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PART I

Life and Works

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CHAPTER I

*Edith Wharton: Contextual Revisions**Laura Rattray*

I don't believe there is any greater blessing than that of being pierced through & through by the splendour or sweetness of words, & no one who is not transfixed . . . has known half the joy of living.¹

In a recently recovered letter to her German teacher, Anna Bahlmann, the fourteen-year-old who would become Edith Wharton pens a memorable self-portrait as she sits weeping tears of alcohol from a dripping bandage, a wet cloth tied over an inflamed eye, leaving the correspondent only her “very short-sighted” eye to guide her as she writes. Yet write she does, and not a polite note – but, in “very bad writing,” an eight-page letter, detailing her poetry-in-progress, stanza choice, line and language variants, translation, current reading, and literary criticism. “For two or three days my eyes have been ailing, & reading & writing forbidden pleasures, but now they are well again & I have got a new pen & I am quite comfortable,” assures the young correspondent. “Please, if it be not troubling you too much, tell me which lines you *do not like*, in your next letter” (my emphasis).² The evocative image conveyed through poor, sight-strained penmanship reminds us in force that, whatever the obstacles, the youth who wrote as Eadgyth, David Olivieri, and Edith Jones was resolutely determined to write. Indeed, from earliest childhood, stories, reading, and “making up” inspired “rhythmic raptures” (*BG* 38) and “ecstasy” (*BG* 42) – “almost a form of illicit sexual indulgence” suggests Elaine Showalter³ – while at twenty-seven the author proclaims the blessing of “being pierced through & through by the splendour or sweetness of words.” Whatever course her life would take – a life she later described as a series of “adventures with books”⁴ – Edith Wharton’s primary love affair appears always to have been with language.

Filtered through the contexts of both her own age and those of subsequent generations, images of Wharton and her work continue to realign. Louis Auchincloss memorably titled his 1971 study *Edith Wharton: A*

Woman in Her Time, yet the subject was also a woman *of* her time. And what a time. “The world is a welter and has always been one,” she writes in the concluding “And After” section of her 1934 memoir, *A Backward Glance* (379). Born during the United States’ Civil War, and dying as Europe broached World War II, Wharton witnessed dramatic social, economic, literary, cultural, and historic transformations. She lived through the Gilded Age, the Progressive Era, the surging expansion of the railroads, and a second industrial revolution. Her generation saw the building of immense industry monopolies, the seemingly unassailable power of financiers and bankers, the invention of the telephone and the incandescent bulb, divorce reform, the birth of film, the United States’ expansionist endeavors, waves of immigration and immigration selection, Einstein’s theory of relativity, and the arrival of the car. Wharton had a front seat at many of the cataclysmic events of World War I, while she viewed (from a distance) the onset of Prohibition in 1919, Amendment 19 (Woman’s Suffrage in the United States) in 1920, a resurgent Ku Klux Klan, the Jazz Age, a series of Wall Street panics followed by the Crash, heralding the onset of the Great Depression. She witnessed the birth of modern celebrity culture, the coming of age of the modern consumer era, the rise of magazines, and revolutions in publishing, architecture, and interior design. In the arts, she outlived many of a phenomenal cast of leading talents. In an appreciation published in the week of the writer’s death on August 11, 1937, the *New York Times* attempted to convey a sense of her extraordinary longevity in its opening lines: “Edith Wharton survived several literary generations. It is easier to realize how much of change she spanned in her creative life when one recalls that four of her poems, written at the age of 15, won the approval of Longfellow and, through his recommendation, appeared in *The Atlantic* of 1880.” Although she would be accused of failing to apply the theory to practice in her late writings, Wharton’s “First Word” of *A Backward Glance* proclaims, “one *can* remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration if one is unafraid of change” (vii).

Wharton was a writer whose fiction often captured the very moment of social transition. She charted, for example, the course of new money, which threatened to dwarf the old inherited income of the genteel classes, heralding a dynamic shift in the makeup of elite social circles. She depicted the newly minted seeking to trade their wares on the marriage market for the lustre of social acceptance, alongside the erosion of traditional values and an increasing tolerance of divorce. With ambition and unsophisticated talent storming the bastions of the old, established order, social context is very quickly established as a primary character of

a number of Wharton's most renowned society novels. *The Custom of the Country*, first published in 1913, the prophecy and warning text of rampant materialism, assumes a breathtakingly contemporary relevance in the burning embers of the economic meltdown post 2008. In the society novels, Wharton's narrator gives voice to the context, often translating for the reader the complex signings of an unfamiliar, closed world. May Archer's knowing instruction to her husband in *The Age of Innocence* that he "must be sure to go and see Ellen," her rival, memorably unleashes a page of narrative translation explicating this complex "mute message," "the code in which they had both been trained" (AI 269–70). Motoring to Le Bréau at the outset of World War I, Wharton commented on mysterious road "advertisements," which were in fact concealed plans of the principal French towns and the environs. The advertisements, noted the curious author, required viewers to look "at the picture at a certain angle" before "seeing the map come out" – and it is context itself that often proves the secret to unravelling her own narrative world.⁶

While elevated society proves its most insistent focus, Wharton's narrative realm does not deal exclusively with the preserve of the wealthy. The author was aware of the assumption that she wrote "only about the rich," despite "a list of . . . tales, which deal with divers classes of people."⁷ She certainly witnessed poverty and exploitation firsthand, in both urban and rural settings, in Europe and the United States, and notably criticized her predecessors, Mary Wilkins and Sarah Orne Jewett, for their "rose-coloured" distortions of country life (BG 293). She was well informed about the insalubrious working conditions facing factory workers and the damage those conditions inflicted on their health. Her (often less familiar) work considers those "divers classes" on a sliding scale of privilege from shabby gentility to the working poor and beyond – into the bowels of America's underclass and the destitute: her first published poem, "Only a Child" (focused on a child, locked up in a reformatory, who commits suicide); her first published story, "Mrs. Manstey's View"; the early rejected novella, *Bunner Sisters*. Her protagonists of privilege may also look into that social abyss: Lily Bart, always vulnerable and playing for high stakes, gambles, loses, and leaves the game to face New York's "rubbish heap" (HM 498). Wharton's plays also descend the social scale: an untitled play – one of the most intriguing, raw additions to her oeuvre – concerns an unmarried, pregnant maid and the social horrors and hypocrisies raining down on her from her elevated employers and their circle, one of whom is also pregnant by a lover. She, however, is a married woman protected by position, money, and class.⁸ Hypocrisy

thrives in Wharton's narrative milieu, even as it is mercilessly exposed. In a November 1905 letter to the *New York Times Saturday Review of Books*, reader Joseph D. Holmes forcefully objected to *The House of Mirth* "as a representation of New York society," and lamented the paper's praise for the novel:

Certainly Mrs. Wharton should apologize for introducing us to a set of people we would never meet twice voluntarily and making roués, divorcées, and gamblers her samples of the inhabitants of the "purlieus" of Fifth Avenue and Rhinebeck. Doesn't Mrs. Wharton know some of our big-hearted, athletic, clean-living men, prominent in church and social work, as in society and business? Doesn't she know some of our bright, broad-minded women, the true leaders of New York's "best" circles – generous, witty, "smart" in the best sense? . . . And the pity of it is that it should go out to the Nation and abroad with the praise of the Outlook and THE NEW YORK TIMES SATURDAY REVIEW OF BOOKS.⁹

However, Wharton scholarship was slow to acknowledge that its writer was also tainted to varying degrees by the prejudices of her age. Early-twentieth-century anxieties about "race suicide" and hybridity deeply informed Wharton's aesthetic practices. Yet it is only in recent years that scholars have considered thoroughly the sometimes conflicting and profoundly uncomfortable discourses of race and imperialism that inflected both her world and her work, with important studies by Elizabeth Ammons and Jennie Kassanoff, among others.¹⁰ This writer's palette fashioned an array of female protagonists unrivaled in the history of American letters, yet their creator proved at times remarkably dismissive of women and women's rights. These views often came in the guise of casual remarks and witticisms in her correspondence. When encouraged by Mary Berenson to read her daughter Ray Strachey's volume, *The Cause* (1928), charting the history of the British women's movement, Wharton countered: "To read a book called 'The Cause' (& *that* cause!) will require all my affection for you." After glancing at the volume, she retorted: "I, who think that women were made for pleasure & procreation, note with satisfaction that the leaders of the movement, judging from their photos, all look unfitted for the first, & many for both functions!" (quoted in Lee 611–12). The writer's career spanned a period that witnessed extraordinary changes and progressions in the social, sexual, economic, and political arenas for women, while at the same time, in practice, women's lives continued in many aspects to be conflicted and curtailed. (Few authors have employed images of imprisonment and entrapment to such devastating effect.) Here too was a woman whose

vividly evocative travel descriptions, breathing nuance and sensitivity, could transport her reader to the very sites: the silver lamps flickering in the side chapels of the Santa Maria Novella in Florence, the “powdered” pine woods of St. Moritz with their suspended white waterfalls, magical Moroccan bazaars, and “enchancing” Greek Islands. At the same time, she could dismiss its people, the inhabitants of such wondrous places, in a facile, arrogant stroke: “filthy,” “noisy,” “brutal,” and “detestable.” (“Only man is vile’ ought to have been written of Southern Italy instead of Ceylon’s Isle.”)¹¹ Such prejudices were largely left out of the Lewis edition of the letters (Lee is too charitable in deeming their absence “a polite misrepresentation” [613]); only recently have these prejudices been reclaimed as part of the record.

The stuffy grande dame, rigid realist, tentative modernist – a variety of reductive labels have attached themselves to Wharton over the years. “When a critic thinks up a good label for me it lasts about ten years,” she observed to an interviewer a year before her death.¹² Some of the epithets, however, were self-attached – for instance, writing of herself to younger contemporaries as representing “the literary equivalent of tufted furniture and gas chandeliers” (*Letters* 481) or “the Mrs. Humphry Ward of the Western Hemisphere” (*Letters* 445) – and these tags then proved stubborn to remove. And “Mrs. Wharton” was undoubtedly concerned about image: while she arranged papers “for my biographer,” in private or intimate matters she proved determined to cover her tracks. She was notably anxious that her letters to her former lover Morton Fullerton should be returned (they were not), whilst in the midst of grief for her “so devoted” Anna Bahlmann, who gave more than forty years’ service before her death in 1916, the “heart-broken” author had the presence of mind to request of Bahlmann’s niece that all her letters be destroyed.¹³ Sally Norton left a note that in the event of her death her correspondence was to be returned to the writer for her to destroy it, as she could not bring herself to do so.¹⁴ Wharton was a prolific correspondent throughout her life: following a short trip in 1924, she found sixty-five letters awaiting her return, “the incoming mail over three days” (*Letters* 3), while in August 1905 she described herself as “overwhelmed” by correspondence and missing the “faithful hand” of Anna Bahlmann who was in Paris. The Lewis edition of her correspondence, while immensely valuable, reproduces only four hundred of many thousands of extant letters (these many thousands despite significant casualties, not least the author’s destruction of most of her letters to Walter Berry and the burning of many of her letters by James), and it is inconceivable that there are not further discoveries still

to be made in the United States and Europe, notably in France, where she made her home for more than twenty-five years.

Wharton scholarship has witnessed both important new discoveries and misdirections. Landmarks in the scholarship include R. W. B. Lewis' 1975 biography, which capitalized on the opening of the Yale archives, and Hermione Lee's internationally lauded 2007 study, which regenerated widespread interest both within and beyond the confines of academia. Biography has long been the showcase genre of Wharton scholarship, which in certain regards proves both a blessing and a curse: it opens up the critical vista on a life, while indirectly perpetuating determinedly biographical readings of her work. (The BBC Radio 4 adaptation of *Ethan Frome*, broadcast in January 2012, even recasts its narrator as "Miss Wharton.") The ongoing appreciation of Wharton's later writing, and of her less familiar works generally, has been greatly welcome, placing an extended range of texts under the critical spotlight. An emerging interest in the author's contribution to genre underscores her extraordinary dexterity, spanning both fiction and non-fiction: poetry, plays, novels, novellas, short stories, translation, architecture and design manuals, critical writings, memoirs, travel writing, and cultural history. Other ties have been loosened or unfastened entirely – most mercifully, perhaps, the link to Henry James that at one time threatened, like *Ethan Frome*, to bind "hand and foot." In a prescient 1967 article, Louis Auchincloss bemoaned the comparison ("ad nauseam") of the writers' backgrounds, when Wharton's, he claimed, "couldn't have been more different if she'd been born in the dust bowl": the female writer from a "cultivated . . . [yet] totally uncreative family . . . had to fight for her own expression, whereas Henry James would have been practically slapped over the fingers with a ruler had he not started writing at an early age."¹⁵ Unexpected archival discoveries have also captured the imagination – the purchase of the Fullerton letters by the University of Texas at Austin, the recovery in France of Wharton's account of her cruise on the *Vanadis*, and the ever-green, seemingly prurient interest in the graphic Yale "Beatrice Palmato" fragment – even, in the last case, as boxes of substantial writings in the Beinecke archive continued to be overlooked.

Gaps have remained, however, and more than 150 years after the writer's birth, ongoing discoveries are still required to supply missing pieces of the puzzle. Despite the vast extant correspondence, R. W. B. and Nancy Lewis conclude that "Edith Wharton was thirty-eight years old, [and] had been publishing fiction for nine years . . . before someone other than her Scribners editors thought her letters worth retaining" (*Letters* 4). As

a result, they explain, there is only a single letter in their volume from Wharton's youth and childhood, then "[a]lmost twenty years must pass before another letter [dated 1893] . . . comes into view" (*Letters* 27), throwing a veil over the writer's childhood, young adulthood, and the early years of the Wharton marriage. Similarly, Lee speculates on years when the biographical trail runs cold: "[F]ive poems [appeared] in *The Atlantic Monthly* when she was eighteen. And then something happened. It would be nine years before a few more poems appeared. . . . It was another seven years before her first book publication, and eight years before her first volume of stories. . . . The huge creativity of this exceptional young girl was somehow halted" (Lee 46).

There are surprises, however. Two years after the publication of Lee's biography, Wharton scholarship witnessed the extraordinary recovery of the writer's correspondence to Anna Bahlmann, her German teacher, secretary, early literary advisor, and sometime confidante. Auctioned at Christie's in 2009, purchased for the archive at the Beinecke, and only recently available to scholars, the collection includes 132 letters from Wharton to Bahlmann and spans a period of 41 years. The earliest mis-sive was written at Pencraig, Newport, on May 31, 1874, when Edith Jones was just twelve; the last, dated December 29, 1915, was mailed from Paris, where the fifty-three-year-old writer was subsumed by her relief work during World War I, and with a lifetime's experiences in between. While covering more than four decades, many of the letters are focused on the mystery years of her youth and early married life, before and during the emergence of the professional author. Like the advertisements that concealed secret maps over which Wharton puzzled in the French countryside, this fascinating new resource opens up a series of altered images, realigning our understanding of the family dynamics, her youthful voice and ambitions, and calls into question her retrospective depiction of both people and events. Even where the clinical facts remain the same, the contexts from which those facts are mined can be transformed.

As Melanie Dawson identifies in her essay on biography for this volume, in later life Wharton depicted herself as having been a shy, solitary, intense child. In her memoir draft, "Life and I," the author self-consciously accentuated the portrayal, even amending her manuscript from "very shy" to "painfully shy self-conscious child" (*LI* 198). Wharton depicts a girl beset by anxieties and phobias, living "in a state of chronic fear" and "terror," "some dark undefinable [sic] menace, forever dogging [her] steps" in a "species of hallucination" that lasted "seven or eight years" (*LI* 191–92). The witty exuberance of *Fast and Loose* always appeared to run

counter to such a claim, and the earliest letters to Bahlmann are charmingly animated, humorous, and high-spirited. Written from Newport, Rhode Island, the early correspondence presents a delightful picture of the pastimes of the young Edith Jones, as well as opening up the contextual vista on her social world. The familiar image of the author as the stately older woman entirely gives way not just to the girl, but to the girl unfettered by the potentially skewed perspective of her mature self, and she is a welcome new presence in Wharton research.

In the first letter of the Bahlmann correspondence, the twelve-year-old has been “commissioned” to write by “Mamma.” Newport is “delightful” and they are ready and will be “very very glad indeed” to see “dear Miss Anna,” with the “[e]ver your very affectionate” E. N. Jones requesting that she be a long time putting the house in order. In correspondence written between the ages of twelve and fifteen, she also makes her best “dancing school curtesy,” she is pestered by her young niece Trix to whom she is “Aunt Eduff,” and she feels really “beatific,” having “practiced violently one of Beethoven’s waltzes, (a species of funeral hymn) made two rosettes for a new pair of slippers & generally behaved . . . – a sensation having still the charm of novelty.” At fourteen, Edith Jones is about to join an archery club, and she also provides “dearest Tonni” with a charming description of lawn tennis, the sport young people gather most afternoons to play: “It is a most fascinating game; difficult, tiresome, & destructive to pretty dresses, & to the complexion, but nevertheless delightful.”¹⁶ She was evidently an energetic, athletic child and young woman, with skating, bicycling, and sleigh-rides also referenced among her leisure pursuits.

During this period, the breathtaking range of reference and learning that pervades the correspondence of the mature Wharton is already well fermented. She is an avid reader, facing the “horrid” task of having to decide which books will accompany her to New York, unwilling to leave a single volume behind, but unable to take them all to the city. Longfellow, Browning, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Dante, George Eliot, Goethe, and Schiller’s correspondence are among those referenced, with Edith Jones urging Bahlmann to return so they can read German together. She will often critique a work for its lack of “passion,” suggesting, for example, that Longfellow’s poetry reminds her of a lifeless, “chilly” sculpture. Although Wharton would later claim that her mother largely forbade the reading of novels (*BG* 65), George Eliot’s fiction is evidently on her younger self’s reading list: *Daniel Deronda*, her “beloved” *Romola*, and in a charming summation of *Middlemarch* she once again bemoans a lack of passion,