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In this issue

- Conference News** 2
- Beyond Morality: Lily Bart, Lawrence Selden and the Aesthetic Commodity in *The House of Mirth***
Lois Tyson 3
- The Figure of Edith Wharton in Richard Howard's Poem *The Lesson of the Master***
Adeline Tintner 11
- Wharton's View of Women in *French Ways and Their Meaning***
Julie Olin-Ammentorp 15
- Pavillon Colombe, St. Brice, a poem**
Judith Saunders 19
- Book Reviews** 20

Wharton at the 1992 MLA Convention

Edith Wharton will be well represented and presented at the 1992 Annual Convention of the Modern Language Association meeting in New York City, December 27-30.

"Edith Wharton's Non Fiction" is the title of the session arranged by the Edith Wharton Society and its President, Susan Goodman, California State University, Fresno. Papers and presenters are "The Autobiographical Gift of Edith Wharton," Clare Colquitt, San Diego State University; "Wharton, Gender, and the Iconography of War Propaganda," Jean Gallagher, Queens College, CUNY; and "Did She or Didn't She? Edith Wharton, Imperialism, and 'The Great War,'" Judith Sensibar, Arizona State University. Linda Wagner-Martin, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, will be the respondent.

The session will take place on Wednesday, December 30, 3:30-4:45 p.m. in the Green Room, New York Hilton.

"The View from New York: Wharton, Whitman and Cahan" is the title of the second session arranged by the Edith Wharton Society and Katherine Joslin, Western Michigan University. It will include "Edith Wharton: Talking Back to Whitman," Kenneth Price, Texas A&M University, College Station; "Edith Wharton and Abraham Cahan: Two Unlikely Literary Bedmates," Ludger Brinker, Macomb College; and "'The Pelican' and the Missing Center: Wharton Responds to New England Women Writers," Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Massachusetts Institute of Tech. The respondent will be Jane Goodwyn, Roehampton Institute, London. This program will take place on Tuesday, December 29, 3:30-4:45, Mercury Rotunda, New York Hilton.

Following this session, the Edith Wharton Society will hold its annual business meeting and cash bar party between 5:15-6:30, in Room 524, New York Hilton. New and prospective members welcomed.

The annual Edith Wharton dinner will take place later that evening at the Bombay Palace Restaurant where a full Indian buffet will be served. Reservations are \$32. Checks and inquiries should be sent to Carol Shaffer-Koros, 58 Normandy Drive, Westfield, NJ 07090.

ALA Meets in Baltimore in 1993

The fourth annual conference of the American Literature Association will convene May 28-30 in Baltimore, Maryland. The ALA is a coalition of the societies devoted to the study of American authors. It is devoted to exploring the richness and diversity of American writing and the Edith Wharton Society is one its founding organizations.

Next year's meeting will take place at the Stouffer Harborplace Hotel. The conference fee is \$35 and rooms are \$70 a night single or \$80 a night double. The ALA is also preparing its first newsletter. Send \$5.00 and all inquiries to Alfred Bendixen, English Dept., California State University, Los Angeles, CA 90032-8110.

CALL FOR PAPERS: The Edith Wharton Society will arrange two sessions for the ALA Conference. The first is "The Narrative Art of Edith Wharton." Proposals and papers should be sent to Elsa Nettels, Dept. of English, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA 23185. The deadline is December 20, 1992.

The second session, "Revising *Ethan Frome* and *The Age of Innocence*," welcomes 1-2 page proposals. Send these to Kris Lauer, Dept. of English, Fordham University, New York, NY 10023 by December 21, 1992.

Beyond Morality: Lily Bart, Lawrence Selden and the Aesthetic Commodity in *The House of Mirth*

by Lois Tyson

As Blake Nevius observes,

Edith Wharton was one of the first American novelists to develop the possibilities of a theme which since the turn of the century has permeated our fiction: the waste of human and spiritual resources which in American went hand in hand with the exploitation of the land and forests. (55)

Of course, the "waste of human and spiritual resources" to which Nevius refers included the waste of America's womanhood, and in Wharton's novels this theme is central. In both *The Custom of the Country* (1913) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), for example, women are represented as marriage commodities who sell themselves to the highest bidder. However, few works — in Wharton's corpus or elsewhere — treat the issue of woman as commodity as thoroughly as her first major novel, *The House of Mirth* (1905), a chilling portrait of wealthy New York society at the turn of the century.

While readers disagree in their interpretations of some aspects of protagonist Lily Bart,¹ most see her as a heroic figure who is morally superior to the society whose victim she becomes. A beautiful, intelligent young woman who hasn't the money to support herself in the stratum of high society to which she was born and bred, Lily must use her beauty and social graces in order to keep her position among the wealthy set in which she lives. Although she is twenty-nine years old when the novel opens — and should therefore lose no more time in acquiring the rich husband she needs in order to put a permanent end to her financial problems — Lily cannot bring herself to marry the dull, self-involved species of male, such as Percy Gryce, who has the money, if not the spirit, to keep her in the high style she requires. We learn, in fact, that Lily has spent the eleven years since her debut marriage to a number of rich men for whom she had successfully "set her cap." A series of social difficulties, in which Lily figures as the victim of unscrupulous society figures Gus Trenor and Bertha Dorset, sends her into a

severe social and financial decline. Unwilling, because of the higher vision of life awakened in her by Lawrence Selden, to reestablish her position through the morally questionable means at her disposal (the quiet purchase of Bertha Dorset's good will through the use of some indiscreet letters written by that lady, followed by marriage to Simon Rosedale), Lily sinks further and further into poverty and despair and finally dies from an overdose of a sleeping drug.

This interpretation, which forms the core of critical consensus on the novel, is based on the moral opposition of the two worlds between which Lily vacillates: the superficial, commodified world of the Trenor-Dorset milieu and the rarified, spiritual world she associates with Lawrence Selden. Despite some critical antipathy to Selden, who, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff puts it, is "a mouthpiece for the worst of society's prejudices" (111),² what is seen as the protagonist's growing moral fiber is linked with her growing interest in him: while Selden may not be worthy of Lily's admiration, her feelings for him are credited with the ethical concerns for which she sacrifices not only her last chance to return to fashionable society, but the last of her financial resources as well. However, this critical focus on Lily Bart's moral dimension misses the novel's analysis of a subtler phenomenon that collapses the opposition between the Trenor-Dorset Weltanschauung and the alternative Lily sees in Lawrence Selden: the psychology of woman as commodity-fetish. As this article will attempt to show, *The House of Mirth* dramatizes the psychological contradictions and dead ends to which a woman's transcendental project — her labor to escape existential inwardness through self-reification — is liable in our culture.³ In Lily's case, self-reification is attempted through self-aestheticization: her project is to escape existential inwardness by becoming an *objet d'art*. As we shall see, Lawrence Selden finally exerts the more powerful influence on Lily, not because he offers her an alternative to this goal, but because he offers her the more effective means of achieving it

through a parallel project of his own.⁴

Most readers easily recognize that the world of the Trenors and the Dorsets, among whom Lily has cast her lot, is a marketplace where she numbers among the commodities for sale.⁵ However, although more intelligent and sensitive than most members of her group, Lily commodifies⁶ people just as they do. She wonders, for example, why Selden "had always been kind to his dull cousin [Gerty Farish] . . . why he wasted so much time in such an unremunerative manner" (94; Bk. I, ch. 8). Similarly, Lily doesn't accord her poor and unattractive cousin Grace Stepney the "scant civilities . . . [she] accorded to Mr. Rosedale" because she did not "forsee that such a friend [as Grace] was worth cultivating" (128; Bk. I, ch. 11). Most important for our purposes, Lily commodifies herself.

It is Lily's conception of herself as a commodity that explains her obsessive desire to remain a member of the Trenor-Dorset clique. Her wish to continue in this milieu is not, as many critics and Lily herself believe, related merely to an appreciation for beauty that manifests itself as a deep-seated need to be around lovely things.⁷ In fact, such a desire could be fulfilled more easily in other wealthy milieus, such as the Sam Gormers, where there is, in addition, "a greater good-nature, less rivalry, and a fresher capacity for enjoyment" (244; Bk. II, ch. 5). As a commodity, Lily's value is exchange value — she has worth only to the extent to which, and in the ways in which, others deem her worthy of some sort of expenditure — and the Trenor-Dorset clan provides a more discriminating appreciation for her exchange value than do other groups with whom she is acquainted. Unlike the Gormers and the Wellington Brys, the Trenor-Dorset clique is used to the best human commodities available, and they make fine distinctions among them. Although people like the Brys and Simon Rosedale — due to the strategic use of their great wealth — manage to increase their exchange value to the point where the Trenor-Dorset set accepts them, Lily knows that they can never receive "that precise note of approval" that a woman of her abilities is capable of calling forth (143; Bk. I, ch. 12).

As a commodity, Lily has fashioned herself to resemble one of the rarest and most expensive items on the market: the *object d'art*. Her appearance as a *tableau vivant* of Reynold's "Mrs. Lloyd" at the Wellington Bry entertainment epitomizes her concept of herself as an art object. As Lily is well aware,

[T]he unanimous "Oh!" of the spectators was a tribute, not to the brush-work of Reynold's "Mrs. Lloyd" but to the flesh and blood loveliness of Lily Bart . . . It was as though she had stepped, not out of, but into, Reynold's canvas, banishing the phantom of his dead beauty by the beams of her

living grace. (141; Bk. I, ch. 12)

Lily is as much a *tableau vivant* in the daily routine of her social life as she is in her representation of Reynold's portrait. Always wanting to produce an effect of idealized beauty, Lily is very deliberate in her exploitation not just of costume, but of facial expression and setting as well. For example, as she leans against the ballustrade of the terrace at Bellomont, the protagonist notes that Percy Gryce has spotted her from the midst of his reluctant tête-à-tête with Mrs. Fisher.

[H]e cast agonized glances in the direction of Miss Bart, whose only response was to sink into an attitude of more graceful abstraction. She had learned the value of contrast in throwing her charms in-to relief, and was fully aware of the extent to which Mrs. Fisher's volubility was enhancing her own repose. (49; Bk. I, ch. 4)

Similarly, the lifestyle she desires for herself would be her frame: like Annie's desire for "perfect moments" in Sartre's *Nausea*, "the life [Lily] longed to lead [was one] in which every detail should have the finish of a jewel, and the whole form a harmonious setting to her own jewel-like rareness" (94; Bk. I, ch. 8). Even nature is subdued to the purposes of Lily's art: during a solitary walk in the woods, she finds a "charming" spot, "and Lily was not insensible to the charm, or to the fact that her presence enhanced it . . . and the combination of a handsome girl and a romantic scene struck her as too good to be wasted (63; Bk. I, ch. 5).

By fashioning herself as an art object, Lily acquires some very real, material advantages: the social leaders of her group solicit her presence to adorn activities that take place in the most luxurious of settings, and she can command a very high price on the marriage market. However, her self-image as art object reflects and supports a psychological structure that is at odds with the psycho-sexual requirement of any marriage in which sexual, if not emotional, intimacy is an implicit condition of the contract. *Objets d'art* are commodities that are seen but not touched, and Lily's desire to be an art object reflects her desire to be admired from afar, to be viewed without being touched. Like a framed portrait or the hard surfaces of the finely crafted jewelry she loves, Lily wants to be beyond history — impervious to the "humiliating contingencies" of life (101; Bk. I, ch. 8) — and beyond the existential inwardness that an awareness of existential contingency promotes. "More completely than any other expression of wealth," jewels enhanced by an artistic setting "symbolized the life she longed to lead, the life of fastidious aloofness and refinement" (94; Bk. I, ch. 8). Physical intimacy endangers the transcendental project because it touches nerve endings tied to emotions (fear, anger, love, hate) and moods (anxiety, insecurity)

that preclude the possibility of achieving transcendence. As Walter Davis observes, when transcendence becomes a major project, sexuality becomes a major threat (82).⁸ Lily's desire to aestheticize herself out of existence informs her life so pervasively that we see its expression even in the seal with which she secures her letters: "a grey seal with *Beyond!* beneath a flying ship" (163; Bk. I, ch. 14).

The protagonist's desire not to be touched is particularly apparent, of course, in her interpersonal relationships. While her avoidance of physical contact with unappealing, predatory men like Gus Trenor, George Dorset, and Simon Rosedale certainly needs no explanation, Lily doesn't like being touched even by her attractive women friends, as we see when the protagonist "extricate[s] herself" from Judy Trenor's embrace during a conversation between the two women at Bellomont (47; Bk. I, ch. 4) and "Dr[aws] back" from Carrie Fisher "clasp" after the reading of Mrs. Peniston's will (242; Bk. II, ch. 5). As Gerty Farish knows, "Lily disliked to be caressed" and, therefore, Gerty "had long ago learned to check her demonstrative impulses toward her friend" (176; Bk. I, ch. 14). It is a joke that has the ring of truth when Lily facetiously says to Carry Fisher, "Other things being equal, I think I should prefer a half-husband" (249; Bk. II, ch. 5). And, certainly, the power of Lily's unconscious desire to avoid marriage is evident in the consistent pattern of her behavior with the eligible men she pursues: to avoid marrying the Italian prince she'd known years ago, she paid too much attention to his step-son (197; Bk. II, ch. 1); to avoid a marriage proposal from Percy Gryce, she pays too much attention to Selden (56; Bk. I, ch. 5); she actively pursues Rosedale only when it gives her an alternative to considering marriage to George Dorset (259-60; Bk. II, ch. 6) and, even more significant, only when she has reason to believe that Rosedale doesn't want to marry her anymore (251-52; Bk. II, ch. 5). This technique both keeps her from having to marry and sets up a smoke screen that protects her from probing too deeply the motives behind her behavior.

How, then, can Lily's attraction to Lawrence Selden be explained? Although, at first glance, her relationship with this character may seem to contradict the assertion that Lily dislikes physical intimacy, Selden's appeal can be seen as a direct outgrowth of her role as art object and the desire for emotional insulation it represents. For Selden shares Lily's desire to aestheticize her body, which is part of the larger project he shares with her: the desire to escape existential inwardness. In order to understand the psychological dynamics of his transcendental project, and how it is related to Lily's, it is necessary to consider the relationship among woman's body, the commodity, the art object, and the fetish, or the (p)art object.

To begin, we must examine the way in which Lily is an object for Selden. Just as the Trenor-Dorset clique appreciates Lily's uniqueness as a commodity in a way that the Gormers do not, Lawrence Selden appreciates her as an art object in a way that the Trenor-Dorset group does not. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff aptly observes, the relationship between Selden and Lily is one between connoisseur and collectible: for him, Lily is an idealized object which the actual woman can never match (129-30). However, the standard of perfection that Selden demands she become is not "a flawless, absolutely constant embodiment of [moral] virtue" (129), as Wolff suggests, but an absolutely constant embodiment of aesthetic perfection. For it is only as the perfect aesthetic object that Lily can help Selden fulfill his own transcendental project.

Selden's clearest statement of his transcendental project occurs in the oft-quoted "republic of the spirit" speech. Here Selden explains to Lily that his idea of success is the attainment of "personal freedom," freedom "[f]rom everything — from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents. To keep a kind of republic of the spirit — that's what I call success" (71; Bk. I, ch. 6). While some critics believe that this speech refers to Selden's moral vision,⁹ Selden's attempt to achieve a "republic of the spirit" has, instead, all the earmarks of an idealized aesthetic quest.

Raised in a household where limited funds and refined taste put a premium on the fine things the family could afford — good books, fine paintings, old lace — Selden never lost the appreciation for aesthetic quality he learned as a boy, an appreciation that was never marred by the kind of material overindulgence practiced by his wealthier acquaintances (160-61; Bk. I, ch. 14). As a result of this early training, Selden has a "responsive fancy" that gives him "magic glimpses of the boundary world between fact and imagination," and "he could yield to vision-making influences as completely as a child to the spell of a fairy-tale" (140-41; Bk. I, ch. 12). This ability, coupled with his desire to be free from the exigencies of a world in which his moderate income affords him little protection from "material accidents," are responsible for his romantic pursuit of a spiritual republic to compensate for the inequities of the concrete world in which he finds himself. Of course, Selden's quest for transcendence is a quest for social superiority as well: Selden wants to be "above" his social group in every sense of *above*. The irony is that this very desire, because it is socially produced, ties him to the society he would transcend. Selden doesn't escape social desire; he merely abstracts it.

Lily represents for Selden the romantic incarnation of his aesthetic values. He was bred to have "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" (161; Bk. I, ch. 14). When Selden believes that the Lily Bart he sees in the *tableau vivant* is "the real Lily" (143; Bk. I, ch. 12), it is because she has merged with her image. This is the Lily — the external sign of beauty, the "perfect object" — with whom Selden finally admits he is smitten and for whom he "luxuriate[s] . . . in the sense of [his] complete surrender" (143; Bk. I, ch. 12). And it is her violation of his aesthetic ideal — not, as many critics believe, of his social or moral prejudices¹⁰ — that causes Selden's repeated attempts to extricate himself from his emotional involvement with Lily.¹¹ Thus, for example, when Selden sees Lily emerge alone from Gus Trenor's house late at night, when he learns that she joined the Duchess of Beltshire's loose crowd, when he sees her apparent resolve to remain in the employ of Mrs. Hatch — that is, whenever she fails to live up to his "republic of the spirit" — he sees her divided from him by the crudeness of a choice which seemed to deny the very differences he felt in her. It was before him . . . in the stupid costliness of the food and the showy dulness of the talk, in the freedom of speech which never arrived at wit and the freedom of act which never made for romance. (200; Bk. II, ch. 1)

That Selden perceives Lily's failure to live up to his "republic of the spirit" in terms of the change in her as aesthetic object is evident when, for example, he meets her for the first time since the night he saw her leaving Trenor's house. Selden notices that

a subtle change had passed over the quality of her beauty . . . Now its impenetrable surface suggested a process of crystallization which had fused her whole being into one hard brilliant substance . . . [in which] the warm fluidity of youth . . . chilled into its final shape. (199-200; Bk. II, ch. 1)

At first glance, Selden's aestheticization of Lily contrasts sharply with the rather crass commodification of this young woman by the Trenor-Dorset group. As Carol Wershoven notes (50), during the *tableaux vivants*, in contrast with the rest of the company who focus on the scantiness of Lily's drapery and speculate on her intention to display her form (for social profit, of course), Selden is moved by the "eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part," and he angrily condemns a society unable to appreciate the virtues of her loveliness (142; Bk. I, ch. 12). However, his aestheticization of Lily intersects with the other characters' commodification of the heroine in a way that is central to the psychology involved: in both commodification and aestheticization, the object becomes a fetish.

According to Marx, as soon as an object becomes a commodity, "it is changed into something transcendent"

(26). Just as the productions of the human brain appear [in the religious experience] as independent beings endowed with life and entering into relation both with one another and the human race . . . [s]o it is in the world of commodities with the products of [human] hands. (Marx 27)

While the religious fetish is endowed with life in the form of metaphysical meaning, the commodity, Marx explains, is endowed with life in the form of social meaning (27). However, in both cases, that meaning exists in a realm beyond the actual physical properties of the object in question. And, because it "stands for" something beyond itself, the commodity can also function as a partial object; that is, the commodity can be a fetish in the Freudian sense as well: it can be used as a substitute point of focus in order to mask and deny a painful psychological reality.

Lily's body, as aestheticized by Selden as well as by herself, has the qualities of a fetish in both these ways. The "eternal harmony" (142; Bk. I, ch. 8), for which Lily strives and which only Selden appreciates, is a meaning that points to a transcendent realm beyond the actual physical properties of Lily's flesh-and-blood body. And her aestheticized body is also a surrogate. Selden's focus on Lily as *objet d'art* masks and denies the same painful psychological reality that Lily's self-aestheticization seeks to mask and deny: psychological vulnerability to existential contingency, a vulnerability that increases in direct proportion to one's poverty and that promotes an existential experience neither character desires. As *objet d'art*, Lily's self-representation places her, and the connoisseur who truly appreciates her, in the realm of timeless, changeless beauty where they need not concern themselves with the uncertainties of life in the concrete world. Thus, Lily and Selden's mutual attraction is grounded in a shared transcendental project. Selden fetishizes Lily's aestheticized body as a sign of the transcendence, of the escape from existential inwardness, he seeks. And Lily, in order to achieve the aestheticized body — the self-reification — she desires, fetishizes Selden's gaze.

Because Lily sees Selden as a connoisseur of *objet d'art*, his appreciation of her beauty is extremely important. When she receives a note from Selden the morning after her stunning success in the *tableaux vivants*,

the sight of Selden's writing brought back the culminating moment of her triumph: the moment when she had read in his eyes that no philosophy was proof against her power. It would be pleasant to have that sensation again . . . no one else could give it to her in the fulness. (147; Bk. I, ch. 13)

This mutual gaze, which recurs throughout the novel,

underscores Lily and Selden's narcissistic *folie à deux*. As Joan Rivière explains in her 1929 article, "Womanliness as Mascarade," women, as objects, look only in order to be looked at while looking. Lily likes to watch Selden watch her because it is his gaze that fixes her as the aesthetic object she wants to be. Conversely, her return gaze, as aesthetic object, fixes Selden in his desired identity as connoisseur. The pair thus fulfills the desire of each for self-reification, for self-abstraction.

As an abstraction, Selden's attractiveness to Lily lies largely in the ways in which he is beyond her reach. Lily's desire to feel her aesthetic power over Selden is therefore increased by the uncertainty that she will always be able to do so. When they meet at the Van Osburgh wedding, for example, Lily expects him to be still under the sway of their last encounter at Bellomont, where he first revealed a personal interest in her. She is distressed to see that now "he had gone back without an effort to the footing on which they had stood before their last talk together" (99; Bk. I, ch. 8). Finding Selden frequently beyond her reach makes him all the more attractive to her, not because she wants what she can't have, but because his unavailability protects her from the advancement of an intimacy that, unconsciously, she doesn't really desire. Similarly, Selden seems deliciously beyond Lily's reach because of the transcendental project — the "republic of the spirit" — he represents, which resonates powerfully with the otherworldly, romantic quality we see in her girlhood idea of a perfect husband: "Lily's preference would have been for an English nobleman with political ambitions and vast estates; or . . . an Italian prince with a castle in the Apennines and an hereditary office in the Vatican" (36-37; Bk. I, ch. 3). Even Lily's perception of Selden's physical characteristics places him in another world:

His reputed cultivation was generally regarded as a slight obstacle to easy intercourse, but Lily . . . was attracted by this attribute, which she felt would have had its distinction in an *older society*. It was, moreover, one of his gifts to look his part; to have a height which lifted his head above the crowd, and keenly-modelled dark features which, in a land of amorphous types, gave him the air of belonging to a *more specialized race*, of carrying the impress of a *concentrated past*. Expansive persons found him a little dry . . . but this air of friendly *aloofness* . . . was the quality which piqued Lily's interest. Everything about him accorded with the *fastidious* element in her taste. (68; Bk. I, ch. 6 — my emphasis)

It is clear in this passage that Selden appeals to Lily because he calls up her girlhood desire for men who don't exist in the material world, and this is the desire for the

otherworldly that she has carried with her into adulthood. Indeed, we learn that when she'd had the opportunity to marry a flesh-and-blood English nobleman or a real Italian prince, she threw it away.

Although Lily and Selden do make physical contact on one occasion — they kiss — the context in which the event occurs reveals that it is not the manifestation of a budding sexual inclination on Lily's part. Following the *tableaux vivants* — which clearly gave both characters the feeling that they were, for the moment, in another, more romantic world beyond existential reality — the pair enjoy a quiet tête-à-tête in the conservatory, in a scene the otherworldly, tanscendental elements of which are foregrounded: "The magic place was deserted: there was no sound but the splash of the water on the lily-pads," and the "drift of music" from the nearby house seems as if it "might have been blown across a sleeping lake . . . Selden and Lily stood still, accepting the unreality of the scene as part of their own dream-like sensations" (144; Bk. I, ch. 12). Then, as they sit in quiet conversation, her face turned to him . . . and their lips touched. . . . "Ah, love me, love me — but don't tell me so!" she sighed with her eyes in his; and before he could speak she had turned and disappear[ed] . . . in the brightness of the room beyond. (145; Bk. I, ch. 12)

The sentimental novels of Emma Bovary's girlhood could hardly have produced a better line than "Ah, love me, love me — but don't tell me so!" Both the semantic content of the phrase and the manner in which it's delivered bespeak the sub-text of Lily's behavior in this scene: what she is really saying is "love me, but don't do anything to which I will have to respond in the real world." Indeed, the next morning, Lily refers to the "scene in the Bry's conservatory" as "a part of her dreams," and she feels "annoyance" at Selden for sending her a note requesting a visit so soon afterward: "she had not expected to awake to such evidence of [the previous night's] reality . . . It was so unlike [Selden] to yield to such an irrational impulse!" (147; Bk. I, ch. 13).

For some critics, who believe that a good deal of Lily's behavior is motivated by her love for Selden,¹² her "love me — but don't tell me so!" could refer to the conflict between her desire to marry him and her need for the kind of wealth he cannot supply. On the contrary, Lily's conflict, up to this point, has been between her desire for wealth and her desire to avoid marriage to the rich men who could provide it. In Selden she has, for the first time, an unconflicted romantic relationship: she can share her desire for the otherworldly, and play out all of its romantic possibilities, without having to face the importunities of a man whose station in life allows him to press his suit.

Lily's attraction to Selden's otherworldliness, and her

desire to belong to the romantic world she glimpses through his eyes, also help explain the moral dimension so many critics see in behaviors that can be associated with Lily's ultimate preference for Selden's approval over that of the Trenor-Dorset clan.¹³ While I agree with Blake Nevius that the "possibility" of a moral dimension in Lily occurs at the novel's close (57), the critical focus on the protagonist's ethics overlooks the psychology that informs them. For example, her desire to discharge her debt to Trenor, although initially born of her desire to re-establish her relationship with his wife (239; Bk. II, ch. 4), soon becomes symbolic behavior, not in the literary sense, but in the psychological. This debt — like her disastrous voyage on the *Sabrina* and her acquisition of Bertha Dorset's letters — represents one of Lily's most horrifying experiences of existential contingency and the acute anxiety that accompanies it; in closing the door on this chapter of her life, she wants to close the door on existential experience. The hyper-morality she develops during the second half of the novel, which comes to a head in her destruction of Bertha Dorset's letters to Selden, is a function of her desire to rise above the whole Trenor-Dorset group in the way she believes Selden has risen above it: by transcending the existential inwardness that keeps him aware of his vulnerability to life's uncertainties. Lily wants to be admitted to Selden's romantic "republic of the spirit," and she knows only one way to get what she wants: by becoming the perfect object for her audience. Therefore, she must do whatever she thinks a member of the "republic of the spirit" would do in any given situation. At this point, hers is an outerdirected "morality"; because she hasn't internalized the principles upon which it operates, her moral perceptions tend to apprehend issues in black and white terms, as the moral perceptions of young children often do. This is why she cannot save herself by letting Bertha Dorset know she has possession of her incriminating letters to Lawrence Selden. Although no third party would ever see them — and Selden could, therefore, in no way be hurt by them — the letters are written, as Rosedale says when he realizes the connection, "to *him* [Selden]" (273; Bk. II, ch. 7).

It should not be surprising, in this context, that only the protagonist's death can complete and safeguard Lily and Selden's transcendental project. During the final four chapters that take us from Lily's last days at Madame Regina's millinery workshop to her fatal overdose — chapters upon which arguments for the protagonist's moral evolution rely — we see a different Lily Bart, capable of a great deal of human warmth and with a new capacity to make real contact with others. For example, she responds with "the first sincere words she had ever spoken to him" (309, Bk. II, ch. 10) to Rosedale's brave

offer to visit her after she is dismissed from the milliner's and is living in poverty in a run-down neighborhood. Similarly, she frankly confesses to Selden his importance in her life without expecting or requiring a response in kind. Even her distaste for physical closeness is suspended when, during a visit with Nettie Struther, she picks up that young woman's child and "felt the soft weight sink trustfully against her breast . . . thrill[ing] her with a sense of warmth" (333; Bk. II, ch. 13). This is not the Lily Bart who commodified herself and others; however, neither is this the heroine who, through loss and suffering, has developed into the superior moral being many critics want to see in her. Rather, this is a dying woman who is taking her leave of this world. She need not fear the existential inwardness to which her emotions will make her liable only because she will soon be forever beyond it. What we have here is a commodity-fetish for whom death can be the only issue, the only completion of its transcendental project.

Although Lily doesn't commit suicide in the deliberate and pre-mediated way this term usually implies,¹⁴ she so desires the "brief bath of oblivion" the drug gives her (339; Bk. II, ch. 13) that she deliberately refrains from considering the risk she is taking when she increases the dose to compensate for her growing immunity to its soporific effect:

She did not, in truth, consider the question very closely — the physical craving for sleep was her only sustained sensation. Her mind shrank from the glare of thought as instinctively as eyes contract in a blaze of light — darkness, darkness was what she must have at any cost. (340; Bk. II, ch. 13)

Lily's has to be a passive suicide because only an "accidental" death allows her to preserve the illusion she wants to preserve: that she hasn't acted, hasn't chosen, but has remained an object to the end.

Particularly striking in this context, the language used to describe Lily's feelings when she takes the drug reveals that the chloral is more than a simple haven from the misery of her waking life: she is enamored of its death-like effect.

She lay very still, waiting with a sensuous pleasure for . . . the gradual cessation of the inner throb, the soft approach of passiveness, as though an invisible hand made magic passes over her in the darkness. The very slowness and hesitancy of the effect increased its fascination: it was delicious to lean over and look down into the dim abysses of unconsciousness. (340; Bk. II, ch. 13)

The unconsciousness the drug brings is as "delicious" to Lily now — and as sensuously described — as the "studied luxury" of her life at Bellomont (41; Bk. I, ch. 4). Death — or death-like unconsciousness — is as attractive to her

now as those experiences were then because it is the only sphere of the otherworldly that remains open to her. She can no longer reify herself as a commodity for the Trenor-Dorset clique because they are no longer buying what she has to sell. And she feels she can no longer hope to share Selden's otherworldly domain, the only alternative to her former lifestyle — however vaguely conceived — she has ever been able to imagine, because, having failed for so long to live up to his romantic ideal, her efforts to live up to it at the end of the novel seem to produce little change in his behavior toward her. Thus, "she saw herself forever shut out from [his] inmost self" (323; Bk. II, ch. 12). Feeling herself alone and helpless, she lets herself die. As Freud explains,

when the ego finds itself in an excessive real danger which it believes itself unable to overcome by its own strength, it . . . sees itself deserted by all protecting forces and lets itself die. ("The Ego and the Id" 58)

While there may have been other "protecting forces" available to Lily — her budding friendship with Rosedale and Gerty Farish's unflagging moral support — they wouldn't have protected her in the way she most desired protection: from the existential anxiety produced by her vulnerability to the physical realities of life on the "wrong side" of the "social tapestry" (290; Bk. 2, ch. 9). Only the Trenor-Dorset lifestyle or Selden's otherworldly vision, Lily believes, could have provided that protection, and now only death can provide it.

For Selden, as well, Lily's death is the only real source of the abstract perfection he seeks in her. It is no coincidence that Selden is finally able to tell Lily he loves her, is finally drawn "penitent and reconciled to her side" only when she is dead: "He knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its less; and in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear" (347; Bk. II, ch. 14). These closing lines are as deliciously romantic as the description we saw earlier of Lily's relaxation into a luxurious sleep after taking the fatal dose of chloral. Her death is thus the consummation of both characters' desire for abstract perfection and it fulfills the unconscious psychological agenda that has operated for Lily since she first came to rely on Selden's otherworldly vision for her refuge, since she first found "the thought of confiding in him . . . as seductive as the river's flow to the suicide" (183; Bk. I, ch. 15).

Clearly, the significance of Lily Bart's death, like the significance of her life, cannot be explained by her attraction to one side or the other of a moral opposition between the Trenor-Dorset milieu and the spiritual realm she associates with Lawrence Selden, for it is the opportunity they offer for self-reification that attracts her to both. While the protagonist's intelligence, sensitivity, and

delicacy make her far superior to — and infinitely more sympathetic than — her milieu, the view that she is victimized by her social stratum for being too moral to survive in it casts the protagonist in terms that are too simple to reflect the depth and complexity of Wharton's characterization. If, in Lily's world as in our own, commodity culture claims many victims, *The House of Mirth* reveals that one powerful reason why can be found in the nature of the psychological pay-offs it offers. It is not enough, then or now, to simply say that commodity culture victimizes women, for such a formulation of the problem leaves women's individual strength and collective power out of the equation. How does commodity culture lead women into collusion with their own victimization? This is the question we must also ask. And this is the question *The House of Mirth* can help us answer.

Grand Haven, MI

NOTES

¹ For example, Lily Bart has been variously seen as a rather independent, even somewhat rebellious, character (Ammons 30-34, Wershoven 58, Dimock 124), as the victim of an almost naturalistic determinism (Lyde 135, Nevius 56-57), and as her own worst enemy due to her tendency to act too quickly (Fryer 90) and her tendency to not act quickly enough (Auchincloss 24).

² See, also, Auchincloss (14), Lawson (36), and Walton (60).

³ Existential inwardness might best be described as the anxious, self-reflective psychology that characterizes our experience as creatures in an uncertain world, in Heidegger's words, "whose very being is at issue" (67). Self-reification — or self-transformation into a fixed substance beyond the world of existential contingency — is the attempt to transcend and thereby avoid existential inwardness.

In discussing Lily Bart's transcendental project, I do not intend any kind of biological essentialism. Certainly, men and women both are capable of the same kinds of transcendental projects. (As we shall see, Lily's transcendental project is symbiotically related to the transcendental project of Lawrence Selden.) Wharton's novel, however, foregrounds the psychology of self-reification to which women in our culture have, historically, been heir.

⁴ As my thesis implies, my argument will draw on a combination of elements from psychoanalysis, existentialism, and Marxism. The theoretical precedent for using these frameworks together comes from Walter Davis' *Inwardness and Existence: Subjectivity in/and Hegel, Heidegger, Marx, and Freud*.

⁵ See, for example, Wershoven, Montgomery (897), Dimock, and Fryer (86).

⁶ Karl Marx's analysis of the commodity distinguishes between use value (value based on the uses to which an object is put) and exchange value (value based on the money or other objects for which an object can be traded). French semiotician Jean Baudrillard extends Marx's theory to include sign-exchange value (value based on the social status an object's ownership confers). A commodity, by definition, is judged only in terms of its exchange value or sign-exchange value. Commodification, then, is the act or condition of relating to persons or things in terms of their exchange value or sign-exchange value to the ex-

clusion of other considerations. The term thus carries with it the devaluation of self and other inherent in the marketplace psychology represented in this novel.

⁷ See, for example, Wolff (116-17), Trilling (110), and Howe (124).

⁸ The belief of some critics that Lily is sexually responsive seems to be based on a confusion of erotic display with erotic feeling or on the fact that the critics themselves find her sexually attractive. See, for example, Fryer (77), McDowell (47), and Trilling (113). In contrast, Robert Shulman notes that Lily does not act from "genuine sexual impulses" (16), but he develops the idea differently than I do.

⁹ See, for example, Wolff (129) and Howe (120). Although Robert Shulman criticizes Selden for it, he believes, as does Diana Trilling (112), that this character often functions "as [Lily's] conscience" (16).

¹⁰ See, for example, Wolff (111), Auchincloss (14), Lawson (36), and Walton (60).

¹¹ Robert Shulman discusses the conflict between what he calls Lily's "real self" — her ideal, moral self, which she and Selden associate with timeless beauty — and her "captive self," the crass, self-serving traits she shares with Bertha Dorset. However, Shulman doesn't interrogate, as I do, the psychological motives informing the protagonist's desire for the ideal.

¹² See, for example, Gimbel (56), Trilling (112)14), and Shulman (15)16).

¹³ See, for example, Dimock (134), Howe (124, 126), Lyde (129), and Walton (66).

¹⁴ There is a good deal of disagreement about the nature and meaning of Lily's death. For a representative sample, see Ammons (37, 42), Fryer (94), McDowell (43-45), and Walton (67). While Lawson believes, as I do, that death is "[t]he only escape left for Lily" (34), he develops the idea differently than I do.

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The Figure of Edith Wharton in Richard Howard's Poem *The Lesson of the Master*

by Adeline Tintner

The Lesson of the Master (1974) is a dramatic poem in a volume called *Two-Park Inventions* by Richard Howard, poet, translator and critic, in which we see a portrait of Edith Wharton with her very name kept.¹ It is based on Richard Howard's knowledge and information about her from various books. The first source is her memoirs, *A Backward Glance*, and the others are Leon Edel's fifth volume of the life of *Henry James* (1972), as well as Louis Auchincloss's biography of Edith Wharton (1971). At that time, before the revelations in R.W.B. Lewis's *Edith Wharton: A Biography* of Wharton's concealed love affair with Morton Fullerton, the object of her affections was assumed to be Walter Berry, a man who she revered and honored all her life and next to whose grave she wanted to be and actually was buried herself. He had died in 1927 and the basis of this dramatic dialogue by Howard is an imagined automobile trip that Wharton made from Paris to Versailles at a time, 1912, which is not true to the date of the death of Walter Berry. She is accompanied by a friend of the dead man, Gerald Mackenzie, who has been given a fictive name in the poem.

The epigraph sets the mood for the poem: "Edith Wharton was here, an angel of devastation in her wondrous, cushioned, *general* car," a line from a letter written by Henry James. The title, *The Lesson of the Master*, gives us the main theme of the plot of this poem, which is one among the group of dialogues, including Oscar Wilde's visit to Whitman in Camden, which center around homoerotic feelings.

It appears in Howard's dialogue that Henry James suggested the companion in the automobile trip, a Gerald Roseman, also an invented name and character, as an answer to Wharton's suggestion that he recommend someone whom she did not know to accompany her, and the lesson he wished her to learn was that her beloved friend, Gerald Mackenzie, whose ashes she is on her way to bury, was a homosexual and therefore could not love her in the way she wanted to be loved.

The dialogue between the two characters draws on

Wharton's powers of "devastation," on her obsessive sense of order and her quirk of ordering others to create this order. It involves a knowledge of her excessive smoking of special brands of cigarettes, her behavior with her omnipresent dogs and her imperiousness in general. Through her companion, Edith Wharton will learn "the lesson of the master" which is that the man whom she had such strong feeling about, whose ashes she is about to bury, has been the lover of the man accompanying her. In this poem, we are to infer that Henry James thought that she needed to know what the true facts of Gerald's emotions were.

What is interesting about the delineation of Edith Wharton's character is that, from a position of arrogance and contemptuous attitude to the Jewish young man who is accompanying her, she changes her behavior after she realizes from the tears the young man sheds that he is right about Gerald's feelings and that she did not share them the way this young man had. Here Wharton's rationality and intelligence is stressed. Richard Howard is an extremely skillful poet whose matter has often been taken from that of literature as well as art. His skill is demonstrated in this poetic dialogue by the gradual presentation of details of Wharton's character according to the sources then published, which are so distributed as to make perfectly plausible the change in her behavior to her companion in the automobile as the ride comes to an end.

The very first lines show her drive or obsession to be neat and to control her environment, because she tells her companion not to litter the car with the ashes from his cigarette nor to throw them out of the window and litter the Bois de Boulogne. The cigarette ashes have been introduced to contrast them to the ashes of Gerald Mackenzie, the mutual friend, which she is conveying to a cemetery in Versailles. This is part of the correct information about where Walter Berry and she herself later on were buried, that is, in the Cimetière des Gobards in Versailles.

Mr. Roseman reminds her that they have already met

at Howard Overing's in London, a reference perhaps to Howard Sturgis's home, where Roseman reminds her of the many "gold-tipped Egyptian" cigarettes she had smoked on the occasion in London when he met her. But she is completely insulting and arrogant in her attitude to Roseman because she claims that she had told James that she wanted someone who was "no one in particular," so that "one may say anything" to him. This reminds us of an actual letter that James had written to John Hugh Smith warning him that Wharton may be "difficult" and here she surely is that. Although she believes at this moment that James has made a mistake in suggesting this young man, we realize at the end of the poem that James did no such thing, that he purposely sent this man who was a lover of Gerald Mackenzie to make clear to Edith Wharton the kind of men they all were. Howard assumes here that James wanted to tell Edith Wharton the fact that his whole group was a homoerotic one and that they had feeling about each other that she couldn't understand. This does not quite jibe with certain facts, such as the tale by Edith Wharton called "The Eyes," in which she depicts a circle of homoerotic men of which the center clearly is Henry James, which resembles the Qu'acre group based in Howard Sturgis's home in Windsor close to London and composed of a circle of friends dominated by Henry James. In this tale published in 1910, two years before this invented trip in 1912, Edith Wharton shows she knew the tastes of her men friends.²

Roseman quotes Gerald as saying that "Edith Wharton is a self-made man." Edith Wharton next says that "Gerald found me when my mind was starved, and he fed me 'til our last hour together." This is the comment she makes about Walter Berry in *A Backward Glance*: "He found me when my mind was starved and my soul was hungry and thirsty and he fed them 'til our last hour together,"³ at which point Roseman remarks, "So you were not entirely self-made."⁴ As she gets more expansive, she tells Roseman that she "made something" of herself to give to Gerald as a person. She asks, "What were you, the two of you . . . ?" Roseman answers it was "why I was suggested for the job . . . We were what you failed to be . . . You and Gerald: one" (LM, 49). This is a great shock to her for she stops the car and says, "I will not hear this." She resists the truth in her imperious fashion and she asks her driver, whom Howard calls Georges (whereas her real driver was called Cook), to stop the car. Roseman continues relentlessly and says that she will not hear it because "you know 'this' already, Mrs. Wharton." There were "Eight years, during which you waited for Gerald Mackenzie to marry you."

During those years, he told her, his and Gerald's lives "overlapped" (LM, 50). He quotes Gerald as having said "women are for men who fail" and that a woman was

"an abyss which might suddenly swallow you both." She asks him how would "you know anything at all about being a woman" and he answers "I am a woman for the same reason you are a man." (LM, 50) "What did you make of Gerald's friends you met a Howard's. . . what do you make of Mr. James? Surely you know what we are and what we do. You did know that, Mrs. Wharton, didn't you?" She answers, "I know what *you* are, Mr. Roseman, you tell me enough to know that. Nor am I tempted to put you and Gerald and Mr. James in the same basket of crabs because you do — or say you did — the same things." (LM, 51) He has to tell her this in order to "spare you the needless expense of . . . what has already been expended," she answers by saying, "You are a Jew, Mr. Roseman, are you not?" He answers that his father was a banker and she answers in her nasty way "Each of us gets, Gerald always used to say, though doubtless not to you, the Jew he deserves" (LM, 52. This seems to reflect Edith Wharton's generally unsympathetic attitude to Jews, which Richard Howard gleaned from her letters and from other reports.

She tells Roseman that he takes from her "the Gerald I knew, the Gerald who invented me — for whom I invented myself . . . you take Gerald from me and replace him with a preposterous caricature who behaves as people behave in the newspapers, *some* newspapers and Elizabethan plays," to which he answers "I cannot take from you what you never had . . . what I am saying is that Gerald led another life." The relation with her, he implies, was "not living — it is pretending . . . you liked Gerald to pretend and he liked pretending" (LM, 53). She asks him how he dares to "speak of 'our' Gerald . . . as if you had the right" (LM, 53). Then he lets her have it. "Certainly we have not lost the same meaning from our lives." When he heard her talk, "I heard all the harshness of a dogmatist mingling somehow in every sentence with the weakness of an egoist and the pretentiousness of a snob." (LM, 53)

At this particular point, she seems to have gotten the message she was meant to get and has dropped her contemptuous, superior, critical attitude: "I have always been everyone's admiration and no one's choice. It is I who have done the choosing . . . Gerald did not love me. No, Affection and desire — those apparently were his poles, and we divide them between us, you and I" (LM, 55). Roseman has noticed her change of verbal behavior and says, "You speak so differently, Mrs. Wharton, the moment you are released — relieved . . . from Gerald. You become a different woman; it is a strange mutation." She adds, "I do not want a sense of the past, as Mr. James keeps calling it, and the future is deaf . . . I want a sense of the continuous life," (LM, 58) and she suddenly notices that Mr. Roseman is crying.

His tears touch her and she decides, so released finally is she from her wrong relation to Gerald, that she will not let Roseman take the urn by himself into the cemetery while she waits for him in the car. "When you come back we shall decide what to say "to Mr. James . . . He has made his experiment in fiction — he has turned his screw, as I suppose he would say." They both agree that they shall say nothing about their conversation to James. Roseman says, "Thank you: Edith, if I may" and, when she says that she would call him by his first name if she knew it, he says, "It is Gerald." Hearing that he has the same name as the man she had loved, that, in other words, they were really one, she suddenly bursts out laughing, which is the first time "in a week" that she has done so. She answers, now a totally changed woman in her relation to this young man, as well as to the Gerald whom she had wanted to love her, and says, "Your story, the one we shall spare Mr. James, is what the American public always wants: a tragedy with a happy ending."

This particular portrait of Edith Wharton is very different from other literary portraits of her. It is an attempt to give an accurate portrait, since he keeps her name and her characteristics lifted from the autobiographical and biographical works available at that time. Howard also makes her, in addition to her imperiousness, her snobishness and her relentlessness, a woman of great intelligence who is capable of accepting the truth when she understands it. In her ride from Paris to Versailles, she has learned a number of heart-rending things, the chief one being that Gerald was a homosexual or homoerotic, part of the circle of men of the same tastes. This is an imagined dialogue, but her character is not placed under the disguise of a Grace Elliot or a Mrs. Alice Gray, as in the cases of Louis Auchincloss's and Paul Bourget's "fictioning" of Wharton,⁵ but in the character of Mrs. Wharton as Howard saw it as an actuality. What is a fantasy is this drive from Paris to Versailles to bury the ashes of, presumably, Walter Berry. What is also imagined is the fact that the Walter Berry character is presented as homoerotic. We know from other sources that Walter Berry was a womanizer and a playboy and there is no evidence, and never has been, that he loved men. But since he is not called Walter Berry, but is a fictive character called Gerald Mackenzie, we have here a combination of real writers and fictional characters. In this poem, Henry James and Edith Wharton live as themselves in a world inhabited by fictive characters in much the same way that we find real authors rubbing shoulders with fictive characters in some novels of the 1990's, such as in Rebecca Goldstein's *The Dark Sister*. There William James, the actual American philosopher, and Dr. Austin Sloper, a fictive character from Henry James's *Washington Square*, both inhabit side by side the

world of the novel. We may say that Richard Howard was one of the earliest practitioners of this game of blending fact and fiction which is now reaching a high level of popularity.

In choosing as the title for his poem "The Lesson of the Master," the title of a well-known story by Henry James, Howard is doing two things. In the first place, he is telling us by the title itself in no uncertain terms what the message of that poem is: Henry James has picked out Gerald Roseman to tell Mrs. Wharton the truth about Gerald Mackenzie's erotic disposition with the revelation that he could never have had with her the relation she wanted. But at the same time he seems to be contradicting this because we recall that the meaning of the James tale is thought to be uncertain. Do we see Henry St. George, the "master" of the James story as a villain who has manipulated Paul Overt, the "overt," innocent young man to think that marriage will interfere with his writing and in that way steals the young woman Paul loves himself? Or do we see a man who knows he is a second rate writer and who honestly believes he is saving Paul from a mediocre career by advising him to resist marriage and give up all for art? This ambiguity is also built into the meaning of Howard's poem. Has James really picked out this young man, Gerald Roseman, to be the messenger of the hurtful truth about Mrs. Wharton's would-be lover's true erotic deviation, or has the young man simply taken upon himself to tell her, using James as the inventor of the manoeuvre? I tend to believe the first, but have no way of knowing what Howard intended. We are left, I believe, with the built-in ambiguity of the James tale. Otherwise, we must assume that Howard has taken upon himself to reveal this rather crude, as well as cruel, device on the part of James to reveal his own sexual deviation, something I find hard to believe James would do, for it was of James that Walpole wrote in 1934 in *The Apple Trees*, "There was no crudity of which he was unaware but he did not wish that crudity to be named."⁶ It was not only that James would not name that crudity, but he did not want anybody else to name it, if we are to believe Walpole, and therefore it would not be plausible that he would send Gerald Roseman on a mission to name it to Edith Wharton. Also, it is not consistent with what we know of James's character that he would deliberately hurt Edith Wharton for whom he had a deep affection.

But aside from the possible interpretations of Howard's intentions in this "two-part invention," the character of Edith Wharton emerges with a validity and authenticity rather striking. All her positions are taken within what we know of her intelligence, character, and emotional depth. She is a convincing Edith, in spite of the genesis of the situation in which she finds herself. She is there

with her asperity and her prejudices, but finally her intelligence and understanding make her triumph over her own class consciousness and imperious failings.

New York City

References

1. James Gargano called my attention to Richard Howard's portrait of Edith Wharton in "The Lesson of the Master" and asked me to try my hand at interpreting it.
2. Adeline R. Tintner, "The Metamorphoses of Edith Wharton in Henry James's *The Finer Grain*," *Twentieth Century Literature*, Volume 21, December 1975, No. 4, pp. 355-379.
3. Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1934), p. 119.
4. Richard Howard, "The Lesson of the Master," in *Two-Part Inventions* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), pp. 40-60. References referred to as LM and page number.
5. Adeline R. Tintner, "Justice to Teddy Wharton: Louis Auchincloss's 'The Arbiter,'" *Edith Wharton Review*, Volume VII, No. 2, Winter, 1990, pp. 17-19; "Edith Wharton and Paul Bourget," *Edith Wharton Review*, Volume 8, No. 1, Spring 1991, pp. 16-18.
6. Hugh Walpole, *The Apple Trees* (Waltham St. Lawrence: The Golden Cockerel Press, 1932), p. 53.
7. There is one discrepancy in the chronology of the poem. Even though Edith Wharton's divorce took place in 1913 and Teddy Wharton's death took place in 1928, they are referred to in the poem as events that have already occurred before the date of this ride to Versailles, 1912, which is the time of the duologue (or dialogue). The sub-title of the poem reads "Paris - Versailles, 1912" (LM, 40). However, this can easily be subsumed under "poetic license."

Book Review continued from page 24

feminist perspectives on Wharton, which comprise about ninety-five per cent of Wharton scholarship:

One might claim them both (James and Wharton because of their appealing heroines) as *feminist* writers, and indeed "feminist critics" have claimed them for their own. The danger is, however, that those critics may be sometimes more political than literary; that is too often the case with Wharton's readers, in fact (7).

At the same time he dangles irresistible hints of a need for feminist (and other) interpretations of his comments on Wharton's relationships with Henry James, John Hugh Smith and Robert Norton. The "piquant touch of the erotic" (13) in "the meeting of minds" between James and Wharton is perhaps easier to accept as the perception of a James scholar than "Wharton's dalliance with John Hugh Smith and later, if less obviously, with the calmer and more discreet Robert Norton" (17). If by "dalliance" Powers means "affairs," it colors the situation quite differently than if he means playful flirting, or cruel toying with sensitive feelings. The matter is unclarified and difficult to interpret from any critical perspective because its source was accidentally omitted. Notwithstanding, Powers is a superb scholar and writer, and *Henry James and Edith Wharton, Letters: 1900-1915* should be an indispensable addition to any serious collection of works on James or Wharton.

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Edith Wharton Inducted Into Poet's Corner

On October 25, 1995, at the Sunday evening vesper service of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, Edith Wharton was inducted into the American Poet's Corner. The opening procession of a white robed choir chanting and holding lit slender candles as they walked the cavernous arched stone hall would have pleased the Wharton that loved ritual and tradition.

She would have beamed at the choice of speakers and her writings they chose to read. Louis Auchincloss read from *A Backward Glance* of her young and awkward self relishing the treasures of books in her father's library. From *The House of Mirth*, Mary Gordon spoke the double self of one of her most beautiful and beset heroines as Lily Bart finds moments of escape with Lawrence Selden. The tragic denouncement of most of Wharton's leading women was breathtakingly voiced as Ms. Gordon ended with the suicidal sled ride of Ethan Frome and Mattie Silver.

The formal induction followed in one of the rotundas where marble plaques lie on the ground marking eighteen other eminent writers. Chosen by a group of prominent American poets, Wharton now symbolically lies with Cather, Dickinson, Moore, Hawthorne, Irving, Poe, Faulkner, Eliot, Whitman, James, Stevens, Emerson, Frost, Twain, Emerson, Melville, Robinson, and William Carlos Williams. Beneath her name and dates is the inscription from one of her letters: "There is no end to life, in its mercy as in its pain."

Wharton's View of Woman in *French Ways and Their Meaning*

by Julie Olin-Ammentorp

Earlier discussions of Wharton's *French Ways and Their Meaning* have focused on the attitudes toward women that Wharton expresses in that work, particularly on her praise of the Frenchwoman. The most frequently cited passages from the work are excerpted from Wharton's argument that the social, moral, and psychological maturity of the Frenchwoman contrasts sharply with the overall immaturity of the American woman, and presents a model that American women would do well to follow. Perhaps the most-quoted passage is that in which Wharton writes that the Frenchwoman is "as different as possible from the average American woman . . . the Frenchwoman is *grown up*":

Compared with the woman of France the average American woman is still in kindergarten. The world she lives in is exactly like the most improved and advanced and scientifically equipped Montessori-method baby-school. . . . But what is the fundamental principle of the Montessori system? It is the development of the child's individuality, unrestricted by the traditional nursery discipline[.] (100-101)

Most critics thus far have followed the lead of R. W. B. Lewis, who summarizes Wharton's argument thus:

The Frenchwoman, however, as against her American counterpart, is regarded as a truly free spirit who stands beside her husband or lover in his work as in his idle hours[.] (422)¹

Contrary to the prevailing notion that Wharton's argument in *French Ways and Their Meaning* constitutes a feminist statement, a closer reading of her chapter on "The New Frenchwoman" suggests Wharton's unstated belief in the fundamental inferiority of women. Although the Frenchwoman may be, as she claims, the Frenchman's "partner," in no way do Wharton's examples of this partnership suggest that it is an equal one. Further, Wharton's professed admiration for the Frenchwoman she describes is curiously at odds with her own life and her

fiction.

Although Wharton never overtly states a belief in the superiority of men, the assumption of it underlies much of her argument about women in *French Ways*. For instance, she assumes that only men can mature on their own, so that women must associate with men in order to "grow up":

It is because American women are each other's only audience, and to a great extent each other's only companions, that they seem, compared to women who play an intellectual and social part in the lives of men, like children in a baby-school. They are "developing their individuality," but developing it in the void, without the checks, the stimulus, and the discipline that comes of contact with the stronger masculine individuality. (102-103).

Wharton reiterates the last phrase in her assertion that "the man is the stronger and the closer to reality" (103). Similarly, she implicitly equates the "broadly human" with the male by excluding women from that category:

No matter how intelligent women are individually, they tend, collectively, to narrow down their interests, and take a feminine, or even a female, rather than a broadly human view of things. The woman whose mind is attuned to men's minds has a much larger view of the world, and attaches much less importance to trifles, because men, being usually brought by circumstances into closer contact with reality, insensibly communicate their breadth of view to women. (119)

Even allowing that Wharton may have been stating a truth observable in her day, or allowing that many women were petty,² it is worth noting that Wharton never goes beyond the surmise to ask *why* this might be so. She accepts that men are "usually brought by circumstances into closer contact with reality," without asking either who

defines reality or what conditions create the circumstances that bring men into contact with that reality.

Similarly, Wharton demonstrates her profoundly heterosocial view when she writes that separating men and women at the dinner table "means death to general conversation, for intelligent women will never talk together when they can talk to men, or even listen to them" (26). Although, as Susan Goodman has argued, women in Wharton's fiction are often allies, Wharton here suggests that women (at least intelligent ones) would like as little to do with each other as possible. Women's main interest is men, who live in the "real world." *French Ways*, despite its claim that it is heterosexual and heterosocial relations that drive civilization forward,³ makes few suggestions about why men would want to have anything to do with women.

Given her fundamental belief in the superior closeness of men to reality, it is hardly surprising that the husband-wife partnership Wharton describes is one that is really dictated by the husband. In her extended description of such partnerships, the wife begins to emerge not as equal (surely implied in the very term "partner") but as unpaid employee. Wharton writes that "In small businesses the woman is always her husband's bookkeeper or clerk, or both; above all she is his business adviser" (103). Clearly, the wife's position in any of these roles is subordinate to the husband's. Moreover, in an era in which Engels in Europe and feminists like Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the United States had argued the nearness of marriage to prostitution,⁴ and only a decade before Virginia Wolff argued the necessity of women's financial independence in *A Room of One's Own*, Wharton's view of the unpaid labor of these wives seems either remarkably naive or consciously conservative. Indeed, Wharton goes to the opposite extreme in the argument about women and economics, celebrating the fact that French wives go unpaid for their work:

it is not only because she saves him a salesman's salary, or a book-keeper's[s] salary, or both, that the French tradesman associates his wife with his business; it is because he has the sense to see that no hired assistant will have so keen a perception of his interests, that none will receive his customers so pleasantly, and that none will so patiently and willingly work over hours when it is necessary to do so. There is no drudgery in this kind of partnership, because it is voluntary . . . (106)

Several details here undermine that notion that the wife is equal: (1) it is the French tradesman who is in control, "associat[ing] his wife with his business," rather than a mutual decision to work together; (2) customers are "his customers," not their customers, as the business interests

are "his interests;" (3) the partnership is described as "voluntary," yet surely one wonders what might befall the French tradesman's wife who did not "volunteer" for such duty. (Apart from these gender-related issues, certainly Wharton is overly optimistic in assuming that working over hours can never be "drudgery" simply because it is "voluntary"!)

Wharton allows that French women have fewer legal rights than American and English women. Yet she asserts that "these theoretical restrictions" have little to do with "the heart of reality," so that the French wife's life has more of real equality about it than that of her English-speaking counterparts.

The subservience Wharton describes here (as opposed to the equality she initially seems to describe, the equality critics have claimed for her) is reiterated throughout her description of French wives. Just as women at dinner parties are to exhibit their wonderful gift for listening, not talking ("responsiveness is the *rôle*"; "Women . . . are generally far more intelligent listeners than talkers" [24-5]), so the French wife demonstrates her strength through her prudence, silence, and thrift. As an example of the Frenchwoman's superiority to English and American women, Wharton tells of the "five thousand million francs" France agreed to pay Germany at the conclusion of the Franco-Prussian war; that the sum was paid off eighteen months ahead of schedule she credits to "the obscure part played by the millions of wives and mothers whose thrift and prudence silently built up her [i.e. France's] salvation in 1872" (105). Women's importance here is exemplified in her obscurity, her silence. In the same way she praises

the millions of brave, uncomplaining, self-denying mothers and wives and sisters who sent them [i.e. their male relatives as soldiers] forth smiling, who waited for them patiently and courageously, or who are mourning them silently and unflinchingly, and not one of whom . . . is ever heard to say that the cost has been too great or the trial too bitter to be borne. (121)

Again, many of the strengths here are strengths of silence and abnegation, not of speech or of action: woman, in Wharton's view, is great not for what she is, but for what she gives up. Woman is also defined here, as throughout, solely by her relation to men: she speaks not of woman *per se* but of "mothers and wives and sisters." Particularly in wartime, she suggests, an unattached woman is of no value because she has nothing — no men — to give up.

Far from seeing this situation as undermining the position of women, however, Wharton claims that "the Frenchwoman rules French life . . . under a triple crown, as a business woman, as a mother, and above all as an artist" (111). She goes on to explain:

As life is an art in France, so woman is an ar-

tist. She does not teach man, but she inspires him. As the Frenchwoman of the bread-winning class influences her husband, and inspires in him a respect for her judgment and her wishes, so the Frenchwoman of the rich and educated class is admired and held in regard for other qualities. But in this class of society her influence naturally extends much farther. The more civilized a society is, the wider is the range of each woman's influence over men, and of each man's influence over women. (1112)

Clearly the opening of this passage makes one wonder whether it could really be written by the author of "The Muse's Tragedy," which so clearly delineates the problems of being merely an "inspiration" to the male artist.⁵ As the passage continues Wharton reconfirms the Victorian notion of separate spheres, with its implication that the proper role for women was to influence men and to be influenced by them, rather than acting directly for themselves. In this vein Wharton goes on to assert that "it is possible to have a ruling caste of grown-up men and women only in a civilization where the power of each sex is balanced by that of the other" (113). It is difficult, however, to reconcile such a call for "balance" with the multiple imbalances she describes throughout her essay.

Indeed, Wharton's stance toward women recalls Margaret McDowell's observation that "The exact nature of Edith Wharton's feminism resists easy definition" (253). Wharton's stance is, moreover, perplexing in light of both her life and her art. Wharton both implicitly and explicitly defines women as married women; she writes that the unmarried girl "is only a sketch, the married woman is a finished picture" (114-115). As she wrote this a number of years after her divorce, one wonders how she defines herself. Certainly the difference between virginity and sexual experience may be the watershed experience that, for her, separates "girls" from "women";⁶ if so, Wharton would be safely on the side of "married women." Yet she herself was no longer married and, despite the many important men in her life, did not identify herself in terms of any one particular man. Further, she was not content with "inspiring" men to produce great works of art, but rather aspired to — and did — create artworks herself. Recalling the earlier-quoted passages about women's role as listener rather than talker, one wonders as well about all those memorable dinner parties and evenings around the fireplace Wharton recounts: surely she was a talker as well as a listener. Candace Waid has suggested that Wharton may simply have exempted herself from the role of listener she prescribed for other women. As Waid writes, Wharton's description of the "man's woman" . . . indicates the privileged position in relation to her sex that Wharton reserves for women

among men such as George Eliot and herself" (8). Apart from the safe assumption that Wharton considered herself as psychologically mature as any Frenchwoman, it is hard to see how, if at all, Wharton is like the model of womanhood she espouses.

Her fiction as well consistently resists this model, both through the fictions she wrote and the fictions she did not. "The Muse's Tragedy" shows the tragedy of a woman who lives always as a muse, never as woman or artist; a work like "the Touchstone" simultaneously suggests the ludicrous nature of the woman artist and indicts society for its limitations on the woman artist.⁷ Through omission as well Wharton suggests that the very model of womanhood she proposes — the woman as artist in "the art of living" — is imaginatively uninteresting. Judy Trenor, for instance, fills such a role, yet Wharton portrays her as shallow and heartless, even vindictive. Although Wharton had friends who excelled in the "art of living," and although this art was as much a part of her life as her writing, she seems to have found the role simply uninspiring as a subject for fiction. Paradoxically, in order to find literary renderings of the kind of woman Wharton praises, the best place to turn may be to a writer far more feminist than Wharton: Virginia Wolff, whose Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsey, whatever their limitations, have a gift for making life the kind of art Wharton praises.

In *Edith Wharton's Argument with America*, Elizabeth Ammons has noted Wharton's conservatism in the period after the war.⁸ Certainly *French Ways*, far from serving only as a plea for greater maturity for American women, asserts a very conservative, even Victorian, model for women. The work as a whole is governed by rigid ideas of social structure, with Wharton apparently at the top of the social ladder. In her comments about Germans, for instance, she reveals a remarkable sense of proprietorship, a sense that America is somehow "ours" and not "theirs" — even when "they" are immigrants decidedly settled in the United States.⁹ Addressing soldiers who have felt that "the Germans we knew at home were easier people to get on with" than the French (10), she remarks:

For one thing, the critics in question knew the Germans at home, *in our home*, where they had to talk our language or not get on, where they had to be what we wanted them to be — or get out . . .

The Germans in Germany are very different; though, even there, they were at great pains, before the war, not to let Americas find it out. (10)

Certainly Wharton is indulging in a great deal of cultural simplifications — and vilification — here. In the same way she oversimplifies the French woman, claiming that

"There is no new Frenchwoman" (98); "The first thing for the American woman to do is to learn to know *the Frenchwoman* as she has always been," avoiding the temptation to believe that the Frenchwoman "as a tram-conductor, a taxi-driver or a munition-maker" is any different from the Frenchwoman who existed before the war (99). The war, for Wharton, was not a cause of noticeable change in the lives, attitudes, or freedoms of French women. On the contrary, Wharton suggests a timeless quality to French women: the French woman is "as she has always been," surely a historical overgeneralization.

In short, Wharton is given in *French Ways and Their Meaning* to large-scale oversimplifications and overgeneralizations. In the same way it has been tempting for critics to rely on the overgeneralization that appeal to us (in our era, those that seem to support a "feminist" Wharton) while overlooking those that do not. Wharton's war works have been passed over ostensibly because of their lesser literary merit; perhaps also because they present a side of Wharton that is conservative (even reactionary), didactic, even preachy. It is time, however, to look at these works more closely. Wharton's view of women is not so simple as once thought; she is neither the misogynist nor the misandrist, nor perhaps the feminist, some critics have suggested. A closer examination of her war works may lead us to modify our views of her in other ways as well.

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NOTES

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¹ See, for example, the references to *French Ways and Their Meaning* in books by Susan Goodman, Janet Goodwyn, Penelope Vita-Finzi, and Elizabeth Ammons, as well as the article by Margaret McDowell. Admittedly such references are always extremely brief; thus far *French Ways and Their Meaning* has received, so far as I have been able to ascertain, no extended analysis.

² Wharton's use of the word "trifles" will resonate for those familiar with Susan Glaspell's 1916 play of that name. One point of the play is to illustrate that what men may consider "trifles" may be of great importance; one wonders exactly what Wharton would consider "trifles."

³ Wharton writes, for example:

it is because the two sexes complete each other mentally as well as physiologically that no modern civilization has been really rich or deep, or stimulating to other civilizations, which has not been based on the recognized interaction of influences between men and women. (103)

⁴ Gilman and Engels both questioned the economic nature of sexual relations, asking why society was so concerned with prostitution — the "transient trade" in sex — while it found the "bargain for life" acceptable (Gilman, 62-63). Engels im-

plied that marriage was worse than prostitution, writing that a married woman "does not hire out her body, like a wage-worker, in piecework, but sells it into slavery once for all" (Tucker, 742).

⁵ As a whole "The Muse's Tragedy" may support Wharton's model of the proper role for women. Mrs. Anerton's tragedy is not that she is not an artist herself, but that she has never been thoroughly loved; in Wharton's view, Mrs. Anerton had never been thoroughly a woman. Simultaneously the story illustrates Wharton's reservations about the role of woman as muse — a role she endorses in *French Ways*.

⁶ Candace Waid makes this distinction (8), crediting R.W.B. Lewis' biography for it.

⁷ For more detail, see my article, "Edith Wharton, Margaret Aubyn, and the 'Woman Novelist'" (*Women's Studies*, special Wharton issue, spring 1991).

⁸ Elizabeth Ammons writes that "Conventionally speaking, she [Wharton] moves from a liberal to a conservative position on the woman question" with her 1922 novel *The Glimpses of the Moon* (160). As I argue here, Wharton's move from a "liberal" to a "conservative" position comes earlier, and is expressed in *French Ways*. At the same time it should be noted that if, in Ammons' words, Wharton endorses "marriage, the home, and motherhood" for women (162), she also endorses separating women's role as mother from their roles as wives and lovers, and endorses sexual freedom for married women (*French Ways* 128-132). Princess Estradina in *The Custom of the Country* illustrates such behavior, exhibiting maternal tenderness while also carrying on a discreet affair.

⁹ Significantly, Wharton seems to forget that her own predecessors were once immigrants. She refers to them as "our American ancestors" (82) while describing their transplantation to this continent, even as she refers to native Americans as "savages" (79) and "bloody" (84).

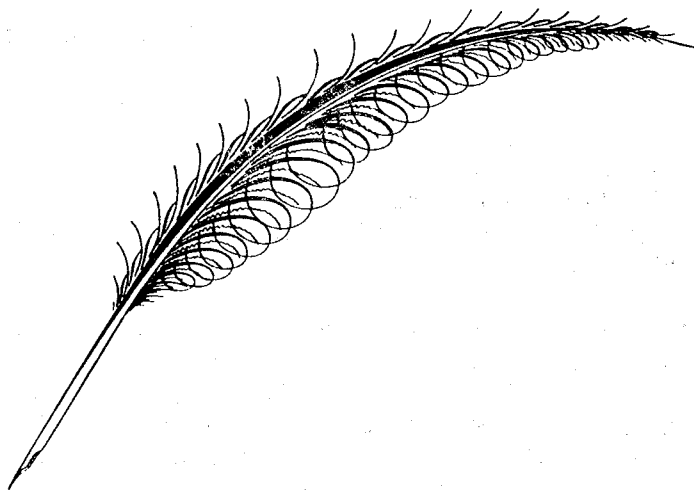
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Pavillon Colombe, St. Brice

by Judith Saunders

It's still a gorgeous property.
Rooms laid out in line, like a train,
invite a circumspect homage
(no photographs, please.) In
the otherwise uninhibited
parlor, a mangy dog lies curled
on a sofa beside the fire
that flames out against June dampness.
On closer inspection
we see this isn't a dog at all,
but a fox - stuffed, and decidedly
dead. Next room displays
two ornately enamelled
purple birds, posed on spiky chunks
of crystal quartz and placed
— unaccountably — in a golden cage



Outside, two creamy borzois pant
in early summer sun; draped
full-length against the gravel,
they look too limp for the season.
The grounds divide and sub-divide:
borders or ornamental shrubs,
rose-covered archways and trellises,
paths and hedges carefully planned
in geometric patterns
create serene enclosures,
a cultivated privacy
of space. One shaded square contains
a shallow, algae-covered pond:
paddling in slow motion there,
a black swan, exotic and sleek,
traces the paltry perimeter,
pushing languid trails through the green
constricted surface of its waters.

For tea we converge
on canopied tables set forth
on the lawn. We devour
crustless sandwiches
of watercress and cucumber,
bite-sized chocolate and coffee eclairs,
strawberries big as tangerines.
White-jacket servants pour juice
and sparkling wine, refill
the emptying trays, ply us
with memorable morsels
while we contemplate
the shuttered exterior
of this richly haunted house.
The dead fox dreams beside the fire.
The borzois pant. Two caged,
fantastical birds clutch fast
to tiny Zaubergergs. In tight,
slow circles, a black swan spins.

Book Reviews

Edith Wharton: New Critical Essays
Eds., Alfred Bendixen and Annette Zilversmit
New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc.,
1992. \$42.

Reading criticism I sometimes sympathize with Edith Wharton's reaction to James Joyce and T.S. Eliot. "I know it's not because I'm getting old that I'm unresponsive," she explained to Bernard Berenson. "The trouble with all this new stuff is that it's *à thèse*: the theory comes first and dominates it."¹ *Edith Wharton: New Critical Essays*, edited by Alfred Bendixen and Annette Zilversmit, offers a welcome exception. Contributors deal in complex and original ways with theory and issues of gender, race, and culture, but Wharton and her work "dominate." As Bendixen writes in the Introduction, this volume celebrates "the revival of Wharton's critical reputation" and suggests "some of the directions in which Wharton criticism may move profitably within the coming years" (viii). Zilversmit's closing essay, "All Souls': Wharton's Last Haunted House and Future Directions for Criticism," eloquently pleads for more inclusive critical approaches that will lead us to see the author as "a psychological novelist," not merely "a literary proselytizer of feminist protest" (327).

The editors have chosen essays that give a sense of the range of Wharton's subjects and genres (excluding the non-fiction), as well as the discussion it has generated. The volume focuses on relatively neglected novels — "The Fruit of the Tree (1907), *The Reef* (1912), *The Children* (1928), *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929), and *The Gods Arrive* (1932). Previously published essays, such as Elaine Showalter's "The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Wharton's *House of Mirth*," provide a kind of historical context, which highlights perhaps a lessening interest in Wharton's heroines and a returning one in her heroes.

Elsa Nettels' concern with gender and first-person narration, Carol Singley's analysis of homoeroticism in "A Bottle of Perrier," and Judith Sensibar's attention to "bachelor types" illustrate this revival, while essays such as Abby Werlock's "Edith Wharton's Subtle Revenge? Morton Fullerton and the Female Artist in *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*" and Catherine Bancroft's "Lost Lands: Metaphors of Sexual Awakening in Edith Wharton's Poetry, 1908-1909" reflect a continued interest in the connections between Wharton's life and art. Taken together they might also signal a new emphasis in Wharton studies, a shift away from analyses of individual characters to the larger political, historical, and

cultural conditions that surround them. Judith Fryer's essay, "Reading *Mrs. Lloyd*," shows how all the themes in *The House of Mirth* (1905) coalesce in the *tableaux vivant* scene, where "the conventions of high art and popular culture" (29) converge; while Donald Pizer, Judith Sensibar, and Carol Singley convincingly argue that Wharton must be seen in the traditions of American naturalism, modernism, and the female Gothic. Pairing Wharton and Jesse Redmon Fauset, Elizabeth Ammons advocates a new way of contextualizing literary history, one that makes connections between the work of white and black women.

In a sense, this collection, which recognizes the scope and depth of Wharton's vision, also marks her coming of age. All the contributors recognize the importance of gender, yet they are not narrowly bound by it. Jean Blackall's discussion of narrative technique, for example, exposes the dualism at the heart of *Summer* (1917). The last three essays in the volume, which are a "reconsideration" — to use Margaret B. McDowell's term — of Wharton's ghost stories, serve as an open-ended conclusion to the collection that conveys the richness of Wharton's imagination and writing, the impossibility of making her or her work conform to any single thesis.

¹ Letter of Edith Wharton to Bernard Berenson, January 6, 1923, *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, eds. R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988). 461.

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Katherine Joslin. *Women Writers: Edith Wharton*.
London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1991. 156pp.
\$24.95.

Readers new to Wharton as well as those who have read the major novels more times than they can count will learn from and enjoy Katherine Joslin's witty, well-focused, and gracefully written discussion of Edith Wharton for the Macmillan series on woman writers.

Joslin's study stresses that Wharton saw identity as bound to "the web of customs, manners, culture' elaborately spun about the self" (2). Thus, although Wharton's characters might envision living in a world outside of their society, such as Lawrence Selden's "republic of the spirit" in *The House of Mirth*, they are inextricably

connected to their social group (2). This theme of the individual enmeshed in the social web is the focus of the book's seven chapters dealing with Wharton's life, fiction, critics, and four of her novels.

Joslin places Wharton's stress on "relational selfhood" in a woman's tradition. For instance, Wharton's life story, *A Backward Glance*, bears the hallmarks of a woman's story in the way it moves away from Wharton herself and toward her male friends, thus marginalizing her as a writer. A male autobiography, by comparison, would tell the story of "autonomous heroic selfhood" (4). Wharton's fiction, as well, is gender marked. While 19th and early 20th century American fiction written by men features male characters struggling to extricate themselves from society's restrictions — whether Ishmael taking to sea or Huck Finn lighting out for "the Territory" — women writers make their protagonists heroic by placing them *within* society. The community becomes "the Territory" (32). Though Wharton's fiction features the lives of "malcontents" at odds with their community — Lily Bart, Charity Royall, Ethan Frome — her ironic vision emphasizes that survivors are those who best "fit" the intricately patterned, enormously powerful social structure" (38). Wharton revises both the male pastoral romance and the female domestic novel by stressing that the social bond restricts the individual while being essential to his or her identity. To go beyond society is to "annihilate the self" (38).

To tell this ironic story Wharton adopts the ostensibly objective tone and language of male scientific discourse, one of her favorite genres. She realized, Joslin observes, that "Her adoption of male models of scientific, sociological, anthropological investigation gave her voice, a female and therefore culturally less powerful one, the ring of male authority" (40). The cool tone intensifies the painful irony that the society for which characters make moral sacrifices seldom recognizes these sacrifices and so undercuts the character's heroism.

Joslin's observations are deliciously witty. She notes, for example, that Wharton didn't have much success with men, but that "the story of the rest of her life is such a satisfying one precisely because all the men around her fail to provide her a more traditional life . . . In her selection of men, Edith Wharton, as it turns out, chose wisely" (22). Ultimately Wharton's most satisfying love affairs were with her two French homes, Ste. Claire in Hyères and Pavillon Colombe in Ste. Brice.

In her discussion of four of Wharton's major novels — *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Mother's Recompense* — Joslin emphasizes the main character's various relationships with community while arguing that all of these

novels struggle with the "Women Question," that is, who is a woman and what manner of life does she live if she isn't married? Lily Bart, in *The House of Mirth*, searches futilely for "a world within the human community," rather than a world "Beyond!" as her stationary seal suggests, yet she consistently rejects potential ones, such as the "'sisterhood' of philanthropic feminists" represented by Gerty Farish (62). *The Custom of the Country* inverts the plot of *The House of Mirth* in that, while Lily eventually realizes the necessity of human community, Undine Spragg never understands community at all. Her initials, U.S., make her a representative woman in a society where community has failed, primarily because men and women can't communicate honestly with one another.

In *The Age of Innocence* Ellen Olenska's Bohemian community challenges Newland Archer's "lethargic and colorless society" (92). While he wants to flee with Ellen to a "new land" beyond society, Ellen wisely realizes that "the self is always relational," intertwined with one's culture (96, 95). But her culture of art and ideas threatens his culture of money and dinner parties. Joslin skillfully contrasts Archer's "armchair feminism," riddled with hypocrisy, to the individualism of the many eccentric, "widely arrayed" women in the novel who animate Old New York society with badly needed energy.

Kate Clephane tries, in *The Mother's Recompense*, to reestablish herself in the society and identity she had left nearly twenty years before and finds that it is impossible to ignore what she has become since then, a middle-aged expatriate. Joslin argues convincingly that *The Mother's Recompense* is not only a reconfigured incest story, told from a woman's point of view, but also a kind of ghost story, with Kate confronting spectral versions of herself as she tries to reconnect with her abandoned daughter Anne. All the characters thus become "ghostly versions of Kate" (121-22).

Joslin argues less convincingly that the incest theme pursued in this novel as well as in the "Beatrice Palmato" fragment, which Wharton worked on just before she wrote *The Mother's Recompense*, fascinated Wharton because incest "represents the powerful pull of the initial community, parents and family, on the individual" (111). Although acknowledging Mr. Palmato's disastrous effects on the women in his life, Joslin contends that Beatrice enjoys sex with her father because she "yearns for home, her initial community" (112). I would suggest that if this is true it is only because her mentally frail mother, no doubt enervated by her powerful husband, is unavailable to her.

In her last chapter Joslin discusses how the literary community judging Wharton's work has, until recently,

usually reflected a male bias. Beginning with Percy Lubbock's *Portrait of Edith Wharton*, which undercuts Wharton while lauding Henry James, Joslin illustrates that, as a female writer, Wharton has been subject to criticism of "her gender, morality, intellect and social class, even her mental health" (142). The contemporary placement of Wharton in a female literary tradition has enriched and enlivened what Joslin calls the "big business" of Wharton criticism. As she rightly concludes, Wharton's "resiliency over several generations of ideological literary debate and revision bodes well for her longevity" (142).

Good criticism helps readers see familiar texts anew, and Joslin's book does that, while providing an informed background on Wharton for readers unfamiliar with her. There are some problems, such as omitted publishing information for two key references in the last chapter and repetitive quotes and ideas. But the biggest drawback is that space restrictions probably prevented Joslin from discussing more of Wharton's work — her short stories, her other major novels, her travel writing. I wish this admirable book could have been longer.

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Gloria C. Erlich. *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992. 210 pp. \$20.

The title of Gloria C. Erlich's compelling study evokes fantasies of erotic desire and also brings to mind crucial moments from the tortuous quest narrative of Wharton's friend Henry Adams. Like Adams, Wharton too set out on a quest for meaning. According to Erlich, the knowledge Wharton sought was sexual. Her suggestive title notwithstanding, Erlich immediately dispels any notion that her purpose is "X-rated." As she explains, "For Edith Wharton sexual education was a lifelong process of coming to terms with the role of love and sensuality in human experience" (ix). Erlich grounds her analysis of this process in the theories of D.W. Winnicott, Louise J. Kaplan, Sophie Freud, and most importantly Sigmund Freud. Considering this last influence, it is fitting that the story Erlich tells of Wharton's sexual education is to some extent classic Freudian romance.

Not surprisingly, Wharton's problematic relations with her parents are here of primary concern. Erlich prefaces her discussion of Lucretia Rhineland and George Frederic Jones by making her own view of motherhood

plain. Recognizing that her attitude toward "multiple mothering" may offend feminists who "see nothing essential in the mother-child bond and believe that mothering can be done equally well by a father, an au pair, or the staff of a day-care center" (4), Erlich aligns herself with those who hold that "the introduction of an alternate primary care-taker" (8) typically causes estrangement between mother and child, and often leads a child to experience "problems with intimacy" as well (7).

Whatever one's position on parental roles, Erlich offers an illuminating interpretation of Wharton's uneasy childhood and of its significance for her writing. Erlich argues convincingly that Wharton had not one mother but three, the most important of whom was wholly imagined. Considerably less imaginary were Wharton's birth mother, Lucretia Jones, and her Irish nanny, Hannah Doyle. Regarding the former, Erlich postulates that Wharton came to associate Lucretia Jones with "the God of Calvinism — vigilant, omnipresent, and unappeasable" (24). In contrast to this "bad" mother, "Nanny Doyle" was "a benevolent goddess" who provided Wharton "a cocoon of safety" (7). Erlich reasons that Wharton's "polarization of the two women contributed to the mother power without love, to the nanny love without power" (24/25). Neither perspective was entirely just.

The effects of Wharton's experience of "split mothering" were many. Throughout her life Wharton would look to women of a lower class for nurture and support. Hannah Doyle was thus the predecessor to Catherine Gross and to other adored servant women on whom Wharton depended, and to "nanny-equivalent[s]" in the fiction as well, e.g., Gerty Farish and Nettie Struther (62). The legacy of Wharton's internalization of Lucretia Jones as vengeful god was physical and psychic pain. Fear of this inner mother led to chronic depression and headaches during the first twelve years of Wharton's marriage, and was at least partially responsible for the enduring celibacy of that union. Erlich further claims that for much of her life Wharton felt a general sense of "dis-ease," "of being thought unclean": "The illusion of maternal omniscience generated such exaggerated compliance, such extreme scrupulosity [on Wharton's part], that her entire sexual nature — feelings along with knowledge — were driven underground" (28). For Erlich, Wharton's "greatest creative act" was her successful vanquishing of this repressive internalized mother and "the forging through her own intellect and imagination what life had denied her — an inner mother that would suffice" (xiii). Wharton's determined struggle to resurrect and rediscover her buried sexual life was necessarily connected to this project.

In her own attempt to plumb Wharton's underground

world, Erlich joins critics such as Barbara A. White who hold that Wharton's relationship with her father was incestuous — in essence if not in fact. Through a close reading of Wharton's memoirs, of hand imagery in the fiction, and of the "Beatrice Palmato" plot summary and "unpublishable fragment," Erlich concludes that Wharton found in her father's library a "secret garden" of both literary and earthly delights. According to Erlich, Wharton's childhood "reading probably stimulated sexual fantasies and perhaps some autoerotic activity" (35). Noting that Wharton's writing is "preoccup[ie]d with incest" (36), Erlich surmises, "If, as seems plausible, young Edith had experienced some kind of incestuous stimulation, we can more easily understand her emotional volatility and overactive sense of guilt" (38). Though Erlich admits that no one "know[s] what occurred in George Frederic Jones's library" (42), and that all evidence that Wharton was sexually victimized by her father is "circumstantial" (182), she nonetheless argues that as Wharton was growing up . . . "[b]ooks and even words became libidinized, the library became a place of secret initiation. . . ." (42).

While analyzing Wharton's complicated familial ties, Erlich repeatedly turns to the writing in order to illumine "continuities between Wharton's life and art" (xi). Regarding the early fiction, Erlich's readings of *The Touchstone* and *The House of Mirth* are particularly astute. Margaret Aubyn, Erlich proposes, is both an authorial projection representing "troubling aspects of [Wharton] as woman and writer" (77), and a portrait of Wharton's "persecutory" inner mother as well. In the latter guise, Aubyn embodies "not the self-centered withholding aspects of Wharton's actual mother, but rather the obverse, a masochistic mother figure who achieves psychic omnipresence by inducing guilt" (78). According to Erlich, *The Touchstone* is one of Wharton's first efforts to reimagine her internalized mother so as to further her sexual education.

Erlich's discussion of *The House of Mirth* centers on the incest theme and on Lily Bart's repressed oedipal desires. Though Lily scarcely recognizes, much less understands, her fleeting romantic desires, Erlich observes that Lily "habitually situates herself within dangerous oedipal triangles" (57). Such is the case with Lily's relationship to the Dorsets and the Trenors. In reference to the latter liaison, Erlich's cogently reasons that "in blaming herself for Gus's seduction attempt, Lily Bart acts and feels very much like many victims of incest . . ." (61-62). Yet Erlich maintains it is ultimately Simon Rosedale, not Gus Trenor, who represents "the spectre of the incest figure" that "stands for Wharton's unresolved feelings about her father, neither Levantine nor Americanized Jew, but the tabooed 'other' of Wharton's early years" (74).

In Erlich's judgement, works such as *The Touchstone* and *The House of Mirth* allowed Wharton to imagine "new possibilities for [her erotic] development" (ix) and

helped to prepare her for "what psychologist Sophie Freud calls 'the passion experience'" (86). As Wharton scholars know, that experience brought Wharton into contact with the sexually dynamic Morton Fullerton, "a chronically faithless" charmer "with a marked preference for older women, who at the time of wooing [Wharton] was engaged to his cousin and adoptive sister . . ." (96). Erlich finds striking parallels linking Katherine Fullerton and Wharton, not the least of which was a tendency toward self-abasement and idealization of their "sexual liberator" (100). Crafting of "the passion experience" a "religion of love" (103), Wharton "found in Fullerton a remedy for her inhibitions — a model and an authority for [sexual] spending" (97) who enabled her to experience "what happy women know" (qtd. in 108).

The lessons Wharton learned at this time naturally found their way into her writing, perhaps most obviously in the highly autobiographical novel *The Reef*. Yet as Erlich's explication of the later fiction makes clear, the Fullerton affair marks the climax, not the conclusion of Wharton's sexual education. Works such as *The Son at the Front*, "The Old Maid," the Vance Weston novels, and *The Buccaneers* illustrate that Wharton continually reimagined and rewrote the plot of her familial romance.

In many ways, the strength of Erlich's study is also its limitation. As Erlich herself confesses, "[A] good deal of psychobiography is inevitably speculative" (182). In order to map out Wharton's sexual education, Erlich must make assumptions regarding matters for which definitive answers may — or can — never be known. Without more evidence, it is impossible to measure the psychosexual dimensions of Wharton's relations with her father and mother, or with her significantly older brothers. Regarding such uncertainties, Henry Adams proves instructive. In "The Dynamo and the Virgin," Adams writes that he composed his twelve-volume history of the United States "for no other purpose that to satisfy himself whether . . . he could fix for a familiar moment a necessary sequence of human movement." Yet as Adams perceives, "Where he saw sequence, other men saw something quite different . . ." In his peroration, Adams more generally speaks of his failed but necessary quest for sequence, that is, for "the secret of education": "In such labyrinths . . . [t]he pen works for itself, and acts like a hand, modeling the plastic material over and over again to the form that suits it best. The form is never arbitrary, but is a sort of growth like crystallization, as any artist knows too well . . ." That other readers may model Wharton's inner life quite differently in no way diminishes the excellence of Erlich's study. Her book is a finely wrought crystallization that sheds light on many aspects of Wharton's labyrinthine sexual and literary education.

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Lyll H. Powers, ed. *Henry James and Edith Wharton, Letters: 1900 - 1915*. New York: Scribners, 1990. 412 pages. \$29.95.

In 1985 Wharton scholars received the gift of *The Library Chronicle* (31:1985) featuring Edith Wharton's love letters to Morton Fullerton edited by Alan Gribben and accompanied by insightful essays by Gribben and Clare Colquitt. The invaluable *The Letters of Edith Wharton* edited by R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis (New York: Scribners, 1988) followed, igniting a celebratory spark in the theme of letters at the Edith Wharton-in-New York conference (October, 1988). That, in turn, has lit other fires in probable future publications of additional essays on the subject of Edith Wharton and her letters. In 1990 these major works of scholarship were joined by another, *Henry James and Edith Wharton, Letters: 1900-1915*, edited by Lyll H. Powers.

Although Edith Wharton receives equal billing with Henry James in the title, apparently only eight letters and five postcards from Edith Wharton to Henry James survive along with thirty-six from Wharton to James's amanuensis, Theodora Bosanquet, mostly concerning James's health. For all practical purposes the book is an impeccably edited collection of the letters of Henry James to Edith Wharton. The correspondence is beautifully introduced from the point of view of a scholar who is undeniably a deeply learned James expert.

Naturally, it is not surprising that the weight of the text and its excellent introduction emphasize *Cher Maître*. (Perhaps this is a good place to recall that Wharton used the same salutation when writing to Bernard Berenson.) The author's understandable preference for James over Wharton is not disguised, the introduction focussing as it does on how "James was helpful in introducing Wharton to the beau monde of English society" (10), the "importance for James of his friendship with Edith Wharton" (12), "James's dilemma" (13), "what James found in Edith Wharton" (13), James's involvement in the Wharton-Fullerton affair (16), and of course his famous early advice that (as if she were a horse) Wharton tether herself in her native pastures. James undoubtedly changed his mind as the untethered author swept him around Europe in her many horse-powered "motor."

Powers acknowledges Wharton's admiration of *The Portrait of a Lady* but feels her reservations about James's late work might have resulted from jealousy over being "dubbed a James manqué, her work characterized as 'James and water.'" Noting that while Wharton's negative comments about James's "unreadable" late work "may have the look of 'sour grapes'" they can be cast in another light (5), he still believes she didn't understand James's ideas. Nevertheless, in "Henry James in His Letters" (*Quarterly Review* 234 [July, 1920] 188-202) Edith Wharton discusses the importance of "subject," the "central

intelligence," and other Jamesian techniques, demonstrating that she understood the contents of the Prefaces to the New York Edition as well as anyone. She did find them digressionary — as indeed they are — but perhaps failed to realize that there might have been reasons for what she termed James's "scattered magnificence":

The prefaces to the Definitive Edition deal exhaustively with subject and construction, but they do so with a scattered magnificence. They were the work of an ill and weary man . . . I had often urged Henry James to let one of his friends — the task was meant for Mr. Lubbock — detach from those packed pages, and place in proper sequence, the chief passages on the art of fiction. The idea interested him and should still be carried out; but meanwhile those for whom the mining of the prefaces is too arduous will find in the Letters a clearer and more accessible, if less deeply reasoned, compendium of his theory.

Because he felt that Wharton failed to understand James's genius, Powers characterizes Wharton's attempt to secure the Nobel Prize for James as a means of helping him financially. Yet Nobel Prizes are often awarded for earlier work, or life work, and Wharton could have sought it on the very strength of *The Portrait of a Lady*, wishing also to help James psychologically, for she personally experienced his devastating depressions over public indifference to his brilliant accomplishments.

The inevitable weight of Jamesian material in this book could have the unintentional effect of resurrecting that outmoded vision of Edith Wharton sitting in the shadow of the Great Master which many Wharton experts have set out so successfully to dispel. A careless reader could get the impression that Edith Wharton's primary importance is that she was the lucky recipient of Henry James's brilliant *belles lettres*, not that anyone can be sorry to have them for any reason. Powers' analysis of James's playful literary allusions like those to "pigging" are thoroughly enjoyable: "James also loved to string out a joke, stretch a network of allusion, develop a pun to the extent that the strain could be borne — and sometimes beyond" (23). In a letter of March 13, 1912, James writes about how George Sand and Chopin "pigged so thrilling together." After Chopin's "pigging" evolves into a [pork] "chop" at home in grease, James refers to Sand's "nosing for the human truffle," and supports the visual with olfactory imagery. Here the Wharton scholar immediately recalls Lily Bart's mother snubbing cousins who "lived like pigs." (HM 30) Was Wharton alluding to Sand in *The House of Mirth*? Was that line the origin of James's verbal game? Interesting questions begin to arise for the scholar who arrives at Powers' book with a Whartonian perspective.

Unfortunate is Powers' nearly sweeping dismissal of

continued on page 14