

EDITH WHARTON AND THE INVADING GOTHs

PATRICIA R. PLANTE

Edith Wharton's first war novel was published the year the United States entered the First World War, and both her countrymen and their British Allies received it with enthusiasm. The tale of how war comes to those of fighting age had often been told, but less intelligently--according to contemporary critics, who felt that now that America had taken sides in the conflict, she had done so for France "the adored." And surely, The Marne reiterates over and over again how worthy of adoration France is. The hero is an American boy of fifteen whose love of France is the cause of his great bewilderment and sorrow at the average selfish American attitude when the war begins. Four years later in the second battle of the Marne and after, he is rejoiced to find that some Americans really understand. The critics generally agreed that Wharton was right in accusing the average American of selfishness at the beginning of the war, but evidently, they were among the few who really understood and whose attitude was different. They rejoiced to think that the frankness of the book might antagonize the complacent readers who had no insight into the height of French ideals; they repeated that America was not the right hand of God setting the world right; they emphasized the fact that in spite of the novel's brevity it had all the significance of a long historical work.

The second Wharton novel of the war, A Son at the Front (1923), did not fare as well as its predecessor. To begin with, the Armistice has been signed and the only battles waged were in the hearts of men who were seeking to forgive. Hence, the few lone voices crying that opportunity does not concern the artist were drowned by those who clamored that this was a most inopportune time for a war novel. The majority agreed that it was past even the eleventh hour for Edith Wharton to tell them, albeit in flawless English and Jamesian structural perfection, that the War had brought cruel suffering to a great many members of society. Furthermore, readers in both America and England had been satiated with propaganda for France and were vociferous in their denunciation of it whenever they detected more--as they seemed to here. Wharton was accused of seeing things with a myopic vision and of being snobbishly blind to anything but the Parisian scene tarnished by German atrocities.

Time has not altered the critics' judgment of Edith Wharton's two novels of the war though most literary critics since the 1930's have simply chosen to ignore them. The opinion of those who do comment on them could be aptly summarized by Edward Wagenknecht, who wrote that Edith Wharton's war books are not unskillfully done, but that they are vitiated by the superficiality of her thinking.¹ Critics now deplore her propagandist attitude and narrow thinking in these two works. If any change has taken place it is that The Marne does not seem to have been considered propagandist when it first appeared, whereas now the tendency is simply to link it with A Son at the Front. It is not a question of doubting Wharton's sincerity; it is merely that her view of things seems to be prejudiced. As Blake Nevius put it, her war literature showed that she could lose her head as well as the average newspaper reader.²

Certainly, in The Marne one is somewhat amazed to find that such an accomplished craftsman as Edith Wharton ends with a supernatural happening what seems to have been intended as a realistic novel. The young hero, Troy Belknap, is wounded in action and would undoubtedly be left on the battlefield to die, were he not miraculously rescued by his French friend, Paul Gantier, who had been killed in the first battle of the Marne. It might have been better, from the point of view of form and unity of spirit of the novel, to have saved the hero in some other way. However, Edith Wharton achieved her purpose in inventing this ending as a symbol for her belief in the immortality of the French ideals and the French civilization. In that aspect, at any rate, it makes a fitting close for the tale, and is but one more indication that Wharton's purpose in writing it was more moral than aesthetic.

In both The Marne and A Son at the Front, Edith Wharton was primarily concerned with promoting her conviction that the French spirit was worthy of world-wide admiration and emulation. Her love and understanding of France are intimately connected with her love and understanding of certain qualities to be found in her own conservative New York society. This would seem to explain her adoption of France as a home after the New York aristocrats had been invaded by the parvenus. Her problem was not merely one of escaping the plutocrats, but of finding another brownstone atmosphere. Hence, having once discovered it among the French, she was not prepared to lose it again. Every sacrifice had to be made for its preservation. The German invasion of France, therefore, was for Wharton a re-enactment of the vulgar attack of the nouveaux-riche upon New York society. The latter had lacked the strength to ward off the barbarians, and this renewal of the struggle was an opportunity--a second chance--to defeat the "Goths."

It is not a question of Wharton considering the German attack upon France as simply a matter of bad taste. She did not envision the brutality and suffering occasioned by particular raids as merely destroying famous paintings and sculpture. Indeed, in spite of her distaste for any kind of "social work," her leadership and devotion in setting up sanitariums and

orphanages and relief centers for refugees during the war were heroic--as were her visits to hospitals at the front. When in her autobiography she recalls "with startling vividness the scenes of my repeated journeys to the front; the scarred torn land behind the trenches, the faces of the men who held it, the terrible and interminable epic of France's long defence,"³ her anguish is for human torment. However, though she felt great sorrow at the sufferings and privations she witnessed, her intellectual vision of the war was as a destroyer of order and beauty and taste--taste which in her philosophical persuasion was equated with morality, as we shall see later. In Fighting France she wrote: "All France knows today that real 'life' consists in the things that make it worth living, and that these things, for France, depend on the free expression of her national genius. If France perishes as an intellectual light and as a moral force every Frenchman perishes with her; and the only death that Frenchmen fear is not death in the trenches but death by the extinction of their national ideal. It is against this death that the whole nation is fighting; and it is the reasoned recognition of their peril, which, at this moment, is making the most intelligent people in the world the most sublime."⁴

Furthermore, in her autobiography Edith Wharton's chapter dealing with World War I begins thus: "One beautiful afternoon toward the end of June 1914, I stopped at the gate of Jacques Blanche's house at Auteuil. It was a perfect summer day; brightly dressed groups were gathered at tea-tables beneath the over-hanging boughs, or walking up and down the flower-bordered turf. Broad bands of blue forget-me-nots edged the shrubberies, old fashioned corbeilles of yellow and bronze wall-flowers dotted the lawn, the climbing roses were budding on the pillars of the porch. Outside in the quiet street stood a long line of motors, and on the lawn and about the tea-tables there was a happy stir of talk. An exceptionally gay season was drawing to its close, the air was full of new literary and artistic emotions, and that dust of ideas with which the atmosphere of Paris is always laden sparkled like motes in the sun" (p. 336). A shiver runs through the company as it learns of the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand. But soon "The talk wandered away to the interests of the hour . . . the last play, the newest exhibition, the Louvre's most recent acquisitions . . ." (p. 337).

The horror of the destruction of such a beautiful, orderly, tasteful world numbed her with indignation--as did the supine, isolationist, average American attitude towards the horror. It seemed incredible to her that the entire world did not regard the war in this light, and she was particularly saddened at the thought that America remained neutral for so long. Her countrymen evidently had few regrets about the death of her own New York class and were not overly concerned about the demise of the French one. Arthur Schlesinger and others have shown that in spite of the stirring of emigrants' emotions born of national attachments ". . . most persons eagerly supported the President's position of official neutrality, viewing the

European resort to bloodshed as something horrible and unclean. Of 367 editors polled by the Literary Digest in November 1914, 105 favored the Allies, 20 the Central Empires, and 242 neutrality."⁵

In The Marne Wharton states over and over again that Americans had neglected a moral responsibility by refusing to come to the rescue of France at the very beginning of the war. "At school he [Troy] heard the same incessant war-talk, and found the same fundamental unawareness of the meaning of the war."⁶ One Sunday after chapel the rector gave the students a little talk to explain why it was right for America to keep out of the struggle. "The words duty and responsibility and fortunate privilege recurred often in this address, and it struck Troy as odd that the lesson of the day happened to be the story of the Good Samaritan" (p. 37). After the sinking of the Lusitania, the American opponents of the war had another point of departure for their arguments, "and Troy, listening to the heated talk at his parents' table, perceived with disgust and wonder that at the bottom of the anti-war sentiment, whatever specious impartiality it put on, there was always the odd belief that life-in-itself--just the mere raw fact of being alive--was the one thing that mattered and getting killed the one thing to be avoided" (p. 48).

The same attitude is expressed in A Son at the Front. The reader is made to understand that John Campton has a difficult time persuading himself that Americans have no business in this war. He attempts to defend this opinion because his son, George, is of fighting age and he is afraid that he may be sent to the front. However, when George not only volunteers to fight for the French cause, but gives his life up for it, there is no doubt that the author is portraying him as a hero who, in spite of his youth and inexperience, had surpassed his elders in courage and insight. His dying for France was but the fulfillment of a moral obligation as his very last words fittingly indicate: "Everything all right."⁷

The modern critics are possibly right in deploring Wharton's vision of the war, which superficially seems to admit of no greater crime than that of destroying a cultured people. However, this attitude in Edith Wharton is not as absolutely narrow as it would seem. Those who accuse the author of extreme blindness in The Marne and A Son at the Front ignore or condemn a very basic principle in the Wharton philosophy, namely, that taste is the standard of all morality. She firmly believed that the safeguarding of good taste had justified the existence of the New York class of aristocrats, and she was as convinced that the French society's end in life was the same. In French Ways and Their Meaning, published in 1919 by Scribner's to see how the long French inheritance may benefit America, which is still, "intellectually and artistically, in search of itself," the virtues which she praises are identical with those possessed by the "Four Hundred" in the 1870's, '80's, and '90's as evidenced in her New York society novels. She writes, "In Reverence is one of these preserving ele-

ments, and it is worth while to study it in its action in French life" (p. 36). She then delights in showing the reader to what extent the French revere custom; how they follow an almost religious ritual in placing their guests at table, in planting their gardens, and even in preserving certain little superstitions such as the fear of eating blackberries. Reverence is also seen as one of the fundamental elements of taste, and taste, of course, is the sine qua non. The French have always cultivated it, and to it, they owe their long artistic supremacy.

The description of one of Wharton's Paris dinner parties found in her autobiography, A Backward Glance, is identical in spirit with those which she so ably created in such realistic New York society novels as The Age of Innocence and The Custom of the Country. Beseated by the question of precedence in French society, she seeks advice from a young woman as to the seating of her guests. The young woman in turn consults "le Duc de D.," who was "the final authority in the Faubourg on ceremonial questions." The gentleman does draw up a seating plan but concludes that Edith Wharton should never have invited the particular guests in question together, for the "shades of difference in their rank were so slight and so difficult to adjust," that even as a diplomat, who had represented his country as Ambassador to one or two great powers, he recoiled from the attempt. In chapter VII of The Age of Innocence, Newland Archer and his mother consult Henry van der Luyden, the arbiter of New York fashion, in the same spirit of reverence. Edith Wharton could indeed write in A Backward Glance that ". . . allowing for the difference in race and tradition," the French circle into which she was received "was so like the one I had left in New York" (p. 87). Add to reverence and taste the love of continuity or tradition, and one is in possession of the roster of virtues honored and promoted by the French as admired by Edith Wharton. They are the same virtues for which she extols the New York aristocratic society in her autobiography. "The value of duration is slowly asserting itself against the welter of change, and sociologists without a drop of American blood in them have been the first to recognize what the traditions of three centuries have contributed to the moral wealth of our country" (p. 5). Or again, "It would have been 'bad manners' to speak 'bad' English, and 'bad manners' were the supreme offence" (p. 52). It is no wonder, then, that Edith Wharton wished every man who cared to uphold standards of morality and beauty to dedicate himself to the defence of her beloved France. Troy Belknap and George Campton were on the side of the angels.

One could not say as much, however, for a considerable number of their elders whom Edith Wharton regarded as the embodiment of complacency. Once more she displayed her genius for satire, and in this instance, her attack upon those who felt that they had done their duty once they had given a tea for the benefit of war orphans was merciless. In The Marne Troy's parents are dreadfully upset when war is declared. "But what chiefly

troubled them was that they could get no money, no seats in the train, no assurance that the Swiss frontier would not be closed" (p. 12). Safe in Paris, they regain their balance. "Having secured (for a sum that would have fitted up an ambulance) their passages on a steamer sailing from England, they could at length look about them, feel sorry, and subscribe to all the budding war charities" (p. 13). In A Son at the Front, Wharton is no less disgusted with George's mother, whose main concern is first, to prevent her son, who is an American born in France, from being drafted, and second, to rescue her Rolls-Royce from the clutches of the authorities. Edith Wharton's love for France caused her to despise those who adopted the philosophical attitude that, war or no war, one owed it to himself to go on living. And in both of her war novels, she attacks them at every opportunity.

Ironically, though the invading "Goths" of 1914 were defeated, Edith Wharton's aristocratic world had also once more been crushed, and she was well aware of this. In the last chapter of A Backward Glance she wrote: "After 'A Son at the Front' I intended to take a long holiday--perhaps to cease from writing altogether. It was growing more and more evident that the world I had grown up in and been formed by had been destroyed in 1914, and I felt myself incapable of transmuting the raw material of the after-war world into a work of art" (p. 369-70). Edith Wharton had recognized and fled the invaders in New York; they had pursued and caught up with her in Paris.

Fordham University

Footnotes:

¹ Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the American Novel (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1952), 256.

² Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1953), 159.

³ Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1934), 351.

⁴ Edith Wharton, Fighting France (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), 238.

⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Political and Social Growth of the American People 1865-1940 (New York: Macmillan Company, 1941), 400-401.

⁶ Edith Wharton, The Marne (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1918), 36.

⁷ Edith Wharton, A Son at the Front (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), 408.