



INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Guest Editor: Laura Rattray,
University of Hull

Edith Wharton's "Book of the Grotesque": Sherwood Anderson, Modernism, and the Late Stories 1
Donna Campbell,
Washington State University

"Land of Contrasts," 5
Land of Art: Morocco and the Imagination of Edith Wharton
Adam Jabbur,
University of Delaware

Edith Wharton: Narrating the Past 11
Maureen E. Montgomery,
University of Canterbury,
New Zealand

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**Edith Wharton's "Book of the Grotesque":
Sherwood Anderson, Modernism,
and the Late Stories**

Donna Campbell
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With a few notable exceptions, among them "After Holbein," the much-anthologized "Roman Fever," and fine late ghost stories like "All Souls," Edith Wharton's late fiction has generally received little critical attention and even less critical respect. In their studies of the short fiction, Evelyn Fracasso and Janet Beer address some of the late stories but focus on the earlier ones, while essays on individual stories also favor those written earlier in Wharton's career, with the exception of work by Charlotte Rich, Carol Singley, and Jennifer Haytock on the stories of colonialism and empire. Barbara A. White goes further, lamenting the dismissal of the late stories by Edmund Wilson yet declaring that many of Wharton's late stories are "bad," in part because of what she sees as their distasteful humor (83). But Wharton was not the only American writer to choose distasteful subjects and treat them with a combination of humor, horror, and pity, for this combination also describes the short stories of an American modernist master of the short story form, Sherwood Anderson.¹ In "The Book of the Grotesque," the opening chapter of *Winesburg, Ohio*, Anderson explains his method through one of the parable-like stories that the book employs: an old man begins to write by picturing truths and the people who live by them. The truths them-

selves were beautiful, but "the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque, and the truth he embraced became a falsehood" (26).²

Anderson's theory of the grotesque not only explains the theme of *Winesburg, Ohio* but also reflects standard concepts of modernism: the impossibility of knowing a single truth, and the sometimes destructive—or comic—effects of placing one's faith in reason's ability to discover it; the failure of language to express such truths; and the transcendent power of the epiphany. Wharton's works, too, focus on this issue of the truth in their exploration of moral dilemmas. For example, in the early stories, which read like earnest morality plays, characters agonize over questions of ethical choice, such as Birkton's concern over selling out artistically in order to provide for his sister's future in "That Good May Come" or Lydia Tillotson's hesitations over the lies involved if she marries her lover in "Souls Belated." But in several of the late stories, the protagonists' devotion to absolute values makes them grotesques in Anderson's sense of the word. Moreover, with its connotations of disability and distortion, of truths told incoherently and refracted through a fitfully comprehending listener, the term "grotesque" signifies not only a truth imperfectly told but one inextricably linked with the body, suggesting to modern readers Bakhtin's concept of "grotesque realism," which destabilizes realism and "discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world."³ The late stories are in this way

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

different in genre but not in theme from the ghost stories, which likewise disclose “the potentiality of an entirely different world.” In both types of stories, fidelity to a single transcendent truth, like adherence to a single standard of reality, is undermined through the ironically rendered perceptions of the characters in the tale. Critics have been eager to see destabilizing and subversive elements in the ghost stories but have sometimes dismissed the possibility that such elements can exist in the late magazine fiction. Yet the late stories preach much the same message as the ghost stories: the nature of truth is never certain, as the nature of the spectral world in the ghost stories is rarely definite. In no realm is this uncertainty as clear, and as comic, as in Wharton’s non-ghost stories dealing with the dead.

Two of Wharton’s late stories, “The Looking Glass” (1936) and “The Day of the Funeral” (1933), display a mordant humor in their depiction of the grotesque and demonstrate the ways in which Wharton challenges standard features of modernism such as the epiphany. “The Looking Glass” features a frame story in which the Irish Mrs. Cora Attlee talks to her granddaughter Moyra, and an inner story, her tale of interactions with her employer, Mrs. Clingsland. One of Wharton’s pampered, superficial society women, Mrs. Clingsland, according to Mrs. Attlee, would have had “a loving nature, if only anybody’d shown her how to love” (849). As her name suggests, she clings only to the truth of her own beauty, a devotion that makes her obsessed with her reflection in the mirror, a truth-telling device that must always fail her. Like Mrs. Heeny from *The Custom of the Country*, Mrs. Attlee is a masseuse who can heal the wounded psyches of the rich through conversation, and she tries to help by listening to Mrs. Clingsland. But Mrs. Clingsland becomes inconsolable and grows thin after a botched face lift leaves her “looking like a ghost, with a pouch under one eye” (850). Her physical transformation into a grotesque is a literal and figurative manifestation of her obsession with the truth of her beauty, and she seeks out multiple looking glasses for comfort: the mirror, Mrs. Attlee, and finally the spirit world.

In despair at her ruined looks, Mrs. Clingsland calls on Mrs. Attlee’s psychic powers so that she can be comforted by the spirit of Harry, a young man who had admired her but had died on the Titanic. Worried that she cannot feed the insatiable appetite of Mrs. Clingsland’s extravagant self-regard in a properly convincing, educated voice—“you might as well have asked me to write a Chinese dictionary” (853), she tells Moyra—Mrs. Attlee recruits an impoverished young man, a former tutor, to provide the text for Harry’s spirit messages. Mrs. Clingsland swallows the compliments from the spirit world down “like champagne,” in language that establishes her as one of

Wharton’s psychological vampires. After telling Mrs. Clingsland that Harry had been “[b]linded by her beauty; struck dumb by love of her!” Mrs. Attlee comments, “Oh, but that’s what she’d been thirsting and hungering for all these years” (853). Mingling grotesque humor and pathos, the story comes to an Anderson-like ironic conclusion when Mrs. Attlee goes to pick up a letter, supposedly from Harry, that the tutor has written. But when she reaches his apartment, she discovers that the tutor has died, and since the letter is half hidden under the bed, she must get down and reach under it—as his body lies on it—to pick up the letter. When Mrs. Clingsland asks about getting more letters, Mrs. Attlee speaks a figurative truth that is also a literal truth: “I spoke very gravely. ‘It’s not an easy thing, ma’am, coaxing a letter like that from the dead’” (858).

The sentence reads like a punch line because it is one. The potential tragedy of Mrs. Clingsland’s delusional devotion to her own beauty has been transformed into comedy by Mrs. Attlee’s flat statement and by her unconscious punning (“gravely”). With this substitution of comedy for tragedy, the reasons for Wharton’s specifying Mrs. Attlee’s ethnicity, giving her a light Irish dialect, and making a lower-class character the narrator of the story, all unusual features in her fiction, become clear. On one level, “The Looking Glass” is really a joke of the familiar Pat and Mike variety. In Pat and Mike stories, the humor resides in having a literal-minded pair of Irishmen debating some point of obvious truth, blinded to the implications of their words by their cultural position as immigrants, their religion, their stupidity, or some combination of the three. This type of humor relies on Pat and Mike taking literally what is meant figuratively so that the reader perceives the irony. Wharton’s humor reverses that dynamic, as Mrs. Attlee tells a literal truth that she knows the desperate Mrs. Clingsland will take figuratively: it really *isn’t* easy coaxing letters from the dead. Yet at a deeper level, the story poses a serious question, the same Jamesian question at the heart of early and late stories ranging from “The Rembrandt” to “Her Son”: is it ethically correct to foster a comforting delusion even if the only way to do so is to perpetuate a lie? The entire story of “The Looking Glass” unfolds as a series of reflecting mirrors and deceptions in its pursuit of this idea. In the inner story, Mrs. Clingsland is tricked into a reliance on the spirit world partly by Mrs. Attlee but primarily by her own obsessive quest for reassurance about her beauty. At the level of narration, Mrs. Attlee deceives herself about the legitimacy of her involvement in the spirit world, despite her promise to Father Divott that she would give up such activities, by describing the comfort she has given to Mrs. Clingsland. Finally, at the level of the frame story, Moyra tricks her grandmother into telling the “unconfessed” (846) story by pretending an

(Continued on page 3)

(Continued from page 2)

interest in the moral question of the case, when actually she just wants to hear about the “one grave lapse” (846)—another unintentional pun, this time on Moyra’s part—in her grandmother’s life.

As the looking glass or literally the medium (perhaps another of Wharton’s deadpan jokes) through which Mrs. Clingsland can see her beauty reflected in the eyes of another, Mrs. Attlee understands her role in the deception and worries about its consequences for her place in the afterlife. Yet at an extratextual level, the irony in Mrs. Attlee’s solution to her moral dilemma is evident to the reader. Although she worries about, and Father Divott forbids, dabbling in the spirit world and transmitting its false messages, she is comforted by her final deception of Mrs. Clingsland, getting her to pay \$100 for masses toward the soul of the impoverished tutor. “I had hard work making her believe there was no end of the masses you could say for a hundred dollars,” Mrs. Attlee tells Moyra (858). She never sees that she is herself deceived: like the false letters from the spirit world she conveys to Mrs. Clingsland, the purchase of masses in U.S. currency marks another incongruous intersection of the spiritual and material, an intersection that in terms of the story’s logic renders the masses an equally false system of consolation. “The Looking Glass” is not what it seems at first, a sentimental story in which a wise, self-sacrificing servant protects a foolish but lovable mistress by catering to her illusions. Wharton completely undercuts this sentimental plot, for Mrs. Clingsland remains tragically grotesque in her devotion to a warped truth, and Mrs. Attlee accepts her dual deception of Father Divott and Mrs. Clingsland. Both women remain so comically enmeshed both in the material world and in spiritual worlds that can be bought and sold that transcendent understanding—an epiphany—is impossible.

Stories such as “The Looking Glass” and “The Day of the Funeral” are the flip side of the late ghost stories, for instead of the supernatural element amplifying the charac-

ters’ fears and illusions, the macabre humor deflates the significance of these illusions by providing a dose of reality. For example, grim comedy characterizes the first lines of “The Day of the Funeral”: “His wife had said: ‘If you don’t give her up I’ll throw myself from the roof.’ He had not given her up, and his wife had thrown herself from the roof” (669). The statement is arresting and darkly funny, but it also happens to characterize exactly the materialist perspectives of Ambrose Trenham, the intellectual college professor whose life for the twenty-four hours following his wife Milly’s death is the focus of the story.^{iv} “The Day of the Funeral” is a portrait of a relentless egotist, one of Wharton’s most selfish male characters in a body of work that does not lack for examples of self-regarding men. The truth to which Trenham clings, and that renders him a grotesque, is his belief that he lives a disinterested life of the mind and is able to judge his own motives rationally, a truth that the narration undercuts at every turn. For example, he believes that he is above caring about such mundane issues as leaving food on the table, saying “what does it matter?” even though his wife, Milly, abhors the practice because it attracts flies (671). But Trenham actually lives in a resolutely material realm in which he is interested primarily in food and sex. Unlike Hugh Millner of Wharton’s early story “The Blond Beast,” he never develops the imagination that would allow him to sympathize with another person or to deny any of his primal desires. Wharton emphasizes his bestial qualities through scenes of eating. After deciding to remove Barbara Wake, his lover, from his life for her annoying habit of wanting to talk to him, he finds himself hungry and demands food and consolation from the mild-mannered servant, Jane. Later, after an elaborate scene of sealing Barbara’s letters into a packet and writing her a letter terminating their relationship, he “dined hungrily” (674) as if to reward himself after the effort of the decision by symbolically eating the body of what he has killed.

“The Day of the Funeral” teases the reader by hinting at a redemption of Trenham that never happens, and as such it negates both the premise of nineteenth-century morality tales about the power of the deceased to reform the living and the modernist convention of the epiphany. In thinking about his wife as he had never done when she was alive, Trenham has enough insight to realize that her coldness “concealed a passion so violent that it humiliated her” (675). Yet he still blames her for the failure of their relationship, as he blames Barbara for attending Milly’s funeral, in his eyes a breach of decorum that will force him to break off his relationship with Barbara. Walking toward Barbara’s garage, their usual trysting spot, to return her letters, he decides magnanimously to give her another chance. His decision, however, is less motivated by morality than

(Continued on page 4)

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(Continued from page 3)

by a physical response. Seeing Barbara's "slim gloveless hand" as he enters the dark garage makes him recall his "kiss on the palm" when he had met her, and remembering that "sensuous elastic palm" makes him reconsider whether he wants to "carry on life without ever again knowing the feel of that hand" (676). Readers of "Beatrice Palmato" and of the carriage scene between Ellen and Archer in *The Age of Innocence* will recognize the erotic significance of hands and palms in Wharton's works: Trenham's decision to reunite with Barbara has less to do with duty than with his arousal at the sexually charged memory of her hands. As often happens in Wharton's stories, the discovery of the packet of letters, the tangible evidence of a dead love affair, seals his fate. Despite Trenham's change of heart and his wish to conceal the letters, they fall to the ground, and Barbara insists upon reading Trenham's letter breaking off their affair. When she questions him about his wife's knowledge of the affair, she is horrified by Trenham's indifference toward Milly's feelings and dismisses him forever. The epiphany is Barbara's, not Trenham's, as she recognizes him for what he really is.

Wharton follows this reversal of traditional plotting with another that resonates even more closely with her ghost stories. Late ghost stories like "Pomegranate Seed" pit two women, one living and one dead, against each other for the soul of the man they both love, with the dead one winning through the medium of letters. But Milly Trenham

is that rarity in Wharton's fiction, a woman who left no diaries or letters, and, as "The Looking Glass" establishes, "It's not easy coaxing letters from the dead." Instead of presenting two women vying for the attentions of a man, "The Day of the Funeral" asks what would happen if the dead woman and the living one joined forces along gender lines to challenge the callous indifference of the man they had loved. A greater man might learn something from their reactions, but Trenham is motivated only by physical comfort and an iron-clad sense of self-regard. Shrugging off his encounter with Barbara, Trenham returns home to the friendly ministrations of Jane, whose "friendly hand," rather than Barbara's sexualized one, "[shuts] him safely into" his house and his familiar life (686) as she prepares to take Milly's place. Like the characters of "The Looking Glass," Trenham will never experience the epiphany that the reader expects from a modernist story. The familiar plot of the intellectual saved through immersion in emotion (as in D. H. Lawrence's "The Horse Dealer's Daughter") is refuted, for "The Day of the Funeral" argues that it is possible to be an intellectual and a sensualist without possessing a soul. As Sherwood Anderson's characters discover, living in and through the body cannot provide salvation, nor can intellectual reasoning, unless human beings can communicate with one another. In embracing the single truth that life is wholly material and governed solely by reason, Trenham renders himself a grotesque without the

(Continued on page 5)

Edith Wharton Collection Research Award

Deadline: March 15, 2011

Each year the Edith Wharton Society offers a Edith Wharton Collection Research Award of \$1500 to enable a scholar to conduct research on the Edith Wharton Collection of materials at the Beinecke Library at Yale University. Prospective fellows for the 2011-2012 award are asked to submit a research proposal (maximum length 5 single-spaced pages) and a resume by March 15, 2011 to Margaret Murray, (murraym@wcsu.edu) Western Connecticut State University.

The research proposal should detail the overall research project, its particular contribution to Wharton scholarship, the preparation the candidate brings to the project, and the specific relevance that materials at the Beinecke collection have for its completion. The funds need to be used for transportation, lodging, and other expenses related to a stay at the library. Notification of the award will take place by April 15th and the award can be used from May 1, 2011 through May 1, 2012. A final report will be due June 1, 2012.

We are pleased to announce that the winner of the 2010 Edith Wharton Research Award is:

Dr. Irene Goldman-Price
for her project:

Tonni and Herz: Forty Years of Correspondence from Edith Wharton to
Anna Catherine Bahlmann

(Continued from page 4)

possibility of the understanding that some of Anderson's characters manage to achieve.

Rather than seeing the late stories as "bad," as White suggests, they can be considered as commentary on, and critique of, the kind of absolute adherence to truth that modernism had shattered. The result for Wharton and Anderson is modernist stories that end in a manner that is sometimes comic, often ironic, and always appropriately unsatisfying. With their use of dark humor and multiple ironies, "The Looking Glass" and "The Day of the Funeral" undercut sentiment in ways that help to produce an alternative vision of the reality that their characters experience. In short, when considered as Wharton's own "Book of the Grotesque," the late stories seem less like unsatisfactory examples of a realist mode than sophisticated variations on a modernist one.

Notes

ⁱ Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) centers primarily on the experiences of young George Willard, whose encounters with the townspeople reveal to him, a future writer, their secret isolation and despair.

ⁱⁱ Wharton's library contains a copy of Anderson's *A Story Teller's Story* (1924) given to her by Walter Berry.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bakhtin adds that grotesque realism, which "discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life . . . leads man out of the confines of the apparent (false) unity, of the indisputable and stable" (48).

^{iv} Cynthia Griffin Wolff calls this opening "several of Wharton's funniest lines" and sees the story as proof that "Edith Wharton had decided not to retire into permanent grumpiness" (384), but White contends that "all the characters and even the basic situation are repellent" (85).

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"Land of Contrasts," Land of Art: Morocco and the Imagination of Edith Wharton

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Edith Wharton's *In Morocco* documents her 1917 visit to the French colony under the auspices of its Resident General, Marshal Louis-Hubert Lyautey. The invitation was a show of gratitude for Wharton's philanthropic work on the western side of the Great War's trench line. Both coinciding with, and helping to facilitate, the author's final tour of Morocco, the war figures prominently in the travel narrative that Wharton published almost two years after the armistice. Along these lines, many critics have observed that *In Morocco* looks rather like a work of propaganda. Charlotte Rich, for example, understands Wharton's "idealization of the colonial enterprise" as the function of a "political agenda" that involves the author's "deep concern for French culture and civilization, threatened by World War I at the time of her travels" ("Edith Wharton and the Politics of Colonialism" 8). In fact, Wharton's preface for *In Morocco* begins with a reference to the four-year interruption of European normalcy: "Morocco still lacks a guide book," she laments, a "deficiency" that Wharton "should have wished to take a first step toward remedying" were it not for the conditions that prevented "leisurely study of the places visited" (vii).

Of course, the inconveniences of travel comprised only a small part of the war's effect on Wharton. As Julie Olin-Ammentorp explains, Wharton's letters reveal her "gradual acceptance of the reality of war, as well as her shift from excitement to horror and fatigue" (29). The war marked a dividing line for Wharton, as it did for so many, and her growing wartime anxieties come to parallel the confluence of unfamiliar experiences and sensations that grew out of her trek through colonial North Africa. Nearly every commentary on *In Morocco* has noted Wharton's ambivalence toward this place where east intersects with west, where past merges with present, and where beauty

(Continued on page 6)

(Continued from page 5)

collides with horror to create, in the words of the author, a “land of contrasts” (*In Morocco* 32). Perhaps it was her conflicted reaction to Morocco that encouraged Wharton to infuse her narrative with what Sarah Bird Wright terms “a balance between objectivity and involvement” (60) – possibly the same balance that Wharton exercised as she grew weary of the conflict in Europe while also maintaining her dedication to a French victory.

Just as Wharton’s wartime experiences shade her account of Morocco, both her reflections on that country and her response to modernism, some time later, provide the inspiration for one of Wharton’s short stories set in North Africa. “A Bottle of Perrier,” first published in 1926 under the title “A Bottle of Evian,” narrates the thought processes of an American archaeology student named Medford during his stay at a “half Christian fortress, half Arab palace” (511) in the Moroccan desert. When Medford arrives, he learns that his host – an English archaeologist named Henry Almodham, whom Medford has met only once – had rushed off that morning to examine “some unexplored ruins” (511) and would return in a day or two, leaving Medford to wait with Almodham’s Maltese servant, Gosling, and a handful of Arab workers. As the days go by, Medford grows suspicious, if not paranoid; he begins to suspect that Almodham has hidden away in a secret chamber of the palace, regretful of having invited such a brief acquaintance. Finally, the story reaches its climax when Medford learns that Gosling had murdered Almodham out of frustration, or maybe spite, after twelve years of service without a single holiday.

Notwithstanding their many differences, Medford and Wharton seem to experience Morocco in much the same way. Like Wharton, Medford finds in Morocco both beauty and dread. Also like Wharton, Medford luxuriates in the exoticism of the desert oasis even while he longs for the familiar conveniences of European civilization. Both Wharton and Medford seek escape from the troubles of the western world, discovering in Morocco an eerie timelessness, a junction of old and new, of past and present, and of expectation and reality. It is with these contrasts that Wharton develops an aesthetic common to *In Morocco* and “A Bottle of Perrier,” one that blends anxiety with comfort, mystery with discovery, and ignorance with knowledge. As Judith Funston points out, *In Morocco* catalogues Wharton’s personal impressions of “an alien land” (1); in tearing away the “the fairy-tale facades,” Funston continues, Wharton uncovers her “increasing horror” at the very real “shadow-world of the harem” (12). Similarly, Medford must give up his gothic imagining of Almodham’s secret observation chamber when Gosling confesses to the murder. Both of them disoriented, both of them impelled to give up their fanciful illusions, Wharton and Medford become reflections of one another and together transform Wharton’s “land of contrasts” into a land of art where the mysteries of eastern life become the material for a western story.

Writing of his own visit to Morocco in *The Innocents Abroad*, Mark Twain remarks that he and his companions had “wanted something thoroughly and uncompromisingly foreign. ... And lo! in Tangier we have

(Continued on page 7)

Announcement

The Edith Wharton Essay Prize

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

All entries will be considered for publication in the *Edith Wharton Review* as well as for the Edith Wharton Essay Prize. Submissions should be 15-25 pages in length and must follow the new 7th edition MLA style, using endnotes, not footnotes. Applicants should not identify themselves on the manuscript, but should provide a separate cover page that includes their names, academic status, e-mail address, postal address, and the notation “The Edith Wharton Essay Prize.”

To submit an essay for the prize, send three copies by March 15, 2011, to the editor of the *Edith Wharton Review*: Dr. Carole M. Shaffer-Koros, English Department, CAS 3rd Floor, Kean University, 1000 Morris Avenue, Union, NJ 07083.

(Continued from page 6)

found it" (50). As might be expected, there is reason to question Twain's sincerity here, since much of what follows looks suspiciously like a satire of the old, familiar United States; even so, his sentiments echo those of previous travelers to North Africa and foreshadow Wharton's own reflections decades later. By this time, according to Wharton, Tangier had become the "cosmopolitan, frowsy, familiar" place "that every tourist has visited for the last forty years"; yet beyond Tangier lies the "unknown Africa," leaving the traveler with "no way of knowing ... where the long trail over the Rif is going to land one, in the sense understood by any one accustomed to European certainties" (4-5). Although Morocco had changed since Twain's visit in the nineteenth century, the place still offered Wharton an encounter with the "uncompromisingly foreign"; words such as "enchantment," "secret," "mysterious," and "hidden" count among the commonest descriptors in the narrative. Like Twain, she uses her impressions of Morocco to comment on western social issues, especially the status of women, but her narrative also conveys a genuine sense of discomfort and alienation. As Wharton leaves Tangier for the less traveled regions of Morocco, she feels that "Europe and the European disappear" (8).

At the same time, however, Wharton delights in acquiring new and deeper knowledge of Moroccan life. She encounters not only mystery and alienation, but also a "feeling of adventure" (13) that evokes the intensity of her desire to learn and to know. Because of her relationship with the Resident General, Wharton gained access to holy sites from which westerners had, until recently, been excluded. "The Fazi are not yet used to seeing unbelievers near their sacred places," she remarks; "It is only in the tumult and confusion of the *souks* that one can linger on the edge of the inner mysteries" (101-02). "Until a year or two ago," she writes elsewhere, "the Christian could only conjecture what lay beyond [the walls of Moulay Idriss and El Kairouiyin]. Now he knows in part" (93). In other passages, Wharton comments on the lives of Moroccans themselves: "it is only on rare occasions," she explains, "and in the court ceremonies to which few foreigners have had access, that the hidden sumptuousness of the native life is revealed" (162). Wharton seems to discover just that during her stay at the home of a Moroccan dignitary: "there were no fretted walls," she observes in her customary attention to domestic surroundings, "no painted cedar doors, no fountains rustling in unseen courts ... and such traces of old ornament as [the house] may have possessed had vanished." "But presently," Wharton goes on, "we saw why its inhabitants were indifferent to such details"; once seated in her host's armchairs, Wharton peered out of a raised oriel window and beheld "one of the most beautiful views in Morocco" (183).

Wharton's accumulation of experience and infor-

mation – including her periodic summaries and descriptions of Moroccan history, art, and architecture – becomes something like an act of collecting. Around a decade earlier, Wharton had written ambivalently about the practice, or at least some forms of it, in her short story "The Daunt Diana." Wharton appears to confront the same ambivalence as reifies Moroccan culture in her travel narrative. At times she falls back on comfortable generalizations about, for instance, the "familiar Arab lines" (164) of Moroccan architecture, at one point even claiming that each "step of the way in North Africa corroborates the close observation of the early travelers, whether painters or narrators" (78). She also self-consciously fictionalizes and romanticizes Morocco, a place where members of a ceremonial procession "contrive to become two-dimensional" (91), where westerners come face to face with "a princess out of an Arab fairy tale" (171), and where the "dream-like unreality" (157) allow Wharton to imagine herself "in the foreground of a picture by Carpaccio or Bellini" (78). Foregrounding herself in this way places herself at a distance from the reality of Morocco itself, just as she wonders about the thoughts of one Moroccan woman whose inner life "it would have taken a deep insight into the processes of the Arab mind to discover" (178). Occasionally gratifying her expectations, that is, by finding what she had imagined she would find, Wharton also questions her understanding of Morocco and its people – in a way professing only the kind of knowledge that comes from recognizing the limits of knowledge. Morocco, Wharton shows us, is itself a collection of influences and intrigues, both artistic and cultural, from across the Middle East, lower Africa, and even Europe. That she at times treats Morocco like a storehouse of observable and comprehensible artifacts does not prevent her from decrying that same European tendency to replace "native activities" with "the lifeless hush of a museum" (22).

In "A Bottle of Perrier," Wharton revisits the theme of collecting in a fictional reminiscence of her time in Morocco. Just as the western mind can never fully know, but can only imagine Morocco, Medford stumbles with dubious success through the mysterious circumstances of Almodham's desert life, using his training as an archaeologist to collect information and gather impressions in a quest for knowledge. The story begins with a narration of just that process:

A two day's struggle over the treacherous trails in a well-intentioned but short-winded 'flivver,' and a ride of two or more on a hired mount of unamiable temper, had disposed young Medford ... to wonder why his queer English friend ... had chosen to live in the desert.

Now he understood. (511)

(Continued on page 8)

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These anxieties, too, find their way into "A Bottle of Perrier." That the story repeatedly misleads the reader while its characters mislead themselves; that it ironically confirms Medford's feeling that something is awry, but also disconfirms the reason for his mistrust; that it confuses Medford's knowledge with his ignorance and conjecture, as Wharton does for herself with *In Morocco* – that it should do all of this with a plot centered on the confusion of a displaced western mind cannot help but recall the disorientation that Wharton felt in the last two decades of her life, with a rapidly changing western world, and a rapidly changing literary world, pushing itself into a future of the "unknown and unknowable" (*In Morocco* 136). Stephanie Batcos correctly states that *In Morocco* "presents a . . . fractured, modernist self" (175); in a way, "A Bottle of Perrier" does as well.^{iv} Before learning the secret of Almodham's fate, Medford seems to channel Wharton's traumatized, yet resilient, post-war psyche: "He no longer knew what to believe or whom," the narrator reports; "The very impenetrableness of the mystery stimulated him. He would stay, and he would find out the truth" (525). The truth he learns, though it neatly resolves the story's plot, still fails to resolve the story's tensions. The closing passage has Medford and Gosling simply standing "in the middle of the court and [staring] at each other without speaking" (531). Margaret McDowell informs us that Wharton's stories "relate silence to fear" (306), perhaps the same fear that

plays out through "the vagaries of the mind" (Singley 271) in Wharton's psychological realism. The palpable bewilderment of Medford and Gosling might then remind us of Wharton's own response to much of what she saw during and after World War I.

Still, the question of Medford's truth remains unanswered. What are these two men thinking about as they stare at each other, seemingly dumbfounded? Perhaps they are silently piecing together all of the ironies of the last few days: that Medford, a well-traveled Arabic speaker, had allowed himself to be persuaded that all Arabs are treacherous liars, thus removing suspicion from Gosling and convincing Medford not to ride out with Selim; that upon being convinced, Medford had asked himself, "Was [Gosling] weeping for Almodham, already dead, or for Medford, about to be committed to the same grave?" (523-24), thus foreshadowing what almost happens when Gosling nearly pushes Medford into the well, even though Medford had been imagining a sandy grave dug for him by villainous Arabs in the middle of the desert. They might also recall that Medford had tried to bluff Gosling by suggesting that he knew about Almodham's secret midnight walks through the courtyard, thus causing Gosling to fear that the place was now haunted by Almodham's ghost and finally inducing him to confess his crime – and that through this bluff, Medford had finally discovered the truth he had sought, but not the truth he had expected. Such

(Continued on page 10)

The Edith Wharton Listserv

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(Continued from page 7)

Wharton then describes the serene oasis surrounded by a desert “all golden with promise,” though also “livid with menace” – a place of curiosity and imagination and possibility. Yet like Wharton, whose travels through the desert inspired her relief at the sight of a “town at last” (11), Medford quickly turns from contemplating the Moroccan wilderness to investigating Almodham’s residence “as if speedy contact with man’s handiwork were necessary to his reassurance.” “Let’s take a look at the house,” Medford says to himself.

Medford’s collecting of impressions works as more than just a theme for Wharton; it forms the foundation of her narrative strategy in a story that calls on the reader to join Medford in the gathering of knowledge. For Medford, this collecting involves his apprehension of the people and places he encounters, as well as the whereabouts of his absent host. The reader’s collecting, on the other hand, involves the apprehension of a story and its characters’ motives. It leads, moreover, to the dubious conclusion of a plot every bit as mysterious and ghostly as Morocco itself. Although Medford finds Almodham’s house to be “smaller than he had imagined” (513), his situation proves far more complex and troublesome than anticipated, just as Morocco, for Wharton, turned out to be more complex than the tales of the *Arabian Nights* would suggest. In fact, the smallness of the house opens space for Medford’s imagination to flourish, eventually leading him to concoct the secret chamber where he fancies that Almodham patiently waits for his guest to leave. Medford’s gothic tale later gives way to Gosling’s ghost story – to his fear that Almodham has returned from the dead to haunt his disloyal murderer. Both versions, readers come to learn, are misapprehensions; Wharton finally offers a rational explanation for the increasingly foul smell of the well water, for Gosling’s strange behavior, and for Medford’s growing belief that something is rotten in Almodham’s palace. It is, after all, Almodham himself, whose body is decomposing in the well that Gosling had pushed him into.

In “A Bottle of Perrier,” Wharton fashions no romantic tale of westerners in the exotic and mysterious east. Instead, she challenges expectations and assumptions, even those of her own characters. Early in the story, for instance, Medford subtly disputes Gosling’s characterization of Arabs as malevolent liars. “It’s odd,” Medford remarks, “that you say you don’t trust any of these fellows – these Arabs – and yet you don’t seem to feel worried at Mr. Almodham’s being off God knows where, all alone with them.” Gosling responds after a pause: “Well, sir, no – you wouldn’t understand. . . . you’d ‘ave to ‘ave lived among them, sir, and you’d ‘ave to speak their language.” “But I –” Medford begins. “But I’ve traveled among them more or less” (520). Medford neglects to

mention that he also speaks Arabic. Despite his first-hand, and presumably well informed, experiences he later allows Gosling to convince him that riding off with an Arab in search of Almodham would be too risky. As Carol Singley confirms, the Arab servant’s name, Selim, connotes the positive attributes of “one who is ‘sound, safe, healthy, perfect, whole, faultless; sound in body and mind’” (279).ⁱ And it turns out that Selim, surprisingly enough, is far more trustworthy than the murderous Gosling, to whom Charlotte Rich accurately ascribes a “hybrid cultural identity” (“Fictions of Colonial Anxiety” 68).ⁱⁱ The irony here is double. Even Wharton, whose *In Morocco* routinely parades stereotypes that seem painfully racist to twenty-first-century eyes, questions those very stereotypes in her fiction; conversely, Medford eventually succumbs to these stereotypes even though he had seemed disinclined to accept them at the start. A comparable episode appears near the story’s end when Medford becomes “annoyed that he should have been so duped by the hallucinating fancies of the East” (527). Altogether, the separate events of “A Bottle of Perrier,” rather than providing a clear system of meaning or hierarchy of values, captures aesthetically the angst and ambivalence that Wharton discovered in herself as she penetrated deeper into the previously unknown and unseen depths of Moroccan life.

Morocco was not, however, the only source of anxiety for Wharton in her later years. The rising artists of the 1920s sought to represent the intricacies of the post-war, post-Victorian world in ways that often distressed Wharton’s moral constitution – and her aesthetics. A number of recent studies have explicated Wharton’s response to the social transformations that consumed Europe and North America during and after World War I, including the various artistic trends that now fall under the general heading of “modernism.” Whereas Shari Benstock remarks that Wharton was “profoundly disturbed” by the “dehumanized subjectivity” of modernist fiction (34), Judith Sensibar reads *A Son at the Front* as “an important contribution to the modernist movement” (253). Robin Peel conceives of a middle-ground for Wharton, conceding that certain features of her novels from 1911 and 1912 seem to portend “the gathering wave of modernism,” but insisting that Wharton “is *apart from modernism* in that her work resists the call to take art out of history, economics, and politics” (277).ⁱⁱⁱ Wharton’s concerns were not limited to art. Dale Bauer finds Wharton’s “greatest ambivalence” in her attention to the larger matter of mass culture and its consequences for “ethics and responsibility” (5). Although the war might have altered a number of Wharton’s perspectives, she kept her distance from the more drastic social developments of the 1920s and largely retained a “baffled reaction to Modernism” (Joslin and Price 12).

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ironies, all based on insufficient knowledge and misguided assumption, abound in "A Bottle of Perrier," and all of them have implications for mysteries far greater than the truth of one Englishman's demise in the North-African wilderness.

At the end of the story, readers find out what happened to Almodham, and why. This revelation alone, however, draws no attention to the "inner life" that, in Wharton's estimation, modernism regretfully ignored (Wegener 128). Instead, the aesthetic force of "A Bottle of Perrier," like that of *In Morocco*, grows out of a narrative structure that transforms an encounter with the foreign into an encounter with the self. At one point in the story, Medford remembers having told Gosling that "he would wait for Almodham a year; but the next morning he found that such arbitrary terms had lost their meaning. There was no time measure in a place like this" (514). The same impression of timelessness reappears throughout *In Morocco*, and there too it suggests a moment of pause for consideration, a release from the haste of tourism into an imagined place where the atmospheric presence of so much history, and so much yet to come, renders meaningless the counting of minutes and hours. It seems that Wharton found the timeless setting of Morocco ideally suited for contrasting her collected impressions of the past with her collected impressions of the present – and of the future that she imagined. But "strange is the contrast," to borrow again from *In Morocco*, for in "A Bottle of Perrier" it looks sometimes like comparison. The introspective process, uninterrupted by individual points on a timeline, allows Wharton to revisit in her short story the ironies and forms of her early work while also sharing in the alienation and skepticism reflected in the writings of so many modernist authors, even if her skepticism is aimed at the modernist sensibilities from which she feels alienated. In this elegant, yet somewhat convoluted, interplay between author and character, what differentiates Wharton from Medford – age, social habits, presumably worldview as a whole – is also what binds them in their efforts to find a stable variety of truth in a drastically altered version of the human experience.

Notes

ⁱ Both "Selim" and its approximate equivalent, "Salem," derive from the word "Muslim."

ⁱⁱ Rich concludes that although "A Bottle of Perrier" cannot be seen as "undermining the problematic bases of colonialist discourse," it questions "the dichotomies of Orientalist thought that assign violence, chaos, and primitiveness to the non-West while reserving control and "civilization" for the West" (70).

ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly, Jennifer Haytock argues that Wharton "participated in the literary, social, and political questions

of the modernist era without necessarily agreeing with other modernist writers" (182).

^{iv} Carol Singley notes that "A Bottle of Perrier" "is a modernist confrontation with good and evil – a perilous penetration into uncharted regions of self and civilization" (280).

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Edith Wharton: Narrating the Past

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There is no fiction or non fiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative.

E. L. Doctorow

It was June 1908. Edith Wharton had recently returned from a sojourn in Paris and opened The Mount for the summer and fall seasons. She was in emotional turmoil. After receiving letters from Morton Fullerton in rapid succession for the first three days after her return home, she went nineteen days awaiting a further missive from him. Instead of news of his impending arrival, it contained an indication that his affairs detained him in Europe and he was unsure of his travel plans. In Paris that spring, she had finally embarked on an intimate affair with Fullerton and was now in the full flush of an emotional and physical awakening. On 3 May, in the private diary she called "The Life Apart: L'Âme Close," after a day in the country at Beauvais, north of Paris, in the company of both Henry James and Fullerton, she wondered: "If I could go off with you for twenty-four hours to a little inn in the country, in the depths of a green wood, I should ask no more." At this point she seemed to make up her mind, after three months of planned, chance and cancelled meetings with Fullerton in Paris and three weeks before her scheduled departure for the United States: "I will go with him once before we separate" (3 May 1908; qtd. in Price and McBride 676). It was a decision revisited in fictional form when the Countess Olenska asks Newland Archer: "Shall I—once come to you; and then go home?" (Wharton, *The Age* 1264). In the novel the assignation does not take place between the would-be lovers that summer. The pleasure is not just

deferred; it is left forever to the imagination. In real life, Wharton left it to the imagination of others as to whether the consummation of her affair with Fullerton occurred on one of her last three day-trips with him before she sailed back to New York to rejoin Teddy.¹ On meeting her husband at the docks, she felt suffocated: "ici j'étouffe" (Lewis 220, 229). Newland, too, feels suffocated as he contemplates his future married to May. In his library after dinner, as May sits and sews, he stands up suddenly and lifts the window sash to lean out and take in the air of an "icy night" (Wharton, *The Age* 1250). In place of a cold winter's night, Wharton's need for air occurs in the heat of a Lenox summer and she complains in a letter to Sally Norton about the "oppressiveness:" "I suppose my hay-fever makes me feel the want of air more than if I were breathing normally." She tells Sally that she can think of no place where she would rather be than "on the deck of an oceansteamer—turned eastward!" She is "tempted," she writes, because her motor is still in France (7 July 1908; qtd. in Lewis & Lewis 159).

The Age of Innocence, Wharton's best known work of historical fiction, was an opportunity for reworking themes around missed opportunities and entrapment in marriage as well as the conflicts between personal desires and the weight of social decorum. Narrative is fundamental to the way in which human beings make meaning and make sense of their lives, and Wharton's writings, fictional and autobiographical, are no exception. This is not to say that her fiction is confined to her own private past; rather, it reflects the views of a past that is "charged by ideology," by sets of cultural practices and understandings through which to justify the social power of her class as well as her own professional authority as a serious writer of fiction (Kaplan 164-65). In particular, her social situatedness as a woman author, as a member of a bourgeois elite that traced its ancestry back to the Revolution and beyond, and as a member of the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture, shaped her construction of the past.

Generic boundaries between history and fiction were fiercely policed following the professionalization of history as an academic discipline. Historiographer Alun Munslow refers to "constructionist or late-modernist" historians and relics of an older epistemological position occupied by "reconstructionist or modernist" historians (*The New History* 5) who insisted upon the differentiation between the two forms of writing and this extended to the exclusion of fictional texts as a form of evidence. There has since been a significant shift in historiography, as Munslow puts it:

Historians of the deconstructionist or linguistic turn, like others aware of the indeterminate character of postmodern society and the self-

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(Continued from page 11)

referential nature of representation, are conscious that the written historical narrative is the formal *representation* of historical content. This consciousness has emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century, prompting all historians to think self-consciously about how we use language—to be particularly aware of the figurative character of our own narrative as the medium by which we relate the past and written history. (*Deconstructing History* 25)

This is a shift to which contemporary novelists, among others, have contributed in questioning the status of historical knowledge. Linda Hutcheon's seminal work, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), was hugely important in demonstrating the relationship between historical and fictional discourse through her study of historiographic metafiction that "both install and then blur the line between fiction and history" (113). While her focus is on a particular kind of postmodern novel in the late-twentieth century, she points to the problematization of history in other periods, for, as she writes, "the novel and history have frequently revealed their natural affinities through their narrative common denominators: teleology, causality, continuity" (90).

How does Wharton as historian negotiate the nature of the past, specifically the past reality of old New York society? How does historiography and fiction come together and cross each other's boundaries in her historical consciousness at a time when historians were seeking to align their discipline to the natural sciences? Munslow's pinpointing of the "three reciprocal and co-equal key features of the history project—being, knowing and telling" is useful here (*The New History* 7). Our ontological status, "our existence(s) in the present" is intimately connected with how "we come to know the reality of the past" and how historians represent that knowledge as historical narrative. This is integral to academic historical writing in the 1920s and still is today. Wharton's being, her social situatedness, shapes how she narrates old New York, a fictional place that focuses the drama on the drawing rooms and select public spaces of bourgeois sociability before any sense of "dispossession" by the newly arrived immigrants (James, *An American Scene* 86).ⁱⁱ Perhaps her construction of old New York was, as Henry James might have called it, "an artful evasion of the actual", an "escape from the ubiquitous alien . . . into the past" (87). If so, against a cityscape of different accents and languages, Wharton's retreat was to a space of assimilated migrants whose social position had been established over several generations. Such a space was not only contested in her lifetime by the *nouveaux riches* from other parts of the country but also surrounded and intersected by migrants of a different kind and in far vaster numbers. The latter, however, the so-called "new

immigrants" scarcely figure in her New York, old or new.

Wharton's fictional representation of the values and traditions of old New York is already apparent in *The House of Mirth* and especially in *The Custom of the Country*, the novel she failed to finish, as originally planned, in that fateful year of 1908. In both novels she deals with the struggle for hegemony within a social elite transformed by industrial and consumer capitalism. James's own grappling with the changes in New York City at this time in *The American Scene* was intensified by his twenty-year absence and articulated through his sense of modernity's inability to linger long enough to acquire a past. The pace of change destroyed the possibilities for continuity of institutions and social organization, no accretion of habit was possible in order to develop a dense civilization (11, 77, 113). The cataclysm of the First World War brought old New York's values and traditions into sharp relief for Wharton, and she attempted to record this in *The Age of Innocence*, but in a much more avowedly historical way than in her earlier novels. In the immediate aftermath of the war she had a keen sense that an era had come to a close: the war had created a temporal breakage between then and now. The sense of rupture prompted her to write to Charles Scribner in 1919 that she had "forgotten how people [before the war] felt and what their point of view was" and how difficult it was to send her imagination backward (12 September 1919; qtd. in Lewis and Lewis 425). If "the accessibility of the [contemporary] social world to representation" was a challenge to American realists (Kaplan 66), capturing past reality seemed to Wharton to pose yet a further challenge, especially capturing a past from which she now felt disconnected both temporally and spatially. Her historical consciousness underwent a profound shift, helped along by having lived through an event of global historical significance. Despite her avowal to Scribner that she was suffering from amnesia, she later wrote to Mary Cadwalader Jones in 1921 that "Every detail of that far-off scene was indelibly stamped on my infant brain" (17 February 1921; qtd. In Lewis and Lewis 439).

Glancing backwards from the 1930s, Wharton's teleological perspective had shifted again and she came to have an even more appreciative sense of "nearly three hundred years of social observance: the concerted living up to long-established standards of honour and conduct, of education and manners" which "contributed to the moral wealth of our country" (*Backward Glance* 780). Moreover, the tensions between old New York and the newly minted millionaires, so finely crafted in both *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, no longer constitute the final conquest of old New York. The invasion in the 1880s of "money-makers from the West, soon . . . followed by the lords of Pittsburgh" is now interpreted with greater

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(Continued on from page 12)

sanguinity with the passage of time (780). Certain social observances may have changed, but traditions had largely been maintained partly because the “dearest ambition” of “the Invaders” was “to assimilate existing traditions” (780). The latter (of recent origin though they might be) recognized the power of such traditions in conferring social status and influence.

In both *The Age of Innocence* and *A Backward Glance*, the rupture of the war is described in hyperbolic terms to characterize the gulf Wharton felt in the way people interacted with each other. “Quaintly arbitrary” observances have become analogous to “the domestic rites of the Pharaohs” (*Backward Glance* 780-81). She reiterates the allusion to the world of ancient Egypt that she made in *The Age of Innocence* with its “hieroglyphic world” (1050). The metaphor is further extended in her autobiography when she describes old New York as an archaeological site to “be dug up in bits by the assiduous relic-hunter” (781). Old New York thus becomes pre-history, an ancient civilization. The exaggerated recession of old New York into the past is further evidenced by Wharton’s insistence that “Its smallest fragments begin to be worth collecting” (781). One of her lasting childhood memories of Rome, a “city of romantic ruins,” was hunting on the slopes of the Palatine, amid the ruins of the Palace of the Caesars, for another kind of fragment: “mysterious bits of blue and green and rosy stone . . . previous fragments of porphyry, lapis lazuli, verde antico” that had once been “Imperial vases and statues” adorning the villas of ancient Rome’s emperors and aristocrats (806-07). The child playing at archaeology has become a historian who lays claim to being someone who can authenticate details of a past life from personal experience and not simply from the acquisition of knowledge through research. She can vouch for the authenticity of the fragments of historical evidence as someone “who knew the live structure” (781).

In *The Age of Innocence* this “far-off” past becomes a landscape which has not yet suffered the intrusion of the present with its modern alterations. For Mrs. Archer, however, changes in old New York are measured by the smallest increment. Her annual pronouncement at the beginning of the winter season, “that New York was very much changed,” itself a sign of continuity, is prompted by her inspection into “each new crack in its surface, and all the strange weeds pushing up between the ordered rows of social vegetables (1219). Some thirty or so years later, at the end of the novel, Newland contemplates the technological advances in communications and transportation but it is the fact that his son is marrying one of “Beaufort’s bastards” which gives the true “measure of the distance that the world had travelled” (1295). Illegitimacy is no longer a permanent badge of dishonour. Personal pasts can be rehabilitated. Yet it was part of the assertion of old New

Yorkers’ claim to superior social status to point to their lineage and engage in genealogical societies. To include Fanny Ring in the Archer genealogy with the discrepancy between her marriage to Beaufort and the birth of their daughter would surely, as intimated here, have been unthinkable for Mrs. Archer.

Wharton describes her mother as having no truck with those who attempted to invent aristocratic traditions and both parents as “singularly, inexplicably indifferent” to matters of descent (*Backward Glance* 781-82). This disingenuous disavowal is soon dispelled when Wharton describes how her parents pointed out her great-grandfather, Major-General Ebenezer Stevens, when they took her to the Capitol and showed her Trumbull’s renditions of the “Surrender of Burgoyne” and the “Surrender of Cornwallis.” She outlines her ancestry going back to colonial New York on both sides of the family in her autobiography. It is an avowedly bourgeois ancestry, with her colonial forebears forming part of the mercantile scene, but nevertheless linked to an “aristocratic nucleus” (meaning social elite). She describes the generation of her great-grandfather as “meager relics of the past” but provides sufficient detail to locate it in relation to the Revolution, the period of the Napoleonic Empire, to George Washington, and the War of 1812, all significant markers in the history of the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture in the United States (782-92). This lineage and Mrs. Jones’ interpretation of it is incorporated into *The Age of Innocence* when the narrator describes the “small and slippery pyramid” of New York in Newland Archer’s day. Mrs. Archer reiterates almost exactly what Wharton’s mother apparently told her, namely:

“One of your great-grandfathers signed the Declaration, and another was a general on Washington’s staff, and received General Burgoyne’s sword after the battle of Saratoga. These are things to be proud of, but they have nothing to do with rank or class. New York has always been a commercial community, and there are not more than three families in it who can claim an aristocratic origin in the real sense of the word.” (Wharton, *The Age* 1053-54)

This is a device common to both historical and fictional narratives. Here in the novel, Mrs. Archer is an “informant;” she acts as the passer on and preserver of family knowledge while, simultaneously, affirming the family’s cultural and social identity as white, bourgeois and American (see Barthes 146). Such details do not denote reality, even though they have some basis in Wharton’s own genealogy, they *signify* reality. Reference to actual events and people in the novel give the illusion of a past reality; their function is metaphorical and to offer an

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interpretation. Here the tone is decidedly authoritative, unembellished. It mimics history-writing in the nineteenth century, as Roland Barthes describes it, "at that privileged moment . . . when it was trying to establish itself as a genre in its own right" by taking "the 'pure and simple' narration of the facts as the best proof that they were true" (155).

This passage is culturally charged in another way. It affirms a cultural identity at a time when there was a perceived threat to what constitutes an American identity with the increasing diversification of the United States' population after 1880. *The Age of Innocence* was published in the year of the National Origins Act, the culmination of concerted efforts by immigration restrictionists—amongst whom Wharton could count a number of her friends—people who were alarmed at the growth of a foreign-born population "unfamiliar with our language and traditions", as one sociologist put it in 1924 (Gossett 382). Despite Mrs. Archer's disavowal that having distinguished ancestors "have nothing to do with rank or class," they have everything to do with rank and class in a racially organized society and exert a prior claim to an essential American identity (Kassanoff 3, 8-11).ⁱⁱⁱ One way to preserve and protect that identity was through social engineering and limiting citizenship; another was to perform the cultural work necessary to justify restriction and exclusion.

As Bentley contends, the form of the novel of manners that Wharton constructs and refashions enables her to provide a representation of present and past reality that "domesticated" perceived threats to bourgeois life as lived by Edith Wharton, her family and friends. Her use of a newly emergent, contemporary, ethnographic discourse constituted an extension and assertion of her social authority. Ethnographers also sought to impose an order on the past and present through their study of ancient and/or so-called primitive cultures and to impose a cultural identity on the Other (Bentley 21-23, 77). Edith Wharton's representation of old New York is not a nostalgic mourning for a lost past. To be constituted thus would render her work archaic and of no relevance to the present or future. Rather, it is a demonstration of her command of cultural knowledge, of how a particular and influential social group functioned and exerted its power, and a practical demonstration of how that social group continued to exert its power through its superior claim to interpret both its past and its own significance in the creation of American civilization. Her fictional narratives intersect with other discursive forms (especially historical forms such as anthropology, architectural history, archaeology and social history), in order to enhance that authority to construct the past. The use of detail is similarly used to enhance the authoritative-ness of her interpretation of the past. Wharton's storytelling, therefore, is not "innocent." It becomes, like any

form of written history, a "primary vehicle for the distribution and use of power" (Munslow, *Deconstructing History* 13). Her art is brought into the service of a bourgeois Anglo-Saxon elite; it becomes a cultural strategy to encourage readers to identify with and accept "the moral and legal system" underpinning that elite. The narrative form in itself, particularly in its realist guise, helps to produce, as Hayden White puts it, "notions of continuity, wholeness, closure and individuality that every 'civilized' society wishes to see itself as incarnating" (86-87). Wharton makes sense of her world through her commitment to a certain set of values; she is embedded in a historically specific cultural milieu which shapes what she knows and tells.

To appreciate, then, Edith Wharton's fiction as evidence, we need to see her writing as an historical artifact located in a specific time and place, interacting with non-fictional discourses that also attempt to represent the real (past or present). Her narratives, both fictional and non-fictional, produce meanings that are circulated and distributed, reworked and critiqued. It is not simply the content that is of interest to the deconstructionist historian—the content cannot, in any case, be divorced from the form, the point that Hayden White was at pains to make in the face of an historical profession heavily invested in empiricism and the correspondence theory of truth/knowledge. It is Wharton's narration of the past—through her being and knowing—which contributes to the historian's understanding of how power operates within a specific historical context.

Wharton's way of expressing and illustrating the hidden power of old New York is often done through creating characters who experience a living death, such as Newland Archer.^{iv} "Tribal discipline," whether overtly exerted or internalized, is shown to severely limit the exercise freedom of action and individuality. In the spring of 1908, Wharton was anxious about surveillance by her servants at her rue de Varenne apartment which impinged on her opportunities for pursuing a physical relationship with Fullerton (Benstock 183; Montgomery 113-14). On her ocean voyage home that summer she wrote a story, "The Choice," in which a married woman, Isabel Stilling, confesses to her lover that she wishes her husband dead. Like Newland Archer contemplating May in the stifling library,^v Isabel Stilling fantasizes how the death of her spouse might release her from her social responsibilities. In an "incident" in the boathouse one night, her husband and lover end up in the deep water underneath. The narration of how this happens is deliberately opaque. The woman cannot make out the identity of the two men in the darkness. She puts out an oar and ends up rescuing her husband.

(Continued on page 15)

(Continued from page 14)

Wharton's representation of her world is one in which individual choice is sacrificed for the good of the whole, in which personal pleasure is deferred, and in which power is exercised diffusely and hard to locate. The dramatic action of her plots repeatedly comes from the discordant encounter of the individual with the collective nature of power, but, for all of the implied critique, how she represents old New York deploying multiple realist discourses implicates her in the reproduction of that collective power. Arguably, the most powerful of those realist discourses is history.

Notes

ⁱ There is no explicit statement in her private diary. Price and McBride suggest that the pressed flower on the page for 9 May, the day of the trip to Montmorency, might signify the first consummation of the affair (666).

ⁱⁱ After his visit to Ellis Island, James was struck forcibly by the "profane overhauling" of the United States by newly arrived European immigrants (85-86).

ⁱⁱⁱ Kassanoff argues that formerly powerful elites searched for a new source of self-justification and deployed race as a nostalgic way of conceptualizing civic cohesion, social exclusivity and oligarchic permanence (11).

^{iv} "He pulled the sash down and turned back. 'Catch my death!' he echoed; and he felt like adding: 'But I've caught it already. I am dead—I've been dead for months and months'" (*The Age* 1250-51).

^v "What if it were *she* who was dead! If she were going to die—to die soon—and leave him free! The sensation of standing there, in that warm familiar room, and looking at her, and wishing her dead, was so strange, so fascinating and overmastering, that its enormity did not immediately strike him. He simply felt that chance had given him a new possibility to which his sick soul might cling" (*The Age* 1251).

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