EDITH WHARTON NEWSLETTER

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FIRST SPECIAL SESSION HELD AT NEW YORK MLA

The first Special Session on Edith Wharton was held at the Annual MLA Convention in New York on December 27,1983. Entitled "Wharton's Women: Victims or Self Saboteurs?" and chaired by Annette Zilversmit of Long Island University, Brooklyn Center, it drew a surprisingly large audience. Over sixty people sat or stood in the aisles as four panelists discussed whether the heroines of Wharton's fiction were defeated by the limitations of society or by their own insecurities. Kathy Earley of Middlesex County College in "At Home with Herself: Houses and Female Identity in The Age of Innocence, Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive," posited that Ellen Olenska and Halo Tarrant escape complete victimization by finding houses of their own. Like the various residences of Wharton herself, Earley concluded, the homes of Ellen and Halo create oases of self-sufficiency in hostile milieus. Katherine Joslin-Jeske of Northwestern University found Wharton herself the victim of Percy Lubbock's early memoir, Portrait of Edith Wharton. Presently editing a selection of letters from the still unpublished correspondence, Joslin-Jeske, in "What Percy Lubbock Didn't Say About Edith Wharton," attributed his highly negative picture to Wharton's spurning of Lubbock's wife. (An edited version of Joslin-Jeske's paper appears in this issue of the Newsletter.) To Dale Flynn of the University of California, Davis Campus, marriage itself is the trap a conventional society sets for its women. Analyzing "Souls Belated," Flynn asserted in "The Difficulties of Choice" that Lydia Tillotson's decision to marry Ralph Gannett reveals Wharton's pessimistic conclusion that women "cannot live beyond the pale of society." Wharton's narrative strategy of double points of view, Lily's and a narrator's, in The House of Mirth was explored by Deborah Lambert of Merrimack Valley College, University of New Hampshire, in "Lily Bart: Femme Fatale, Failure, or Feminist?" "The unsympathetic narrator," Lambert maintained, "undercuts Lily and enforces our distance from her...and permits no positive values to emerge."

Annette Zilversmit, acting as respondent, pointed out that the panelists essentially upheld that Wharton's women were victims of a male-dominated and conventional society. Although she had intended the session to discuss the possibility that, like other protagonists of American Literature, the women in Wharton's fiction might be emotionally wounded and self-destructive, no one, among thirty submitted abstracts, considered the idea. Contending herself that these heroines suffer from long-held guilts and anxieties, she posed several questions to each participant. A lively discussion followed among panelists and audience.

FIRST MEETING OF SOCIETY CONVENES

The first meeting of The Edith Wharton Society took place on December 23,1983 at the MLA Convention in New York City and was chaired by Annette Zilversmit. Members agreed that our purpose was to make Wharton respected as an artist, not just a woman writer, and to bring her into the canon of important American literary figures. Our immediate goal was to gain official recognition by the MLA to guarantee sessions at each annual convention. Although we will hold annual meetings at each forthcoming convention, we will have to petition for Special Sessions for the next two years. Judith Saunders of Marymount College, Tarrytown, will organize and chair the proposed 1984 Special Session. The topic will be "Structure and Design

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THE EDITH WHARTON SOCIETY
NEWSLETTER

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Annual Membership is $5.00

Editor's Bulletin Board

This issue inaugurates the official Newsletter of the newly formed Edith Wharton Society. It is a modest beginning and paid for by the dues of our over fifty members. Hopefully, we shall find funding and expand our issues. Several interesting articles and notices have begun arriving. This issue focuses on views of Wharton personally. The fall number will concentrate on the references to art in Wharton's work and feature an article by the literary and art critic, Adeline Tintner.... THE NEXT OFFICIAL ANNUAL MEETING OF THE EDITH WHARTON SOCIETY will be held in Dec. at the Annual MLA Convention in Washington, D.C. The date, the time and the place will be announced in the next issue. ....AN INFORMAL MEETING of members living in the Metropolitan New York Area will take place in New York City, Fri., June 8, to plan future projects especially a Wharton 2-day conference in June 1985. All members are invited. Please write me (140 Riverside Drive, New York, N.Y. 10024) if you are interested. Inexpensive rates at small hotels (about $50 a night, double) near where Wharton lived might be available. ....THE MOUNT, EDITH WHARTON'S SUMMER HOME in Lenox, MA has a permanent foundation dedicated to maintaining and restoring the estate. Tours of the main residence are conducted mid-June through Labor Day, Wed. through Sun., Mon. holidays, and Sat. and Sun. until Oct. Dramatic performances and other events take place at various times. (To help the upkeep of the estate and to gain free admissions, you can become "A Friend of Edith Wharton" for $25.00.) For further inform tion write: Edith Wharton Restoration, P.O. Box 974, Lenox, MA 01240.

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What Lubbock Didn't Say

Katherine Joslin-Jeske

When I began to read Edith Wharton's letters in the Beinecke in 1980, I was struck again and again with Wharton's voice in these letters, her ease, sensitivity, and sympathy. As I read further, I came upon Percy Lubbock's notes for his Portrait of Edith Wharton, (along with his correspondence with Gaillard Lapsley) about the form and content of his book. His portrait consists of letters he solicited and edited from several of Wharton's friends and acquaintances, interspersed with Lubbock's own descriptions of her. He characterizes Edith Wharton from the very first page as self-centered, insensitive, even imperceptive. He draws the "dazzling intruder, la femme fatale," as she barges into Henry James's world, shattering his sense of order with "Napoleonic" zeal. Wharton becomes through Lubbock's pen "the wild woman, angel of devastation."

At the same time as he delineates her destructive force, he undercuts her stature as a person and a writer. He describes her as the creation of Henry James: "He admired her effect in the world--he watched, he presided over it, he couldn't, if it really was her own doing, have designed or composed it for her more pictorially--it was as good as a fiction of his own..." Indeed, he portrays Wharton as an intruder in the memoir. Why, I asked myself, would Lubbock depict her in such uncomplimentary terms?

Lubbock admits part of the problem he had with his subject. Both he and Wharton belonged to a literary circle who "lived on Henry." But Lubbock sees himself as an "unobtrusive young man, believed literary in his asperations." He acknowledges his disappointment over Wharton's early lack of interest in him, but concedes, "Some day one may overtake her."

Lubbock may have suggested more than he intended. His Portrait is a blatant attempt to do just that, to overtake the woman who had snubbed him. Yet, the young Lubbock fawned on Edith Wharton. He found her supportive, and stimulating. However, the older Lubbock characterizes her as harsh, with "a chill, a check upon the swiftness of the sympathy." What had

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happened between 1913 and 1937 to alter his opinion?

Lubbock suppresses that information in his memoir. He does not tell his reader that Wharton "cut" him in 1926 and refused attempts to mend the breach. She had introduced him to Sybil Cutting Scott, feigned friendship, and after their marriage broke with them both. Wharton had characterized Lubbock's bride as "that well-meaning waste of unintelligence." Sybil's relationships with men particularly irritated Wharton. After the death of her first husband, Bayard Cutting, Jr., Sybil had a liaison with Bernard Berenson, a flirtation with Lubbock, followed by a second marriage that failed and then her union with Lubbock in 1926. Wharton refers in letters to "the nauseating news" of the impending alliance and warns her other male friends to be wary of Sybil's charms. "This kind of thing has got to stop," she cautions.

Given the intensity and duration of the dispute, it is "profoundly puzzling", as R.W.B. Lewis points out in his biography, that Gaillard Lapsley would have invited Lubbock to write the memoir. He even does it over Lubbock's protestations. To overcome his subjectivity, Lubbock suggests a supposedly objective format for the portrait: "I can imagine an editor taking up a series of such sketches, arranging and disposing and framing them, so to speak, in a way that would make a single book." However Lubbock's lie, his suppression of his conflict with Wharton, informs and deforms his portrait of her. Lubbock's correspondence with Lapsley and the original sketches placed side by side with his published version, reveals how completely his subjectivity marred the truth.

First, his Preface is supposedly the text of a letter he wrote to Lapsley about the form and content of the memoir. Actually it has been significantly edited. He deletes, for example, a discussion of Wharton's survival as a literary figure: "It may be...that somebody of the next generation will desire to make a book about her; and if so he (she, more likely) should certainly be provided with authentic materials. But this he(or she)may not appear after all." The "authentic" materials he suggests are not Wharton's own letters, but rather letters or sketches, written by those who knew her. Also, he intends that the portrait should "include each friend's contribution as it stands." That, however, doesn't happen.

Lubbock underrates Wharton's war work as well as her writing. He draws her as an unquestioning worker in the war effort, and emphasizes her sharpness, her quickness to reprimand. Actually, the three men in the chapter, Henry James, Charles Du Bos and Eric Maclagen, gain the foreground. Interestingly, Lubbock does not use sketches in this chapter. He excludes Mrs. Gordon Bell's reference to the "mountains of work" Wharton accomplished; and J.E. Blanche's assertion that Wharton "worked marvels." More to the point, he edits out Elizabeth Norton's analysis of the effects of the war on Wharton's personality: "...a side of her character which was latent but had had little chance for expression developed rapidly, and a starved heart expanded, and she became a warmer personality, and a larger human being..."

As one would expect, Lubbock questioned what others said about Edith Wharton's capacity for friendship. At several points in his portrait he includes anecdotes about Wharton's petulance, her tendency to ridicule others, her aloofness with all but her inner circle.

However, in most cases the sketches are followed by rebuttals. Her close friends found her to be warm, generous, supportive, in spite of her often difficult nature. Lubbock distorts by omitting the rebuttals. For example, Kenneth Clark recalls the moment when "suddenly, as a result, I believe of her liking my book... I was admitted, and immediately recognised the warm-hearted generous Edith with her wonderful sympathy for human nature, which I don't think an outsider could ever see." Likewise, Lubbock includes a cold sketch of Wharton by Elizabeth Norton, but excludes her more personal note that Wharton "kept in intimate touch with my father and Sally... How Edith found time for such correspondence speaks loudly for her sense of affection and loyalty."

It is not that her friends always found her charming and congenial, but her closest friends remark on her loyalty, kindness, and warmth--all traits that conflict with Lubbock's portrait. He may not have been fully conscious of the effects of his editing, as R.W.B. Lewis maintains; however, he gives his wife two sections. That distortion was conscious since he quotes her liberally while withholding her name. She is allowed to settle accounts

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Other Views

Noel Riley Fitch recounts in Sylvia Beach and The Lost Generation (New York: Norton & Co., 1983), "In the Pavillon Colombe, a dozen miles north of Paris, Edith Wharton, the sixty-year old American novelist and venerable personality, struggled through Ulysses, finally casting it aside ...Miss Wharton, who had been away from America a decade now, lived extravagantly in a world quite apart from the avant-garde rue de l'Odeon; only an occasional friend, such as Gide or Valery, associated with both literary circles."

In his Voices: A Memoir (New York: Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1983), the novelist Frederic Prokosch recalls, "Edith Wharton lived in Paris but was nowadays regarded as a member of a stale, dusty oligarchy. Still I remembered Ethan Frome as a ruthless little masterpiece, and I secretly preferred the Whartonian alabaster to the Steinian granite or the Joycean porphyry."

More enamored of Wharton was the Bloomsbury man of letters, Desmond MacCarthy whose portrait is drawn by Leon Edel in his Bloomsbury, A House of Lions (Philadelphia: Lippincott Co.,1979). Edel writes, "Desmond himself, in a fantasy a few years before his death--he was reviewing Percy Lubbock's conversation piece about Edith Wharton--projected himself into the world of that grande dame of American letters. He fancied himself (out of Henry James) as Lambert Strether to her Maria Gostrey. 'I should have enjoyed occasionally taking part,' he mused, 'in the charms and possible obliquities' say of Madame de Vionnet. 'I can imagine myself going to tea, talking, talking and staying on to supper: a perfect omelette braveuse, cold grouse and a Moselle (the just perceptible violet bouquet of that wine harmonising with the slightly sour flavor of the bird) and then a triangle of brie and a big yellow pear, both in perfect condition. Yet, I should have been content and most grateful.'"

(First Meeting, Cont'd)

in Wharton's Short Fiction." The deadline for proposals was March 15. Members not attending were to be sent a special flier.

The proposed constitution was read and approved by the membership. The called-for Executive Committee for 1984 was also approved. The Executive Director is Annette Zilversmit and the Committee members are Kathy Earley, Dale Flynn, Katherine Joslin-Jeske, and Judith Saunders. Zilversmit will also edit the Newsletter.

Members offered ideas for the society to undertake. Margaret McDowell suggested we look into regional MLA meetings for sessions on Wharton. To solicit new members, Alexandra Collins proposed announcements in professional journals. Saunders thought we should list and evaluate the available editions of Wharton's work and Alan Price informed members that Wharton & Co., a bookshop, (36 Hancock St., Boston, MA 02114) is a good source for first and rare editions. Suggested for future newsletters, were an updated annotated bibliography and a membership list with members' publications on Wharton. Joslin-Jeske concluded that interested members might meet informally in June in New York City to start planning and implementing some of these proposals.

(Lubbock, Cont'd)

with Wharton in an anonymous voice.

Fuller portraits of Wharton have recently emerged from R.W.B. Lewis and Cynthia G. Woolf. Yet what Lubbock didn't do still affects Wharton scholarship. In his enthusiasm to write the memoir, he and Lapsley decide not to publish her letters. Lubbock felt they were "only tokens and messages, however interesting, to serve till the next meeting." My own reading of Wharton's letters differs. Her letters to Lubbock and Lapsley are often terse. However, reading through her correspondence I discovered that she uses many voices. She can be uncomfortable, abrupt; at other times she can be relaxed, commenting on books, people, travel. Lubbock admits to Lapsley that it may be useful to see more of her letters because "one catches a fresh tone here and there," especially in the letters to Sally Norton. A different portrait of Wharton emerges from all her letters. What Lubbock didn't say about Wharton might be said by Wharton herself.

- Northwestern University