing classic anthropological views which "posit culture as a self-contained whole made up of coherent patterns," Rosaldo suggests that "culture can arguably be conceived as a more porous array of intersections where distinct processes crisscross from within and beyond borders" (20).

4. Affirmation of one's own qualities too often leads to judgment and a sense of superiority, so Wharton writes (*French Ways* 18).

5. Geertz reaches a somewhat similar conclusion in *Local Knowledge* when he proposes that his anthropological approach involves "searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms--words, images, institutions, behaviors--in terms of which, in each place, people actually represent themselves to themselves and to one another" (58).

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Economies of Essence in *The House of Mirth*

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In his study of *The Jew in American Literature*, Sol Liptzin notes that in works by non-Jewish American novelists such as Willa Cather, Theodore Dreiser, Ernest Hemingway, and Edith Wharton, Jewish characters are portrayed as "inscrutable, uncanny, or monstrous" (153). Quoting a 1930 article by F.K. Frank, Liptzin writes that for the group of novelists of old American stock who resented the intrusion of the Jewish influence into the sphere of American culture, "'there is only one sort of Jew--the boulder Jew. ...Edith Wharton recognizes only this Jew...[a figure who] is a symbol of modern social disintegration'" (154). Similarly, Louise A. Mayo shows that for "genteel anti-Semites" like Henry Adams, who discusses the Jewish question in *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), published two years after Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, the Jew "symbolized the 'economic man' who had succeeded despite all the obstacles in his path, while Adams, despite all his advantages had failed" (58).

Against the backdrop of such *ressentiment*, the Jew could be projected as an agent "bringing about the social and economic changes that endangered the privileged orders" (Mayo 58). Put otherwise, anxiety about the ongoing commodification of social life, about a modern industrial capitalism increasingly grounded in exchange--rather than use-values,¹ could be projected onto the figure of the rapacious Jew, already circulating in the cultural imaginary in the form of a secretive, manipulative, and usurious Shylock, among other literary and non-literary stereotypes. His own text participating in this imaginary, Frank Norris portrayed the Polish Jew Zerkow in *McTeague* (1899) as having "the thin, eager, cat-like lips of the covetous...and claw-like prehensile fingers--the fingers of a man who accumulates, but never disburses."² Here Zerkow's concern with accumulating money translates, metonymically, into such physical traits as cat-like lips ready to lap up anything and a prehensile grip associated with primates and other animals that use hands or tails to "grasp" and "climb."

Norris's naturalistic figuration of Zerkow as a greedy, grasping animal represents, then, a double displacement. In a first move, a character is assigned a place in the social order, given an identity, by a narrator and by other characters who project onto Zerkow anxieties associated with their own changing status in what is not an order but an order-in-flux. Jewishness becomes a sign, a symptom of what is wrong with a world in decline.

Then, in a second move, the character's identity, which is what it is because of the character's position in sociocultural space, gets reified as a set of physical and therefore intrinsic or essential attributes. An ethnicity becomes an essence; Jewishness is now a bedrock for identity, rather than a habitus, a history, or a mode of becoming.

Arguably, the same double displacement is at work in Wharton's representation of Simon Rosedale in *The House of Mirth*. But with this distinction: even as Wharton's novel works to essentialize Rosedale as a ruthlessly acquisitive, obsessively status-conscious Jew, to mark him off as a special agent of commodification and exchange, the text reveals that Rosedale is not really any different from all the other, non-Jewish characters. Rather, he expresses the inmost essence of their own behavior, the coherent theory of their unreflective praxis. Initially marking him as unfit for social interchange, Rosedale's ethnicity is, as the novel proceeds, recirculated as a generalized orientation toward buying and selling, a form of life in which everyone in the novel participates equally—if given a chance. What began as an attempt to characterize the greedy self-promotion of the Jew as a circumscribed territory, a space deserving to be marked off and contained, evolves into a generalized condition of being, an aspecific ethos. Thus, even as Wharton attempts to build a naturalistic world based on biophysical essences, to articulate a social logic according to which people are what they are essentially and necessarily rather than historically and contingently, her discourse works to explain identity as an effect of learned patterns of thinking, acting, and communicating. In this respect the novel accounts for identity in terms of culture, not nature.

Many of Wharton's descriptions of Rosedale do portray him as radically --because racially--Other. His Otherness, at such moments, opens onto an exteriority from which issue forces that threaten the very core of Old New York Society. These are forces associated with new money, the exchange-based economy that is compromising the social superiority of what was hitherto the landed aristocracy. Rosedale first appears in the novel as "A plump rosy man of the blond Jewish type, with...small sidelong eyes which gave him the air of appraising people as if they were bric-a-brac" (Wharton 35). (Later Rosedale is described as having "small stock-taking eyes, which made [Lily] feel herself no more than some superfine human merchandise" [242].) Immediately after intro-

ducing him, the narrator provides a racial explanation for Rosedale's tendency to estimate things in terms of the profit they might bring him: "He had his race's accuracy in the appraisal of values" (36).

Indeed,

as a man who made it his business to know everything about every one, whose idea of showing himself to be at home in society was to display an inconvenient familiarity with the habits of those with whom he wished to be thought intimate.... Rosedale, with that mixture of artistic sensibility and business astuteness which characterizes his race, had instantly gravitated toward Miss [Lily] Bart. (36)

Later Rosedale uses his ever-growing financial resources, implied to be the result of successful speculation on Wall Street, to make a slow but steady climb up the social ladder: "He knew he should have to go slowly, and the instincts of his race fitted him to suffer rebuffs and put up with delays" (127). When he makes a formal proposal of marriage to Lily, Rosedale appears "a little flushed with his unhopd-for success," but also "disciplined by the tradition of his blood to accept what was conceded, without undue haste to press for more" (176). Lily senses in him at this point a kind of insuperable racial memory, "the stored force of a patience that might subdue the strongest will" (176). Rosedale's access to a collective history of Otherness, it seems, is what makes him Lily's most formidable antagonist in the novel.

At other moments, however, Wharton's text suggests that Rosedale represents the true interior of Old New York Society, assimilating himself to and expressing its already-commodified character rather than introducing the virus of commodification from without. On this interpretation, Rosedale is a formidable antagonist for Lily not because he and she are so different but because they are so profoundly, even uncannily, similar. Early on in the novel, Lily is revolted by Rosedale because of "some intuitive repugnance" (37); but she nonetheless "understood his motives" for attempting to cut the best possible figure in society, "for her own course was guided by as nice calculations" (36). More strikingly, during Lily's and Rosedale's second conversation about the prospect of marriage, Ro-

IN MEMORIAM

The Edith Wharton Society regrets to inform its membership of the death of James W. Tuttleton on November 6, 1998. Professor Tuttleton, who taught for thirty years at New York University, was a prolific and major contributor to Wharton studies since the sixties. We owe him a particular debt of gratitude for keeping the academy's attention focused on Wharton's canon before the feminist renaissance of the seventies. *The Novel of Manners in America* (1972) offered a new paradigm for the explication of Wharton's work. He continued to publish his splendid studies of Wharton and American literature until his death. His most recent volume is *A Fine Silver Thread* (Chicago: Ivan Dess, 1998). His wry humor, solid scholarship and intellectual honesty will be deeply missed. Those interested in memorializing his life and work in American letters, through The James W. Tuttleton Dissertation Fellowship, should contact Margaret P. Murray at 139 Village Pond Road, Guilford CT 06437. (203) 458-0018.

sedale outlines a scheme that would allow Lily to regain her former social stature by threatening Bertha Dorset with exposure of the letters that implicate Bertha in an affair with Lawrence Selden. It is not just that, "[a]fter the tissue of social falsehoods in which [Lily] had so long moved it was refreshing [for her] to step into the open daylight of an avowed expediency" (242). More than this, fascinated by Rosedale's ability to frame the problem "in terms of business-like give-and-take" and by what seems to her an "escape from fluctuating ethical estimates into a region of concrete weights and measures" (244), Lily

found the indignation gradually freezing on her lip, found herself held fast in the grasp of his argument by the mere cold strength of its presentation....And it was not, after the first moment, the horror of the idea that held her spellbound, subdued to his will; it was rather its subtle affinity to her own inmost cravings. (244, my emphasis)

Rosedale and Lily, it is true, are united in their effort to gain access to social circles from which they have been excluded. But the connection between them is more than just a strategic one. In many of the scenes where Selden appears, Rosedale appears as well;³ these two male characters, in the unfolding of events, seem to mark off two poles on a spectrum of role possibilities in terms of which Lily seeks to imagine a course in life. Although Lily herself views Selden as a model, inspiration, and potential helper throughout the novel, Selden fails her repeatedly, while Rosedale is the one to whom she ultimately chooses to "transmit her version of the facts" (273) before it is too late. He is also the one who offers Lily material help in the form of a loan that would be, in his words, "'a plain business arrangement, such as one man would make with another'" (279). Selden may represent Lily's conscious or semi-conscious hopes, the object of desires she believes she should have; but as a powerful figure haunting Lily's imagination, Rosedale condenses thoughts and perceptions that Lily cannot allow herself to acknowledge.⁴ At issue, in particular, is knowledge that social intercourse now reduces to a play of forces commodifying the self as a thing without inherent worth, a thing with merely more or less value for the purposes of (an) exchange.

I am suggesting, then, that the text undermines its own overt characterization of Rosedale as a racially-Other instrument of change and decline, an exotic pathogen introducing into the social body of the Old World the viral corruption of new money. Whereas the novel sometimes tries to locate (and localize) the proclivity for calculation and appraisal in Rosedale's racial make-up, in fact we see almost everyone in the novel already calculating and appraising. In the opening scene, for example, Selden errs in assuming that "he could never be a factor in [Lily's] calculations" (28). Meanwhile, by gleaning from Selden information about Americana that

she later uses to feed Percy Gryce's egoism, Lily "had once more shown her talent for profiting by the unexpected" (40). Gryce himself, by spending "all his week days in the handsome Broad Street office where a batch of pale men on small salaries had grown grey in the management of the Gryce estate,...was initiated with becoming reverence into every detail of the art of accumulation" (42). Jack Stepney resolves to make Rosedale his best man because of the "thumping present I'd get out of him" (71). Gus Trenor, who must speculate on the stock market to help fund his and his wife's extravagant way of living, advises Lily on the profitableness of socializing with Rosedale: "all I can say is that the people who are clever enough to be civil to him now will make a mighty good thing of it" (93). For her part, Mrs. Peniston makes a religion out of estimating and conserving her resources, going through her "linen and blankets in the precise spirit of the penitent exploring the inner folds of conscience" (107). Late in the novel, putting up with what strikes her as Rosedale's overfamiliar manner, Lily tells "herself that this momentary endurance of his mood was the price she must pay for her ultimate power over him [i.e., by marrying him];" at this moment "she tried to calculate the exact point at which concession must turn to resistance, and the price he would have to pay be made equally clear to him" (240).

As this last passage suggests, the affinities between Lily's and Rosedale's speculative habits of mind run very deep indeed. But more generally, rather than breaching the integrity of the social order with his racially-based difference, Rosedale repeats what that order is already really like at its core. He is thus an agent of difference only in this sense: Rosedale reveals that the social order is different from what its members take it to be—that its members are not, as a certain stratum of Wharton's discourse might lead us to think, stable selves endangered by forces of commodification and exchange that come from an alien outside. The contradictoriness of Rosedale's portrayal is therefore no accident. Through Rosedale, Wharton's text qualifies its own thematization of racial essence; it shows, despite itself, that the commodity is a corollary of essentialist theories of the self, rather than their antithesis. Opening onto the structure of the exchangeable commodity, the essentialized self proves to be a relational construct with a value, a distinctiveness, fixed only by its circulation in a context.

This last point can be put another way. Even as it works to shore up essentialist concepts of a bounded, coherent self, the text reveals those concepts' limits. Specifically, aspects of Wharton's novel reveal that identity is not a bedrock or essence but the sign of a sign, a reduplication of social attitudes and habits thought to signify a certain kind of self. One becomes a self through an ongoing process of displaying one's likeness to—and difference from—others engaged in a similar kind of display. On the one hand, identity is a matter of differences that signify.

This becomes evident to Lily when her tarnished reputation forces her to move in unfamiliar social circles:

The Gormer *milieu* represented a social out-skirt which Lily had always fastidiously avoided; but it struck her, now that she was in it, as only a flamboyant copy of her own world, a caricature approximating the real thing as the "society play" approaches the manners of the drawing room. The people about her were doing the same things as the Trenors, the Van Osburghs, and the Dorsets: the difference lay in a hundred shades of aspect and manner, from the pattern of the men's waistcoats to the inflexion of the women's voices. Everything was pitched in a higher key, and there was more of each thing(222)

On the other hand, identity is a matter of signifying relatedness, of displaying analogies and parallelisms between self and other(s). Thus, when Rosedale first proposes to marry Lily, the narrator describes with faint mockery how Rosedale draws on a repertoire of signs that he has learned through observation of those around him: "He leaned forward a little, resting his hands on the head of his walking-stick. He had seen men of Ned Van Alstyne's type bring their hats and sticks into a drawing-room, and he thought it added a touch of elegant familiarity to their appearance" (174). But of course at some point "men of Ned Van Alstyne's type" themselves learned to carry walking-sticks by observing others. Rosedale here repeats explicitly and consciously what others repeat implicitly and unconsciously. He is forced to build, through signs, an identity that others have already had the opportunity to use signs to build. Essentialist concepts of the self as stable, including notions of a transcendental ego, are bound up with a forgetting that this labor of signs ever had to be undertaken. The narrator's mockery of Rosedale's efforts at imitation is arguably a result of the same forgetfulness.

As a whole, however, Wharton's novel does help us recall the *derived* character of the coherence and integrity attributed to any interior, e.g., the inner sanctum of (non-Jewish) Old New York Society. Interiority results from strategies for suppressing awareness of an interior's dependence on what is exterior to it. In this way, *The House of Mirth* outlines what could be described as a Hegelian shift from pure essences to economies of essence. Here as in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the singular or essential becomes inherently complex, derived from a process rather than standing alone before or outside of time. In this way, too, Wharton's novel works to demythologize the notion that identity is the cause of who we are.⁵ Whatever Wharton's conscious aims, her novel works against the grain of this myth of identity by setting into play two contradictory textual logics--one explaining the self in terms of racial essence, the other explaining race as a category unable to contain, to express, the contingencies of a self rooted in a time, a place, and an evolving form of life. *The House of Mirth* projects this double logic into cultural

space; crosscutting its mythologization of Simon Rosedale is an antimyth we have yet to master nearly a hundred years after the novel was written. The antimyth can be paraphrased as follows: Rather than being the cause of a self that comes before and remains exterior to its social setting--i.e., instead of being an essence that operates transcendently as a condition for any possible existence--identity is a local, contingent effect of human interaction. It emerges from unfolding relationships between people living--thinking, acting, and communicating--in specific, socially-situated contexts.

Notes

1. For an insightful and influential account of how a sense of the commodification of social existence informs Wharton's vision of the world portrayed in *The House of Mirth*, see Wai-Chee Dimock's "Debasing Exchange."

2. Quoted in Mayo (46).

3. In the opening scene, for example, Lily encounters Rosedale as she nervously exits Selden's bachelor quarters (35), afraid precisely of running into someone she knows. Further, at Jack Stepney's wedding, Lily has a double consciousness of needing to exchange pleasantries with Rosedale while Selden watches her doing so (105-06). And on the day after Gus Trenor violently confronts her with a demand for sexual favors in return for the money he has helped her make on the stock market, Lily sits waiting in her room for Selden to arrive with a proposal of marriage. But it is Rosedale, not Selden, who comes to propose (173-77).

4. During their second interview about marriage, Lily has a "scared sense of [Rosedale's] power" (243). More generally, from the end of the opening scene on, Lily feels that she has "put [herself] in [Rosedale's] power" (37), Rosedale's very name evoking "one of the many hated possibilities hovering on the edge of life" (71), and his presence at Jack Stepney's wedding exposing to Lawrence Selden a dimension of Lily's life she would prefer to keep hidden from him (105-06). From the start, then, Wharton's text associates Rosedale with the uncanny, in the technical sense of that term: his appearances in the novel mark the return of the repressed.

5. I use the term *myth* and its cognates in the sense specified by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*.

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Frozen Hell: Edith Wharton's Tragic Offering

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In the 1932 *Colophon* article, "The Writing of *Ethan Frome*," Edith Wharton called her novella a "tragedy of isolation" (qtd. in Goodwyn 74). Wharton fused the sterile environment of New England with Ethan's inability to communicate with others into one of literature's darkest tragedies. In the modern world, the tragic hero does not face a hierarchy of gods to please or oracles to decide his fate. The modern world contains only real people who make mistakes, suffer, and die or endure. The degree of suffering is not necessarily in just proportion to their mistakes and, from this discrepancy, tragedy arises. Tragedy must also portray a hero who exercises the freedom of his will as he struggles with forces and ideas from either within or without himself. Ethan Frome is a good, gentle man who makes mistakes, has limited abilities, struggles with his obligations and desires, and eventually suffers a cruel twenty-four years of a frozen, living hell. The narrator leaves us to ponder this hell long after we finish reading the last word. To understand *Ethan Frome* as a modern tragedy, we need to explore this definition of modern tragedy, examine Wharton's own views on the form, and pinpoint the tragic elements in *Ethan Frome*. The tragic elements of the novel can be seen by an examination of Ethan's character and struggles, his flaws, the inner conflict invested in the setting, and the nature of self-sacrifice portrayed in the story.

According to Stephen Booth, "we still use Aristotle's dicta on tragedy in the way we use a source for truth that, like the revealed truth of the Bible, is not available to human beings at first hand" (82). While Aristotle's *Poetics* is certainly the place to begin a modern definition of tragedy, it is not the place where we stop. Edith Wharton's impoverished New England countryside of 1911 and Aristotle's Attic Greek world are radically different and require different approaches to the viewing of life. Greek civilization with its gods and selected citizenship provided wily kings (Oedipus), exacting gods (Dionysus), and powerful witches (Medea) for the weaving of a tragedy. In contrast, the modern world arrived without a rigid class structure, without mighty monarchs, and--for many--without God. Democracy, in theory, views all humans as equal. Hence, the socially elevated tragic hero of Aristotle's time is replaced by a modern tragic hero who is elevated internally instead of externally, even though many of the Greek heroes are also internally elevated in terms of their goodness

and desire to be just, e.g., Oedipus.

The modern tragic protagonist still fits Aristotle's criteria of the four character traits of goodness, appropriateness, lifelikeness, and consistency (*Poetics* 60). The modern hero need not come from a socially elite family. Instead, his moral strength, not his worldly station, elevates a character above the common lot. Arthur Miller suggests in "Tragedy and the Common Man" that tragedy exists "when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing--his sense of personal dignity" (1). So while we no longer agree that the best tragedies are drawn from a few noble families, modern tragedy agrees with Aristotle that the tragic tale includes a good protagonist who, through his *hamartia* or tragic flaw, is brought down to a place of suffering and pain. This modern tragic hero differs from the Greek hero of melodrama in that the latter does not struggle intellectually; he simply reacts to the forces acting upon him. The audience, viewer, or reader reacts with feelings of pity and fear that result in the cleansing act of a catharsis. Unfortunately, Aristotle remains vague about the exact nature of this purging or catharsis, whether psychological or emotional. Yet in a modern view of catharsis, the audience leaves the experience feeling purged of the tensions developed by vicariously living through the hero's struggle. This experience may also include the didactic element of gaining a better understanding of life's toils and troubles. Nevertheless, we are moved by the experience, and the amount of emotive response, for Aristotle and for us, helps determine the quality of the tragedy.

The modern world, then, although it no longer finds tragedy in inherently noble families, nonetheless finds it in human beings similar in their goodness, nobility of character, and thoughtful grappling with conflicting forces that lead to catastrophic suffering. Marilyn Jones Lyde proposes that all tragedies, regardless of literary era, "have possessed three basic elements: first, a serious subject involving a struggle between one character and some great force; second, universal significance, that extension of meaning which gives action importance for all men and all time; and finally, relentless honesty" (125-26). To qualify her first point, Lyde, stating that the "great force" was often fate, believes that "fate, as an expression of the will of the gods, has been replaced by fate as the irrational and illogical operation of inevitable chance" (126). If this seems a negation of free will, and it is difficult not to see it as such, then Lyde's theory will not completely fit our definition. Even the Greeks allowed for free will. Oedipus knew of the prophecy that he would grow up to kill his father, but neither a force nor a human being made him kill the old man at the place where the roads met. He acted on his own. Lyde's second point is close to Aristotle's view of tragedy's "possessing magnitude;" and her third point, while ambiguous, suggests a character who is both good and believable and an outcome that is possible given all that is probable. Lyde's description just isn't as detailed and limiting as Aristotle's. Aristotle, thinking of drama, the stage, does not allow for a narrator, and he applauds the

theatrics of spectacle and poetic language. Lyde, because she leaves tragedy open to the vehicle of prose which often incorporates narration, does not utilize the spectacle of drama, and employs non-poetic though often rhythmically powerful language.

Tragedy as a genre goes beyond the stage to any form of literature that honestly depicts a morally good person suffering through the domination of internal passions, the behaviors of evil people, the whims of an indifferent universe, or the active alienation of the modern world. Tragedy as a genre is not limited to the dialogue of a play; it can be expressed, and its action imitated, in the prose of a novel. Its tragic nature inheres in the suffering of a human being who acts with free will and through some mistake causes great pain or even death to himself or those around him. Thus, although we now begin to stray from Aristotle's description, we remain with its spirit. In the words of James Mark, "Genuine tragedy does not depend on the scale of the events or the social and political importance of the characters; the source may be smaller, but the challenge may be no less acute" (78).

This working theory of tragedy keeps Aristotle's main tenet: "tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and possessing magnitude" (*Poetics* 50), with the exception of the need for an externally elevated main character, spectacle, embellished language, and lack of narration. "It was the combination of intense feeling for life with a deep sense of its precariousness, impermanence, and ambiguity that inspired the tragedy of the Greeks" (Mark 78). These same unsettling qualities form part of modern tragedy's framework. Life is tragic, and it hurts; art often acknowledges these painful reminders of the human condition. Modern tragedy is therefore defined as a genre that includes both drama and fiction in which a person of moral goodness (our tragic hero) struggles with forces, desires, or ideas from either within or without himself. In the course of the struggle the character reveals a tragic flaw in his personality that brings about the catastrophe: because the hero acts with free will, he must bear responsibility for the catastrophe. By looking at both the cause of the tragic events and the way the hero copes with them, we respond emotionally with pity for the sufferer and fear for our own potentially similar destinies; we therefore experience the didactic response of examining our own behavior, comparing our own life decisions to those of tragic characters. (This latter response is not in Aristotle and need not be part of the tragic reaction proper.)

In her introduction to *Ethan Frome*, Wharton mentions twice that her short novel is a tragedy. Certainly, many people use the term tragedy very loosely and frequently imply disaster rather than actual tragedy. Robert B. Heilman distinguishes between the two terms by suggesting that disasters are everyday, external occurrences (e.g., a car crash in which teenagers are killed), whereas tragedies are profound in nature with divided characters struggling among themselves against larger values or desires.

Regrettably, Wharton does not record many of her views on the nature of tragedy in either her letters or essays. Yet from the gravity with which she discusses her characters, we may infer that she does not use the word lightly. In Lyde's words, Wharton "believed that suffering is the inevitable result of an offense against the moral order of the universe;...more accurately, it is an error in judgment, a failure to deduce the right course of action from the facts, to balance individual morality with social convention in order to arrive at moral truth" (Lyde 129-30). Wharton not only called *Ethan Frome* a tragedy of isolation, but "a tragedy of human waste and suffering" (qtd. in Goodwyn 74). In her book *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton leads us to an understanding of her sense of tragedy when she writes: "In any really good subject one has only to probe deep enough to come to tears...; that is, if one really pierces to the meaning of life, he will eventually find tragedy" (qtd. in Lyde 125).

Through her portrayal of Ethan's struggle in *Ethan Frome*, Wharton does indeed pierce to the meaning of life. To Aristotle, "character is whatever reveals a person's habit of moral choice—whatever he tends to choose or reject when the choice is not obvious" (*Poetics* 52). Similarly, when Wharton's Ethan makes specific choices, e.g., not to leave Zeena and Starkfield, he reveals his nature. On the first page of *Ethan Frome* the narrator, upon initially seeing Ethan, tells us, "Even then he was the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man" (*Ethan Frome* 1). Shortly thereafter, the narrator reveals that Ethan's ordeals would have been enough to kill a normal man. But then Ethan is above the normal man, and Wharton's narrator reinforces Ethan's heroic stature early on as he drives his sleigh, "his brown-seamed profile, under the helmet-like peak of the cap, relieved against the banks of snow like the bronze image of a hero" (5). As Blake Nevius notes, "no element in the characterization of Ethan is more carefully brought out than the suggestion of his useful, even heroic possibilities" (119).

A number of personal traits lift Ethan above the common lot into the heroic: for instance, "He had always been more sensitive than the people about him to the appeal of natural beauty" (14). At his most articulate when discussing the stars and their constellations, Ethan first enters his elevated, eloquent state as a result of Mattie's presence. He experiences "other sensations, less definable but more exquisite, which drew them together with a shock of silent joy: the cold red sunset behind winter hills, the flight of cloud-flocks over slopes of golden stubble, or the intensely blue shadows of hemlocks on sunlit snow" (14). This sensitivity and heightened awareness initiates Ethan's first communication with Mattie, who understands and taps into Ethan's "secret soul," a soul of high morals, compassion and dreams. Ethan tries to elevate his already good and kind nature by emulating Abraham Lincoln through his plan of self education. He sets up his study with a few books and attempts, "with these meager properties, to produce some likeness of the

study of a 'minister' who had been kind to him" (55). Generously, he cares for his injured father, his ill mother, and then his invalid/psychosomatic wife. Even after Ethan is severely injured, when the narrator suggests to Harmon Gow that Zeena, not Ethan, is doing the caring now, Gow corrects him: "Oh, as to that; I guess it's always been Ethan done the caring" (2). Ethan's kind manner does not desert him after his recovery from the accident, as evinced by the hospitality he extends to the narrator when inviting him into his home during the storm. Lyde points out that Ethan's "moral superiority," although "not without blemish," still rises "above the common level" (136).

Ethan has the makings of a real hero: he is kind, gentle, and unfailingly considerate of others. But somehow his early promise flickers; Ethan becomes "a prisoner for life, and now his one ray of light was to be extinguished" (57). The narrator tells us, "he was too young, too strong, too full of the sap of living, to submit so easily to the destruction of his hopes" (56); but he is brutally forced into an acceptance of his destruction. A look at the way Ethan arrived at this insurmountable impasse reveals the way his tragic flaw and certain outside forces coalesce into his tragedy.

Mrs. Hale tells Ethan that she admires him for taking care of his parents, and then Zeena; she knows he's "had an awful mean time" (60). It was just chance that his father was injured, forcing Ethan to curtail his education and, as the good son, stay home to honor his filial obligations. Then his mother's illness prolongs his confinement as caretaker. Upon the arrival of his cousin Zenobia with her excellent nursing skills, Ethan's life looks as though it will resume its promising course, aided by his nurturing cousin. After his mother dies, Ethan, reduced to a lonely orphan imprisoned in the silence of the empty house, hears "Zeena's volubility" as "music in his ears" (29). His loneliness and fear of solitude, an offshoot of his inability to communicate, together with his sense of obligation, awakens his *hamartia*, or tragic flaw—asking Zeena to wed: "He had often thought since that it would not have happened if his mother had died in spring instead of winter" (29).

On the surface Ethan and Zeena do not look like such a bad match. Zeena demonstrates considerable skill as a nurse and caretaker: "her efficiency shamed and dazzled him" (29). They agree to sell the farm and move to a large town so Ethan may fulfill his dreams: to rise above his

humble beginnings, become an engineer and, eventually, unravel the "huge cloudy meanings behind the daily face of things" (11). But in fact the problem lies in appearances; Zeena is not who she appears to be. She doesn't share the same dreams as Ethan, and Ethan lacks the ability to communicate enough with Zeena to recognize their incompatibility before they are married.

Zeena shows her true colors soon after the wedding. She is in reality a human being petrified of life, and this phobia manifests itself in snobbery and eventually hypochondria: "She chose to look down on Starkfield, but she could not have lived in a place which looked down on her. Even Bettsbridge or Shadd's Falls would not have been sufficiently aware of her, and in the greater cities which attracted Ethan she would have suffered a complete loss of identity" (30). Within a year Zeena becomes "sick" and, in a clinically-ill manner, controls Ethan's existence, adding one more wall to shut in Ethan from the outside world. The arrival of Mattie Silver threatens this structure, of course, and in this dynamic of love for Mattie versus obligation to Zeena, Ethan's tragedy pushes toward its dark climax.

Ethan's fate is that he was born in a region of the country where the harsh weather and poverty contribute to a meager, agricultural existence. His tragic flaw goes beyond his choosing to marry a woman who, rather than help him, hinders him both economically (little work, medical costs) and emotionally. His flaw, however, goes further than making a bad decision. It extends to and encompasses his inability to communicate his thoughts to other human beings. When Ethan becomes aware that he loves Mattie, and that Zeena will dismiss her unless he intervenes, a conflict arises that threatens his very soul: "He had made up his mind to do something, but he did not know what it would be" (59). Given Ethan's deficiencies, this dilemma is pathetic but all too real. He is a kind man. He doesn't want to hurt Zeena; even in the final letter he writes, but never delivers, he maintains a gentleness in tone, never blaming her for the unhappiness of their relationship. And ultimately, because he realizes the highly mortgaged farm will probably not sell, he does not abandon her because to do so would leave Zeena destitute.

Wharton introduces the problem of communication before the story ever begins when she reveals that she chose an outside narrator because the people of Starkfield have a "deep rooted reti-

cence and inarticulateness" (viii). Ethan and Zeena never communicate. He does not confront her. They have their first fight in their seventh year of marriage. A marriage without arguments is not only unhealthy, it is bizarre. In Blake Nevius' opinion, "it is in view of his potentialities that Ethan's marriage to Zeena is a catastrophe" (120). Perhaps Zeena wouldn't have been so "sick" had Ethan confronted her early on and talked to her about their individual fears and dreams.

Ethan's lack of communication skills trips him up with Mattie as well as with Zeena. When they have their one night alone, the best he can do is to kiss the material she was sewing, a pathetically inadequate demonstration of his strong feelings for her. While he does manage to sooth her feelings over the broken pickle dish—a symbol of Zeena's inability to live life, her prized possession sits in a closet, away from anyone's view and performs neither a utilitarian nor an aesthetic function—he does not communicate to Mattie just how much he has longed for the domestic scene that their after-dinner respite intimated.

Ethan, moreover, simply cannot bring into the open even his simplest thoughts. The mentioning of Zeena's name throws him into a stupor from which he cannot break free. In Cynthia Griffin Wolff's words, "it is not that he [Ethan] does not feel deeply, for he does. However, one mark of maturity is the ability to translate desire into coherent words, words into action; and Ethan Frome is incapable of such translations" (174). As a married man in a Puritanical society, when Ethan finally and feebly tries to communicate with a young, single woman, he is punished for his indiscretion. Eugene Kaelin writes that the contemporary "noble protagonist must possess some tragic flaw—otherwise his or her tragic suffering would appear unjust to the audience which would respond in moral outrage rather than in pity and fear" (347). It is difficult not to feel outrage at Ethan's outcome, but most of that anger shoots to a world where such a good man, no matter how inarticulate, could end up so abominably. Ethan's inability to express his feeling within his trapped existence caused by a despicable fate is made more intense since he has done nothing as "bad" as, say, Oedipus, who killed his father, married his mother, and fated his children to tragic lives, or Macbeth, who killed many, including women and children. Grace Kellogg writes, "Nowhere in literature is it easy to find a more tragic story-end than *Ethan Frome* has provided" (171).

Nature in *Ethan Frome* plays a role in the bleak outcome, acting as a malevolent force to help crush the spirit of our tragic hero. R.W.B. Lewis observes that the Starkfield setting was Wharton's attempt at "recreating the spell that the New England landscape had laid upon her, its dark somber beauty, its atmosphere (for her) of the haunted and tragic" (Lewis 309). Lyde, too, believes that to catch the "outcropping granite" (vii) of New England "the ending had to be one illustrative of the grimmest endurance imaginable" (Lyde 130). What could be worse for a young man than living the rest of one's life with two ruined women, Zeena, "a mysterious alien presence, an evil energy" (EF 50) and the woman he truly loved: the formerly beautiful and vibrant Mattie, now reduced to a bitter, paralyzed wretch, spouting out a "querrulous drone" (74)? What in nature could parallel such misery?

Harmon Gow tells us almost immediately that Ethan had "been in Starkfield too many winters" (2), and we soon learn the reason for Gow's observation. Winter is described as an army that lays siege on Starkfield and brutally imprisons its inhabitants until spring. Ethan is said to be "a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface" (5). The repressive climate parallels the repressed citizens. We learn that the Frome gravestones mock Ethan, seeming to read, "We never got away—how should you?" (21) The stone markers are a part of nature—a man-made fixture of stone taken from the earth and then placed back in the earth. Hence, they appear in the final dark thoughts of Mrs. Hale because nature has the last word. Wolff sees the weather as a mirror to Ethan's inner soul: the "deadening isolation is in the cold world of unloved and unloving inner emptiness—a world of depression, loneliness, and slow stagnation" (164).

And yet this iron-skyed reality is paradoxical. Nature can also be the place where man can discover his true self. When Ethan's poverty requires him to tear down the dilapidated "L" on his house, which links the farmhouse to the barn, the narrator tells us that the "L" is the image of "life linked with the soil" and constitutes "the actual hearth-stone of the New England farm" (8). The "L" serves the double purpose of protecting the farmer from the outside climate and connecting him to the animals, an essential part of his livelihood. Ethan is cut off from both, alienated from himself. This side of nature reveals an outdoors where humans can freely pursue their true

feelings; but the indoors, while it provides protection, also demands social conformity. Only in the outdoors can Ethan even attempt to communicate with Mattie "under the open irresponsible night." However, "in the warm lamplit room, with all its ancient implications of conformity and order, she seemed infinitely farther away from him and more unapproachable" (39).

At Shadow Pond Ethan tries to connect with Mattie, yet nature mirrors the characters here: "It was a shy secret spot, full of some of the dumb melancholy that Ethan felt in his heart" (66). The narrator tells us they stumble "upon happiness as if they had surprised a butterfly in the winter woods" (66). Their happiness occurs by chance; they have no real ability to prolong or develop their love. In this same scene Ethan feels free, like a boy courting his young love: "He looked at her hair and longed to touch it again, and to tell her that it smelt of the woods, but he never learned to say such things" (66). Here nature enters into the compliments of courting, but poor Ethan cannot even articulate the natural phrases of love making. Lyde notes, however, that "there is an unmistakable correspondence between the physical scene with its struggle between life and coma, and the stunted convention of the isolated world which has twisted Ethan's life and smothered his one chance at emotional fulfillment" (149). Again, Lyde seems to negate the presence of free will, which runs counter to our theory of both traditional and contemporary tragedy.

Ethan was free to leave Zeena, even if he lacked the words to communicate such a decision. Janet Goodwyn accurately pinpoints Ethan's tragedy when she writes that Wharton's New England novels are taken up with the basic conditions of survival; the most basic considerations—food, warmth, shelter—are not to be taken for granted here, but it is only when the more complicated needs arise—like that of loving and being loved—that the real tragedy ensues" (74).

Finally, did Ethan Frome's life have to become a tragedy, and, if so, how should we view such a story? Ethan's inability to communicate led him to marry a "sick" woman who dragged him down into the isolated despair engulfing her. And once in the quagmire of Zeena's pathology, Ethan could only sink deeper with every futile move toward Mattie. At the core of Ethan's personality is a code of self-sacrifice which appears good until it progresses to the point of erasing his identity and

his spiritual and emotional needs. Ethan's inability to distinguish between when self-sacrifice is noble and when it is martyrdom really constitutes the major part of his flaw—his failure to communicate his thoughts. He cannot make such subtle distinctions; Starkfield society has never asked him to do so. He honors family ties; he even argues with Zeena, protesting that she cannot evict Mattie because of the young woman's kinship to Zeena. For the most part, he remains loyal to Zeena: even though he eventually realizes that she "at every turn barred his way" until finally "a flame of hate rose in him" (51), ultimately, he is too kind to leave her in the lurch. Anna-Teresa Tymienicha notes that "the tragic feeling expresses the moral conflict and the impossibility of solving it" (298). Ethan and Mattie's suicide attempt is not really a solution; rather, it provides a grimly ridiculous example of Ethan's inability to communicate with life. Certainly, Wharton offers no solution with her darkly ironic table-turning ending: Zeena is now the the good, healthy nurse and Mattie the sullen, crippled patient, both locked in a futile struggle for the wounded Ethan to view.

This irony is the bane of Ethan's present, tortured existence and is what Mrs. Hale alludes to when she says, "it's him that suffers the most" (77). She further develops this irony in her dreary, hopeless closing words of the story: "And I say, if she'd [Mattie] ha' died, Ethan might ha' lived; and the way they are now, I don't see's there much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard, 'cept that down there they're all quiet, and the women have got to hold their tongues" (77). Nevius sees this speech as "one of despair arising from the contemplation of spiritual waste" (118). Ultimately, however, he acknowledges Ethan's own part in his tragedy: "It is Ethan's own sense of responsibility that blocks the last avenue of escape and condemns him to a life of sterile expiation" (Nevius 121).

Kellogg suggests that Wharton "was putting down a story of Nemesis, a god she was very familiar with, a god less of retribution than of spite" (174). Ethan's vanity and weakness are traceable to his inability to communicate, to think that he could live life just through taking care of others. He never tries to fulfill his ambitions and desires until, fully and firmly entrenched in his pathetic life, he can no longer envision, much less obtain, his chance at happiness. And here, for Wolff, lies the tragedy: "Ethan Frome becomes . . . an emblem of van-

quished heroism, defeated strength, and foreclosed potentiality—not merely a crippled man, but Manhood brought low" (167). Wolff further observes, "Ethan Frome introduces us to the terrible contingencies of the human condition" (182). While modern tragedy still requires a hero and heroic suffering, it does not necessarily provide the comfort that a restoration of order offers in Sophocles or Shakespeare. Ethan is left to rot in his frozen hell. Ruined, too, is Mattie's life, one that has never offered much because of the sins of her father, the brutality of poverty, and the lack of opportunities for women of her class and era. Mattie falls in love with Ethan because no one but he has ever shown her kindness. This independent, bright, and cheerful young woman so remarkably full of life is fated to be crushed by the reality of Starkfield and the Fromes.

Even with a belief in the sanctity of marriage, one has difficulty not viewing Ethan's inability to leave the wicked Zeena and start life over with Mattie as a tragic mistake different from, but related to, his inability to communicate. Kaelin writes that our sympathy for the character's plight is generated by the moral worth of his struggles against surrounding circumstance (350). Yet the fact remains that, even if the bars are reinforced by people and forces meaner and greater than himself, Ethan fails to break out of the caged life he creates for himself. When a kind man struggles and suffers immensely, the audience cringes for his (and subsequently, their own) relief. Edith Wharton, as a good modern, sends us home with no such consolation. Ethan Frome does not deserve the catastrophic life dealt him, and therein lies the modern tragedy so close to that of real life. If, however, our reactions to our plights determine our heroic natures, then Ethan's ability to continue to care for the women at home and show kindness to the narrator reveals an uncommon and admirable strength. Ethan's final resolve and acceptance of his lot place him among the great anguished characters of tragic literature who have still found dignity and humanity in defeat.

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American Literary Realism Moves to Illinois

Gary Scharnhorst has announced that beginning with the fall 1999 issue, *American Literary Realism* will be published by the University of Illinois Press. Fortunately, Prof. Scharnhorst will continue to edit the journal. He may be contacted at the University of New Mexico, Department of English, Albuquerque, NM 8713.

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Edith Wharton Panels at Chicago MLA

Edith Wharton and Female Homoeroticism

Moderator, Annette Zilversmit, Long Island U.

1. "Suppressing the Love of Women: Misdirected Desire in *The House of Mirth* and *Dora*." Lisa Sewell, Villanova U.
2. "Homoerotics via Heterotics: Edith Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense*." Radhika Mohanram, U. of Waikato, NZ.
3. "Paris Murders and Lesbian Panic: Historicizing 'All Souls.'" Annette Zilversmit, Long Island U.

Public and Private Spaces in Edith Wharton

Moderator, Jean Franz Blackall, Emerita, Cornell U.

1. "The Publicity of the Private." Mark Eaton, Oklahoma City U.
2. "Thresholds: Edith Wharton's 'Pomegranate Seed.'" Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, The George Washington University.
3. "'At Home in the Great World: Public and Private Spaces in Wharton's Fiction.'" Ann Gaylin, Yale U.

New Paulus Opera Based on *Summer*

On August 28, the Berkshire Opera Company in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, will premier *Summer*, an opera based on the Edith Wharton novel, with music by Stephen Paulus and libretto by Joan Vail Thorne. The work was commissioned in 1997 by The Edith Wharton Restoration and the Berkshire Opera Company. According to *The Berkshire Eagle*, *Summer* "tells the story of an 18-year-old girl who becomes pregnant during a summer romance and is left to face the future alone."

Summer is but one of a series of Wharton works to be turned into musical compositions, including a one-act opera by Robert Ward (libretto by Roger Brunyate) based on "Roman Fever" and a one-act chamber opera entitled *The Power of Xingu* composed by James Legg, with libretto by James Legg and Sharon Holland.

With special thanks to Scott Marshall

New Documentary on Wharton

On May 5, Wharton friends and scholars previewed the American screening of a French documentary by Elizabeth Lennard entitled *Edith Wharton: The Sense of Harmony*. The nearly hour-long film presents a fond but rather conservative view of Wharton as writer and woman. It includes interesting original early 20th century footage and interviews with R. W. B. Lewis, Louis Auchincloss and Eleanor Dwight. The film is co-produced by FRP/PRP/France 3, film script by Elizabeth Lennard and Danielle Memoire; voiceover by Lisa Liebmann, James Lord, and Jeffrey Carey. Composer Marc Olivier Dupin wrote the original score. The producers have been seeking an American public venue, but due to the grainy quality of some of the dated footage, have been unsuccessful thus far.