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EDITH WHARTON'S LITERARY THEORY

A DISSERTATION

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Norman, Oklahoma

1957

EDITH WHARTON'S LITERARY THEORY

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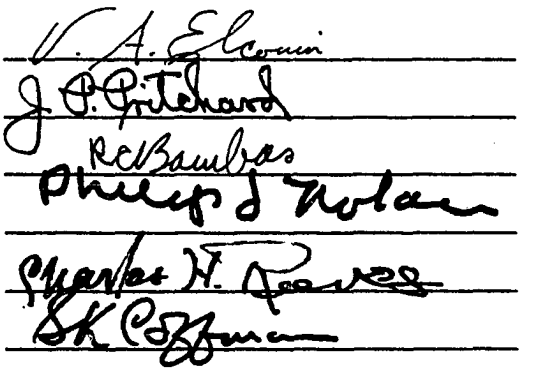

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I.	CRITICAL FRIENDS AND ACQUAINTANCES	1
II.	MRS. WHARTON'S CRITICAL THEORIES: GENERAL CONCEPTS	35
III.	TECHNIQUES OF FICTION	69
IV.	THE PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST	108
V.	CONCLUSIONS	147
BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WRITINGS OF EDITH WHARTON		170
BIBLIOGRAPHY		174
APPENDIX		177

CHAPTER I

CRITICAL FRIENDS AND ACQUAINTANCES

Edith Wharton published her first volume of fiction in 1899, and three years later produced her first formal efforts at literary criticism.[1] These two events, however, did not mark the beginning of her creative effort or of her study of criticism. These occurred when she was but a child of four. In A Backward Glance she records her early experiences with "making-up," a bardic endeavor complete with enthusiasm and inspiration.

> Well--the "Alhambra" once in hand, making up was ecstasy. At any moment the impulse might seize me; and then, if the book was in reach, I had only to walk the floor, turning the pages as I walked, to be swept off full sail on the sea of dreams. The fact that I could not read added to the completeness of the illusion, for from those mysterious pages I could evoke whatever my fancy chose. Parents and nurses . . . noticed that I often held the book up-side down, and that I turned them at about the right pace for a person reading aloud as passionately and precipitately as was my habit.[2]

It is, no doubt, just as well that none of these early "stories" were preserved. But the anecdote is not without importance, for it does show that at a remarkably tender age Mrs. Wharton had a feeling for the

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[1]Edith Wharton, The Greater Inclination (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899); Edith Wharton, "Stephen Phillips' Ulysses: A Drama," Bookman, XV (April, 1902), 168-170.

[2]Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1934), p. 34.

fictional world and a lively sense of the reality of imaginary characters.[1] And it also shows the depth of the years of unrecorded development which preceded the appearance of her first volume of prose fiction in 1899.

At a somewhat more experienced age, after reading and writing were faits accomplis, Mrs. Wharton encountered her first hostile criticism; it was fitting that she should early become accustomed to it. At eleven, she wrote what purported to be her first novel which she submitted to her mother's tasteful if somewhat unlettered criticism. The novel began: "'Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Brown?' said Mrs. Tompkins. 'If I had known you were going to call I should have tidied up the drawing-room.'" To this remarkable occasion the only recorded comment of her mother-critic was, "Drawing-rooms are always tidy."[2] Here, then, at eleven was Edith Wharton working with her typical setting, the drawing-room, and with her typical method, manners.

Although it must be admitted that humor is the greatest virtue of these two anecdotes, they are important. They indicate clearly the strong literary impulse that seized upon the young mind of Edith Wharton, and they show the force of her love for letters, a love that made her persist in writing fiction even when her literary success was a source of bewildered embarrassment to her friends and a kind of family disgrace

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[1]"The imagining of tales (about grown-up people, 'real people,' as I called them . . .) had gone on in me since my first conscious moments . . ." Ibid., p. 33.

[2]Recorded in Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942), p. 75.

to her relatives.[1] Moreover, they show the beginning of a long devotion to the art of fiction, a devotion that led her to make writers, artists, and critics her especial friends and companions. Indeed, these anecdotes give an index of her length of service to literature and aesthetics, and a measure of the importance that art assumed in the routines of her daily living and in the rituals of her creative composition. The material result of this long period of happy, self-imposed servitude to letters may be seen in the forty-two volumes she wrote, co-authored, or edited, in some eight or ten masterful novels (which in spite of complacent criticism are something other than Henry James diluted), and finally in a creditable body of literary criticism planted in her "art" novels and short stories, published as reviews and critical articles in contemporary journals, and partially collected in her critical book, The Writing of Fiction.

Since the publication of The Greater Inclination (1899), The Valley of Decision (1902), and The House of Mirth (1905), almost all historians of American literature have felt obliged to take account of Edith Wharton, even those entirely out of sympathy with the ideas and society she represents. Without exception these historians have honored the purity and brilliance of her style and the clarity and beauty of her art form, but not one has ever inquired into the body of critical experience, theory, and thought upon which these forms and this style are built. This neglect appears more striking when one considers the number, fame, and authority of Mrs. Wharton's close literary friends and associates. First and easily the greatest among these was Henry James.

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[1] Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 143.

The Wharton-James acquaintance began in the late eighties and shortly afterward developed into a close friendship that was broken only by James's death in 1916. Between the eighties and 1916 their relationship was unbroken, for when James was not visiting Mrs. Wharton at her residence in America or France, or when she was not visiting James at Rye, their correspondence by mail was uninterrupted, as the James's letters collected by Percy Lubbock show. They freely exchanged books by their friends and contemporaries, thoughtfully criticised and commented upon one another's art, and in some instances read proof for one another and saw each other's work through the press. By happy circumstances they frequently met in the homes of common friends, and the freedom, comfort, and ease provided by Mrs. Wharton's automobile made James her frequent if not inevitable travelling companion. The early and strong impact of this friendship on Mrs. Wharton's fiction may in part be measured by her literary performance in The Touchstone (1900) or in Madame de Treymes (1907).

Scarcely second in importance, at least in Mrs. Wharton's valuation, was Paul Bourget, whose acquaintance she made as early as 1893. When Bourget was commissioned by Gordon Bennett to write the series of articles on America for the New York Herald later collected in Outremer, he was explicitly instructed to write his article on "fashionable watering places" at Newport, and his trip there brought him into Edith Wharton's home. Like Mrs. Wharton, Bourget was born into the higher levels of society, and like her too his earliest interest had been in poetry. Unlike her, however, he had already made a place for himself in literary history, while in 1893 she was still some six years away from the

appearance of her first book. Bourget had already published twenty volumes of poetry, fiction, and criticism, among these what was historically his greatest work, Le Disciple (1889). Around this particular work a storm of critical controversy had earlier raged, for, addressing his book to the youth of France and flying in the face of contemporary naturalistic thought, Bourget insisted on the moral responsibility of the artist, on the responsibility of the author to foster in the souls of his readers an increased ability to love and to exercise will. This new message attracted much attention because earlier Bourget had aligned himself with "art for art" and partially, at least, with the Naturalists. The enormous influence of this new critical departure from an admired and recognized author like Paul Bourget is credited by one writer with having considerably loosened the grip of Naturalism from French literature.[1] The moral and social implications of such a doctrine, however, combined with the patrician attitudes and highly developed taste which Bourget's background fostered, were enough to establish an immediate rapport between the two artists, one which only death interrupted.

The other two important close critical friends Mrs. Wharton had were Bernard Berenson and Vernon Lee, both of whom had a large entry into Mrs. Wharton's affections because of their profound knowledge of Italian architecture, art, and gardens. With the Berensons Mrs. Wharton spent much time; she visited them in Italy, and in 1913-14 made a motor trip with them through Germany. Berenson's sound scholarship and his

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[1]Albert Autin, Les Grands Événements Littéraires: Le Disciple de Paul Bourget (Paris: Société d'Éditions Littéraires et Techniques, 1930), p. 62.

wide acquaintance with the remaining artifacts of past culture and art made him a congenial companion to Mrs. Wharton, but his refusal to deliver an aesthetic judgment without first considering the questions of ethics and morality probably furnished that point at which his association with her was richest. At this point all their discussions of art, whether a cathedral or a novel, a chancel or a short story, became involved with human nature, structure of character, and greatness of soul, and Mrs. Wharton felt that if these problems were not obviously related to the art, then the art was worthless. While still a student himself, Berenson was also a tutor to Miss C. Anstruther-Thomson, one of the few persons to be admitted to a full, intimate acquaintance with that rich, enigmatic personality, Vernon Lee.

Vernon Lee, the adopted name of Violet Paget, was born in Boulogne, France, in 1856, and early established residence in Italy with her brother, Eugene Lee-Hamilton. Entry into her home there was not easy, even for the vigorous and persistent Mrs. Wharton, but Vernon Lee's remarkable fiction, her penetrating analysis of Italian settings, her travel books, and her criticism and appreciations of Italian art made her acquaintance a prized one, and Mrs. Wharton won it. Together they drove through the Italian landscape, visiting cathedrals, inspecting art objects, and discussing enduring values in art. Although Mrs. Wharton is curiously reticent about Vernon Lee, she does pay her two signal compliments: she dedicated a book to her and recorded that she was easily the best of women "talkers" she had ever met, a compliment which must be measured against Mrs. Wharton's distinct preference for the companionship and conversation of men.

These people, James, Bourget, Lee, and Berenson, were not the only noteworthy artists and critics of Mrs. Wharton's acquaintance, but they were probably the most important because of the length and closeness of their friendship and the evidence of their influence on her art and criticism. Others among her friends, however, were nonetheless important: for example, Charles Eliot Norton, William C. Brownell, Percy Lubbock, Charles du Bos, and Jean Cocteau. The mere cataloguing of her friends and the simple recognition of the duration and closeness of these friendships with people who devoted all their energies to art seem to recommend Mrs. Wharton's critical ability and to indicate that both her casual thoughts and firm convictions about art had at least sufficient merit to engage, stimulate, and even challenge the critical thoughts of her associates. It is unthinkable, for example, that the preternaturally sensitive Henry James would have tolerated inane or inept conversation from her simply for the sake of his pleasure in her motor-car, or that the decidedly independent and individualistic Vernon Lee would have condescended to Mrs. Wharton's company on their excursions through the Italian landscape merely to ensure further complimentary reviews of her brother's undistinguished verse. The truth is that Mrs. Wharton's criticism achieved a degree of competency, and furthermore, that she shared with these four major friends similar and basic notions about the function and execution of art. This is not to say, however, that their art works, once produced, were similar or, for that matter, even liked by all the members of this group of friends. Assuredly this was not true. Henry James, for example, was thunderstruck into a silence of titanic indignation when Vernon Lee, without warning, dedicated to him her "first

attempt at a novel," Miss Brown (1884). Later, Vernon Lee, in the course of her sensitive and accurate analysis of James's prose, took somewhat malicious and immodest glee in pointing out that in spite of his mastery of craft and his insight into human behavior, his subject was nevertheless essentially a "tempest in a tea-cup."

For all her admiration of a good "talker" and for all her love of good conversation, Mrs. Wharton nevertheless suffered two distinct disadvantages when she came to a discussion of basic ideas of art and the thoughts and speculations suggested by them. These handicaps were her impatience and her inability to become involved in serious philosophic or speculative thought. Her recognition of this incapacity as well as her awareness of its source is clearly indicated in the following observation:

> Being deprived of the irreplaceable groundings of Greek and Latin, I never learned to concentrate except on subjects naturally interesting to me, and developed a restless curiosity which prevented my fixing my thoughts for long even on these.[1]

Although her acceptance of her own limitations was complete and uncritical, the attitude of her friends was neither so complacent nor so generous. Percy Lubbock, for instance, observes, "Her glance is quicker than any where it falls, more inquisitive and more divining; but no student she, no brooding analyst persevering in a research."[2] More pointed and more openly critical is the observation of Sir Kenneth Clark:

> She delivered her view with no misgiving or embarrassment; and her confidence may have betrayed her at times, but never in one

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[1]Wharton, A Backward Glance, pp. 47-48.

[2]Percy Lubbock, A Portrait of Edith Wharton (London: Jonathan Cape, 1948), p. 135.

> matter, her quick recognition of the voice of real authority, wherever it spoke, and her prompt resort to it. . . . The learning that she tore from their books and talk was not as thorough, I dare say, as her ease in drawing and announcing her conclusions; with her impatience, that was always plucking at her attention and rushing her pace, the mark of scholarship was not hers, nor likely to be; but even among the severest pundits her free ways, her refusal to be talked down, might be found both wholesome and entertaining. Yet there was something else that she missed, not only accuracy in her studies. In her unwillingness to linger over an impression, to toy with it, to return to it, she often seemed to deny herself the reward of the amateur--the endless variety of his freedom to take his pleasure as he finds it. She refused her share of that long and dear adventure.[1]

Not only, then, were her scholarship and her research faulty, but as Sir Kenneth Clark implies, her conversation was hampered by her unwillingness to play with an idea, to follow the glimmering lead of suggestions, or in short, to be spontaneous. In view of these severe limitations, a special sense, it seems, must be brought to Lubbock's definitive statement of her conversation about art:

> With the sole exception of the craft or writing of fiction --in the discussion of which she always gave herself all leisure, because the theme was to her of inexhaustible significance--Edith's *tempo* in talk was a *scherzo*, and even a *scherzo* in *pizzicato*. Every topic that arose was by her too swiftly shelved.[2]

Just as her aversion to leisurely speculation, her haste, and her impatience had an unfortunate effect on the quality of her conversation and her ability to discuss literary ideas freely among her compatriots, so

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[1] *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 98. Note also: "Enough just now to recall how she used to brush aside speculation, upsetting the table of argument the moment it was set for anything that looked like a philosophical debate. The lively leap of her mind stopped dead when she was asked to think, I don't say about the meaning and ends of life, but almost about any theoretical inquiry, any fanciful rearrangement of the world as it appears." *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

also did they have unfortunate effects on her critical writings. All too often, failing to record the enriching and enlightening logical steps which lead to her critical statements, she reduces her thought to apothegm. Too often she leaves her reader astonished to find a great to-do and bother resolve itself into a bland, unqualified critical truism which she obviously intended to contain more of the spice of intellection and profundity than it conveys.

These faults, although they do damage the casual reader's estimation of Mrs. Wharton's critical sophistication, do not seriously threaten the validity of her critical ideas. Most of them can be more thoroughly understood, more fully explained, either by comparing them with similar statements made by and about artists in her short stories and novels, where she obviously felt compelled to be more detailed and specific, or by tracing some of her terms and language back to their source. For example, when she uses the word germ or germination in one of her unelaborated, ex cathedra statements, one can feel fairly certain that its true referent lies in the critical statements of James, and the recognition of such a source frequently illuminates a rather wide area of unmentioned and otherwise unapparent thought. How much, finally, Mrs. Wharton's reluctance to explore verbally the problems of the art of fiction interfered with her communication and conversation with her friends is a matter of only passing concern; it is, however, much to the point to recognize that this same habit of mind makes much of her critical writing appear more platitudinous than it might otherwise have seemed had she but paused to re-examine the intricate steps which led to her conclusion.

Edith Wharton's customary mode of conversation and her characteristically unscholarly methods, especially in view of Sir Kenneth Clark's statements, need, it seems, further examination before one approaches her critical theories. She was not a scholar as the burden of her own testimony in A Backward Glance confirms. Percy Lubbock also gives the measure of how little she was a student in his delightful description of the treatment she accorded to James's work:

> But the shining intruder [Edith Wharton], strange to say, by no means shared this diligence when it came to reading him [James]. She glanced and passed, she whisked through him and out again--not empty-handed, naturally, but how much of that treasury is to be seized by glances?[1]

If this is indicative of her characteristic treatment of a book by a friend, even granted her thorough knowledge of his methods and subjects, how much less care, one may assume, she must have accorded to the reading of books by men of whom she knew nothing but the name and historical milieu. The simple indictment and disparagement of Mrs. Wharton's scholarship borders, of course, on the irrelevant, for in spite of her disorderly acquaintance with the history of literary criticism, she did formulate a satisfactory theory of literature, and though her literary execution sometimes fell short of her critical aspirations, the substantial body of her best work is testimony to the adequacy of her critical thought.[2]

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[1] Ibid., p. 17.

[2] Her lack of scholarship did, however, allow her to overlook Irving, Poe, and Bryant, for example, in the development of American criticism, and to intimate that Henry James invented American criticism of prose. See also: Edith Wharton, "Henry James in His Letters," Quarterly Review, CCXXXIV (July-October, 1920), 189.

In the study of her critical ideas, however, Edith Wharton's lack of formal scholarly training is not without significance, for it points up two facts: first, that her marshalling and arranging of long lists of famous literary critics is largely simple name-dropping--with the possible exceptions of Goethe, Sainte-Beuve, and Matthew Arnold. The second, and possibly the more important fact is that in view of her lack of formal training and her characteristic hasty treatment of books, one must logically look to her friends and acquaintances as the sources of principal influence on her literary and critical thought.

The resemblance Mrs. Wharton's literary ideas bear to those of classical or former critics derives, probably, from her more learned acquaintances, Henry James, for example, and Paul Bourget. It should not, however, be assumed that since she lacked a firm historical critical perspective, she was totally dependent upon her friends for her ideas, or abjectly, uncritically adopted their ideas. She was capable of independent thought, as Percy Lubbock's description of her relation to Henry James clearly shows:

> [Henry James] for many years had been the greatest among her friends--the greatest, not the oldest, nor the closest, nor the most influential; he was not of those who had coloured or swayed the mind of her youth. She had made friends with him in her books, so to speak, when she began to write --enrolled, as was evident, under his banner, a disciple of his art, but of his authority, as she emerged from pupilage, she was by no means patient, nor a meek receiver of his doctrine--though his approval of her work, when she got it, was the only meed of praise that she greatly cared about or valued. Nor, beneath the benignity of his observant eye, was there any filial deference in her mien. . .[1]

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[1] Lubbock, A Portrait of Edith Wharton, p. 137.

This statement about the intellectual relationship established between Henry James and Edith Wharton can be applied to her relationship with other of her friends without doing violence to her critical flexibility. She could be, indeed she was influenced by their opinions, but she nevertheless maintained her critical integrity while she adopted those ideas which comported with her own.

Some attention should be given to Lubbock's qualification of James's influence--that he was not the greatest influence because he did not "colour or sway the mind of her youth"--for though his explicit reference is to Walter Berry, his implication concerns the circumstances of Edith Wharton's youth, those circumstances which necessarily limited her view of society and developed and modified her taste. Since her distinctive taste and her ignorance of every social station have significant ramifications in both her art and criticism, each deserves some comment.

Mrs. Wharton's restricted view of society, since she was born among The Four Hundred, has been severely criticised. It is said that she did not know "the common man," whoever he might be, and that she did not know the "lower classes" of society. Similarly she has been criticised for selecting as her setting the world of the socially elect and choosing for her subjects the problems of the socially elite. This is all very true; that is, the observations are accurate though the criticism is unwarranted. These critics themselves tacitly admit that their criticism is perhaps unsound, for they fail to indict Homer and Shakespeare for their exclusive treatment of aristocratic and noble society, or to indict Stephen Crane and Sherwood Anderson for their exclusive

treatment of the "lower" classes. In her behalf, it might be observed that an artist usually works best with the material, setting, and problems he knows best, and that as Henry James observed, one is not justified in criticising the subject but only what is done with that subject. Moreover, a writer of fiction who is worthy the name of artist will explore the life of his characters--as Mrs. Wharton does in her best novels --until he sounds those depths of the human condition which exist equally in a New York drawing-room and in a decaying hotel in Winesburg, Ohio. Finally, so long as the writer or critic realizes--as both Matthew Arnold and Mrs. Wharton did--that "other things being equal, nothing can alter the fact that a great argument will give a greater result than the perpetual chronicling of small beer,"[1] and that the great argument is to be found wherever humanity is touched, his criticism and art will not, for lack of broad social vision at least, be greatly impaired. It might also be noted that when Mrs. Wharton does deal with common folk, she often treats them with sympathy, understanding, and apparent good humor. Sometimes, having stripped them of their commonness of lunch-pail and costume, she touches that commonness of their nature which makes them both dear and noble.

The second important aspect of the "colouring and swaying" of Mrs. Wharton's mind by her social station expresses itself in her taste and in her concept of taste. Though these must be treated in detail later, it should be said here that neither her taste nor her experience allowed her to see life in terms of Mark Twain's Mississippi rivermen

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[1]Edith Wharton, "The Great American Novel," Yale Review, XVI (July, 1927), 649-50.

or of Howells's fugitives from Ohio. The circumstances of her life, her experience, and her predilections colored her fiction and her literary theory; she could see meaning and beauty only in the activities and manners which fell within her actual and imaginative experience. Moreover, her concept of taste, in large part formed and developed by the luxury, order, and beauty that surrounded her youth, compelled her to arrange consciously, to select deliberately, and to structure aesthetically the experience and materials of life into meaningful and intelligible patterns. This compulsion, derived from the bent of her personality and expressed in her taste, excludes from her critical sympathies some of the positive aspects of literary trends new to her such as Naturalism and the stream-of-consciousness techniques of fiction. It does not, however, cripple her critical system or mar the beauty of her art. It simply identifies her with the group of critics and artists who believe that life has meaning, that rational human behavior assumes form, and that the artist's duty is to convey an intense sense of life and to reveal its ethical, moral, and social meaning.

These, then, were some of the attitudes, tendencies, and penchants Edith Wharton brought to her group of friends. It is curious that this group never developed into a "school" (a group writing in a style identifiable more with the group than with the individual authors), for many circumstances, aside from their common friendship with Edith Wharton, were conducive to this development. For example, they were all born into economic comfort; they all enjoyed high social rank; and they shared many attitudes and ideas not only with Edith Wharton but also among themselves. All five had distinct "Italian" periods, but whereas

Wharton and James grew out of it, Bourget, Berenson, and Lee specialized in Italian scenes, architecture, and art. In addition, each of them tried a turn at stories of the supernatural. For most, this was but a serious exercise, but for Vernon Lee it became a mannerism and an habitual mode of expression. Further inter-relationships were established among the members of the group by Edith Wharton's dedication of books to Vernon Lee, Bernard Berenson, and Paul Bourget, by Bourget's dedication of volumes to Henry James, and by their frequent meetings and journeys together.

Although it is clear that Mrs. Wharton drew more thought from the group than she contributed to it, so close was the personal as well as the intellectual relationship among the members of the group that it is now extremely difficult, if not impossible, to isolate the precise degree and direction of the influence any one of them had upon the other. Note, for example, the following statements written by Mrs. Wharton in 1925:

> . . . the impression of vividness, of presentness in the affair narrated, has to be sought, and made sure of beforehand, by that careful artifice which is the real carelessness of art. The short-story writer must not only know from what angle to present his anecdote if it is to give out all its fires, but must understand just why that particular angle and no other is the right one. He must therefore have walked around it, so to speak, and applied to it those laws of perspective which Paolo Uccello called "so beautiful," before it can be offered to the reader as a natural unembellished fragment of experience, detached like ripe fruit from the tree.[1]

and one again made in 1934, where she isolates the principal permanent

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[1]Edith Wharton, The Writing of Fiction (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), pp. 48-49.

value of fiction:

> One, and the principal [value], is the creating of characters which so possess us with the sense of their reality that we talk of Anna Karenina, Becky Sharp, Pere Goriot, and Tess, as of real people whom we have known and lived with.[1]

Mrs. Wharton's emphasis on the writer's duty to give the "impression of vividness," to make his story have the "presentness" of "a natural fragment of experience," and to lend to his characters a "sharp sense of reality," immediately suggests the influence of Henry James, who wrote:

> The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life. . . .[2] A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. . . .[3] I may therefore venture to say that the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel--the merit on which all its other merits . . . helplessly and submissively depend. If it be not there, they are all as nothing, and if these be there, they owe their effect to the success with which the author has produced the illusion of life.[4]

The thought of Henry James and Edith Wharton is obviously parallel on certain levels, and their emphasis is precisely the same. It would be very easy to assume complacently that this is one of the many instances of James's influence on Mrs. Wharton. The beautiful simplicity of this assumption is somewhat complicated, however, by an investigation of the critical attitudes some of her other friends entertained about this notion. For example, in his epistle dedicating Cruelle Énigme

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[1]Edith Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction," SRL, X (April 7, 1934), 603.

[2]Lyon N. Richardson, Henry James ("American Writer Series"; New York: American Book Co., 1941), p. 77.

[3]Ibid., p. 81. [4]Ibid., p. 85.

(1885) to Henry James, Paul Bourget writes:

> Permettez-moi, mon cher Henry James, de placer votre nom à la premiere page de ce livre, en souvenir du temps où je commençai à l'écrire, qui fut le temps aussi où nous nous sommes connu. . . . Nous tombions d'accord que les lois imposées au romancier par les diverse esthétiques se ramènent en définitive à une seul: donner un impression personnelle de la Vie.[1]

Again, note what Vernon Lee writes of the same aspect of the novelist's power and duty:

> And there is within the power of the novelist, a kind of reality, a quality which affects us as truthfulness, which far surpasses in efficacy the utmost fidelity to single cases, or the highest clearness of typical diagrams. What this quality consists in, on what it depends, is one of the many mysteries of aesthetics. . . the only name I can find for it is sympathy, or passionate personal interest. . . . [The work of the great novelist] affects us as being so much of life which the author has gone through . . . that life has indeed been lived by the author, not in the body, most likely, but in the spirit; he has really been one of those characters in the fervour of sympathetic creation, for there is nothing here which has been observed, constructed, invented--it has been a reality, an inevitable sequence in the imaginative experience of the writer.[2]

Precisely when, then, and from whom did Edith Wharton derive her ideas about presentness and reality in fiction? From Henry James during one of their frequent conversations? From Paul Bourget when he visited at Newport? Or from Vernon Lee as they drove through the Italian countryside talking of art and life? It is impossible to say.

Another example of the difficulty in tracing the exact lines of influence occurs in any attempt to trace the source of Mrs. Wharton's insistence on the moral substance of literature and its corollary

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[1] Paul Bourget, Cruelle Énigme (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1885), p. i.

[2] Vernon Lee, Gospels of Anarchy and Other Contemporary Studies (London: Bretano's, 1909), pp. 251-58.

ramifications in criticism. At a time when writers were busying themselves with art-for-art and with slices-of-life, when the artist's morality and ethical responsibility were popularly discredited and sometimes considered as mere phantasy, Mrs. Wharton maintained that such responsibility should lie at the heart of all great literature. She writes,

> A good subject, then, must contain in itself something that sheds a light on our moral experience. If it is incapable of this expansion, this vital radiation, it remains, however showy a surface it presents, a mere irrelevant happening, a meaningless scrap of fact torn out of its context. But the wide creative vision . . . seeks by instinct those subjects in which some phase of our common plight stands forth dramatically and typically, subjects which, in themselves, are a kind of summary or foreshortening of life's dispersed and inconclusive occurrences.[1]

All great literature, then, according to Mrs. Wharton, must deal with "our moral experience"; it must record the "common human plight" and conclusively order the dispersed and inconclusive experiences of life. Similarly, it is implied, the critic must ask, apparently from a moral viewpoint, Was the work worth doing? Any or all of these ideas of Mrs. Wharton's might have come from Vernon Lee, Bernard Berenson, Paul Bourget, or Henry James. For example, Vernon Lee writes:

> We are mistaken, therefore, in looking on literature as an art exactly like others . . . For only the art of words can thus enlarge our moral and intellectual life, and only it, therefore, has a right to the price of such expansion of experience and understanding.[2] . . . Studies . . . have convinced me that . . . literature becomes an art through one great incidental characteristic: the momentary living in the modes of eternity, with its resultant bracing and clarifying of the soul. This is the central miracle,

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[1] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, pp. 28-29.

[2] Vernon Lee, The Handling of Words and Other Studies in Literary Psychology (London: John Lane, 1923), p. 98.

blessedness and blessing of all art.[1]

Similarly, Bernard Berenson states:

> Ethical considerations and questions of conduct are nevertheless not excluded in one's appreciation of the work of art; nor indeed can aesthetical values, resting as they ultimately do on instinct and will, be separated from ethical.[2]

With equal emphasis, Paul Bourget writes in his preface to Le Disciple:

> Dans ces temps de conscience troublée et de doctrines contradictoires, attache-toi [young man of France], comme à la branche de salut, à la phrase sacrée: "Il faut juger l'arbre par ses fruits." Il y a une réalite dont tu ne peux pas douter, car tu la possèdes, tu la sens, tu la vois à chaque minute: c'est ton âme. Parmi les idées qui t'assaillent, il en est qui rendent ton âme moins capable d'aimer, moins capable de vouloir. Tiens pour assuré que ces idées sont fausses par un point, si subtiles te semblent-elles, soutenues par les beaux noms, parées de la magie des plus beaux talents.[3]

It is not enough, then, according to Bourget, that a work of art be beautiful aesthetically, or that it be sound intellectually; it must be conducive to the exercise of the soul in loving and willing. A critic of Bourget's thought analyzes his moral point as follows:

> C'est ici, sans aucun doute, le pointe essentiel de cette importante préface. À la formule de "l'art pour l'art" des artistes et des littérateurs; à celle du "vrai pour le vrai," des philosophes, Bourget oppose le rapport inéluctable qui, chez l'individu et dans la société, s'établit, de l'idée, de l'image, de la doctrine, du chef-d'oeuvre, à l'attitude pratique qui en découle et qui communique à ce qui sort de l'intelligence, à ce qui s'exprime par la parole ou par la plume, par le ciseau, ou par le pinceau, un force explosive dont ne saurait se désintéresser ni le philosophe, ni le littérateur, ni l'artiste. Ce sera toute la matière du Disciple.[4]

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[1] Ibid., p. 130.

[2] Bernard Berenson, Aesthetics and History (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1954), p. 147.

[3] Albert Autin, op. cit., p. 62.

[4] Ibid., pp. 62-63.

Such a detailed examination of the similar ideas among members of this group points up two facts: first, the essential intellectual homogeneity of this group in their thoughts concerning the obligation of the artist to create a sense of presentness, reality or a sense of life, and to work with subjects involving moral experience or ethical values; second, the enormous difficulty involved in trying to disentangle the many complex threads of critical and artistic influence that were finally woven into the fabric of Mrs. Wharton's criticism. One might also point out that the problems connected with this influence are not limited only to the questions of reality and morality in literature. The same problem arises in an attempt to reach the source of Mrs. Wharton's ideas concerning the sensitivity of the artist, the principle of selection, the merits of style, the problems of characterization, and the treatment of time in fiction. On some of these questions she sometimes agreed with two or three members of the group, sometimes with none.

It is worth repeating that since Mrs. Wharton received no formal, scholarly training, her circle of friends constituted the greatest single influence upon her literary and critical ideas. It should not, however, be assumed that all this influence was positive; that is to say, that the group ideas were a kind of mine from which she extracted those critical nuggets which appealed to her fancy or taste. The theories and artistic practices of the group also exerted upon her what might be called a negative influence. In other words, some of the group furnished her with theories and artistic practices which by their very uncongeniality offered her the opportunity to criticise and by disagreement to delineate more carefully her own ideas and theories. For example,

Mrs. Wharton disagreed with James's technique. She observed that James fell increasingly under the spell of his own formula, that from being an unconsciously operative law, it became an inexorable convention, and that

> to turn the difficulty created by his growing reluctance to "shift the consciousness", he invented the "chorus" of unnaturally inquisitive and ubiquitous hangers-on, the Assinghams and others, who . . . snoop and pry and report in The Wings of the Dove, The Sacred Fount, and The Golden Bowl.[1]

Elsewhere, she records the following critical episode with James:

> . . . His latest novels, for all their profound moral beauty, seemed to me more and more lacking in atmosphere, more and more severed from that thick nourishing human air in which we all live and move. The characters in The Wings of the Dove and The Golden Bowl seemed isolated in a Crookes tube for our inspection. . . . Preoccupied by this, I one day said to him: "What was your idea in suspending the four principal characters in The Golden Bowl in the void? What sort of life did they lead when they were not watching each other, and fencing with each other? Why have you stripped them of all human fringes we necessarily trail after us through life?" I had assumed his system was a deliberate one, carefully thought out, and had been genuinely anxious to hear his reasons.[2]

Further negative criticism arose from the criticism Mrs. Wharton's friends offered to her works. Thus she reports:

> Another day . . . the work under [James's] scalpel was The Custom of the Country--after prolonged and really generous praise of my book he suddenly and irrepressibly burst forth: "But of course you know--as how should you, with your infernal keenness of perception, not know?--that in doing your tale you had under your hand a magnificent subject, and that you used it as a mere incident and then passed it by.[3]

In addition, Mrs. Wharton records the strictures Paul Bourget placed on

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[1]Edith Wharton, "Henry James in His Letters," p. 202.

[2]Simon Nowell-Smith (comp.), The Legend of the Master (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 112.

[3]Ibid., p. 109.

her methods of characterization:

> Bourget me grondait toujours parce que dans mes livres je n'expliquais pas assez les personnages; je lui repondais qu'il sous-estimait l'intelligence de ses lecteurs en supposant qu'il fallait longuement disséquer d'avance le mobile de chaque acte, presque de chaque parole, au lieu de les laisser se révèler par la parole et l'action des personnages.[1]

In addition to such instances as these, Vernon Lee wrote a critical preface designed to introduce the Italian edition of The House of Mirth, and although the book did not appear, Mrs. Wharton had the stimulating experience of criticism at the hands of another of her friends.[2]

This was the group of artists and critics with whom Edith Wharton identified herself; this was the group of litterateurs who exerted the greatest influence, both positive and negative, on her own literary theory. They obviously never formed themselves into a "school" of literature, and they never joined together to promote and mutually admire one another's work. When they admired and approved, it was with sincerity, conviction, and integrity. When they criticised, it was on principle

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[1]Edith Wharton, "Souvenirs de Bourget d'Outremer," La Revue Hebdomadaire, VI (June, 1936), 284.

[2]Actually, unfavorable criticism was often exchanged between members of the group. Note, for example, Henry James's remarks on Paul Bourget. "Have you read P. B.'s Sensations d'Italie? If you haven't, do--it is one of the most exquisite of books. Have you read any of his novels? If you haven't, don't, though they have remarkable parts. Make an exception, however, for Terre Promise, which is to appear a few months hence, and which I have been reading in proof, here--if on trial, indeed, you find you can stand so suffocating an analysis. It is perhaps 'psychology' gone mad--but it is an extraordinary production." Percy Lubbock, The Letters of Henry James (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), I, p. 195. Note also Vernon Lee's remarks on Bourget: ". . . the psychological novelist traffics in people's ignorance, and men like Bourget and Maupassant manufacture individuals and types much as our earliest ancestors made up bird-women, bull-men, and that magnificent human document, the bronze chimaera of Arezzo." Vernon Lee, Gospels of Anarchy . . ., p. 237.

and with honesty. Their warm friendship, essential intellectual agreement, and seriousness before the problems of art created an atmosphere congenial to the development of greatness. Their unflagging devotion to the art of fiction caused them to allow freedom of thought and practice, freedom to discuss fully the motives, purposes, and obligations of the artist as well as the effects of his style, technique, and craft. There was among them the attracting, stimulating force of essential agreement on the philosophy of art, essential homogeneity of social background, essential similarity of personality and temperament. There was, moreover, because of their individual critical acumen, the stimulation to produce works which would assure the security of the individual's place within the group, and the challenge to formulate principles of literature and criticism which would be worthy of acceptance or at least of serious consideration. Small wonder, then, that Mrs. Wharton felt compelled to produce her best art and to bring to some form, her most closely reasoned principles of literary criticism and theory.

Special attention should be given to literary influence from people who either were not Mrs. Wharton's friends and contemporaries or were not, strictly speaking, literary people. In the first category fall Goethe, Sainte-Beuve, and Arnold. In spite of her unscholarly method she apparently did plunge in and out of their writings and she did not emerge entirely empty-handed. To Goethe, for example, she attributes two of her ideas. First she observes the "Goethean principle that 'those who remain imprisoned in the false notion of their own originality will always fall short of what they might have accomplished.'"[1]

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[1] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, p. 34.

Second, and perhaps more important, since she demonstrates a knowledge of Goethe's art as well as of his criticism, is her following observation:

> Goethe declared that only the Tree of Life was green, and that all theories were gray; and he also congratulated himself on never "having thought about thinking." But if he never thought about thinking he did think a great deal about his art, and some of the axioms he laid down for its practice go deeper than those of the professed philosophers.[1]

Matthew Arnold's influence seems to have gone somewhat deeper. In two instances in The Writing of Fiction she refers to him. For example, she quotes him in the following passage:

> To know any one thing one must not only know something of a great many others, but also, as Matthew Arnold long since pointed out, a great deal more of one's immediate subject than any partial presentation of it visibly includes.[2]

And in the following passage she indicates her knowledge of Arnold by her casual allusion to him:

> But though this [the merging of conflicting points of view under the stress of high creative capacity] is true, it is true only of the greatest novelists--those who, as Matthew Arnold said of Shakespeare, do not abide our question but are free.[3]

In addition to such references as these, Mrs. Wharton names Matthew Arnold again and again in both her critical and fictional work. One of the more pertinent indications that Arnold's influences may have been greater than Goethe's lies in the fact that she made some of his ideas her own. It seems, for example, that Arnold's famous dictum of "the criticism of life" lies at the heart of the following statement, but it is apparently so close to Mrs. Wharton that she does not mention Arnold's name.

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[1] Ibid., p. 116. [2] Ibid., p. 19. [3] Ibid., p. 136.

> Any subject [she writes] considered in itself must first of all respond in some way to that mysterious need of a judgment on life[1] of which the most detached human intellect, provided it be a normal one, cannot, apparently, rid itself.[2]

Although Arnold contributed many details and articulated many principles found in Mrs. Wharton's theory of literature, it was probably Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (more than any other non-contemporary critic) who controlled and shaped the spirit and temper of her criticism. Not only did she call Sainte-Beuve the greatest of all critics,[3] but she also named a collection of poems, Eternal Passions in English Poetry, after a phrase distinctively his. Moreover, Sainte-Beuve's definition of a classic shows just how close Mrs. Wharton's attitudes were to his.

> A true classic, as I should like to hear it defined, is an author who has enriched the human mind, increased its treasure, and caused it to advance a step; who has discovered some moral and not equivocal truth, or revealed some eternal passion[4] in the heart where all seemed to be known and discovered; who has expressed his thought, observation, or invention, in no matter what form, only provided it be broad and great, refined and sensible, sane and beautiful in itself; who has spoken to all in his own peculiar style, a style which is found to be also that of the whole world, a style new without neologism, new and old, easily contemporary with all time.[5]

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[1] Italics mine.

[2] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, pp. 26-27.

[3] Edith Wharton, "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," SRL, X (January 27, 1934), 433.

[4] Italics mine.

[5] Charles A. Sainte-Beuve, "What Is a Classic," Vol. XXXII of The Harvard Classics, ed. Charles E. Norton (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909), p. 124. Edith Wharton records having read Sainte-Beuve's "Lundi's" in A Backward Glance, p. 66. There is also a similarity between Sainte-Beuve's concept of the "temple of taste" and Berenson's concept of the "House of Life."

Here one finds Mrs. Wharton's emphasis on morality, sanity, originality, and structure.

Somewhat outside the circle of her closest friends and most frequent companions, but nevertheless a contemporary critic who exerted influence on Mrs. Wharton's literary thought was W. C. Brownell, her first editor. Their acquaintance began when Mrs. Wharton submitted specimens of her first fiction to Scribner's Magazine, where Brownell served as literary critic, and their friendship developed when they found they had common ideas and similar taste. As she relied on the work of Vernon Lee when she wrote of Italy, Mrs. Wharton leaned heavily on Brownell's French Traits when she wrote French Ways and their Meaning (1919). But in criticism specifically their acquaintance was most fruitful. Mrs. Wharton calls Brownell the "most discerning literary critic" of her day and the "best critic after Bourget and James." In a tribute to him, shortly after his death, Mrs. Wharton writes:

> This sense of perspective, this power to comprehend and relate to each other different traditions and alien ideals, was the beginning of William Brownell's art; and no great critic has ever been able to do with less.[1] [Brownell] achieved the difficult feat of setting up a standard which was classical without being academic, so in his spoken counsels the eagerest openmindedness was combined with an unwavering perception of final values . . . the sense of his wisdom and sympathy was always with me, like a guiding touch on my shoulder. Even now that light hand remains, to stimulate and restrain . . .[2]

One of her specific affinities to the critical thought of Brownell's is also pointed up in this same essay. In describing Brownell's criticism

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[1]Edith Wharton, "W. C. Brownell," Scribner's Magazine, LXXXIV (November, 1928), 596.

[2]Ibid., p. 601.

of Hawthorne, she writes,

> . . .[Brownell] adds that all this is "not convincing to those who believe that the artistic synthesis of nature should be more rather than less definite than its material." (I italicize this as a singularly happy summary of a central principle of creative art.)[1]

Since Brownell's idea coincides so closely with James's notion of "the solidity of specification," it is impossible to determine from which (if indeed from either) Edith Wharton derived her notions of reality in fiction. This passage does, however, point up in high relief the similarity between Mrs. Wharton's ideas and those of her early counselor, who, in spite of his greatness, remained on the periphery of her circle of literary friends.

A special place and special attention must be given to the influence of Walter Berry, who strictly speaking was not a man of letters although he had acquired refined tastes and genuine culture. Percy Lubbock points to Berry as the greatest single influence in Edith Wharton's life. Berry, himself, "an international lawyer of high repute, [whose] career was divided between important appointments, first at Washington, later at Cairo," was never fully accepted by Edith Wharton's literary friends. He was, of course, accepted socially; he dined with them, sometimes corresponded with them, and even presented Henry James with a dressing-case, a gift that drew from James one of his most playful and delightful letters.[2] He remained, however, forever on the periphery of the circle; he was exclusively Edith Wharton's friend.

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Lubbock, The Letters of Henry James, II, pp. 217-20.

Although the reports of the value of Berry's friendship and guidance conflict, all writers agree that his influence was as deep as it was extensive. He represents a pervading force which guided her writing from a time before her marriage until his death in 1927.

Because data concerning the Wharton-Berry relationship are rare, and because the precise nature of their relationship cannot now--and perhaps never will--be determined, it seems advisable to give fully both conflicting views. It should be pointed out, however, that the wide disparity between Mrs. Wharton's and Percy Lubbock's evaluation of this relationship may have been caused simply by their lack of disinterestedness. Mrs. Wharton and Walter Berry were friends long before she married, and if their relationship were as close as Lubbock seems to imply, her high valuation of Berry's guidance might have been caused by her love and affection for the man. On the other hand, Percy Lubbock makes it clear in his Portrait of Edith Wharton that he detested Berry while he admired Mrs. Wharton with tender affection. Therefore, his hatred of Berry might have caused him to disparage Berry's influence, though it is somewhat difficult from the present distance to understand why Lubbock thought that Berry's influence was downright sinister and responsible for most of the defects in Mrs. Wharton's art.

Whatever the true effect, value, and quality of Berry's influence was, Mrs. Wharton describes it as follows:

> No critic was ever severer [than Walter Berry], but none had more respect for the artist's liberty. He taught me to be satisfied with my own work, but never to let my inward conviction as to the rightness of anything I had done be affected by outside opinion . . . He looked through what I had written, handed it back, and said simply: "Don't worry about how you're to go on. Just write down everything you feel like telling." The

> advice freed me once for all from the incubus of an artificially pre-designed plan, and sent me rushing ahead with my tale, letting each incident create the next, and keeping in sight only the novelist's essential sign-post: the inner significance of the "case" selected. Yet when the novel was done, I remember how meticulously he studied it from the point of view of language, marking down faulty syntax and false metaphors, smiling away over-emphasis and unnecessary repetitions, helping me patiently through the beginner's verbal perplexities, yet never laying hands on what he considered sacred: the soul of the novel, which is (or should be) the writer's own soul.
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> I suppose there is one friend in the life of each of us who seems not a separate person, however dear and beloved, but an expansion, an interpretation, of one's self, the very meaning of one's soul. Such a friend I found in Walter Berry . . .
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> He alone not only encouraged me to write, as others had already done, but had the patience and the intelligence to teach me how. Others praised, some flattered--he alone took the trouble to analyze and criticise. The instinct to write had always been there; it was he who drew it forth, shaped it and set it free. From my first volume . . . nothing in my work escaped him, no detail was too trifling to be examined and discussed, gently ridiculed or quietly praised. He never overlooked a defect . . . yet I never remember to have been disheartened by it, for he had so deep a respect for the artist's liberty that he never sought to restrict my imagination or to check its flight. His invariable rule, though he prized above all things concision and austerity, was to encourage me to write as my own instinct impelled me. . .
>
> . . . his criticisms became increasingly searching. With each book he exacted a higher standard in economy of expression, in purity of language, in the avoidance of the hackneyed and the precious. . . his own care was to help me do better whatever I had set out to do. . .
>
> I cannot picture what the life of the spirit would have been to me without him. He found me when my mind and soul were hungry and thirsty, and he fed them till our last hour together. It is such comradeships, made of seeing and dreaming, and thinking and laughing together, that make one feel that for those who have shared them there can be no parting.[1]

Such, then, is Mrs. Wharton's valuation of her relationship with Walter Berry. The very language of her account leaves little doubt about the depth of Berry's penetration into the springs of Mrs. Wharton's art. Moreover, her manifest admiration and approval of all that Berry

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[1] Wharton, A Backward Glance, pp. 114-19.

approved, or said, or did leaves little occasion for skepticism about his power to mould and manipulate her taste, her vision, and her values.

By a curious coincidence there are in Mrs. Wharton's tribute to Walter Berry three major principles identifiable with Henry James. These are the inviolability of the artist's vision, the freedom of the artist to choose his subject, and the obligation of the artist to treat his subject fully enough to get to the inner significance of the case selected. In view of this it is possible that as Mrs. Wharton glanced backward over her career, she allowed the devotional light around Walter Berry to illuminate more than was properly his. It is also possible that she articulated Berry's critical suggestions in Jamesian terms, thereby confusing the lines of critical impact and valuing Berry more highly than his actual influence might warrant. She quite obviously, however, recognized the depth and dimensions of Berry's influence, and that she thought it was good is unquestionable.

In contrast to Edith Wharton's account, Percy Lubbock paints a very grim picture of the Wharton-Berry relationship:

> To this friend [Walter Berry] she has paid her own tribute in some deeply charged pages of A Backward Glance, charged with much more than they say, and it would be easy to leave the subject in her hands. She undoubtedly felt that it was to him she owed, as to no one else, the stirring of her imagination, the training of her thought, the knowledge and development of her talent, and that the wisdom of his counsel, accompanying her to the day of his death, was the support of her career. It is as it may be. . . . None of her friends, to put it plainly, thought she was the better for the surrender of her fine free spirit to the control of a man, I am ready to believe, of strong intelligence and ability--but also, I certainly know, of a dry and narrow and supercilious temper. Neither he indeed nor anyone else could chill the warmth of her response to all beauty, and no one, it is very sure, taught her to write but herself with her assiduous practice. But as for the ideas, the intellectual fare on which she was to live

> for so long, his influence was evident, and I call it (I seem to meet many an assenting eye) disastrous. The education she took from him was to hold her fast, and I believe that whenever she seemed . . . to shut up her mind in a box . . . the reason of it went back to Walter Berry.
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> He was an insatiable reader, a true glutton of books; he was a hard worker, with a wide acquaintance among men of learning and letters and affairs; he was a good linguist, and a traveller who searched and mastered the art and culture of many lands. As a critic, a student, a tourist, he shared with Edith many enterprises after her heart, and his practical experience helped her in difficult times. This on the right side. On the other there was very plainly the harshness of a dogmatist, the bleakness of an egotist, and the pretentiousness . . . of a snob; and from all these she suffered hurts in her growth that were lasting. Thus it came about that she was to be left high and dry, for many a year to come, upon the established rationalism of his day; and there she sat on, refusing to argue about a closed subject, while the queries and researches of the following days were so insidiously reopening it.[1]

Here, then, is the other side of the Wharton-Berry relationship, the side seen by Edith Wharton's friends, among whom Walter Berry was obviously no favored figure. The differences in the value judgments made by Lubbock and Mrs. Wharton are too apparent to be worth comment. It is noteworthy, however, to point out specifically the two points upon which they both agree: Walter Berry exerted an enormous influence on the life and writing of Edith Wharton, but--and perhaps this is the more important point--he did not teach her to write. Percy Lubbock states this specifically, and Mrs. Wharton alludes to it by her statement "The instinct to write had always been there; it was he who drew it forth and shaped it." Since Mrs. Wharton states that Berry left free and inviolable the "soul" of her writing, that portion of it which derived from her "instinct," it may be judiciously concluded that her

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[1] Lubbock, A Portrait of Edith Wharton, pp. 48-49.

writing, her style, her mode of expression was essentially at one with her inner self, while the spirit that brightened, or as the case may be, darkened that expression was Walter Berry. In other words, it seems that her essential genius for writing, her ability to see and uniquely receive intense impressions from reality were qualities the nature of which were inviolable, were indeed the true Edith Wharton. On the other hand, the shaping or swaying of this genius in order to determine what it would see and how it would evaluate its perception, seems to be a function of Walter Berry.

The extent to which such an influence might operate is, of course, enormous, and according to all remaining testimony, it was. Such a definition of the quality of the influence, however, seems to comport equally with Mrs. Wharton's view that Berry contributed richly to her art and with Lubbock's view that Berry furnished the "ideas, the intellectual fare on which she was to live for so long." Whether Walter Berry furnished the only medium in which her genius could grow, as Mrs. Wharton intimates, or whether his was the only pervading influence that blighted her genius, as Percy Lubbock indicates, scholarship will perhaps never determine. It is now clear, however, that in spite of the lucid brilliance of her style, the closely articulated structure of her literary forms, the depth, gravity, and pathos of her best subjects--she did somehow narrowly miss greatness. Whether she had the potentialities of a greater spirit, a greater soul which might have been realized in her artistic creations must remain an enigma. It would be deceptively simple to portray Edith Wharton as an artistic victim of her human love, as a woman who, because of her love for an inferior soul,

could not fully realize her own genius. The facts of the relationship are not, however, sufficiently clear to justify such a conclusion. Walter Berry remains, then, a kind of unknown quantity both in Edith Wharton's personal life and in her artistic life. At his best he probably made genuinely valuable contributions to her art and theory; at his worst, he probably only reinforced the worst aspects of her early experience among the socially elect.

Henry James, Paul Bourget, Bernard Berenson, and Vernon Lee, W. C. Brownell, and Walter Berry, Goethe, Arnold, and Sainte-Beuve furnished the principal sources and exerted the principal influences upon Mrs. Wharton's critical ideas and literary theories. How much or how little any one of these persons contributed to the totality of her theory, to what extent he modified and shaped it, it is not the present purpose to determine. It is, however, much to the point to see her against the background of these literary figures in order to define more accurately and discover more fully by what principles she criticised tendencies in modern fiction, analyzed values in art, and reviewed works by her predecessors and contemporaries; to discover the principles upon which she founded her own art, developed her unique style, and chose her subjects; and finally to discover into what areas these principles ramified.

CHAPTER II

MRS. WHARTON'S CRITICAL THEORIES: GENERAL CONCEPTS

Although the extent of the influence her friends had upon Mrs. Wharton's critical theories is not easy to determine, it is clear from her own accounts of her critics and friends that she had a high regard for the accomplishments of the formal literary critic. It is also clear that she realized the positive benefits criticism could bestow on literature. Clearly she attributes part of the excellence of her work to the quality of the criticism she received from friends like Henry James and Walter Berry. The same careful textual criticism she received from them she also accorded to others. Vivienne de Watteville, for example, records the following experience:

> For two years I was happy with the happiness of creative work, and when the proofs came in I wondered for the hundredth time whether I should dare ask Edith to write a preface. It must be she or no one, I thought jealously, for it was her book, she had called it forth. When she told me to send her the proofs, I begged that she would glance through them with a red pencil. . .
>
> She . . . sent me a whole typed page of dry invaluable criticism, and granted me what every artist prays for, the opportunity to see the master at work, to be told not only "this is bad," but why it is bad, and how to put it right. For Edith . . . provided far more than a sheet of abstract criticism; she had done what not one writer in a thousand would have troubled to do, which was to go through the whole proof page by page, pencilling comments and suggestions,

even correcting the punctuation.[1]

Mlle. de Watteville does not record in just what sense Mrs. Wharton "called forth" her book, but it is clear that she felt that her novel had been improved by Mrs. Wharton's criticism.

Mrs. Wharton felt that a national literature as well as individual works could be improved--that is that higher literary standards might be more consistently met--if that nation had a body of competent and interested critics. As proof of this, she points to French literary history, and indicates that the excellence of French literature is in no small measure due to the healthy influence of the sensitive French critics, such as Sainte-Beuve, Anatole France, Jules Lemaitre, and Emile Faguet, who "leave rich deposits of literary criticism."[2] Moreover, she thought that criticism as a literary activity was inevitable. In making a distinction between an artist and an amateur according to his "sense of technique," she writes: "This sense implies an ever-active faculty of self-criticism, and therefore a recognition of the need, and indeed of the inevitability of critics."[3]

The particularly high standards of French literature, then, are maintained by competent critics who meet correspondingly high standards. In France, she writes,

> . . . the reviewer of fiction is expected to have as disciplined an acquaintance with his subject, its forms, its limitations, and its history, as the critic, say, of history or of paleontology. He must have some range of reference, and consequently

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[1] Lubbock, A Portrait of Edith Wharton, p. 187.

[2] Edith Wharton, "The Criticism of Fiction," The Living Age, CCLXXXII (July, 1914), 206.

[3] Ibid., p. 206.

> some kind of perspective. And above all, he must have a sense of form: form in fiction and form in his criticism of it. . .[1]

But criticism and the critic do more than simply trace "form"; they are "concerned with every detail of creation, and hence, and above all, with the point of view of the creator."[2] French criticism, which Mrs. Wharton sets as a model, also "presupposes an intelligent criticism of life in general, and the value of such a commentary is visible in the freedom with which French fiction has always been allowed to deal with life."[3]

At the end of her essay, "The Criticism of Fiction," Mrs. Wharton endorses two critical questions first asked by Goethe: What has the author tried to represent? and How far has he succeeded? To these, she adds one of her own: Was the subject chosen worth representing? In her further description of what the critic should look for, she states that he should analyze both character and events. He should find out what particular thing each novel is trying to be, and should determine the author's particular view of life, not indeed in the conversations of his characters, "but rather from the mute evidence of the author's way of dealing with his subject."[4] Further she notes, "It is only by viewing the novel as an organic whole, by considering its form and function as one, that the critic can properly estimate its details of style and construction."[5] Supporting and more closely defining her meaning of organic form, she continues,

> As the conclusion of the tale should be contained in the germ

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[1] Ibid., p. 207. [2] Ibid., p. 208. [3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid., p. 209. [5] Ibid., p. 210.

> in its first page, so its length, its language, the successive illuminating incidents into which it flashes, should be implicit in its subject, and should therefore be judged only in relation to that subject. . .[1]

This leads to her last generalization, that

> General conclusions must not be sought . . . in the fate of the characters, and still less in their own comments on it, but in the kind of atmosphere the telling of their history creates, the light it casts on questions beyond its borders. . .[2]

Aside from the important principles of literary creation implied in these remarks, one single important fact of critical theory stands out most clearly: in order to be valid, criticism must deal with the style, structure, or method, of a novel only as these relate to the subject of the novel. In other words, no critic is justified in condemning a novel if the form, style, and method fully realize the author's intent. He can condemn only that novel which fails to realize the author's intentions, or the one which realizes intentions which were at the outset unworthy of realization. This indicates a critical flexibility and a viewpoint of relative standards not often associated with Edith Wharton. Indeed, in her actual criticism of her contemporaries evidences of such tolerance are not easily found, but in her theory she contended that the seriousness of the author's intentions and the completeness of his realization of them were the only valid bases of criticism.[3] Although her practice did not always indicate it, this idea

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[1] Ibid. [2] Ibid.

[3] The similarity between her views and James's is, of course, evident, but it is noteworthy that James complimented Mrs. Wharton on the force of this essay. He writes, "Beautifully said, thought, felt, inimitably jeté, the paper excited great attention and admiration here." Lubbock, The Letters of Henry James, II, p. 371.

remained consistent throughout her literary career. For example, fourteen years after "The Criticism of Fiction," she wrote an article in vindication of her own literary methods and subjects, and here she repeats the essentials of her earlier thought:

> . . . I am persuaded that the reader heroic enough to survey the ground I have travelled would find that [in spite of cavilling criticism] I had gone telling my tales in the same old way (which happened to be my way), without, as far as I can see, ever modifying my method [except] as my subject required.[1]

In addition to the methods he employs, Mrs. Wharton contended that the artist must also be allowed his choice of subject, for it too will be determined by his intention, his experience, and his sense of realness. The novelist, she writes, ". . . should write of any class of people who become instantly real to him as he thinks about them," and he must "stick to the scope and plastic interest which are to his hand." "The only rules to be considered in art [then] evolve from the inside, and are not to be applied ready-made from the outside." And considering her own practice, Mrs. Wharton insisted that she "continued to let [her] tales shape themselves in obedience to their inner organism." "A novel [she concluded] is good or bad in proportion to the depth of the author's nature, the richness of his imagination, and the extent to which he is able to realize his intention."[2] The competent critic must remember the relation of method to subject and intent, and be aware of "the incessant renovation of old types by new creative

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[1] Edith Wharton, "A Cycle of Reviewing," Spectator, CXLI (November 23, 1928), 45. Emendation, "except," is mine; otherwise this statement is inconsistent with the thought elsewhere in this article.

[2] Ibid.

action."[1] He must maintain his training and his "sense of perspective, the power to comprehend and relate to each other different traditions and ideals."[2] If he can do this, he may approach the quality of the French critic, the best, and make important contributions to the development of his national literature.

Mrs. Wharton found the reverse of these high accomplishments in American publishers, reviewers, and critics. And she held the inadequacy of American criticism, in part at least, responsible for what she felt was the inadequacy of American literature. She felt that American editors and critics were trying to standardize literary creation by influencing writers to recreate old effects in similar ways and to select their subjects from "just folks."[3] These critics, she stated, found genuineness only in the rudimentary and condemned the complex as unauthentic.[4] In summary she writes,

> Here, I believe, one puts one's finger on the two chief weaknesses of modern reviewing: the idea that the reader wants only a certain "line of goods," and must have it, and the idea that certain categories of human beings are of less intrinsic interest than others.[5]

These were the qualifications, then, that Mrs. Wharton placed on competent and incompetent literary critics. But criticism itself--"the only kind worthy of the name"--she defined as "an analysis of subject

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[1] Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction," p. 603.

[2] Wharton, "W. C. Brownell," p. 596.

[3] Wharton, "The Great American Novel," p. 651.

[4] Ibid., p. 652.

[5] Wharton, "A Cycle of Reviewing," p. 45.

and manner."[1] The inter-relationship of these two terms makes this criticism relevant only to the individual literary artifact, the individual novel or story. She conceived, however, of a further stage in the critical art: the investigation of the "story-telling process." The extension of the critical area is made through "manner" of treatment, "the technique of fiction," and the quality of the artist's mind. Thus, a full view of her idea of criticism must include the following statement:

> The analysis of the story-telling process may be divided into two parts: that which concerns the technique of fiction (in the widest sense), and that which tries to look into what, for want of a simpler term, one must call by the old bardic name of inspiration.[2]

Upon Mrs. Wharton's own bases, then, a principle of organization for the survey of her literary theories may be formed. First, What is the art-object? What is the literary artifact that results from the rhythmic correspondence between subject (as idea) and manner (as realization). Second, What are the principles which determine the successful realization of an idea? And third, What are the attributes of the artist's aesthetic vision which determine his inspiration and lend a particular quality to his literary production?

Before setting out upon a survey of Mrs. Wharton's theories, however, it might be well to emphasize two points, the first by simply repeating it. Form, manner, and technique are relative to the subject of a novel and can be praised or disparaged in it only in respect to

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[1] Edith Wharton, "The Vice of Reading," North American Review CLXXVII (October, 1903), 520.

[2] Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 199.

how fully they realize the author's intention. Second, it should be pointed out that "only by viewing the novel as an organic whole, by considering its form and function as one . . . can the critic properly estimate its details of style and construction."[1] There are, strictly speaking, no rules for composition in Mrs. Wharton's theory. In fact, she was skeptical of rigid formulations of artistic principles. She writes, for example, "it is less dangerous for an artist to sacrifice his artistic instincts to the pursuit of money or popularity than to immolate them to a theory. . ."[2] It was, in fact, on this very point that she took issue with Henry James's "later" practice. She writes:

> I was naturally much interested in James's technical theories and experiments, though I thought, and still think, that he tended to sacrifice to them that spontaneity which is the life of fiction. Everything, in the latest novels, had to be fitted into a predestined design, and design, in his strict geometrical sense, is to me one of the least important things in fiction.[3]

In her theory, then, there are few pre-designed rules to which literary subjects may be fitted but a great number of ideas on the relation of subject and technique, literary execution and historical standards, and of literary standards and human values.

Mrs. Wharton states in The Writing of Fiction:

> On the threshold of any theory of art its exponent is sure to be asked: "On what first assumption does your theory rest?" And in fiction, as in every other art, the only answer seems to be that any theory must begin by assuming the need of selection. . . . No matter how restricted an incident one is trying to give an account of, it cannot

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[1] Wharton, "The Criticism of Fiction," p. 210.

[2] Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction," p. 604.

[3] Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 190.

> but be fringed with details more and more remotely relevant, and beyond that with an outer mass of irrelevant facts which may crowd on the narrator simply because of some accidental propinquity in time or space. To choose between all this material is the first step toward coherent expression.[1]

This basic principle of selection is central to Mrs. Wharton's theory of what a literary art object is. It is the account of an experience which is brought to focus and intensified by the removal (through the process of selection) of irrelevant detail. Further, it is a narrative account of experiences which are divorced from accidental propinquity to themselves and to other facts and experiences. This central principle in her theory is expressed again and again in her writings and it remained consistently significant.[2]

From this principle, it follows that "the art of rendering life in fiction can never, in the last analysis, be anything, or need to be anything, but the disengaging of crucial moments from the welter of existence."[3] It is significant in this definition that art and life are set in clear opposition to one another, for it indicates Mrs. Wharton's insistence that art is not a reproduction of life, as in the sense of the realists and Naturalists; but rather that it is a rendering of it made by disengaging and selecting the crucial moments from life's customary confusion and meaninglessness. These special moments, which are the substance of the art form, are particularly meaningful. Thus she qualifies them by the term crucial which she defines as follows:

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[1] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, pp. 8-9.

[2] Cf. Wharton, "The Vice of Reading," p. 521, and Edith Wharton, "Marcel Proust," Yale Review (n.s.), XIV (January, 1925), 209.

[3] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, p. 14.

> . . . there must be some thing that makes them crucial, some recognizable relation to a familiar social or moral standard, some explicit awareness of the eternal struggle between man's contending impulses. . .[1]

Finally, because these moments are meaningful and divorced from accident, "the artistic synthesis should be more rather than less definite than its material."[2]

Mrs. Wharton never used the word imitation in the Aristotelian sense. The closest she ever came to "necessity and probability" was her insistence on an "unaccidental" propinquity of the episodes and experiences in art. Her ideas about the changes which occur when life-experiences are moulded into art-experiences more nearly approximate those ideas of Coleridge. And it might be pointed out that there is probably some significance in the fact that one of Coleridge's volumes is lying open in the library at the Willows when Weston arrives, and that Vance Weston, the young novelist, becomes first aware that Coleridge engaged in literary activities not represented in his college textbook. At any rate, the language she uses to describe the change is close to that employed by Coleridge. Thus she substitutes for the classical notion of imitation words like re-presentation, transposition, stylization, and transmutation. These are the processes which result from selection and which are necessary to the rendering of life in fiction. Thus she writes,

> It has been so often said that all art is re-presentation--the giving back in conscious form of the shapeless raw material of experience--that one would willingly avoid insisting on such a truism. . . . The attempt to give back any fragment of life in painting or sculpture or music presupposes

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[1] Ibid. [2] Wharton, "W. C. Brownell," p. 601.

> transposition, "stylization." To re-present in words is far more difficult, because the relation is so close between model and artist. The novelist works in the very material out of which the object he is trying to render is made. He must use, to express soul, the signs which soul uses to express itself. It is relatively easy to separate the artistic vision of an object from its complex and tangled actuality if one has to re-see it in paint or marble or bronze; it is infinitely difficult to render a human mind when one is employing the very word-dust with which thought is formulated.
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> Still, the transposition does take place as surely, if not as obviously, in a novel as in a statue. If it did not, the writing of fiction could never be classed among works of art, products of conscious ordering and selecting.[1]

The work of art, then, is the result of a process of consciously ordering and selecting experience and facts from nature, and transposing, transmuting them into a form where they are freed from accident, endowed with meaning, and made capable of yielding a more definite impression than the raw materials of nature itself.

As it stands, this principle of aesthetics, this distinction between art and actuality is not new. It is simply a restatement of long-accepted thought concerning artistic imitation. Some of Mrs. Wharton's qualifications of the process of imitation, however, go far to set her apart from many of her contemporaries. For example, she is separated from the superficial realists by her insistence on a selection which will not represent things as they <u>are</u> but as they ought to be; that is, that facts and experiences should be arranged in meaningful relationships as opposed to "real" relationships. Some critics did identify Mrs. Wharton with the realists,[2] and when the realist was James, she of course did not mind. She was contemptuous, however, of most of the

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[1]Wharton, <u>The Writing of Fiction</u>, pp. 16-17.

[2]Wharton, "A Cycle of Reviewing," p. 45.

others and she associated with their practice the grossest superficiality and the weakest artistic temperament. She writes, for example, that when it was discovered that subtle changes occur in characters because of their varied settings, religions, and economies, the discovery "led to experimentation in the mid-nineteenth century and realism was born with the exchange of the creative faculty for the kodak."[1] She was equally alienated from the Naturalists, for her definition of crucial moments--moments with some recognizable relation to a familiar social or moral standard--set her in distinct opposition to the less selective naturalistic principles. Moreover, she was alienated by the naturalistic idea that familiar social and moral standards were invalid phantasies anyway. The degree of her open hostility to Naturalism may be measured by her statement that in the development of modern letters the "feebler writers beat their brains out against the blank wall of Naturalism."[2] A corollary implication of her idea of selection is that the artistic representation of chaos is impossible, in fact a contradiction in terms. This qualification separated her from Dadaism, Futurism, and other forms of literary lunacy that swept Europe, America, and even her own beloved France during her life-time.

The literary values implied by Mrs. Wharton's description of artistic imitation find more complete expression in her discussion of the proper subject and form of literature. And her literary values distinguish her particular view of literary art from that most commonly

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[1] Wharton, "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," p. 433.

[2] Ibid.

accepted by her contemporaries. The right subjects for literature follow from her definition of crucial moments, the substance of literature. If these are to be moments which illuminate or define or show the human relationship with social and moral standards, it follows then that

> any subject considered in itself must first of all respond in some way to that mysterious need of a judgment on life of which the most detached human intellect, provided it be a normal one, cannot, apparently, rid itself.[1]

Indeed, Mrs. Wharton realized that a subject's value was partially, at least, relative to the artist's ability to see into it. "A gold mine," she writes, "is worth nothing unless the owner has the machinery for extracting the ore."[2] But a good subject, she concludes,

> must contain in itself something that sheds light on our moral experience. If it is incapable of this expansion, this vital radiation, it remains, however showy the surface it presents, a mere irrelevant happening, a meaningless scrap of fact torn out of its context.[3]

The competent and the great artist

> seeks by instinct those subjects in which some phase of our common plight stands forth dramatically and typically, subjects which, in themselves, are a kind of summary or foreshortening of life's dispersed and inconclusive occurrences.[4]

With these qualifications, then, ". . . the novelist's job is to tell a tale and to mirror human nature."[5]

The other principal area of theory which is colored by Mrs. Wharton's personal ideas is form in art. She has three distinct but related ideas of what form is. The first and least saturated with her

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[1]Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, pp. 26-27.

[2]Ibid., p. 26. [3]Ibid., pp. 28-29. [4]Ibid., p. 29.

[5]Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction," p. 603.

values is her definition of form simply "as the order, in time and importance, in which the incidents of the narrative are grouped."[1] This is the simple formal arrangement of the episodes and recorded experiences of the novel. It is determined, for example, by the choice of presenting the episodes in chronological sequence or in another order. It is also determined by the relative importance given to episodes and narrative accounts. That is to say, it is determined by the subordination in length and intensity of certain episodes which are simply related to condition a reader for the "proper" acceptance of the major episodes which carry the greater part of the emotion and the burden of the theme of the novel.

She also defines form as that which is the antithesis of subject, which is, as it were, the garments of the subject.[2] This definition is obviously more abstract. It deals with form as the structure which is the embodiment of theme and subject. It includes the arrangement of episodes, but it is clearly something more than that mechanical form. It more closely approximates the inevitable but abstract form which a certain subject must assume. It is the form which "grows with richness of content," as Mrs. Wharton wrote of G. C. Lodge's poetry.[3] It includes those matters of arrangement, style, and handling which make the total novel a correlative of the artist's original theme and idea. Necessarily abstract because the novel as structure does not assume

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[1] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, pp. 23-24.

[2] Wharton, "The Criticism of Fiction," p. 207.

[3] Edith Wharton, "George Cabot Lodge: An Appreciation of His Poetry," Scribner's Magazine, XLVII (February, 1910), 237.

dimensional and actual proportions, this form is equivalent to the form in sculpture which, though strictly speaking it is unintelligible, nevertheless conveys perfectly the artist's attitudes and his meaning; a form, for example, like Brancusi's "Bird in Flight."[1]

To this point, form is largely a matter of technique and skill. It is that form given by the simple arrangement of episodes, and, one step further, that form which the theme and subject of the novel assume if the writer is capable of realizing them in his medium, words. Further, it is an abstract form which fully realizes attitudes and insights of the author and which clothes his total idea so that it may be visible and communicable to others. In this sense, form is the abstract and external thing correlative to the internal idea of the author. Values, however, in these senses of form are not implied, for clearly these questions deal with how accurately the author has embodied his vision. These forms, then, may be given perfectly to visions unworthy of representation. And if this occurred, Mrs. Wharton would dub the result merely art for art's sake.

Her third definition of artistic form includes the value of the

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[1]Perhaps because this kind of form in the novel occurs only in the imagination of the author and the receptive reader, Mrs. Wharton could not explain it in the technical terms of literature. But the idea expressed here of form in literature is precisely that of form in painting or architecture as she describes it in Italian Backgrounds (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), pp. 112-13: "There must therefore be two recognized ways of judging a picture--by its technique and by its expression: that is, not the mere story it has to tell, but its power of rendering in line and colour the equivalent of some idea or of some emotion. There is the less reason for disputing such a claim because, given the power of seeing soul, as this faculty may be defined, the power of embodying the impression, of making it visible and comprehensible to others, is necessarily one of technique. . ."

artist's vision and the greatness of his soul. Indeed, it assumes her entire notion of the meaning of the literary impulse and the significance of literary creations. This sense of form is first related to mere intelligible, meaningful, structured perceptions. For example, she associates form and perception in the following statement: "Anglo-Saxons, by their lack of 'form' (and their lack of perception), are perpetually giving unintentional offense."[1] And she practically equates form and perception in the following definition of form:

> Form is the essence of a novel . . . the boundless gush of "life," to be tasted and savored, must be caught in some outstretched vessel of perception; and to perceive is to limit and choose.[2]

The form and essence of a novel, then, is the organization into which the author's selected perceptions of the boundless gush of life arrange themselves. Functioning here are the qualities of the artist's perceptions and the necessary form they must assume in order to communicate themselves. In addition this definition of form relates to the art object as it implies the two earlier senses of form.

In the figure of catching wine in a chalice, however, Mrs. Wharton extends the meaning of form to include something other than the art object. She relates the form of the novel to tradition, to originality, and to the entire history of artistic expression. Note, for example, that all artists have dipped into the same flood of wine. They have caught the same material, and the expression of that material has varied only as the quality of their perception has varied, or, to follow the

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[1] Edith Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1919), p. 140.

[2] Wharton, "The Criticism of Fiction," p. 207.

figure, as they dipped various kinds of vessels into the flood. Note again that in her discussions of subject (life or the flood) only those perceptions are worthwhile which contain "our common plight . . . dramatically and typically." Thus form is related to universality, and the novel fails to achieve its proper form unless it constructs out of the welter of existence those experiences which are essentially and commonly human, those problems, pains, and hopes which are typical of humanity. Form, then, becomes a function of the meaning of the novel and its applicability to the human condition.

One of the most important ideas here is that the experiences recorded and perceived by the artist are not significant because they are intense, meaningful, and important to him, or because they have a certain quality which his peculiar act of perception gives them. They achieve form and significance only when they can be related to the totality of human experience, only when their individual expression coincides with the traditional idioms and "stylizations" of literary communication so that they speak at once for all men. Mrs. Wharton states this in her description of permanent values of fiction:

> One . . . and the principal, is the creating of characters, which so possess us with the sense of their reality that we talk of Anna Karenina, Becky Sharp . ... as of real people whom we have known and lived with; and the other is the art of relating these characters to whatever general law of human experience made the novelist choose to tell their tale rather than another.[1]

It is, then, on this level of form--or universality--that the enduring, the permanent value of the novel and artistic expression is based.

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[1]Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction," p. 604.

By considering form in its full implications, new dimensions are added to such statements as the following:

> . . . nevertheless the trend in new fiction, not only in America and England, but on the continent, is chiefly toward the amorphous and the agglutinative. The novelists most in view reject form not only in the structure of their tales but in the drawing of the character.[1]

> I believe the initial mistake of most of the younger novelists, especially in England and America, has been the decision that the old forms were incapable of producing new ones.[2]

> . . . I know no theory more contrary to the free action of genius than the persuasion that any given formula--alphabet, language, or any generally accredited form of expression--is worn out because too many people have used it.[3]

Old forms, then, must be considered by the artist, for only within the accepted stylization of literary expression can new vision be meaningful.

There is no indication that Mrs. Wharton was aware of any paradox in her definitions of form as decreed by the individual subject and of form that is traditional. Actually, within Mrs. Wharton's terms of reference, a paradox does not clearly emerge, for she wrote of form in three distinct senses, and though the areas of reference overlap they do not control one another. For example, the traditional form, say, of a drama is a five act play. Any individual playwright is free to depart from this five act form if the departure conduces to the fullness of his expression. But in another sense there is an added traditional form in the drama, the necessity of its universality, its relevance to life, and "meaningfulness." It is, indeed, unusual to refer to this as a "form,"

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[1] Wharton, "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," p. 433. [2] Ibid.

[3] Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction," p. 603.

but Mrs. Wharton does in her third qualification of form. This is, as it were, the measure, the outline, the form of the individual play when it is projected against the general conclusions drawn from the totality of human experience as it is represented in art. This form must not escape the attention of the writer or playwright. The artist's method and the structure of his product must be functions of his subject, but in the realization of his subject and theme he must produce a form related to other traditional forms. There is a traditional form in which all tragic actions and characters occur. There is a form common to Oedipus, Hamlet, and Lear. The artist may use one act or fifteen if he is writing a tragedy, but if he misses the literary idiom which is the tragic form, his work is nothing. If he misses this form his work will be relevant only to himself, whereas if he achieves the tragic form his work will be relevant to all mankind. Here, then, there is an allowance made for the uniqueness of a thought or passion which is uniquely expressed in literature, but there is also an obligation to make this unique expression relevant to historical expression, the expression of all men. The paradox of form dissipates with these distinctions, and Mrs. Wharton writes, ". . . there will probably never come a time when Romeo and Juliet, Lear and Othello do not furnish material for reembodiment."[1] The vision, quality, and structure of a work of art, then, are entirely functions of the individual subject and author, but unless these are made to coincide with a higher manifestation of form, universality, they are not great literature.

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[1]Edith Wharton, "The Three Francescas," North American Review, CLXXV (July, 1902), 17.

These considerations bring up Mrs. Wharton's views of originality and tradition. Of Marcel Proust she wrote: "There is a certain sense in which genius is always new, the great originators draw as much from the past as from the present--and Proust was no exception."[1] It is clear from her praise of Proust and from her treatment of form, that the successful literary artist must work within the literary tradition. He must draw from the past, but if he is a genius, he will always be new. "The accumulated leaf-mould of tradition is essential to the nurture of new growths of art," she wrote, "whether or not those who cultivate them are aware of it."[2] Proust's strength, however, lay in his awareness of tradition and his use of the old methods of selection and design.[3] His newness lay in his desultory manner and parenthetical syntax, "but mostly in the shifting of emphasis caused by his extremely personal sense of values."[4] Strength and permanence of writing, then, depend on the artist's working within the tradition while

> true originality consists not in a new manner but in a new vision. That new, that personal vision is attained only by looking long enough at the object represented to make it the writer's own; and the mind which would bring this secret germ to fruition must be able to nourish it with an accumulated wealth of knowledge and experience.[5]

Here is the measure of the strength and originality of a novel or any other work of art; here too is its form. It is a secret germ, an indi-

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[1]Edith Wharton, "A Reconsideration of Marcel Proust," SRL, XI (October 27, 1934), 232.

[2]Wharton, "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," p. 433.

[3]Wharton, "Marcel Proust," p. 215.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, pp. 18-19.

vidual and unique perception which is nourished with the accumulated wealth of knowledge and experience as represented by the forms of literature. It is an idea related to the history of ideas, an experience related to the continuum of human experience. The modernity as well as the appeal of this notion to an entirely dissimilar artist may be seen in the resemblance between Mrs. Wharton's thought on form, tradition, and originality, and T. S. Eliot's ideas recorded in "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

In addition to its close relationship to tradition and its quality of originality, the successful novel demonstrates the quality of "visibility." Actually, Mrs. Wharton conceives of two types of visibility. One meaning refers to the function of the artistic form as realization of the author's vision. Thus she writes:

> A novel is good or bad in proportion to the depth of the author's nature, the richness of his imagination, and the extent to which he is able to realize his intention. If reviewers would judge novels by these criteria, they would render services greater than they guess to the writer who thirsts to know how much of his inward vision he has succeeded in making visible to others.[1]

The other sense of visibility relates to the techniques of characterization (and to the imagination of the writer, of course) and refers to a quality inherent in the characters, or rather a quality with which the author can endow them. In Mrs. Wharton's mind this quality transcends simple credibility or verisimilitude of character portrayal. Realness, perhaps, most accurately describes it. But Mrs. Wharton defines visibility as follows:

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[1]Wharton, "A Cycle of Reviewing," p. 45.

> Visibility in fiction is that supreme gift of characterization which admits some few writers to create and describe characters so vivid and so real that they stand in the mind as real people who have lived and suffered in their own persons, with their own names.[1]

This visibility of character seems, to Mrs. Wharton, to be one of the assurances of the novel's prolonged survival. It is the product of great genius and is effected by a "passionate contemplation" and intense absorption into the creation. She points to Balzac, Austen, Thackeray, and Tolstoy as sharing in this ability. "The patient intensity of attention, which these great novelists concentrated on each of their imagined characters," she writes, "produced the intimate sense of the reality of what they described."[2] It seems, in part at least, that this ability to make characters "visible" depends on the author's ability to acquire a kind of empathic understanding of his character. Thus she writes in her first essay on Proust that he had that quality common to all great writers: he made his creations live.[3] In her reconsideration of him some nine years later, she wrote:

> For after all, what constitutes the ultimate proof of creative genius but the degree to which it penetrates and becomes a part of the intelligence on which it acts.[4]

Complementary to this ability to live empathically in character creations are the techniques of characterization which follow from the realization "that the bounds of a personality are not reproducible by a sharp black line, but that each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent

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[1] Edith Wharton, "Visibility in Fiction," Yale Review (n.s.), XVIII (March, 1929), 480.

[2] Ibid., p. 488. [3] Wharton, "Marcel Proust," p. 216.

[4] Wharton, "A Reconsideration of Marcel Proust," p. 231.

people and things."[1] In addition, then, to the passionate and empathic feeling into the life of the character, the artist must also constantly study the character in the character's own surroundings and perceive the subtle personality colorations caused by his setting and his associates. If the artist can accomplish this he can make his creation emerge with realness, with so many of the vestiges of his complete inner and outer life that he immediately convinces the reader of his actuality. The character then becomes visible. Mrs. Wharton's complaints about characters and methods of characterization before Balzac and Stendhal seem to arise from the failure of earlier artists to take this double approach to their characters. She writes:

> The characterization of all the novelists who preceded these two masters [Balzac and Stendhal] seems, in comparison, incomplete or immature. Even Richardson's seems so, in the most penetrating pages of "Clarissa Harlowe," even Goethe's in that uncannily modern novel, the "Elective Affinities"--because, in the case of these writers, the people so elaborately dissected are hung in the void, unvisualized [un-visible] and unconditioned (or almost) by the special outward circumstances of their lives.[2]

There remain two chief attributes which distinguish the work of literary art or the novel: its organic unity and its plot. Mrs. Wharton described organic unity in two ways:

> If, then, design [because of selection] is inevitable, the best art must be that in which it is most organic, most inherent in the soul of the subject.[3]
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> . . . As the conclusion of the tale should be contained in germ in its first page, so its length, its language, the successive illuminating incidents into which it flashes, should be implicit in its subject, and should therefore be judged only in relation to that subject.[4]

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[1] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, p. 7. [2] Ibid., pp. 7-8.

[3] Wharton, "The Criticism of Fiction," p. 208. [4] Ibid., p. 210.

This unity is the close relation and the mutual adaptation of all the devices and methods of narrative art to disclose, express, or invest in visible form the theme of the work and its subject. It is the mutual inter-dependence of length, word choice, discovery, and revelation which must all have their source and reason for being in the subject treated. It is this unique inner relationship which Mrs. Wharton extolled as one which could not be governed by pre-fabricated rules. And in a defense of her own methods, she wrote, "I continued to let my tales shape themselves in obedience to their inner organism."[1] This practice, she wrote, freed her "from the incubus of plot," for her organic unity resulted from an organic form.

Although Mrs. Wharton was emancipated from the "incubus of plot" in her own creative writing, she was never freed from it in her critical writings. In her estimates and reviews of her contemporaries as well as in her purely critical writing the problem of plot arises again and again. Mrs. Wharton recognized that there was a unity of plot and a unity of a novel that could be endowed by the plot. Her principal critical complaint, however, was that plots became arbitrary and unorganic. They were, in short, a series of obstacles arbitrarily raised by the author, a series of obstacles through which the author pushed his characters. She also deplored the convention of the double plot which caused many otherwise competent novelists to lose much of the force of their vision and to vitiate the impact of their form by the inclusion of the remotely relevant facts and experiences recorded in the subplot. This

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[1]Wharton, "A Cycle of Reviewing," p. 45.

kind of writing she called "plotted fiction" and she described it as follows:

> [It is] that type of fiction in which the adventure grows not out of the development of character and the conflict of moral forces but out of the recovery of a missing will or the concealment of somebody's parentage.[1]

This inferior "plotted" fiction was partially the reason for the essential failure Edith Wharton found in George Eliot's literary works. George Eliot, she thought, actually did see life as a drama of the soul and a battle of spiritual forces, but she failed when she tried to reconcile these moral crises with the demands of plot fiction.[2]

Though the plotted novel could be effective, the important variable was how the author saw life. Thus Dumas, DeFoe, and Stevenson

> succeeded because they naturally saw life as a succession of outward accidents and mechanical complications. They rendered it with the truth of direct vision.[3]

The result is that their fictions are integrated since there is a coordination between their vision of life and their rendering of it, but George Eliot's novels are inorganic and from them "plots can be detached . . . like dead branches from a tree," because she saw life in one way and tried to render it in another.

Mrs. Wharton substituted no new word for plot, but she did indicate its special meaning to her. Her notion of the acceptable plot is closely related to the Aristotelian notion of praxis. The acceptable plot is built from the exertion of the unique will of the character

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[1]Edith Wharton, "Leslie Stephens' George Eliot," Bookman, XV (April, 1902), 249.

[2]Ibid., p. 250.

[3]Ibid., p. 249.

involved. When the character exerts his will (through moral choice or action) an episode occurs. This episode is the expression of the character; the elements in it are correlatives to the psychological elements of which his will is composed. Once, however, the will is externalized in action, the episode generates conflicting forces in the face of which character modifications must occur. Mrs. Wharton's idea, then, is that plot derives from the psychological structure of the characters. The succession of outward events (not accidents) and complications in which characters are involved will be in some degree determined by and expressive of that character's unique psychological organization. This reduces to insignificance all arbitrariness of plot. Mrs. Wharton implies her whole notion of plot in her statement that in plotted fiction, the inferior kind, "the adventure grows not out of the development of character and the conflict of moral forces." The thought is confirmed in her positive statement "that the unfolding of events should grow naturally out of the conflict of character, whether (technically speaking) plotlessness or plotfulness results."[1]

A certain degree of deliberate contrivance, a certain amount of the realistic play of chance is, perhaps allowed even to the greatest authors, and certainly these appear in Mrs. Wharton's own novel The Reef. The Reef, however, best demonstrates this special principle of plot. The first words of the novel are a quotation of a telegram: "Unexpected obstacle. Please don't come till thirtieth. Anna." This telegram is the perfect expression of the responsible but uncertain temperament of

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[1]Wharton, "A Cycle of Reviewing," p. 45.

a woman who has spent her life in a spotless moral atmosphere among all the nuances of love without the actual experience of love. It is delivered to George Darrow just as he prepares to embark to join her in France to propose marriage to her. The note itself becomes an obstacle, a reef, and demands a readjustment of Darrow's attitudes and motives. On the pier he meets Miss Viner, a pretty young acquaintance who has just lost her job and is herself going to France to join accommodating friends. Having already obtained his leave, and being partially carried along by his own momentum, Darrow persists in his voyage. He and Miss Viner travel together. Darrow's own inverted self-pity makes him need someone to take care of, and the cruel postponement caused by the telegram predisposes him to take care of a beautiful young girl. Her own distress, for her part, and her insecurity make Miss Viner welcome the solicitations of a handsome, dignified acquaintance. Imperceptibly but inevitably they slide into illicit relations. These conflicts, adventures, and events are inevitably corollary with the psychological structure of the three principals involved: Darrow, Miss Viner, and the intended bride, Anna Leath. The remainder of the novel is the action which these principals initiate in their attempts to adjust and readjust their characters, personalities, and sense of values to the fact and the implications of the "sin." This constitutes, in short, the plot of the novel, and it is precisely this kind of inevitable, organic plot which derives from the characters which Mrs. Wharton contrasts to the inferior plot of prefabricated hurdles and problems through which an author arbitrarily sends his character creations.

These were the leading critical and theoretical ideas which lay

behind Edith Wharton's literary speculations and her practice. In the face of the complexity of these notions, however, she could remark upon the novel in such platitudinous, simple, and superficial phrases as the following:

> . . . a novel is a work of fiction containing a good story about well-drawn characters.[1]
> . . . the novelist's job is to tell a tale and to mirror human nature.[2]

Unfortunately, the great number of such remarks as these has led many critics to measure Mrs. Wharton's critical sophistication by them, and since the decline of her great popularity in the early years of the century, no one has felt it worthwhile to look beyond them. Such remarks, however, as those above are not without significance. It is, for example, significant that in both instances Mrs. Wharton mentions "telling a tale" and "a good story" before she mentions aspects like "mirroring human nature" and "well-drawn characters" from which the permanent values of fiction are derived. The order of these expressions is not caused by chance. It simply indicates that Mrs. Wharton believed that the novelist's first job was to tell a tale, to tell a good story, not necessarily to educate his reader but to interest him. Neither in her literary practice nor in her theory did Mrs. Wharton confuse a good story with a good theory. Never did she confuse the inherent interest-potential of a story with its accurate fulfillment of a preconceived literary design. If a story simply as story were not good, interesting, and beguiling, the novel would not be good simply because it fulfilled a complex design, one intended by the author. In accordance

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[1] Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction," p. 603. [2] Ibid.

with this belief she writes, "It is less dangerous for an artist to sacrifice his artistic instincts to the pursuit of money or popularity than to immolate them to a theory."[1] And again in her fiction she writes, "It is known to comparatively few that the production of successful potboilers is an art in itself, and such heroic abstentions as Keniston's are not always purely voluntary."[2] Clearly, then, Mrs. Wharton recognized the enormous significance of simple interest and eclat among the important characteristics of a novel.

It should also be apparent from the aesthetic theories already discussed that Mrs. Wharton did not valu. the best books by their ability simply to interest a reader without provoking his thought and reflection. In an early essay she recognized the fact of mediocre literature and mediocre readers. In making her value judgment there, she pointed out that the "best books are those from which the best readers have been able to extract the greatest amount of thought of the highest quality."[3] This, of course, does not preclude interest or pleasure, but it indicates that the best books furnish both to good readers.

Since Mrs. Wharton did not thoroughly analyze--in writing at least--the novels which she did not like or could not consider artistic, she left few statements about what a novel should not be or do. Of course, the artist's failure to fulfill the aesthetic obligations already discussed are indications of what the novel should not be. There are,

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Edith Wharton, Crucial Instances (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), p. 70.

[3] Wharton, "The Vice of Reading," p. 514.

however, a few explicit statements. For example, she observes that though the best novels yield "thought of the highest quality," they cannot become simply collections of the author's ideas and intellectual conclusions. She objected strenuously to the tendency of "the novel in its most serious form . . . to become a sort of anthology of the author's ideas."[1] Novels with this kind of propaganda she called "that unhappy hybrid, the novel with a purpose," and she singled out James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence as chief offenders in this literary area. Of Lawrence she wrote, "his characters are no more differentiated than a set of megaphones, through which the same voice interminably reiterates the same ideas."[2] The artistic novel, then, could no more be a set of the author's conclusions shouted by megaphone characters than it could be an uncritical reproduction of reality, a formless view of life, or a representation of chaos.

Not exclusively a quality of the art object or novel and not, strictly speaking, a technique of fiction or solely an attribute or device by which an author creates his effects, taste is nevertheless operative in each of these areas of Mrs. Wharton's literary theory. And because of its influence on the creator as well as its influence on the thing created, it should probably be treated here in some detail. It will, however, be necessary to discuss its specific ramifications later as they apply to specific elements of technique. Taste, writes Mrs. Wharton,

> whatever it may be, is not, after all, the same thing as art. No; it is not art--but it is the atmosphere in which

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[1] Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction," p. 603. [2] Ibid.

> art lives, and outside of which it cannot live. It is the regulating principle of all art . . .[1]

Taste, being the regulating principle of all art, must be both an attribute of the author, since it must regulate his selection and his methods of imitation, and an attribute of the art object, since it is the thing composed of the elements selected.

"The essence of taste," Mrs. Wharton continues, "is suitability. Divest this word of its prim and priggish implications, and see how it expresses the mysterious demand of eye and mind for symmetry, harmony and order."[2] Divested of its "priggish" connotations, and given Mrs. Wharton's qualifications, her idea of suitability does not differ radically from the eighteenth century notion of literary decorum and propriety. For that matter, it does not differ from the concept as it was formularized during the Italian Renaissance. Giraldi Cinthio in 1541, for example, described decorum as follows:

> The poet should ever have his eye on decorum, which is nothing else than what fits places, times, and persons. And therefore it comes about that the ancient observers of the nature of things say that decorum was that beauty, that grace, which springs from the forms of speech that are joined together with judgment and with measure and carry with them some exposition of characters. . . . In short, decorum is nothing other than the grace and fitness of things and should be considered not merely in actions, but also in the speeches and answers of men among themselves. And this principle of decorum should be applied not merely to actions, persons, places, and circumstances, as we have said, but also to words. . . . Nor should this decorum be considered merely in the work as a whole but in each part of it, as in expository passages, invocations, narrations, and other parts as they come, so that each part may have what is individually suitable to it.[3]

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[1]Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning, p. 40. [2]Ibid., p. 41.

[3]Allen H. Gilbert (ed.), Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden (New York: American Book Co., 1940), pp. 272-273. Italics mine.

The similarity between the two concepts is obvious. It is important, however, that Mrs. Wharton indicates that both the eye (the visualizing faculty) and the mind (the intellectual faculty) are involved in her notion of suitability and taste, for this emphasizes the necessary correspondence between image and idea, between event and its significance, and between action and the feeling or emotion it arouses. Her association of taste with "harmony of proportion and beauty of composition"[1] bears out the important role taste plays in form in each of its three manifestations, and shows the close relationship of taste to the perspective and the judgment of the author.

Mrs. Wharton placed a great deal of emphasis on proper perspective of the artist. His lack of it, whether the result of unhealthy sensibilities or poor judgment, is often responsible for the failure of his novel. For example, Ralph Marvell, in The Custom of the Country, failed to see life in its proper perspective:

> Two or three subjects had haunted him, pleading for expression, during the first years of his marriage; but these now seemed either too lyrical or too tragic. He no longer saw life on the heroic scale: he wanted to do something in which men should look no bigger than the insects they were.[2]

Though Marvell has many of the qualifications Mrs. Wharton demanded of an artist, his failure to attain true perspective defeats him, and he never produces his novel. Similarly, Vance Weston in The Gods Arrive tries to show man's greatness in his novel, "Colossus," the very title of which indicates his loss of a right perspective on man. Moreover,

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[1] Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning, p. 45.

[2] Edith Wharton, The Custom of the Country (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), p. 427.

he tries to show the greatness of man as he is projected "against the petty chaos of Jane Meggs's world,"[1] and the incongruity of his vision and his setting defeats his intentions.

Further elaborations of her concept of taste occur when Mrs. Wharton identifies it with "the recognition of a standard."[2] This kind of taste, she adds, "explains the existence of such really national institutions as the French Academy and the Theatre Francais."[3] Here again the ultimate referents of taste lie in the mind of the artist, whose attitude will include respect for the standards of language and art forms established by long tradition and national institutions. But another referent lies in the artistic production itself, which must be consciously modeled to conform with the standards of traditions, national institutions, and historical values. Her final qualifications of taste relate solely to the mental attitudes of the artist and have implications about the work of art only insofar as the art object is colored by the mind of the artist. "Patience, deliberateness, reverence," she writes, "these are the fundamental elements of taste."[4] These qualities, however, apply chiefly to the artist and must be dealt with later. But it is important to recognize now that taste was one of the central concepts in Mrs. Wharton's literary theory. It is important, too, to see its implications in the form as well as in the value of the novel, and to see that it is the only atmosphere which can call forth and sustain art.

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[1] Edith Wharton, The Gods Arrive (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1932), p. 113.

[2] Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning, p. 45.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 55.

Mrs. Wharton saw selection and transmutation as the basic principle of all art, as the process which distinguishes art from actuality. She conceived of the artist as choosing crucial moments from subjects which in some manner could become a criticism or an analysis of life. These moments, she thought, should be articulated in such a way that they would present a discernible and unaccidental propinquity to one another. The entire substance of the art object, she thought, should assume a form commensurate with the subject and correlative to the artist's attitudes. Finally, she thought that the individual forms of character and action should be representative and universal, thus partaking in the traditional forms of character and action. Originality to her was the ability to see intensely a new vision and to create it in the pattern of traditional forms and idioms, and the success of the artist might be measured in the terms of this originality, the success with which he made visible his intentions and his vision, and the unity with which he articulated the materials of his art. Pervading all these functions is the sovereign influence of taste. These are the larger critical and literary theories upon which Mrs. Wharton based her discussions of the smaller aspects of literary practice and techniques. They represent the basic values and structures which the techniques, discussed in the next chapter, were designed to fulfill.

CHAPTER III

TECHNIQUES OF FICTION

Edith Wharton based her theories about art on the premise of artistic inevitability. Thus she saw the interdependence of each aspect of technique with the design of the whole, and similarly she saw the finished product as the successful realization of the possibilities of the individual devices. She considered the art work unified and organized as a living organism.

> Obviously [she writes], as every subject contains its own dimensions, so is its conclusion ab ovo; and the failure to end a tale in accordance with its own deepest sense must deprive it of meaning.[1]

Given these attitudes toward the production and the uniqueness of a work of literary art, only two theoretical variables are possible: the quality and possibilities of the subject itself, and the writer's ability to see into the heart of his matter. The characteristics of the author and the discipline which he must impose on himself will be treated later, but the literary techniques and devices by which the author may realize in literary form the possibilities inherent in his subject must here be discussed.

It is obvious from Mrs. Wharton's figure that the ovum, or in

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[1]Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, p. 51.

Jamesian terms, the "germ" from which the novel grows is the subject. It is equally clear that if the subject determines the ultimate form and realization of the theme, no external or pre-formulated rules can be legitimately applied to it. Indeed, Mrs. Wharton realized this when she wrote:

> General rules in art are useful chiefly as a lamp down a black stairway; they are necessary for the sake of the guidance they give, but it is a mistake, once they are formulated, to be too much in awe of them.[1]

Though it is impossible to impose rigid formulae or rules on art, it is not impossible to discuss and to analyze the technical conventions and stylizations which operate in the transmutation of life experiences into art experiences, and which help to give the peculiar value to the art experience. Or, to follow the figure, better or different lighting may be available to illuminate the specific problems related to different "stairways." This liberal attitude toward the techniques of fiction underlies all Mrs. Wharton's strictly technical discussions. Only when she arrives at the critical question, Was the subject worth representation? does she become dogmatic. Indeed, her rejection of Naturalism and stream-of-consciousness writing was not based upon her aversion to the technical aspects of the writing but to the ultimate values which they were designed to express. In short, she did not like the way these writers saw life as chaotic, unstructured, and unprincipled; therefore, she felt that what they represented was not worth the effort. Although her evaluation of fictional techniques is in no sense dogmatic, it is inextricably involved with her sense of values

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[1] Ibid., p. 42.

both in art and in life.

In 1934 Mrs. Wharton wrote that one of the principal values of fiction "is the creating of characters, which so possess us with the sense of their reality that we talk of [them] as of real people whom we have known and lived with."[1] As might be expected, character portrayal and the techniques of characterization demand more of her attention than any other single technical consideration. Early in her career she noted the need for consistency in characterization, but probably more important, she identified the writer's grasp of reality with his ability to draw credible characters. She notes, for example, that as George Eliot grew in her experience with life, she developed from a laborious style of characterization to a dexterity which allowed her to characterize with brief and masterly strokes; with this ability, she learned to make her characters consistent.[2] "When George Eliot wrote Adam Bede," Mrs. Wharton continues,

> her principal figures were the familiar marionnettes of fiction, and only in the subordinate characters (where stock types were less available) did she show the direct grasp of reality that was to be a distinguishing mark of her matured talent.[3]

The principal figures in any novel, however,

> . . . tend to be least real. This seems to be partly explained by the fact that these characters, survivors of the old "hero" and "heroine" whose business it was not to be real but to be sublime, are still, though often without the author's being aware of it, the standard-bearers of his convictions or the expression of his secret inclinations. They

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[1] Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction," p. 604.

[2] Wharton, "Leslie Stephens' George Eliot," p. 249.

[3] Ibid., p. 250.

> are his in the sense of tending to do and say what he would do, or imagines he would do, in a given circumstance, and being merely projections of his own personality they lack the substance and relief of the minor characters, whom he views coolly and objectively, in all their human weakness and inconsequence. . . . Another reason . . . especially applicable to the leading figures in the novel of situation . . . is that the story is about them, and forces them into the shape which its events impose, while the subordinate characters, moving at ease in the interstices of the tale and free to go about their business in the illogical human fashion, remain real to writer and readers.[1]

There are two reasons why leading characters tend to be unreal. First, the author may be unable to realize them distinctly because they are too much a part of him, and second, he may allow the events to shape the characters instead of allowing the characters to determine the events. The second failure was, in Mrs. Wharton's terminology, a failure to realize form in fiction.

Two other devices that seemed to Mrs. Wharton to produce inferior characters were those practiced by the realists and by psychological novelists such as Paul Bourget. Of the realists, for example, she wrote:

> [They] hit on a convenient device; they discovered that it is much easier, whenever a given character appears, to put the same phrase on his lips, or to call the reader's attention to the same physical infirmity, a squint, a stammer, an odd pronunciation (a means of identification cruelly over-used by Balzac), than to build up, stroke by stroke, the shape and growth of his soul.[2]

Avoiding just this kind of inadequacy was one of the features of Proust's characterization that Mrs. Wharton singled out for praise. She writes: "He has never been satisfied to disguise a pack of dummies under a few

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[1] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, pp. 133-34.

[2] Wharton, "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," p. 433.

showy tags of reality: tricks of speech, of gesture, and thought."[1] Unlike the psychologists, she could not agree with Paul Bourget that it was the novelist's duty to explicate character. In the following account of her talk with him, she points out what she considered faulty in his method and what direction she thought good characterization should take:

> . . . bientôt je me rendis compte que les idées de Bourget étaient tout à fait opposées aux miennes. Dès qu'il commençait un roman, Bourget montait en chaire; il fallait que chaque personnage fût un pion dans un jeu savamment combiné d'avance, et d'où l'imprévu déconcertant de la vie était totalement banni. . . . Bourget me grondait toujours parce que dans mes livres je n'expliquais pas assez les personnages; je lui repondais qu'il sous-estimait l'intelligence de ses lecteurs en supposant qu'il fallait longuement disséquer d'avance le mobile de chaque acte, presque de chaque parole, au lieu de les laisser se révéler par la parole et l'action des personnages.[2]

Aside from the recognized principle that lecturing will not create the illusion necessary for the art experience, Mrs. Wharton complains of Bourget's method of making pawns of his characters, placing them in a pre-organized set of circumstances, and denying to both his characters and their actions the accidents and chances of life.

Stated positively, Mrs. Wharton's criteria of good characterization, as they are implied in her differences with Bourget, are as follows: the character must be allowed to reveal himself by his own words and actions, and though accident and chance are foreign to the composition of art, the characters, in order to retain some semblance of reality, must be shown as they might exist in actual life, that is, subject to the vagaries of chance and coincidence. Good characterization,

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[1] Wharton, "A Reconsideration of Marcel Proust," p. 323.

[2] Wharton, "Paul Bourget d'Outremer," p. 284.

of course, cannot occur without the contrivance of the author, but this contrivance should not take the form of a lecture from the author. Instead, he should allow his characters to behave as they would in actual life and reveal their personalities by their actions and words.

Other methods of adequate characterization are also available to writers, but only to those who are aware that "the bounds of a personality are not reproducible by a sharp black line, but that each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things."[1] Balzac, writes Mrs. Wharton,

> . . . was the first not only to see his people, physically and morally, in their habit as they lived, with all their personal hobbies and infirmities, and make the reader see them, but to draw his dramatic action as much from the relation of his characters to their houses, streets, towns, professions, inherited habits and opinions, as from their fortuitous contacts with each other.[2]

These two principles, in combination with the principle of allowing the character to behave "normally," that is, to express himself as he would in real life and without the obvious interference or explanation of the author, constitute Mrs. Wharton's formula for visibility of character. By obedience to the principle that real personality cannot be graphed or "reproduced by a sharp black line," the author will not be tempted to explain-away his character, that is, to analyze and explicate him so thoroughly that he ceases to be human, that he ceases to be built around a core of human mystery, that he ceases to be dynamic and fluid like the people who form part of our actual experience. However, by

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[1] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, p. 7.

[2] Ibid., p. 5. Italics mine.

obedience to the second principle, treating both the physical and moral being, the aspects of both the physical body and the intellectual soul may be revealed. And finally, by seeing the character in his dramatic relation with his surroundings, with his physical setting and his circle of acquaintances, he may be seen in the round, and emerge as a visible, unique, integrated, human personality. He will be a unit in a drama, simultaneously different from his setting and yet similar to it. His character will be more fully delineated by the dramatic portrayal of the similarities and differences between him and his setting and his responses to these. By the happy combination of these principles, a character becomes more than just credible; he becomes visible. The nucleus of his personality remains inviolable mystery, amorphous to the degree that he remains fluid and inexplicable. But as in life, the character appears to be autonomic, and as his physical being can be known either by the author's description or by the record of the character's appearance to others in the novel, so is his moral or intellectual soul, his sense of values, of form, and of propriety, known through his words, his behavior, and his choices. Finally, he is seen in the round, as he would appear in real life, in a dramatic relationship with his physical setting, his culture, and with other people.

The fulfillment of these principles concerning the total emergence, the visibility of character, occurs probably most successfully in the character of Lily Bart in Mrs. Wharton's The House of Mirth (1905). Lily is first of all isolated because she has no home of her own. Both of her parents being dead, she takes residence with an elderly maiden aunt. By flashbacks and reminiscences, however, Mrs. Wharton reveals

the social group, the parentage, the tradition, and the set of values that went into Lily's composition. Lily's physical charm is described partially by her own awareness of it and by her attempts not only to preserve it but to use it to her advantage. It is also described by its effect on her friends, both male and female, and perhaps most clearly and startlingly by Mrs. Wharton's description of both Lily and the effect of her beauty when she appears in the tableau vivante, for sheer sensuous appeal one of the most memorable scenes in Mrs. Wharton's fiction. Lily's moral and intellectual soul is revealed by her talks with other characters: her aunt, Lawrence Selden, Gus Trenor, and Gerty Farish. The tendencies revealed here are realized in her action: her allowing Trenor to handle her money and to pay her; her accumulation of gambling debts; her submitting to blackmail by a charwoman for the sake of Lawrence Selden; and her rejection of Selden's suit because he is not rich enough for her. Most significant among these, however, is the tableau vivante, for here Lily is seen as a real, suffering human being whose tradition, tastes, and training prepare her only to be ornamental, a thing of beauty in the gilded "house of mirth." At the same time, her character and appearance are more clearly delineated and colored by her dramatic relationship with her actual physical setting. As important, for example, as her moment of fulfillment as ornament in the tableau vivante, is her vague terror and uneasiness in the dinginess and discomfort of Gerty Farish's apartment. All of Lily's relationships, with other characters as well as with her setting, are dramatic and dynamic. She responds to them, and simultaneously they respond to her and give subtle shades of coloring and perspective to her character. And it is

through this dramatic, fluid relationship with everything she meets that Lily Bart emerges as a visible character in fiction.

For verisimilitude, however, Mrs. Wharton has refrained from trying to explain-away the central mystery of Lily Bart. Thus Lily is revealed by another dramatic relationship, one in which her values, her appearance in society, and her love are constantly referred to her inner censor, her inner guide, the inner amorphous character structure which is her Self. She retains, then, an inner, mysterious, inviolable, and unknown self while she emerges from the texture of her setting and social milieu by her clear dramatic relationship to them. By her emergence from the texture of the fiction, she becomes uniquely, visibly individual, and by her involvement with social and human values, she becomes universally representative. Thus Lily Bart represents Mrs. Wharton's solution to the "novelist's permanent problem . . . that of making his people at once typical and individual, universal and particular."[1] Indeed, the resolution of this problem is accomplished by all competent novelists, but the effect of the artwork and the quality of the character are greatly enhanced by the fulfillment of the principle of visibility. And this stands as one of Mrs. Wharton's most sophisticated critical notions.

Mrs. Wharton called these dramatic relationships, especially those in scenes like the tableau vivante, illuminating incidents. These not only reveal character but they also carry part of the burden of the theme and narrative, and part of the total implication of the novel or

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[1] Ibid., p. 142.

work of art. These "moments" she considered in large part the measure of the greatness of any particular author. She writes:

> At every stage in the progress of his tale the novelist must rely on what may be called illuminating incidents to reveal and emphasize the inner meaning of each situation. Illuminating incidents are the magic casements of fiction, its vistas on infinity. They are also the most personal element in any narrative, the author's most direct contribution; and nothing gives such immediate proof of the quality of his imagination--and therefore of the richness of his temperament--as his choice of such episodes.[1]
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> The illuminating incident is not only the proof of the novelist's imaginative sensibility; it is also the best means of giving presentness, immediacy, to his tale.[2]

The illuminating incident is the author's most personal contribution to the novel because its success depends on how much he can see a single action as part of the fabric of his total work, and how well he can make clear by suggestions and implications the final ramifications of any one action in the entire action of his novel. The choice and execution of the illuminating incidents are an index of the author's insight. These incidents are peculiarly the author's own because he, not the characters involved, must draw out the implications of the incident. Moreover, since these incidents are specifically those which have important ramifications in each aspect of the novel, the successful use of them becomes an index of the integrity of the author's vision, his mastery and control of his entire medium, and the depth and perspicacity of his insight into his subject (as idea) and his form (as realization of idea).

Mrs. Wharton realized that a real person, one from actual life and experience, could not appear in literature or art without first becoming a "character." In A Backward Glance she writes:

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[1] Ibid., p. 190. [2] Ibid., p. 113.

> All novelists who describe . . . what is called "society life," are pursued by the exasperating accusations of putting flesh-and-blood people into their books. Any one gifted with the least creative faculty knows the absurdity of such a charge. "Real people" transported [not transmuted] into a work of the imagination would instantly cease to be real; only those born of the creator's brain give the least illusion of reality. But it is hopeless to persuade the unimaginative . . . that to introduce actual people into a novel would be exactly like gumming their snapshots into the vibrating human throng of a Guardi picture.[1]

Indeed, so fast were Mrs. Wharton's convictions on the necessity of objectively imagined characters for the novel that she carefully distinguished between the writer of autobiography and the writer of fiction, and though she felt that autobiographical material could be written by men of genius, she pointed out that "the autobiographical gift does not seem very closely related to that of fiction,"[2] and therefore, it might be concluded, to that of art.

Of especial importance among the characters is the point-of-view character or the reflecting consciousness. On him depend the centralization of the artistic vision, the quality and richness of the experiences and attitudes expressed in the novel, and the unity of impression which all art should strive to attain. Mrs. Wharton writes:

> The way of attaining this centralized vision is . . . to select, among the characters of a projected novel, a reflecting consciousness, and to "make that consciousness full, rich, universally prehensible," and stick to it . . .[3]

Mrs. Wharton also realized that since the novel includes a longer time and more actions than a short story, for example, the "state of

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[1]Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 210.

[2]Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, p. 142.

[3]Wharton, "Henry James in His Letters," p. 200.

omniscience and omnipresence" of the reflecting consciousness might "shake the reader's sense of probability."

> The difficulty [however] is most often met by shifting the point of vision from one character to another, in such a way as to comprehend the whole history and yet preserve the unity of impression.[1]

In order to include all the events of an entire history, then, the point of view must be shifted if the impression of probability is to be kept intact. However, shifting from the view of one character to that of another introduces special problems in the unity of effect and in the consistency of the quality of the experiences recorded.

> In the interest [then] of this unity it is best to shift as seldom as possible, and to let the tale work itself out from not more than two (at the most three) angles of vision, choosing as reflecting consciousness persons either in close mental and moral relation to each other, or discerning enough to estimate each other's parts in the drama, so that the latter, even viewed from different angles, always presents itself to the reader as a whole.
>
> The choice of such reflectors is not easy; still more arduous is the task of determining at what point each is to be turned on the scene. The only possible rule seems to be that when things happen which the first reflector cannot, with any show of probability, be aware of, or is incapable of reacting to, even if aware, then another, an adjoining, consciousness is required to take up the tale.[2]

It is significant here that if two reflecting consciousnesses are used (as in Mrs. Wharton's Hudson River Bracketed, The Gods Arrive, and The Reef), they must have sufficient rapport and intellectual and moral equivalence either to feel and see what the other might, or to understand and explain how the other would feel and what he would notice if he were the experiencing consciousness. It is again significant that this measure is necessary to preserve the unity of effect, the

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[1] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, p. 87. [2] Ibid., pp. 87-88.

wholeness of the narrative, and a consistency in the quality and texture of the experiences recorded. The corollary consideration to be mentioned here is the need to select or create a reflecting consciousness who would, according to probability, be involved in such a situation as the author has chosen, and who is at the same time capable of seeing, feeling, and recording all the nuances, suggestions, and implications which the experiences present. Here join many of the aspects of the novel which Mrs. Wharton saw as a whole, an integer. The psychological structure of the character determines the actions in the novel; the actions, the setting and dialogue demonstrate as well as individualize the character; that is, they contribute to his quality of visibility. In addition, the visible character, standing in dramatic relation to all other things in the novel, perceives, reports, and reflects. Thus the texture and quality of the experiences as well as their relevance to the theme of the narrative and the inevitability of the episodes depend entirely on him. If an irresponsible shift is made in the reflecting consciousness, a corresponding shift must occur in the quality of the experience, the expression of significance, and the meaning of the subject. Actually, in Mrs. Wharton's theory, a shift to a radically different point of view would begin another story. Moreover, a shift to an incompatible point of view would disrupt the reader's illusion of the reality of the action in the novel, for he is intimately aware only of his own consistent impressions and ideas and can only learn the consistency (the structure) of those of other people--the disrupting of continuity and the inconsistency of point of view would destroy verisimilitude then.

"Verisimilitude," Mrs. Wharton writes,

> is the truth of art, and any convention that hinders the illusion is obviously in the wrong place. Few hinder it more than the slovenly habit of some novelists of tumbling in and out of their characters' minds, and then suddenly drawing back to scrutinize them from the outside as the avowed Showman holding his puppets' strings.[1]

Again the significance of the point-of-view character or central intelligence may be seen, not only as it affects probability, and therefore verisimilitude, but also as it operates in the control of the form of the novel. One of the principles which guides the author to the ultimate effect of probability is

> never to let the character who serves as reflector record anything not naturally within his register. It should be the story-teller's first care to choose this reflecting mind deliberately, as one would choose a building-site, or decide upon the orientation of one's house, and when this is done, to live inside the mind chosen, trying to feel, see and react exactly as the latter would, no more, no less, and, above all, no otherwise. Only thus can the writer avoid attributing incongruities of thought and metaphor to his chosen interpreter.[2]

It should be noted, however, that Mrs. Wharton knew enough of artistic illusion to realize that "improbability in itself . . . is never a danger, but [that] the <u>appearance</u> of improbability is."[3]

Like almost every other technical device Mrs. Wharton isolated for discussion, scenic detail and the descriptive passages of the narrative are related to character.

> In the number of characters introduced, as much as in the scenic details given, relevance is the first, the arch, necessity. And characters and scenic detail are in fact one to the novelist who has fully assimilated his material. The moon-enchanted hollow of Wilming Weir in "Sandra Belloni"

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[1] <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 89. [2] <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 46. [3] <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 38. Italics mine.

> is as much the landscape of Emilia's soul as of a corner of England. . .[1]

Not only then is there a dramatic relationship, a rhythm established between the character and his scenic setting, a rhythm which conduces to his quality of visibility, as in the illuminating incidents, but there is also a correspondence between the character and his setting. Thus Mrs. Wharton writes,

> The impression produced by a landscape, a street or a house should always, to a novelist, be an event in the history of a soul, and the use of the "descriptive passage," and its style, should be determined by the fact that it must depict only what the intelligence concerned would have noticed, and always in terms within the register of that intelligence.[2]

Thus dramatic relationships as well as moral, intellectual, and emotional correspondences exist between the characters, their setting, and the description of it, when the artist is able to see his total work.

Many of the principles governing the use and nature of dialogue are implied in Mrs. Wharton's criticism of Henry James's The Awkward Age.[3] She complained that the novel had been "chatted" instead of narrated and that the subject had been "powdered" into dialogue. She thought too that James's failure to resort to narrative was in part responsible for his failure to come to eventual terms with his subject.

> Vital dialogue [she wrote] is that exchanged by characters whom their creator has really vitalized, and his instinct will be to record only the significant passages of their talk, in high relief against the narrative, and not uselessly embedded in it.[4]

This vital dialogue has three principal functions: it illuminates

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[1] Ibid., p. 84. [2] Ibid., p. 85. [3] Ibid., pp. 70-71.

[4] Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 203.

character, summarizes passion and emotion, and mechanically assists the writer in his attempt to represent the passage of time. In the use of dialogue, the writer must never forget that the character, if he is truly visible, is also autonomic, and he must say what he as a character must say, not what the artist needs him to say. Thus Mrs. Wharton writes:

> The moment the novelist finds that his characters are talking not as they naturally would, but as the situation requires, are visibly lending him a helping hand in the more rapid elucidation of his drama, the moment he hears them saying anything which the stress of their predicament would not naturally bring to their lips, his effect has been produced at the expense of reality, and he will find them turning to sawdust on his hands.[1]

Again, dialogue cannot be transported into fiction; it must be transmuted. "Some novelists," she writes,

> not sufficiently skilled to meet [the requirements of vital dialogue], have tried to turn it by interlarding these crucial dialogues with irrelevant small-talk, in the hope of thus producing a greater air of reality. But this is to fall again into the trap of what Balzac called "a reality in nature which is not one in art."[2]

The object of this transmuted talk, this vital dialogue,

> is to gather up the loose strands of passion and emotion running through the tale; and the attempt to entangle these threads in desultory chatter about the weather or the village pump proves only that the narrator has not known how to do the necessary work of selection. . . . His characters must talk as they would in reality, and yet everything not relevant to his tale must be eliminated.[3]

Although good dialogue can, Mrs. Wharton admits, give the effect of "greater animation, of presentness," the inefficiency and the shock

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[1] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, pp. 140-41.

[2] Ibid., p. 141.

[3] Ibid., pp. 141-42.

of improbability which result from its overuse are not compensated by these virtues. "The reason," she writes, "is inherent in the method."

> When, in real life, two or more people are talking together, all that is understood between them is left out of their talk; but when the novelist uses conversation as a means not only of accentuating but of carrying on his tale, his characters have to tell each other many things that each already knows the other to know.[1]

If the resulting "shock of improbability" is to be overcome, "their dialogue must be so diluted with irrelevant touches of realistic commonplace, . . . that . . . it rambles on for page after page."[2] Narrative should furnish "the substance of the novel," and

> dialogue, that precious adjunct, should never be more than an adjunct, and one to be used as skilfully and sparingly as the drop of condiment which flavours a whole dish.
>
> The use of dialogue in fiction [she continues] seems to be one of the few things about which a fairly definite rule may be laid down. It should be reserved for the culminating moments, and regarded as the spray into which the great wave of narrative breaks in curving toward the watcher on the shore.[3]

With her statement that narrative should be "the substance of the novel" in contrast to the obvious fact that dialogue constitutes the "substance" of drama, Mrs. Wharton here broaches an interesting distinction between dramatic and narrative techniques. Though pursuit of such a distinction might have been fruitful, Mrs. Wharton's lack of interest in dramatic techniques precluded the investigation, and she made nothing of it.

Aside from its function of illuminating character, summarizing emotion and passion, and lending a certain animation and presentness to the texture of the narrative, dialogue also serves as a mechanical device which assists the artist in his creation of the illusion of passing time.

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[1] Ibid., p. 74. [2] Ibid. [3] Ibid., pp. 72-73.

The breaking of the narrative pattern, Mrs. Wharton writes,

> even the mere material sight of the page broken into short, uneven paragraphs, all help to reinforce the contrast between such climaxes [in the dialogue] and the smooth effaced gliding of the narrative intervals; and the contrast enhances that sense of the passage of time for the producing of which the writer has to depend on his intervening narration.[1]

Mrs. Wharton felt that the greatest impression of the passing of time occurred in the narrative passages of the novel, but that the impression was enhanced by the contrast between the staccato of the printed page of dialogue and the continuousness of the narrative passages, and by the contrast between the emotion and passion in the dialogue (that was saved for culminating moments) and the even, dispassionate, inevitable flow of the narrative. "Thus the sparing use of dialogue not only serves to emphasize the crises of the tale but to give it as a whole a greater effect of continuous development."[2]

Mrs. Wharton could not analyze the devices by which the impression of passing time is conveyed to the reader; indeed, she called the impression the central mystery of the art of fiction. She did, however, recognize that it was involved somehow with the contrasting tempo of dialogue and narrative--the contrast between the passionateness of dialogue and the dispassionateness of the narrative, of the humanness and weakness of personal speech and the mechanical, unhindered inevitability of the narrative events. In addition she knew that the illusion of passing time was also a function of the author's ability to visualize fully the development of his character and his ability to make the character "visible," to keep him intact, and simultaneously to record distinctly all the

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[1] Ibid., p. 73. [2] Ibid.

minute changes of character structure that marked his development. She does not try to analyze the techniques by which this is done but she points it out as one of the problems. Thus she writes:

> Another difficulty connected with [the illusion of passing time] is that of keeping so firm a hold on the main lines of one's characters that they emerge modified and yet themselves from the ripening or disintegrating years.[1]

Eventually, however, the talent and the secret are incommunicable:

> one can conjecture that it has to do with the novelist's own deep belief in his characters and what he is telling about them. He knows that this and that befell them, and that in the interval between this and that the months and years have continued their slow task of erosion or accretion; and he conveys this knowledge by some subterranean process as hard to seize in action as the growth of a plant. A study of the great novelists . . . will show that such changes are suggested, are arrived at, in the inconspicuous transitional pages of narrative that lead from climax to climax. One of the means by which the effect is produced is certainly that of not fearing to go slowly, to keep down the tone of the narrative, to be as colourless and quiet as life often is in the intervals between its high moments.[2]

Though it is eventually a secret how the artist conveys the impression of passing time, the devices which contribute to it are his apt use of dialogue, his full realization of his characters, his use of transitional narrative passages, and the qualities of style which keep down high color and tone, and his ability to imitate in fiction the quietness of life between the crests of climax. Although Mrs. Wharton obviously gave up in her pursuit of the question of conveying the impression of passing time, the outline of her thought and the area of her awareness are fairly clear. The first principle involved is interruption: the passage of time must occur between two distinct events or images. Thus

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[1] Ibid., p. 97.

[2] Ibid., p. 96.

the lowest level, the apparent interruption of a page of narrative by short, uneven paragraphs of direct discourse conduces to a sense of passing time by the simple effect of the interruptions and the distinction of two different qualities and appearances which give a kind of measure of time. Secondly, the interruption of the smooth, inevitable flow of the narrative selections by staccato, impassioned direct discourse makes a series of poles between which the sense of the passage of time may be conveyed, much as it is conveyed by awareness of a shift from daylight to dark, from morning to afternoon, or from afternoon to evening. Third, a sense of time is conveyed in life by the rhythm between moments of high passion and the intervals of relatively smooth, unruffled existence. If the dialogue, then, is saved for culminating moments of high passion, a similar texture of continuum will exist in the novel, and thus a sense of passing time may be conveyed.

The second principle involved is the author's control over his character and his ability to understand his character's development and to imitate it in fiction. How these three aspects of characterization finally produce the illusion of passing time, Mrs. Wharton could not say, but her implications are clear. The author must first understand his character perfectly and make him visible. He must then know how and through what medium the character will develop and perhaps more important, he must know what will be the characteristics of the character after he develops. Keeping the essential lines of the character intact, the author presents the minute symptoms of the changes in the character. If he does this successfully, he shows a developmental process which must occur in time; thus, Mrs. Wharton implies, the author will convey a sense

of passing time, since the first appearance of the character will be separated from his last appearance with all the intermediate developmental stages clearly marked.

Mrs. Wharton's treatment of the sense of passing time in art is obviously incomplete and inadequate. She appears to have been aware of the more important questions of technique in such a problem as this, but her lack of disciplined speculation or critical imagination precluded her full investigation of it. She obviously relies heavily on her ability to understand a formula rather than to see a principle. But characteristically, with her emphasis on the role of character in the success of a work of fiction, she relates the sense of passing time to the author's ability to make his characters visible and credible.

Since the characters of a novel, once they have become visible, are autonomic, and since the artist is in danger of breaking his illusion of reality when he allows them to say what is most convenient for him and not what they would most likely say in their predicament, it follows that a novelist's created character cannot become a mouthpiece for the author. Mrs. Wharton felt that the characters created by D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf were faulty just because they did become mouthpieces for their authors. If the characters are considered as autonomous, it also follows that

> the view of life [which the author tries to convey] should not be looked for in the conversations of the characters, but rather in the mute evidence of the author's way of dealing with his subject.[1]

Moreover,

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[1]Wharton, "Leslie Stephens' George Eliot," p. 249.

> general conclusions must not be sought . . . in the fate of the characters, and still less in their own comments on it, but in the kind of atmosphere the telling of their history creates, the light it casts on questions beyond its borders.[1]

General conclusions, the view of life, and the significance of the characters' relation to the moral and social standards accepted in the novel, must not be sought in the characters' explicit statements and in the dialogue of the novel. They will be found instead in the way the author treats his subject and in the atmosphere which his style and tone create. This indicates that the specific moral purpose of a novel should not be expressed but implied in the actions and in the way they are represented.[2] By this same principle of the novelist's working on the level of implication, Mrs. Wharton also excludes strictly intellectual speculation from the novel. For example, of Proust, whom she generally admired, she wrote:

> . . . I think now, that his intellectual speculations hampered his genius as a story teller, and that the mist of Bergsonian metaphysics, which now and then thickens to a fog, not only impedes the progress of his tale but frequently blurs the vivid faces of his protagonists.[3]

The implications of Mrs. Wharton's early statement, that the "form and function" of a novel must be considered as one, are confirmed by further inquiry into her critical and literary theories. Each device and principle discussed above can be related to the central matter of characterization. Such a relationship indicates that Mrs. Wharton saw all the elements of literary art not simply as elements or devices that produced the whole, but rather as fragments of the whole. The elements,

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[1] Ibid., p. 250.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Wharton, "A Reconsideration of Marcel Proust," p. 231.

therefore, that Mrs. Wharton abstracted from the novel for analysis and discussion, cannot be added up again to equal the novel. They must be seen in their intimate relationship to the whole work. The figure Mrs. Wharton used to express this wholeness was a "stellar system." Two things were necessary, for example, to write novels of the quality of Balzac's, Thackeray's, or James's:

> the choice of a central situation, and of what might be called centripetal incidents. . . . The tale must be treated as a stellar system, with all its episodes revolving like "the army of unalterable law" round a central Reason Why.[1]

Even though a tale or novel were treated in this manner, its success could not be assured, for certain qualities of the author, as well as certain of his acquired abilities and experiences, determine the quality of his style and treatment, those things which produce the "tone" and "atmosphere," for example, from which the critic may infer the "view of life" and the "general conclusions."

> A novel [Mrs. Wharton wrote] is good or bad in proportion to the depth of the author's nature, the richness of his imagination, and the extent to which he is able to realize his intention.[2]

Some of the techniques by which an author may most efficiently and effectively "realize his intention" have just been discussed. It remains to discover what resources the author may have to give vitality and quality to these techniques.

If the work of art is a realization of the artist's vision of reality, as Mrs. Wharton insists, it is obviously impossible, in certain

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[1]Wharton, "Henry James in His Letters," pp. 199-200.

[2]Wharton, "A Cycle of Reviewing," p. 45.

areas, to distinguish what precisely is an attribute of the art object and what an attribute of the artist. A case in point is the dual reference of Mrs. Wharton's concept of taste to both the author of the work and to the work itself. For example, when she writes that taste "is the regulating principle of all art," her reference is equally to a structure of experiences and a way of perceiving, both of which occur inside the artist's mind, as well as to the principles which regulate and harmonize the elements which constitute the art object once it has been projected outside the artist. On the other hand, when she describes the fundamentals of taste as "patience, deliberateness, reverence," and identifies taste with "the recognition of a standard," her reference is obviously to the artist alone; and when she identifies taste with "harmony of proportion and beauty of composition," her reference is obviously to the art object produced. Some of Mrs. Wharton's generalizations about art, then, refer to the art object as well as to the artist, but it is usually possible to isolate from them certain attributes which refer specifically to the artist. For example, restraint, the instinct for proportion, and the author's own convictions are part of her concept of taste yet she ascribes them to the artist even though they have fairly definite expression in the art object.

The greatest artists, Mrs. Wharton implies, have an "instinct for proportion." This instinct is actually a function of taste, but in the practice of literary art, it is the sense which assists the writer in coordinating subject with length of treatment and characters with their setting and the scope of their adventure. For example, she writes:

> Length, naturally, is not so much a matter of pages as

> of the mass and quality of what they contain. It is obvious that a mediocre book is always too long, and that a great one usually seems too short. But beyond this question of quality and weightiness lies the more closely relevant one of the development which this or that subject requires, the amount of sail it will carry. The great novelists have always felt this, and, within an inch or two, have cut their cloth accordingly.[1]

The precision with which this sense operates may be seen in her description of Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyitch."

> Tolstoy [she writes] gave to "Ivan Ilyitch" just enough development to make a parable of universal application out of the story of an insignificant man's death. A little more, and he would have dropped into the fussy and meticulous, and smothered his meaning under unnecessary detail.[2]

A little less, she implies, and he would have missed his meaning.

This same instinct for proportion exists in drawing the relationships between characters and their setting and their adventures. Singled out as especially competent in these areas are Jane Austen and Tolstoy.

> In no other novelist [she writes] was this instinct more unerring than in the impeccable Jane Austen. Never is there any danger of finding any of her characters out of proportion or rattling around in their setting. The same may be said of Tolstoy, at the opposite end of the scale. His power of immediately establishing the right proportion between his characters and the scope of their adventure--seems never to have failed him.[3]

This instinct for form extends its influence also into the fulfillment of "form" and the purpose of art. It is largely because Tolstoy can see the true proportions among his characters, their setting, their actions, and the scope of their adventure that even his

> . . . longest and most seemingly desultory novels . . . follow a prescribed orbit; they are true to the eternal effort of art

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[1] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, pp. 102-04. Italics mine.

[2] Ibid., p. 105.

[3] Ibid., p. 106.

> to complete what in life seems incoherent and fragmentary. This sense of the great theme sweeping around on its allotted track in the "most ancient heavens" is communicated on the first page of such novels as "War and Peace."[1]

A corollary function of the sense of proportion and taste is restraint. Restraint, Mrs. Wharton understood, could enhance and deepen emotional responses when it was practiced as a manner of presentation. For example, she writes,

> George Eliot, in fact, as she advanced in the study of life, came to see her pathos deeper, and to render it with more restraint, with less appeal to the superficial emotions but with a far more poignant sense of the lachrymae rerum.[2]

Thus restraint, though it is a quality which derives from the artist's further experience with life and his increased ability to see into pathos, is nevertheless, as it appears in fictional presentation, a way of avoiding superficiality. "In any really good subject," Mrs. Wharton wrote, "one has only to probe deep enough to come to tears,"[3] and the artistic representation of these tears and this eternal sadness is best and most effectively done with restraint.

The chances for a writer's greatness are enhanced, Mrs. Wharton thought, if he chose as his field his own particular way of realizing life, and if he based his representation of it on his philosophy of life. "I am convinced," she wrote, "that no story teller, however great his gifts, can do great work unbased on some philosophy of life."[4] It is

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[1] Ibid., p. 107. Note the recurring "stellar" image.

[2] Wharton, "Leslie Stephens' George Eliot," p. 250.

[3] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, p. 35.

[4] Wharton, "A Reconsideration of Marcel Proust," p. 231.

this philosophy, whatever it may be, that in part gives form and structure to the narrative. Similarly, the writer can do well only when he represents life as he sees it. She writes that it is a rule

> that the novelist should deal only with what is within his reach, literally or figuratively (in most cases the two are synonymous). . .[1]

> . . . the novelist . . . should write about any class of people who become instantly real to him as he thinks about them. . .[2]

> The novelist's--any novelist's--proper field, created by his particular way of apprehending life, is limited only by the bounds of his natural, his instinctive interests. The writer who sees life in terms of South Sea cannibals, as Herman Melville did, will waste his time (as, incidentally, Melville did) if he tries to depict it as found in drawing-rooms and conservatories. . .[3]

Mrs. Wharton makes it clear that the writer must take for his field and his material those areas of life which are most real to him, those which involve the greater part of his experience, and which he knows well enough to see life and meaning in.

After the novelist has defined his proper area and his proper field of treatment, he must then exercise his judgment to discover whether he has sufficient talent and ability to deal with it properly. One of the great difficulties a writer faces is

> the mysterious discrepancy which sometimes exists between [his] vision of life and his particular kind of talent. Not infrequently an innate tendency to see things in large masses is combined with the technical inability to render them otherwise than separately, meticulously, on a small scale. Perhaps more failures than one is aware of are due to this particular lack of proportion between the powers

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[1] Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 206.

[2] Wharton, "A Cycle of Reviewing," p. 45.

[3] Wharton, "The Great American Novel, p. 649.

> of vision and expression . . . the only remedy is resolutely to abandon the larger for the smaller field, to narrow one's vision to one's pencil, and do the small thing closely and deeply rather than the big thing loosely and superficially.[1]

One of the artist's attributes which determine whether he can deal fully with a large subject or a small one is the depth and quality of his imagination. In A Backward Glance Mrs. Wharton writes:

> The bigger the imagination, the more powerful the intellectual equipment, the more different subjects will come within the novelist's reach; and Balzac [for example] spread his net over nearly every class and situation in the French social system.[2]

Mrs. Wharton distinguishes between two kinds of imaginative processes, the sympathetic and the creative.

> The chief difference between the merely sympathetic and the creative imagination is that the latter is two-sided, and combines with the power of penetrating into other minds that of standing far enough aloof from them to see beyond, and relate them to the whole stuff of life out of which they but partially emerge. Such an all-round view can be obtained only by mounting to a height; and that height, in art, is proportioned to the artist's power of detaching one part of his imagination from the particular problem in which the rest is steeped.[3]

Although the sympathetic and creative functions of the imagination are not seen as separate, clearly Mrs. Wharton distinguishes two imaginative processes. The first function, the sympathetic, Mrs. Wharton seems to relegate to a minor category by her descriptive word, "merely." However, it is important; its true significance may be seen when the "power of penetrating into other minds" is called empathy or what Keats would have called Negative Capability. Clearly, without being

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[1] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, pp. 22-23.

[2] Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 206.

[3] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, p. 15.

able to experience the life of a character empathically and vicariously, the author would never be able to raise the character to the level of visibility. Moreover, without the fullest possible understanding of the subtleties and the delicate motions of the soul under study, the author could never clearly and emphatically present the dramatic relationships between the character and his setting, and the correlation and correspondences between him and the things surrounding him. Even though this function of the imagination is given here what appears to be a minor role, Mrs. Wharton identified it, once at least, with the ultimate proof of creative genius. In her essay on Marcel Proust, she wrote, "For, after all, what constitutes the ultimate proof of creative genius but the degree to which it penetrates and becomes a part of the intelligence on which it acts?"[1]

Complementary to the function of the sympathetic imagination is the power of the creative imagination to stand "far enough aloof from [the minds it penetrates] to see beyond, and relate them to the whole stuff of life." It is only by comparison with the varied and enormously important functions of this aspect of the creative imagination that the functions of the sympathetic imagination seem inferior. In describing her own conception of a novel, Mrs. Wharton reports that "one of the characters generally appears first."[2] What remains to be done with the character past this point is the measure of the greatness of the creative function of the imagination. First, a situation must be created

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[1] Wharton, "A Reconsideration of Marcel Proust," p. 231.

[2] Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 200.

for the character, and settings which are correlative with him and actions which are necessitated by him must be invented. He must then be "related to the whole stuff of life." This process entails projecting his behavior and his thought against the background of social and moral standards, and relating him sufficiently to the tradition of fictional characters to make him typical and universal (the sympathetic function of the imagination makes him individual). This process, then, gives form, in all three of Mrs. Wharton's senses, to the narrative which follows. Finally, the artist must endow the entire creation with the "stuff of life" as it implies reality and the "thick human atmosphere" in which even fictional characters must move.

The last function relegated to the creative faculty of the imagination seems to be a kind of self-check or a balance between the two functions. It implies the author's absorption into his character to such an extent that he knows and feels its whole personality, while at the same time he exercises sufficient control over his character to keep him from seizing control of the story or overshadowing it. Again, it implies a thorough acquaintance with character and a full ability to see him objectively as he moves over the fictional landscape.

In addition to its other functions, the imagination conduces to the quality of objectivity and control over material. Actually, Mrs. Wharton hesitated to call the subjective writer an artist, because, strictly speaking, he did not create; he reported himself. Probably her hostility to certain romantic qualities in writing caused her antipathy to "self-expression" in fiction, but she writes:

> The subjective writer lacks the power of getting far enough

> away from his story to view it as a whole and relate it to its setting; his minor characters remain the mere satellites of the principal personage (himself), and disappear when not lit up by their central luminary.[1]

More explicitly, Mrs. Wharton describes the results of objectivity as a function of the creative imagination:

> To the artist his world is as solidly real as the world of experience, or even more so, but in a way entirely different; it is a world to and from which he passes without any sense of effort, but always with an uninterrupted awareness of the passing. In this world are begotten and born the creatures of his imagination, more living to him than his own flesh-and-blood, but whom he never thinks of as living, in the reader's simplifying sense. Unless he keeps hold on this dual character of their being, visionary to him, and to the reader real, he will be the slave of his characters and not their master. . . . Once projected by his fancy[2] they are living beings who live their own lives; but their world is the one consciously imposed on them by their creator. Only by means of this objectivity of the artist can his characters live in art.[3]

Objectivity, then, which is the real distinction, from the artist's point of view, between creation and simple expression is one of the greatest functions of the creative imagination.

Although Mrs. Wharton rarely tries to avoid repeating literary commonplaces, she does not state that the artist imitates life and transmutes its experiences into art by the power of his imagination. She implies, however, that it is by this faculty that that mysterious process takes place. She writes, for example, "As to experience, intellectual and moral, the creative imagination can make a little go a long

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[1] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, p. 78.

[2] Mrs. Wharton did not make a distinction between the imagination and the fancy.

[3] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, pp. 119-20.

way, provided it remains long enough in the mind and is sufficiently brooded upon."[1] This, however, is as close as she approaches to the relationship between imagination and imitation or transmutation. The statement here, however, is not without other significance: it indicates that Mrs. Wharton ascribed no supernatural qualities to the artistic imagination. It is significant that the experience-material of art remains long enough in the mind to be sufficiently brooded upon. Her reference here is fairly obviously to an intellectual process. But even though she did not ascribe supernatural qualities to the imagination, as did Coleridge for example, she did surround creative and imaginative processes with a certain mystical aura. Thus as Vance Weston's imagination develops (Chapter IV), the process becomes increasingly mysterious, but never supernatural. The imagination develops by the compounding of intense and meaningful human experiences and it is always under the control of a guiding and rational intelligence. But this will be discussed at more length later.

The objectivity with which a writer must view his imaginative characters in order to make them live in art corresponds to the objectivity which he must bring to his whole work after it is completed. Mrs. Wharton felt that the writer's duty was to his private intent and to the accuracy with which he fulfilled his proper vision of life. In order to do this, the artist must become impervious to the cavilling of mediocre readers and reviewers, and refer his works to his private, inner critical faculty. The young novelist, she wrote:

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[1] Ibid., p. 21.

> will never do his best till he ceases altogether to think of his readers (and his editor and his publisher) and begins to write not for himself, but for that other self with whom the creative artist is always in mysterious correspondence . . .[1]

In A Backward Glance, she states the principle more forcefully and more fully:

> The novelist's best safeguard is to put out of his mind the quality of the praise or blame bestowed on him by reviewers and readers, and to write only for that dispassionate and ironic critic who dwells within the breast.[2]

Although the writer should protect himself from the sometimes damaging criticism of reviewers, editors, and publishers, he should not, through any false notions of preserving his originality, shut himself off from the influence of the best in the tradition of literature.

> . . . the great novels of the past, [she writes, will] haunt the beginner like a passion, and the works of his contemporaries, which pull him this way and that with too-persuasive hands. His impulse, at first, will be either to shun them, to his own impoverishment, or to let his dawning individuality be lost in theirs; but gradually he will come to see that he must learn to listen to them, take all they can give, absorb it into himself [tradition], and then turn to his own task with the fixed resolve to see life only through his own eyes [individual talent].[3]

Through his acquaintance with the tradition of literature and its contemporary manifestations, Mrs. Wharton says, the young novelist may learn the forms, conventions, and values of literary expression. Then from the framework of tradition he may make his departures, and at the same time add to the tradition the uniqueness of his own vision and inspiration.

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[1] Ibid. [2] Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 212.

[3] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, pp. 21-22. This idea is dramatized in Hudson River Bracketed, when Vance Weston is first introduced to the library at the Willows.

For inspiration in the conventional sense, Mrs. Wharton held nothing but contempt. She did not, of course, deny that the artist had inspiration, but she did deny the validity of the popular notion of it. "Many people," she writes,

> assume that the artist receives, at the outset of his career, the mysterious sealed orders known as "Inspiration," and has only to let that sovereign impulse carry him where it will. Inspiration [she continues], does indeed come at the outset to every creator, but it comes most often as an infant, helpless, stumbling, inarticulate, to be taught and guided; and the beginner, during this time of training his gift, is as likely to misuse it as a young parent to make mistakes in teaching his first child.[1]

The qualities ordinarily attributed to "inspiration" Mrs. Wharton ascribed to the creative process, the imagination or intuition.

> I have thought over . . . most problems of creative art in the fascinating but probably idle attempt to discover how it is all done, and exactly what happens at that "fine point of the soul" where the creative act, like the mystic's union with the Unknowable, really seems to take place.[2]

The ultimate secret of the creative act and process is shrouded in mystery, and therefore "no art can be quite pent-up in the rules deduced from it."[3] But on the other hand, no art can "fully realize itself unless those who practice it attempt to take its measure and reason out its processes."[4]

Style, probably the least definable and most general of all Mrs. Wharton's critical categories, is essentially a function of the author, as her definition indicates.

> . . . style [is] the way in which [incidents] are presented, not only in the narrower sense of language, but also, and

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[1] Ibid., p. 20. [2] Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 121.

[3] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, p. 119. [4] Ibid.

> rather, as they are grasped and coloured by their medium, the narrator's mind, and given back in his words. It is the quality of the medium which gives these incidents their quality; style, in this sense, is the most personal ingredient in the combination of things out of which any work of art is made. Words are the exterior symbols of thought, and it is only by their exact use that the writer can keep on his subject the close and patient hold which "fishes the murex up," and steeps his creation in unfading colours.[1]

Style, in its first meaning, is simply the way, the manner in which incidents are presented, but since the incidents, in Mrs. Wharton's theory, are correlatives of character, and since character and actions are the essentials of form, then style, or the way in which these elements of the novel are presented must be coordinated with the whole. Style is also a matter of the use of words; the qualification put upon "their exact use," however, seems not to be an emphasis upon the exact dictionary meaning of the words but rather more nearly what Anatole France meant by le mot juste, for only by this emotionally and aesthetically controlled "exact" use can the word "fish up the murex" and "steep" the creation "in unfading colours." Finally, the quality of the mind of the narrator, whether artist or central intelligence, will determine the quality and style of the recorded incidents, and in this respect, considering the artist as narrator, the style becomes one of the most personal elements of the art work. Illuminating incidents, then, not only because of their extreme personal elements but also because of their reflection in the quality of the experience recorded, become a stylistic trait, but a device of style which remains constant in the adequate style no matter what the quality of the experience recorded or the words

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[1] Ibid., p. 24.

chosen to record it. And illuminating incidents are a kind of touchstone, in Mrs. Wharton's literary theory, by which the adequacy of style may be tested.

Since style, except for the illuminating incident, is a quality rather than a device or technique, and since its success or failure must be measured against the subject and theme it attempts to embody, Mrs. Wharton has few definite statements about it. Some inferences about style, however, can be drawn from her description of her own stylistic practices and from her criticism of other writers. For example, she describes the critical reception of her own style as follows:

> While deploring the absence of plan in my earlier works, the critics had thus far agreed in praising their so-called "brilliancy." There is nothing I have ever hated more than "brilliancy" pinned on like a trimming; but I wrote as I could, and was naturally happy to be praised. Experience, however, subdued my natural tendency to "put things" pointedly, and I became conscious--and happily conscious--of having reduced my style to a more even and unnoticeable texture.[1]

Implied here is the principle that style should not be superficially clever or brilliant, that it should not be consciously ornamental but rather unobtrusively coordinated with the subject and the incident. It is also implied that certain qualities of style will always be cosmetic, but that these qualities should be sufficiently subdued to avoid attracting attention to themselves, an idea which is paralleled by the notion that the best art is that which appears to be artless.

In her essay on George Eliot, Mrs. Wharton condemned Eliot's early style which she characterized as prolix, ponderous, and pedantic.

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[1] Wharton, "A Cycle of Reviewing," p. 45.

And in a further analysis of Eliot's style, she observed that though it is "rapid and varied in dialogue, it lacks both these qualities in narrative; yet in character drawing it is far less heavy and diffuse than in passages of reflection."[1] Other qualities of style which Mrs. Wharton remarked on, specifically in the fiction of Marcel Proust, were desultory manner and parenthetical syntax, characteristics for which her Jamesian background conditioned her unwinking acceptance. In addition, "it was one of the distinctive characters of Proust's genius that he combined with his great sweep of vision an exquisite delicacy of touch, a solicitous passion for detail."[2] And further, "His rarest quality lies . . . in his ability to reveal by a simple allusion, a word, an image, those depths of soul beyond the soul's own guessing."[3] Finally, one further criticism of style seems to be implicit in Mrs. Wharton's description of Bourget's introduction of his characters. "Bourget," she wrote, "montait en chaire." Her complaint seems directed not only against Bourget's method of characterization but also against his execution of style. She objects to his "preachiness," his lack of restraint, patience, and care. And the justice of this criticism is indicated by the fact that even the warmest of Bourget's apologists confess that at times his style is déclamatoire.

Like the final creative act which is as mysterious as the mystic's union with the Unknowable, the art of fiction--"the creation of imaginary characters and the invention of their imaginary experiences"[4]

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[1] Wharton, "Leslie Stephens' George Eliot," p. 249.

[2] Wharton, "Marcel Proust," p. 217. [3] Ibid.

[4] Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, p. 78.

--is shrouded in mystery. No rules can control its production and no formula can be made for its creation. The impulse toward the art of fiction springs eventually from some intuitive power in the writer's intellect and imagination. Once it is produced, however, certain guiding rules and conventions may be deduced from the art object, rules which, indeed, will not control the production of art but which may lead the writer toward a greater understanding of his purpose and a greater mastery of his craft. "There is a sense," writes Mrs. Wharton,

> in which nothing which receives the touch of art is trivial; but to rise to this height the incident, insignificant in itself, must illustrate some general law, and turn on some deep movement of the soul. If the novelist wants to hang his drama on a button, let it at least be one of Lear's.[1]

The material dealt with in this and in the preceding chapter represents what Mrs. Wharton thought were the basic assumptions upon which fiction might build, selection, transmutation, taste, visibility, and form. It also represents the specific techniques that she thought might realize these basic assumptions and values, the techniques, for example, of characterization, style and illuminating incidents, dialogue, and the conveying of an impression of passing time. To these ideas and techniques Mrs. Wharton gave all the logical and analytical thought of which she was capable. Too frequently she fails to get to the heart of her problem, and frequently she must evade the analysis by pronouncing the question a mystery. Some of her remarks, however, seem eminently just and adequate, for example her remarks on visibility in fiction, her remarks on form, and even the implications of her remarks on the

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[1] Ibid., p. 146.

sense of passing time.

The most important concept to which Mrs. Wharton gives her least adequate discussion is artistic imagination. Her ability to analyze and to discuss such a vague, complex, but very real idea was distinctly limited. The problems, though, which surround the formation of the imagination and which deal with the artist's relationship to actual and imagined experience puzzled her throughout her long literary career. Eventually, she was never competent to meet the problems of analyzing the imagination rationally and logically, but she did sufficiently organize her thoughts concerning it to build a myth of the artist, his experience, and the development of his imagination. The myth itself probably sprang from her distinction between the two functions of imagination, the sympathetic and the creative, and the myth is fully developed in her late novels Hudson River Bracketed (1929) and The Gods Arrive (1932). The devices and techniques discussed above relate directly to "the extent to which [an artist] is able to realize his intentions." The development of the "richness of his imagination" and the "depth of his nature" constitute the burden of the critical thought contained in Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive, and in order to arrive at the meaning of the imagination upon which the quality of a work of art will depend, it is necessary to subject these two novels to careful critical consideration.

CHAPTER IV

THE PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

Throughout Mrs. Wharton's fiction artists and artist stories regularly appear. For example, the first story, "The Muse's Tragedy," in her first volume of short stories, The Greater Inclination (1899), deals with the literary remains and reputation of an artist. The story concerns a young critic, Danyers, who wants to write an authoritative critical volume on a poet, Vincent Rendle, now dead. But the burden of the theme and the impact of the narrative consist in the discovery of the curious relationship between Rendle, his "muse," Mrs. Anerton, his unnamed mistress, and the production of his poetry. Mrs. Anerton was intellectually suited to understand Rendle's poetry, and sufficiently imaginative to participate in it. Rendle dedicated his "Silvia sonnets" to her. He fulfilled his human love, however, not with her but with a slender, blonde-haired girl in a Swiss resort hotel. The theme then, of the necessity of the poet's double experience with intellectual love and human love is established in one of Mrs. Wharton's earliest short stories.

This same theme finds its full dimensions in two of her last novels, Hudson River Bracketed (1929) and The Gods Arrive (1932). The recurrence of this same theme in novel form some thirty years later

indicates its persistence and the growing importance it assumed in Mrs. Wharton's mind. Also indicative of this persistence is the fact that in the critical context of "The Muse's Tragedy" she wrote:

> . . . was she not right in conjecturing that he had been deeply influenced by Mr. Rendle's poetry? Pour comprendre il faut aimer, and it seemed to her that, in some ways, he had penetrated the poet's inner meaning more completely than any other critic.[1]

And thirty-five years later, in her analysis of Proust in A Backward Glance, she wrote the following:

> [Proust] merely exemplified the tendency not infrequent in novelists of manners . . . to be dazzled by contact with the very society they satirize. If it is true that pour comprendre il faut aimer, this seeming inconsistency may . . . be a deep necessity of the creative imagination.[2]

Similarly, the subject of her first novel, The Touchstone (1900), is the relationship among Glennard, Mrs. Glennard, and Mrs. Aubyn, a famous artist, now dead, who had once been in love with Glennard. The theme of the story is the moral growth both Glennard and his wife experience when they discover their true responsibility to Mrs. Aubyn after Glennard publishes her love letters. The theme of the human relationship between Glennard and Mrs. Aubyn is not fully explored in this early novel, but it is sufficiently articulated to relate the novel to both the earlier short story and Mrs. Wharton's later novels. For example, Mrs. Wharton writes in Glennard's reflections:

> Later, when to be loved by her had been a state to touch any man's imagination, the physical reluctance had inexplicably, so overborne the intellectual attraction, that the

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[1] Edith Wharton, The Greater Inclination (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), p. 10.

[2] Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 325.

> last years had been, to both of them, an agony of conflicting impulses.[1]

And one year later, in Crucial Instances, Mrs. Wharton included a curious story called "Copy: A Dialogue,"[2] which deals with essentially the same problem from a different perspective. Two renowned authors, Mrs. Dale and Mr. Ventnor, having earlier been close friends and correspondents, meet to exchange their love letters. Both want to include the letters in their memoirs. During their meeting they discover that they have written a beautiful love story in their letters, though they have failed to live it in actual life.

Much of the material in these stories is doubtlessly autobiographical, especially that dealing with the artistic wife tormented by an unimaginative, unsympathetic husband; such stories, for example, as "Expiation."[3] How much of it is autobiographical and how much simply formed a part of Mrs. Wharton's imagined experience it remains for biographers to discover. It is important, however, that she was very early involved, both intellectually and imaginatively, with the question of the artist's real versus his imagined experiences, and with the question of his involvement with sympathetic and intellectual love. By what alchemy was Mrs. Aubyn's pain transmuted into the beauty of her love letters? What curtain of physical repulsion fell between her and

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[1]Edith Wharton, The Touchstone (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), p. 4.

[2]Edith Wharton, Crucial Instances (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), p. 99.

[3]Edith Wharton, The Descent of Man and Other Stories (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), p. 201.

Glennard? And why were two loves necessary to the poet Rendle? A critic in one of Mrs. Wharton's short stories pursues the same questions which obviously disturbed Mrs. Wharton shortly after she became an artist:

> The very next day [Willis French] was to see Horace Fingall's widow, and perhaps to put his finger on the clue to the labyrinth: that mysterious tormenting question of the relation between a creative artist's personal experience and its ideal expression.[1]

The key to the labyrinth she of course never found. Perhaps it is not to be found, but she continued throughout her fiction to approach the problem. It arises in many of her short stories, and is posed in many of her novels: The Custom of the Country (1913), The Age of Innocence (1920), Glimpses of the Moon (1922), A Son at the Front (1923), Hudson River Bracketed (1929), and The Gods Arrive (1932). She knew that the artist lives for beauty,[2] and that the first requirement of beauty in whatever form was that a thing should be in scale--proportioned to its purpose. The artist perceives this proportion, purpose, and beauty, which is not found ready-made in nature, by his unique way of seeing. All artists live, then, as Fingall lived,

> so intensely and constantly with his own inner vision that nothing external mattered. He must have been almost as detached from the visible world as a great musician or a great ascetic; at least till one sat him down before a face or a landscape--and then what he looked at became the whole of the visible world to him.[3]

Again, Crampton, a painter,

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[1]Edith Wharton, Here and Beyond (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1926), p. 221.

[2]Edith Wharton, A Son at the Front (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), p. 410.

[3]Wharton, Here and Beyond, p. 239.

> . . . caught himself once more viewing the details of the scene in the terms of his trade. River, pavement, terraces heavy with trees, the whole crowded sky-line from Notre Dame to the Pantheon, instead of presenting themselves in their bare reality, were transposed into a painter's vision. And the faces around him became again the starting-point of rapid incessant combinations of line and colour, as if the visible world were once more at its old trick of weaving itself into magic designs.[1]

The artist, specifically a literary artist, attains this kind of seeing and vision through his imagination. How his imagination develops and how he acquires the experiences of life to transmute into art is the burden of the art theory in Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive, novels which are the culmination of Mrs. Wharton's long inquiry into the soul of the novelist.

Evidences of Mrs. Wharton's seriousness of purpose and deliberate attention to Vance Weston, the artist in these novels, may be seen in the correspondences between her "fiction" in the novels and her serious non-fictional statements. Note for example, the following similarity. Mrs. Wharton states in The Writing of Fiction:

> The rule that the first page of a novel ought to contain the germ of the whole is even more applicable to the short story, because in the latter case the trajectory is so short that flash and sound nearly coincide.[2]

In Hudson River Bracketed the same idea appears as follows:

> Not know how [the story's] going to end! Then these people had never heard that footfall of Destiny which, for Vance, seemed to ring out in the first page of all the great novels, as compelling as the known on Macbeth's gates, as secret as the opening measures of the Fifth Symphony.[3]

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[1]Wharton, A Son at the Front, p. 221.

[2]Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, p. 51.

[3]Edith Wharton, Hudson River Bracketed (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1929), p. 418.

More striking still is the similarity between Vance Weston's inner, creative state and Mrs. Wharton's own. In Hudson River Bracketed she describes Weston's experience as follows:

> The curtain went up on his inner stage--one by one his characters came on, first faintly outlined, then more clearly, at last in full illumination. The outer world vanished, love, grief, poverty, sickness, debt, the long disappointments and the little daily torments, even the consoling landscape which enveloped him, all shrivelled up like the universe in the Apocalypse, with nothing left in an unlit void but that one small luminous space. The phenomenon was not new, but he had never before been detached enough to observe it in its mysterious acuity. Of all the myriad world nothing was left but this tiny centre of concentrated activity, in which creatures born without his will lived out their complicated and passionate lives. At such moments his most vivid personal experiences paled with the rest of reality, and some mysterious transfusion of spirit made him no longer himself but the life-element of these beings evoked from nowhere. They were there, they were real, they were the sole reality, and he who was the condition of their existence was yet apart from them, and empowered to be their chronicler.[1]

In A Backward Glance Mrs. Wharton tries to convey her own experience.

> What I mean to try for is the observation of that strange moment when the vaguely adumbrated characters whose adventures one is preparing to record are suddenly there, themselves, in the flesh, in possession of one, and in command of one's voice and hand. . . . I may be strolling about casually in my mind, and suddenly a character will start up, coming seemingly from nowhere. Again, but more breathlessly I watch; and presently the character draws nearer, and seems to become aware of me, and to feel the shy but desperate need to unfold his or her tale. . . . What I want to try to capture is an impression of the elusive moment when these people who haunt my brain actually begin to speak within me with their own voices. . . as soon as the dialogue begins, I become merely a recording instrument. . .[2]

These parallels are, of course, not the only ones, but they are sufficient to show how closely Mrs. Wharton's critical and literary theories

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[1] Ibid., p. 516.

[2] Wharton, A Backward Glance, pp. 198-203.

cluster about the development of the artist, Vance Weston. And they also show how in many cases his imaginative and metaphorical experiences are but reflections of her own.

In view of these parallels, it is surprising that more attention has not been given to these two art novels; but the truth is that none of Mrs. Wharton's novels has been so consistently misread or denied serious critical attention as Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive. Sometimes the responsibility for this neglect lies with the critic's tendency to repeat early opinions passed on Mrs. Wharton's fiction. At other times, it lies with the critic's reluctance to account for the full depth and breadth of Mrs. Wharton's thought concerning art. An indication of both processes may be seen in Professor Nevius's statement:

> The clearest suggestion that carries over from The Age of Innocence through Twilight Sleep to Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive is that the pain of life must be accepted. Grandma Scrimser's valedictory to her grandson may be taken as Edith Wharton's first and last word to a generation which, as she saw it, tried to protect itself against the more painful invasions of reality by means of divorces, twilight sleeps, faddist religions, and the aimless pursuit of pleasure.[1]

In addition, Professor Nevius belittles Mrs. Wharton in contrast with James as a theorist, and as a result he tends to ignore her growth of insight. Thus he fails to take into consideration that her early and late fictive statements may mean quite different things; and he ignores the fact that Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive deal specifically with the development, sensibility, and responsibility of an artist, and not, like The Age of Innocence and Twilight Sleep, merely with the sensibilities of men in society.

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[1]Blake Nevius, Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), p. 218.

Indications that the two major themes isolated by Professor Nevius--the trapped sensibility and the delineation of individual responsibility--are inadequate measures of these two novels show, for example, in his inability to explain the apparent inconsistencies in Laura Lou[1] and in his insistence that "there is no single view of the action that will satisfactorily explain all its parts."[2] He gives the following analysis of Laura Lou:

> Laura Lou, with her obvious prettiness, her fretfulness, and inadequacy, and her devouring possessiveness, is the kind of partner Vance might have lived comfortably with had he never outgrown Euphoria and his job on "The Free Speaker." She represents an ideal of womanhood easily satisfied by the standards of Euphoria, and her influence on the budding novelist is therefore regressive.[3]

The greater part of this analysis is accurate; but it does not exhaust either Mrs. Wharton's or Vance Weston's view of the pitiful young wife. It is, furthermore, inaccurate to assert that Laura Lou's influence is regressive. Further investigation of her character shows that she is one polarity of two spiritual experiences an artist must have. And by the analysis of these two polarities, represented by Laura Lou and Halo Spear, the ritual development of the young artist, Weston, may be seen as a whole and entire action.

What these two women symbolize is actually clearly represented by the distinctions made in Plato's Symposium between the earthly Venus and the heavenly Aphrodite, physical love and creativeness as opposed to intellectual love and creativeness. However, Mrs. Wharton did not choose these mythological characters when she constructed the myth in

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[1] Ibid., p. 230. [2] Ibid., p. 226. [3] Ibid., pp. 233-34.

Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive. Instead she took only the earthly Venus, whom she symbolized in Laura Lou Tracy. In opposition to her, she placed Artemis of the Artemis-Actaeon myth, whom she symbolized in Halo Spear. Mrs. Wharton probably substituted Artemis for Urania because the cost in pain associated with beholding ideal beauty, as represented in the Artemis-Actaeon myth, was more to her purpose. With these mythological and symbolic associations established, Mrs. Wharton represents three things in each woman: in Halo Spear, reason, tradition, and the creative function of the imagination; in Laura Lou Tracy, passion, the history of man's suffering and responsibility, and the sympathetic function of the imagination. Together they represent the Past, the artistic imagination, the balance of reason and emotion, and the source of experiences of life which the artist must suffer.

As Professor Nevius indicated, Grandma Scrimser's last words, "We have not made enough of pain," are important in the total action of Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive. In The Writing of Fiction Mrs. Wharton stated, "One good heart-break will furnish the poet with many songs, and the novelist with a considerable number of novels. But they must have hearts that can break."[1] Significantly, then, Weston makes his first serious attempt at writing after suffering a crushing disillusionment in his childhood sweetheart, Floss Delaney. More significantly, however, after this experience he is no longer suited to the life of Euphoria, his home town. He can no longer share with the other citizens the superficial, uninquiring, and complacent sense of

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[1]Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, p. 21.

well-being that the name of the small midwestern town indicates. His first step toward making more of pain is to leave Euphoria, where pain has no meaning, and to go to New York. There his involvement with the two women leads him to the knowledge of pain, while his temperament leads him to work at his craft of fiction. His sufferings at the hands of Halo Spear and Laura Lou Tracy are no less intense and painful than his experiences with Floss Delaney. But they are different in kind because they occur in a ritual pattern which gives them meaning and makes them constructive.

When, at the end of Book III, Vance Weston leaves New York to return to Euphoria, he leaves behind Laura Lou, an undistinguished, awkward, but immaturely pretty distant relative of the proud and elite Halo Spear. When he returns three years later, however, Weston sees her in a different perspective and with different features:

> . . . and he thought: "I used to think her cheek-bones too high; and now the little shadow under them is what makes her look like those marble heads of Greek priestesses with the smile under their lids. . ."[1]

Before his departure, Weston had sent Laura Lou a basket of flowers which particularly caught his eye because of the

> . . . stuffed dove perched on the gilt handle of a basket of sweet-peas and maidenhair fern. It recalled to him Miss Spear's description of that temple to Apollo, somewhere in Greece, which had been built by the birds and bees; and looking at the burnished neck of the dove he thought: "That might have been one of the birds . . . Laura Lou'll like it anyhow."[2]

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[1] Wharton, Hudson River Bracketed, p. 205. Note also the significance Mrs. Wharton gives to the naming of characters, for example, in A Backward Glance, pp. 200-201.

[2] Wharton, Hudson River Bracketed, pp. 153-54.

When Laura Lou recalls the dove to Weston, Mrs. Wharton observes, "How little he had dreamed, when he bought it, that the dove would be Venus's messenger."[1] Vance Weston is completely overwhelmed with desire for Laura Lou, and he very clearly distinguishes between her peculiar attractiveness and that exerted by Halo Spear.

> With that girl on Thundertop [Halo] it had been different; the shock of ideas, the stimulus of the words she used, the allusions she made, the sense of an unknown world of beauty and imagination widening about him as she talked--all this had subdued his blood while it set his brain on fire. . . . But when Laura Lou spoke she became a child to him again. . . . Yet his feeling for her was not the sensual hunger excited by girls like Floss Delaney. It was strained by something new in this tender creature; as if the contending elements of body and soul were so harmonized in her that to look at her was almost to clasp her.[2]

These associations of "Greek priestesses," "doves," "Venus's messenger," and a love that is of the body and soul but not of the intellect culminate in Weston's speech to his wife, Laura Lou, after their hasty, unreasoned marriage.

> "Venus, darling. Didn't you know the dove belonged to Venus? Didn't you know Venus was our goddess, and that she was born out of the waves, and came up all over foam? And that you look so like her that I feel as if you'd just been blown in on one of those silver streamers, and they might pull you back any minute if I didn't hold tight onto you?"[3]

This speech occurs by the seaside where three years earlier Vance Weston had "felt for the first time the weight of the universe upon him," and where "he had scrambled across the dunes to the sands, reached the stones of the beach, knelt close to that long incoming curve [of water], and plunged his hands into it, as if in dedication."[4] To this place he

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[1] Ibid., p. 210.

[2] Ibid., pp. 212-13.

[3] Ibid., p. 242.

[4] Ibid., p. 180.

returns with his new bride and with her drinks the bacchic wine from an empty shell, the mystic vessel of Venus. Thus Laura Lou is slowly transfigured into something more complex and more elemental than a possessive wife. She becomes a symbol and embodiment of human passion, love, and responsibility, the embodiment of a knowledge that derives from the blood instead of from the brain. Were this not abundantly clear, their marriage and union is consummated in an unadorned, seaside cabin where "Over the bed hung a tattered calendar, of which the last page to be uncovered was dated September 15, and bore the admonition: 'Little Children, Love One Another.'"[1]

With this added detail, the pagan, Venus qualities of Laura Lou are crossed with Christian responsibility and her full symbolic character and her significance for Weston emerge clearly and firmly. In addition to being Venus, she is that figure through which pass the subtle but inescapable threads and bonds of awful responsibility, awareness of lost innocence, abject dismay and terror in the face of a new and strange demand for full maturity, discipline, and wisdom. The burden of her profound meaning falls suddenly and terrifyingly on Weston.

> The misgiving just flashed through him; but it left an inward chill. With those other girls he had been tangled up with there had been no time for such conjectures. . . . In the pale winter light she lay like a little marble image; the serenity of her attitude seemed to put the whole weight of the adventure on his shoulders, and again he thought: "Why did I do it? What can come of it?" and he stood dazed before the locked mystery of his own mind. In those short hours of passion the little girl who had seemed so familiar to him had suddenly become mysterious too; closest part of himself henceforth, yet utterly remote and inexplicable; a woman with a sealed soul, but with a body that clung to his. . . . The misgiving, which had passed in a flash the night

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[1] Ibid., p. 245.

> before, now fastened on him with a cold tenacity. "What do I know about her? What does she know about me?" he questioned in a terror of self-scrutiny. He looked at her again, and the startled thought: What if she were lying there dead? flashed through his mind. How could such a horrible idea have come to him? In an instant his wild imagination had seized on it, and he saw himself maimed, desolate, crushed--but free. Free to open that door and go out, straight back to his life of two days before, without the awful burden of responsibility he had madly shouldered. . . the vision lasted but the flicker of a lid, but like lightning at night in an unknown landscape it lit up whole tracts of himself that he had never seen. The horror was so strong that he half turned back to wake her up and dispel it. The faint stir of her breast under her thin night-dress reassured him, and he unlatched the door and went out. . . . Instantly the horror vanished, and as he saw before him the great motionless curves of sea and sky, and thought that all the while they had been there, hushed and secret, encircling his microscopic adventure, a sense of unifying power took possession of him, as it used to in his boyhood. . . . As he stood there, all the shapes of beauty which had haunted his imagination seemed to rise from the sea and draw about him. They swept him upward into the faint dapplings of the morning sky, and he caught, as in a mystic vision, the meaning of beauty, the secret of poetry, the sense of the forces struggling in him for expression. How could he ever have been afraid--afraid of Laura Lou, of fate, of himself? She was the vessel from which he had drunk this divine reassurance, this moment of union with the universe . . . he would carry her on his heart like the little cup of his great communion.[1]

This passage has been quoted at length to call attention to Mrs. Wharton's full treatment of the character and nature of Laura Lou and thus to correct the somewhat distorted treatment she has received in customary criticism.[2] Weston had wanted her, indeed, as artist needed her, "and now he had her; and exquisite as the possession was, he was abruptly faced with the cost of it."[3]

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[1] Ibid., pp. 247-49.

[2] Compare for example, Woman's Magazine (n.s.), XIV (1929), 32, where an unidentified reviewer states that Laura Lou is simply "stupid, soft, and devoted."

[3] Wharton, Hudson River Bracketed, p. 250. Italics mine.

Aside from showing the symbolic significance of Laura Lou, the passage just quoted outlines the experience of the typically "American hero" as described by Professor R. W. B. Lewis.[1] Weston has divorced himself from his traditionless past; he has fled from the spacious West to the East, where he finds the Past and Continuity and becomes involved with Time. He is faced with the burden of responsibility and guilt, or more accurately, loss of innocence, which involvement with time through the medium of woman must necessarily entail. Escape from the "horror" of self-illumination which this involvement produces is represented by an escape into space. Earlier, indeed, when Weston had faced the mere involvement with family and his immediate past, "What he longed for was to vanish into space, to get off into a universe of his own where nothing associated with his former life could reach him."[2] This, in miniature, is precisely what happens in the episode above. Vance longs to "vanish into space," and he does escape by leaving the room which holds his enigmatic Laura Lou and by entering the "great motionless curves of sea and sky" where his horror "instantly" vanishes.[3]

The escape into space is here represented as an escape from the darker responsibilities of the heart to the brighter and perhaps lighter responsibilities of the intellect. Since Weston is a developing artist, he has a dual responsibility to the intellect and the heart, and Mrs. Wharton represents him not as escaping into a mere emotional affirmation

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[1] R. W. B. Lewis, The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

[2] Wharton, Hudson River Bracketed, p. 167. [3] Ibid., p. 249.

of the unity and goodness of the world, but into an emotional and simultaneously noetic experience in which he perceives the "unifying power," "the meaning of beauty," and "the secret of poetry." It remains, however, an escape, and is inadequate to the full needs of the artist unless it is complemented with the responsibilities of the heart. The complementary nature of these two experiences is symbolized in the rhythm of behavior which Weston adopts between Laura Lou (Venus) and Halo Spear (Artemis).

Significantly, Laura Lou and Halo are related by a distant marriage. Equally significant, they are both caretakers of the Willows, the old house in which Weston writes his first novel. Halo Spear superintends the maintenance of the house and Laura Lou executes her orders. What the two women represent is distinguished when Weston is first introduced into the house. When Laura Lou admits him, his sensations are of "fantasy and mystery" and "mysterious and compelling" voices.[1] After she leads him to the library she disappears into the depths of the house and Halo Spear suddenly enters, explains to Weston the books he has removed from the shelves and makes available to him the intellectual resources of the library. The house itself represents to Weston the Past and Continuity, an awareness of which is necessary to the artistic temperament and to taste, as Mrs. Wharton makes clear in French Ways and Their Meaning. Since generations have lived and died in the Willows, it represents that continuum of human life and passion embodied in Laura Lou. Since there is a library at the Willows, it also represents the tradition, the continuum of intellect and art, aspects of the past

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[1] Ibid., pp. 58-59.

embodied in Halo Spear. The Willows, then, represents the total past, and it is in the Willows that Weston produces his first novel.

Even though the mythological backgrounds of Halo Spear are not so explicitly stated as those of Laura Lou, her symbolic function in the novel is equally clear. She represents the artist's responsibility to the monuments of intellect and purity of aesthetic form. She represents the perception of artistic, intellectual beauty, and admits an escape, through form and expression, from the confining responsibilities of the heart. The responsibilities she represents are perhaps more "spacious," but they are nonetheless acquired by pain and suffering peculiar to them. The first suggestion that Halo represents something other than simply a sophisticated socialite lies in her explanation for failing to keep a rendezvous with Weston.

> Nothing prevented me--and nobody. I simply forgot. The day was so heavenly--wasn't it? I went off alone, up the mountain, to bathe in a pool in the woods; and I took some books and the dogs; and forgot everything.[1]

The suggestion here is obviously of the Artemis-Actaeon myth, which gave the title to Mrs. Wharton's first volume of poems. The myth is not exactly reproduced (for example, in the myth Actaeon owns the dogs), but important elements are retained. Halo is identified with Artemis, spiritual purity and inviolable beauty, and the dogs who levy the cost in pain for beholding pure beauty are kept by her. Halo's identification with Athena is suggested by her name, Halo Spear, which recalls the accoutrements of the goddess, the helmet and spear. This association is supported by Halo's grey eyes, a physical characteristic retained in

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[1] Ibid., p. 87.

Athena's classical epithet, and by her function in the novel as intellectual and critical counselor for Weston.

These suggestions are still further supported by Vance Weston's comments on Halo. In her role as means of escape into intellectual "space," Halo takes Vance to Thundertop to watch the sunrise. On the mountain with Halo and the dawning light, Vance felt the "shock of ideas," "the sense of the unknown world of beauty," which "set his brain on fire."[1] Moreover,

> Vance thought of her as goddess-like and remote, mistress of the keys of knowledge and experience; her notice had flushed him with pride, but it seemed a part of the mysterious unreality of everything in this new world.[2]

Suggestive, too, is the language in the following passage:

> His whole sentient self was still away from him, in the blue and gold of the uprolling. He would have liked to lie down there on the ledge of Thundertop between the misty splendours below and the pure light above, and let the hours drift by while the chariot of the day described its great circuit before him. At such moments he was almost disembodied.[3]

And finally suggestive of Halo's symbolic qualities is Weston's curiosity about

> . . . the fact that he had hardly been conscious of his companion's age or sex, hardly aware of the grave beauty of her face, had felt her only as the mysterious vehicle of all the new sensations pouring into his soul--as if she had been the element harmonizing the scene, or a being born of the sunrise and the forest.[4]

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[1] Ibid., pp. 212-13.

[2] Ibid., p. 96. Note also: "He wanted . . . to kiss her on the lids and lips but there hung between them the faint awe of her presence. She was the woman his arms longed for, but she was also the goddess, the miracle, the unattainable being who haunted the peaks of his imagination." Ibid., p. 439.

[3] Ibid., p. 100.

[4] Ibid., p. 101. Italics mine.

As customary criticism indicates, Halo Spear is a wealthy, sophisticated socialite with highly developed literary tastes and affectionate proprietary feelings for Vance Weston. She first criticises his poetry and later helps him with his short stories and novels. She alone keeps him faithful to his task. But she is also a symbol for the intellectual heritage of the Past, the tradition of literary form and excellence, and the inviolability of intellectual beauty. Thus Weston's relationship with her and Laura Lou, and his behavior toward them, clearly represent Mrs. Wharton's view of the dual experience which is necessary to form the vision and artistic maturity of a novelist. Together they represent the pain, suffering and experience the artist must undergo before he can see and understand life and then transmute it into art. Together they constitute a composite which is the Past. This Past is a composite of opposing forces, however; one of man's past tradition of riotous and impulsive passions and "formless" actions and behavior; the tradition of a mysterious human sympathy and a continuum of heavy responsibility and guilt; the other the heritage of intellectual endowment, of reason, order, and form in human behavior and thought, the tradition of beauty of concept and honesty of expression. The social conditions of these two women again reflect the two ideological polarities. Laura Lou is a wavering young girl who is born of an impulsive marriage that broke social forms. She was born into a family which began "several generations ago [when] a foolish Lorburn virgin [ran] away with farmer Tracy's son, who worked in a cement factory."[1] She impulsively broke her engage-

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[1] Ibid., p. 85.

ment to Bunty Hayes in order to enter a reckless marriage with Weston. On the contrary, Halo Spear belongs to an old and established family, and she stifles her personal desires and impulses in order to make a proper (though morally enforced) marriage with Lewis Tarrant.

Vance Weston's relation to the Past is symbolized by his intense love for Laura Lou and his intense adoration of Halo Spear, and both are equally necessary to him. Although he can scarcely tolerate Laura Lou's inability to understand his work, he cannot part with her when she offers to leave him to the "other woman." On the other hand, he cannot deprive himself of the company of Halo Spear whose presence and influence are indispensable to his artistic creativity.[1] Although Weston's adoration for Halo threatens to become sensual and possessive, she remains inviolable, and to the end of the novel both she and Laura Lou retain their symbolic value.

The result of Weston's accumulated experience, his awareness of the past, and his developing imagination finds expression in his first novel, "Instead." The novel recreates the feelings and passions of an elderly owner of the Willows (the sympathetic function of the imagination), and at the same time authentically reproduces her historical past with its customs, values, and perspectives (the creative function of the imagination). Weston writes this book by day at the Willows in company with Halo, with whom he enjoys "fervid intellectual communion,"

> [for] she had always appeared to Vance less as a simple human creature than as the mysterious custodian of the unknown, a being who held the keys of knowledge and could render it

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[1] This situation corresponds to those in both "The Muse's Tragedy," and The Touchstone.

> accessible and lovely to him. . . . And he saw that, as she supplied him with the quaint homely details of that past, she was fascinated by the way in which they were absorbed into his vision, woven into his design.[1]

Laura Lou's role is played by night when she, the "simple human creature," supplies Weston with the necessary emotional, sensuous experience.

> The fact that he had nearly lost her made her more precious, more vividly present to him; he felt in her a new quality which not only enchanted his senses but fed his imagination--if indeed there were any dividing line between the two. For Laura Lou seemed to belong equally to his body and soul--it was only his intelligence that she left unsatisfied. Into the world of his mind, with its consuming curiosities, its fervid joys, she would never enter--would never even discover that it existed.[2]

Beyond this point in the novel, Mrs. Wharton emphasizes the artist's economic status, investigates the clash of differing literary ideologies, and begins to make character adjustments to bring the unstable narrative situation, the love triangle, into equilibrium. The equilibrium is not, however, achieved until the end of the sequel novel, The Gods Arrive. Mrs. Wharton's artistic problem is, of course, clear: the narrative conflicts remain unstable so long as Vance Weston loves two women, and since each represents an indispensable possession of the artist, it is necessary for one to acquire the symbolic characteristics of both. When this is accomplished, Weston can retain his artistic integrity and the narrative conflict can be brought to some satisfactory equilibrium and resolution.

In an attempt to review his own career and economic status,

> . . . Vance began to examine his own case. He had not complied, he had tried to stand on his feet, to defend his intellectual integrity. And where was he? What was he? The flattered and

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[1]Wharton, Hudson River Bracketed, p. 357. [2]Ibid., p. 337.

> envied author of that newest craze, a successful first novel; yet in himself an unhappy powerless creature, poor, hungry, in debt, the bewildered bondslave of the people he despised, the people who sacrifice everything and everybody to getting on.[1]

Part of Weston's apparent failure has been caused by what Professor Nevius calls his "consuming but necessary egoism,"[2] and what Weston himself thinks of as his "irreducible core of selfness."[3] Another contributing factor, however, is Weston's inability to deal with the material world while his mind is fired by the vision of beauty.

> He was frightened to think how completely, when Beauty called, that celestial Beauty which haunted earth and sky, and the deeps of his soul, he forgot everything else, and rushed after the voice unheeding. When that happened, his two worlds were merged in one, or rather the world of daily duties vanished under a more overwhelming reality. But this would no longer be so. He would school himself to keep the two apart. . .[4]

The problems of the artist dramatized in this part of the novel are his difficulty to meet his responsibilities to his art, his social station, and his moral nature. Mrs. Wharton, of course, does not give any final solution for artists, but she does condemn at least three popular "solutions": the bohemianism represented by the effete group of talkative intellectuals at the Coconut Tree, the bohemianism represented by the mildly immoral group that centers about Rebecca Stram, and the false charity offered through endowments by wealthy but completely insensitive and uncomprehending people, as represented by Jet Pulsifer. Weston cannot understand the eclectic, fluid, and unstable literary fads endorsed by the Coconut Tree group. Their literary devotions vary from

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[1] Ibid., p. 428. [2] Nevius, Edith Wharton, p. 228.

[3] Wharton, Hudson River Bracketed, p. 272. [4] Ibid., p. 309.

week to week; they stand solidly behind what is new; their membership demands unqualified mutual admiration; and their literary pronouncements are invariably smooth and adroit but empty and meaningless.

He is equally unable to become involved with the tieless, rootless, and morally irresponsible group associated with Rebecca Stram. Here the lack of moral structure and significance of self fails to provide him with a standard or a framework within which to see and represent society and humanity. In addition, involvement with members of this group is too superficial to be a substitute for involvement with the responsibilities of love and marriage. Because the members recognize no human values, they are disintegrated; they have no responsibility, identifiable character structure, or meaningful behavior.

Because of Weston's sincerity, his naive belief in the goodness of people, and his urgent need for money, he outrages Mrs. Jet Pulsifer's social sensibilities and taste by asking for a loan. Mrs. Wharton makes it perfectly clear, however, that the Pulsifer Award is not made for artistic merit but for sex-appeal, willingness to concede to the rich, and to truckle to the emotional frustrations and intellectual sterility of the propertied classes. She indicates that the artists who accept awards under such terms do more for perpetuating bad institutions than for supporting themselves and their fellow artists.

A second aspect of the artist's economic problem lies solely in his power to make money. Most artists, Mrs. Wharton implies, are fleeced by publishers like Weston's, Dreck and Saltzer. Through inexperience and haste, Weston signed an unfavorable contract with Lewis Tarrant, director of a newly resuscitated but rapidly declining periodical, "The Hour."

Unable to make a living wage under the conditions of his contract, Weston yields to inducements from another publisher to buy him off his current contract in favor of a new and more generous agreement. These efforts, however, are blocked by Tarrant, who insists on holding him to the terms of his original settlement. In indignation and rage over the apparent injustice, Weston destroys his sole manuscript of "Loot," a second novel which properly belongs to Tarrant and the publishers Dreck and Saltzer. The problem is clear: the artist being unschooled in economics falls easy prey to unscrupulous publishers, and his attempts to get more money meet with ridicule, hostility or both.

Though Weston sometimes offends against taste in his efforts to realize and meet his moral and economic responsibilities, he seems in each instance to have Mrs. Wharton's approval. He probably keeps her approbation because he retains his integrity. His greatest offense against taste is his futile effort to borrow money from Mrs. Pulsifer, but Mrs. Pulsifer's outraged sense of propriety is proportionate to her disappointment and mortification when she learns that Weston is married, and the greater part of Mrs. Wharton's ridicule falls upon her. In each attempt to solve his problems, however, Weston retreats before he loses his intellectual, moral, and artistic integrity, and he assumes his proper responsibilities. He avoids Rebecca Stram's group, the Coconut Tree club, and the advances of Jet Pulsifer. He is finally reduced to an abortive attempt at writing advertisements for "Storecraft," a business enterprise which believes it can sell "Geed or Morant" just as it can sell Facial Treatments and Fashions. But he retains his own integrity and Mrs. Wharton's approval and continues working on a new work, "Magic."

Mrs. Wharton does little more than indicate the economic, social, and moral problems confronting the artist. Certainly she does not offer practical solutions to all of them. But her point seems clear. The artist stands in a nearly unique social position: he owes much to his talent and much to the dual aspect of the Past, the tradition of human suffering and intellectual accomplishment. In fulfilling these obligations he often falls short of economic security and independence, and is frequently faced with social indifference, misunderstanding, and hostility.[1] He must make certain adjustments, but he should make only those which will at once allow him to meet his responsibilities and preserve his art. In this part of the novel there are also suggestions of Mrs. Wharton's disapproval of a society that will not support its artists, a system of publication which exploits new and promising talent, and a system of subsidization based on personality, personal attraction, and sex-appeal. Her statements on these matters, however, are not sufficiently long or detailed to allow much generalization of social criticism. Her point of reference is almost constantly the artist himself.

The first motions toward bringing the narrative situation of Hudson River Bracketed into a new equilibrium, and the first indications of the shifting symbolic values of Laura Lou and Halo appear shortly past the mid-point of the novel. Up to this stage in the narrative, Weston has been able to hold in balance the symbolic qualities of both Halo and Laura to the near-completion of his novel "Instead." His long hours of association with Halo, however, during their creative afternoons

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[1]The absence of Mrs. Wharton's personal concern with economic problems perhaps accounts for the brief treatment she gives them.

at the Willows, result in his falling in love with her. Her appeal loses much of its Diana-like quality. Weston wants to kiss her and to love her, and only her own integrity and her intellectual influence over him keep her inviolate.[1] At the same time there are indications that Halo also suffers changing views about Weston:

> Her sympathy with him, she told herself again and again was all intellectual; she was passionately in love with his mind. It was a pity that he had not understood this; had tried to mix up "the other thing" with their intellectual ardours. And yet--no, certainly, she did not want him to make love to her; but would it not have mortified her to be treated forever like a disembodied intelligence? She had to confess to herself that she could not wish undone that foolish scene . . . that the incident in it she most obstinately remembered was his despairing boy's cry: "I want to kiss you. . ."[2]

In addition, Halo remarks:

> To be his Muse, his inspiration--then there really was some meaning in the stale old image! She knew she had had a real share in the making of "Instead," and she wore the secret knowledge like a jewel.[3]

Vance Weston, failing to gain the love of Halo Tarrant, and unable to accept the proffered opportunity "for freedom, solitude [which] cost less than houses and furniture, and much less than human ties,"[4] dedicates himself to his tubercular wife, meets his economic responsibilities as best he can, and pursues his new novel. With his increased experience of life, his developing imagination, and his firmer knowledge of the Past, he develops a "growing mastery of his craft,"[5] and learns to transmute experience and emotion "into the flesh and blood of his

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[1] Wharton, Hudson River Bracketed, pp. 434-44. [2] Ibid., p. 484.

[3] Ibid., pp. 485-86. [4] Ibid., p. 375.

[5] Ibid., p. 507.

creations."[1] "The million delicate tendrils" which incomprehensibly bind Weston to Laura Lou break with her death at the end of the novel. Shortly afterward, Halo Tarrant, realizing or rather rationalizing that she "was utterly useless to Lewis,"[2] discovers Weston's rural cottage and meets him with the words, "Could I help you still--?" Stunned with grief and overwhelmed with emotion at the loss of Laura Lou, Vance accepts her help.

Here the unstable circumstances of the story are brought into equilibrium: Vance has lost his wife; Halo has left her husband; and there is now opportunity for their unlimited intellectual association and the possibility of the fruition of their tentative personal love. The symbolic requirements of Vance Weston as artist, however, are left unfulfilled. He has acquired the artistic qualifications represented by Halo, but at the expense of those represented by Laura Lou. It is necessary, then, if the story is to reach an equilibrium with the full development of Weston, for Halo to acquire the characteristics of both Venus and Artemis. This occurs in The Gods Arrive. In this sequel novel, Halo is given the qualities of Laura Lou, and in this dual role she becomes symbolic of a third quality, an indispensable knowledge symbolized by "The Mothers," as they appear in Goethe's Faust.

Two important references are made to "The Mothers" in Hudson River Bracketed. When Weston finds that he cannot endorse the usual products of modern writers, he remarks:

> "No, life's not like that, people are not like that. The real stuff is way down, not on the surface. When he got

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[1] Ibid., p. 526.

[2] Ibid., p. 556.

> hold of "Faust" at the Willows, and came to the part about the mysterious Mothers, moving in subterranean depths among the primal forms of life, he shouted out: "That's it--the fellows that write those books are all Motherless!"[1]

The meaning of "The Mothers" is not entirely clear; however, Faust's invocation of them suggests certain definitions:

> In your name, Mothers, ye who on your throne
> In endless space forever dwell alone,
> Yet not alone! Around your heads float whirring
> The images of life--though lifeless, ever stirring.
> What once has been in all its radiancy
> Is there astir; eternal it would be.
> And ye allot it then, Ye Powers Omnipotent,
> To where Night spans its vault and day its tent.[2]

Beyond time and space, "archetypes of all things past and future," "The Mothers" have the images of life which are necessary to the artist, the amorphous stuff of life which apparently may be identified through experience (knowledge), and which once identified will yield the images of life in which he may embody his experiences and his vision. In addition, in the mythological context of Hudson River Bracketed, it seems significant that "The Mothers" are associated with Paris and Helen, since they are conjured from "The Mothers" by Faust. Both Helen and Paris are associated with ideal beauty and form, functions of Artemis, and, being involved in an illicit love relationship, they are also a function of Venus. Thus the approach to the profundity of the images of life is

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[1] Ibid., p. 336.

[2] Johann W. Goethe, Faust, trans. J. F. L. Raschen (Ithaca, N.Y.: Thrift Press, 1949), p. 273. Raschen footnotes this passage as follows: "Goethe revealed to his secretary Eckermann that this name was suggested by Plutarch's Life of Marcellus, Chp. XX. According to the latter, their realm is beyond Time and Space within which they dwell as archetypes of all things past and future. They are surrounded by Eternity from which Time flows over into the world as an effluence."

somehow mysteriously associated with the knowledge provided by Venus and Artemis, or stripped of the figurative language, the profundity and reality of the artistic images of life are made possible by the artist's control of the sympathetic and creative functions of his imagination. It should also be pointed out that the implication of Paris and Helen is a subtle anticipation of the illicit love affair to follow in The Gods Arrive, but the principal characters in this novel do not correspond with these fabulous lovers.

Further associations cluster about "The Mothers" in the second reference to them.

> Perhaps what [Grandma Scrimser] called "God" was the same as what he called "The Mothers"--that mysterious Sea of Being of which the dark reaches swayed and rumoured in his soul . . . perhaps one symbol was as good as another to figure the imperceptible point where the fleeting human consciousness touches infinity. . .[1]

The added associations here of a "Sea of Being" and "God" suggest the figure of the mystical experience with which Mrs. Wharton tried to describe her moments of highest creativity, those special moments when the imagined character or thought becomes clothed in manifest style and form. Moreover, the distinction established between the individual perceiving consciousness and the truths or facts of eternity again suggests the artistic process of making transient, incoherent individual experiences coherent and meaningful in an art form and of giving them permanence and universality by relating them to eternal human truths.

In his development in Hudson River Bracketed, Weston, under the combined influence of a knowledge of the past, an accumulation of intense

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[1] Wharton, Hudson River Bracketed, p. 449.

personal experience, and a well-developed imagination--both sympathetic and creative--and with a mere awareness of the function represented by "The Mothers" is able to produce one good novel, "Instead." The novel has limitations, however. It lacks profundity and reality. George Frenside, the critic in Hudson River Bracketed, who along with Weston frequently voices Mrs. Wharton's critical opinions, describes the novel as follows:

> As far as I can see, one trouble is this. The thing you've just done . . . well, it's a pretty thing, exquisite, in fact; and a surprise, a novelty nowadays, as its popularity has proved. But it's a thing that leads nowhere. An evocation--an emanation--something you wrought with enchantments, eh? Well, now take hold of life as it lies around you; you remember Goethe: "Wherever you take hold of it, it's interesting"? So it is--but only in proportion as you are. There's the catch. The artist has got to feed his offspring out of his own tissue.[1]

Weston's experience, then, his grasp of life is deficient. The developing forces which enabled him to write "Instead" must be retained and supplemented by the depth, the veracity, the intensity of artistic vision symbolized by "The Mothers." He must learn to see his material in form and significance, and see to the heart of it. This is the reason for the sequel.

Professor Nevius observes that

> In The Gods Arrive, the characterization of Vance Weston--never, in its predecessor, adequately defined--goes to pieces in Mrs. Wharton's hands. Although his salient traits are carried over from Hudson River Bracketed and he is recognizable by certain exterior signs as the same individual, Mrs. Wharton's attitude toward him has evidently undergone an extensive revision.[2]

It is apparent that Weston's values change in The Gods Arrive; however,

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[1] Ibid., p. 394. [2] Nevius, Edith Wharton . . ., p. 229.

these changes occur as he searches for stability. His primary efforts are directed to his art, and he continues to search for that stability which was broken by the death of Laura Lou and by the change in his relationship with Halo Tarrant. But as a character, Weston does not "go to pieces in Mrs. Wharton's hands." This suggests that she had no control over the character and the narrative, a suggestion which an analysis of the novel contradicts. Though Weston does go to pieces as an artist and as a person, this is caused by the loss of his relationship with the two symbolic women and by the artistic doldrums which fall on him after his first successful novel. But his indecisiveness and waywardness comport with Mrs. Wharton's intentions.

The beginning of The Gods Arrive finds Vance Weston and Halo Tarrant leaving New York for Europe. If this is, as often stated, a journey into the Past, it is only into that part of the Past which Halo can provide. Deciding, however, that she will stay with Weston, although her divorce has not been granted, Halo thinks that she can assume the role of Laura Lou and remain his muse still. But this arrangement does not satisfy Weston either as a human or as an artist. Halo and Vance are not and cannot be married; therefore, there are not between them those ties of the heart and that responsibility which bound Weston so close to Laura Lou. In addition, Halo cannot support the sympathetic aspect of Weston's imagination. The lop-sidedness of their liaison shows immediately in the first work Vance produces under Halo's influence:

> "The Puritan in Spain," dashed off in a rush of inspiration during the previous autumn and winter, had come out in the spring, and attained immediate popularity. . . . But when he was alone, [Weston] recalled the passionate groping conviction with which he had written "Instead," and the beginning

> of the unfinished novel, "Magic," and the feeling returned that those two books had been made out of his inmost substance, while the new one sprang from its surface. "The Puritan of Spain" was better written and more adroitly composed than its predecessors . . . yet now he felt only its superior craft. . .[1]

Thus the mastery of his craft, his competence with words, the clarity of his ideas, all functions of Halo have increased. But significantly lacking are the "passionate groping" and the feelings represented by Laura Lou, and the depth of the profoundest reality represented by "The Mothers." And these deficiencies represent the extent to which Weston must develop in this novel.

Just as Weston's character seems to go to pieces in The Gods Arrive, Halo's character seems confused too because she, as symbol, is in a state of transition. Throughout the novel, Halo retains the essential symbolic function she had in Hudson River Bracketed, but to this center of symbolic identity are added the functions of Laura Lou and "The Mothers." Halo's break with social forms and conventions and her impulsive flight with Weston point up her first break with cold intelligence and reason, and indicate her first approximation of Laura Lou, who also entered a hasty relationship with Weston. The precise similarity and difference between the two women are pointed up early in the novel:

> When [Weston] thought of [Halo] he felt almost as hopeless of explaining himself as he had with Laura Lou. She who was alive and vibrating at so many points, failed to feel the rhythm of his inner life. Everything on the surface of his intelligence she instantly caught up and flashed back. . .[2]

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[1] Edith Wharton, The Gods Arrive (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1932), pp. 71-72.

[2] Ibid., p. 76.

Ironically, while Halo retains her intellectual influence over Vance, she actually insists on playing the single role which threatens to defeat her. She insists on keeping Weston free; she makes no attempts to hasten her divorce and their marriage. And by continuing to play the role she had assumed on Thundertop, she allows him full intellectual space without forcing him to come to terms with the confinement represented by the cottage on the sea.[1] The result is that Weston begins to reject Halo's "intellectual sympathy,"[2] and to pursue more elemental gratifications. As Mrs. Wharton indicates, these fundamental human experiences are equally important with the intellectual ones in forming the total experience to be transmuted into art. The important difference here, however, is that Weston seeks sensual gratification from Floss Delaney, who, like Halo, denies him the involvement of the heart. Even her name, Floss, suggests an involvement without substance.

Never, even during Weston's most earnest efforts to win Floss, does Halo lose her symbolic significance. While Weston is attending a dinner party in company with Floss, for example, he remarks upon the moon:

> Yet while [the moon] mused, he saw that she too changed colour with the change of lights, turning now blush-red, now gold, now pearl, like a goddess who reddens and pales because Actaeon has looked at her. . . . Somehow that wandering moon, going her cool way alone, yet blushing and faltering in the tangle of earth-lights, suddenly reminded him of Halo.[3]

Floss Delaney, "the siren from Euphoria whose infidelity had

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[1] Ironically, however, Vance and Halo do live in a house by the sea.

[2] Wharton, The Gods Arrive, p. 100.

[3] Ibid., p. 219.

first led [Weston] to bark his shins against reality,"[1] is both a foil to Halo and a false Laura Lou. She differs radically, however, from both of them. Her values are entirely materialistic: her esteem for Weston depends on the financial success of his book, "Colossus"; her friendships and engagements are based on what she can get from them by way of social prestige and blackmail. She will not marry. Her love is all appearance and no reality. How her intellect and sensibilities differ from Halo's are pointed up in the following dialogue:

> "Oh, look, look!" Vance cried out, as far away to the east the day woke in fire through trails of Channel mist.
> Floss opened her eyes reluctantly. "I'm cold." She shivered and drew her cloak about her. . . . She had seen nothing, felt nothing, of the beauty and mystery of the dawn. There flashed through him the memory of another sunrise, seen from Thundertop at Halo's side, when he and she were girl and youth, and their hearts held the same ecstasy.[2]

The difference between Laura Lou and Floss is defined in old Delaney's estimate of his daughter: "Sometimes, you know, Weston, I think my daughter is a combination of a ticker and a refrigerator."[3]

Weston's own appraisal of her is made immediately after the impact of their second meeting has dissipated, when the memories of how she played him false with his own philandering grandfather have subsided:

> . . . this girl . . . had been the vehicle of his sharpest ecstasy and his blackest anguish. A vehicle; that was what she'd been; all she'd ever been. "The archway to the infinite"--who was it who had called woman that? It was true of a boy's first love. In the days when Floss Delaney had so enraptured and tortured him she had never had any real identity to his untaught heart and senses; she had been

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[1] Nevius, Edith Wharton . . ., p. 233.

[2] Wharton, The Gods Arrive, p. 290.

[3] Ibid., p. 228.

> simply undifferentiated woman; now for the first time he saw her as an individual, and perceived her peculiar loveliness.[1]

Much of the remainder of the novel is devoted to Weston's discovery that the peculiarity of her loveliness lies in its complete superficiality.

The time Weston spends in the vain pursuit of Floss Delaney is paralleled by the time he spends in vain pursuit of a literary ideal in "Colossus," a novel the very name of which indicates its false perspective. Having abandoned the intellectual stability of Halo and having dedicated himself to an affair with a female who has no heart, Weston loses the balance of reason and emotion and the sympathetic and creative functions of the imagination. In addition, with his symbolic, unsound knowledge of the total Past, he falls easy victim to every "perverted" form of modern writing and faddism. The result is that "Colossus" is a composite of almost everything bad in literature. Significantly, it is Halo who first dares to tell Weston that his new novel is faulty:

> "I'll tell you as well as I can. I'm a little bewildered still; but I have an idea you haven't found yourself--expressed your real self, I mean--in this book as you did in the others. You're not . . . quite as free from other influences . . . echoes." . . . if she spoke at all she must speak as truth dictated; she could not tamper with her intellectual integrity, or with his.
>
> ". . .[E]choes] of books you've been reading. I suppose; or the ideas of the people you've been talking to."[2]

His book, then, is a failure.

Early in The Gods Arrive, Vance Weston dedicated his writing to the mysterious "Mothers": "If ever I do ['write anything really big,'] nobody'll read it. . . . Well, and what if they don't? Who am I writing

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[1] Ibid., p. 205.

[2] Ibid., p. 336.

for anyhow? Only the Mothers!"[1] He realized too that the artist must "go plumb down to the Mothers to fish up the real thing."[2] There is also an indication that Weston experiences a metaphorical descent to "The Mothers." While he and Halo are visiting a church in Spain, Weston records the following impressions:

> Vance felt as if he had dropped over the brim of things into the mysterious world where straight lines loop themselves into curves. He thought: "It's like the feel of poetry, just as it's beginning to be born in you"--that fugitive moment before words restrict the vision. . . .
>
> They began to walk down one of the aisles. Farther and farther away in the heart of the shadows they left the great choir. Halo stood still again. "No--this way," she said, with the abruptness of doubt. "We're going in the wrong direction." Vance remembered a passage in the Second Faust which had always haunted him: the scene where Faust descends to the Mothers. "He must have wound round and round like this," he thought.[3]

In accord with Mrs. Wharton's earlier association of "The Mothers" and "God," Weston has this experience in a cathedral. The experience itself is not sufficient to compensate for what Weston has lost, but significantly it does inspire him to return to work on "Magic," the novel he began when he had the Willows, Laura Lou, and Halo Spear. Though his new novel, "Colossus," is a failure, it does record this descent to "The Mothers." When he reads fragments of his book to the totally insensitive and uncomprehending Euphoria audience, he remarks, "Which was it now? Ah: the descent to the Mothers, the crux, the centre of the book. He had put the whole of himself into that scene."[4] Ironic-

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[1] Ibid., p. 72.

[2] Ibid., p. 118. Note also the figure of "fishing up" as it relates to Mrs. Wharton's comments on style, The Writing of Fiction, p. 24.

[3] Ibid., pp. 21-23.

[4] Ibid., p. 380.

ally, then, Weston has established a rapport with "The Mothers," that is to say, he has achieved a recognition of the images of life and the material of artistic embodiment, but has lost the balance of his imagination, his control of the Past, and he is currently divorced from intense and meaningful experiences which he might transmute to art.

Finally disillusioned of any success in his pursuit of Floss Delaney and cruelly hurt by the death of Grandma Scrimser, the only relative with whom he had more than a simple family kinship, Weston, now separated from Halo, looks for solace in the spaciousness of the Northern woods. Here for the first time, while he recovers from illness, he reads The Confessions of Saint Augustine. The impact of the book is immediate and significant. In Saint Augustine Weston finds the meaning of his Grandmother's dying words: "Maybe we haven't made enough of pain . . . been too afraid of it. Don't be afraid of it."[1] His discovery occurs in the following reflection:

> "And Thou did'st beat back my weak sight, dazzling me with Thy splendour, and I perceived that I was far from Thee, in the land of unlikeness, and I heard Thy voice crying to me: 'I am the Food of the full-grown. Become a man and thou shalt feed on Me.'"
>
> The food of the full-grown--of the full-grown! That was the key to his grandmother's last words. "Become a man and thou shalt feed on Me" was the message of experience to the soul; and what was youth but the Land of Unlikeness?[2]

The religious associations of "The Mothers" culminate here. To mature, the artist must accept the full pain of living. He must assimilate what Laura Lou and Halo symbolize. Then he will have access to the "images of life," the depth of meaning and profundity of human signifi-

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[1] Ibid., p. 410.

[2] Ibid., p. 411.

cance provided by "The Mothers." Recognizing this Weston, though tempted by the freedom of the woods, by the lack of responsibilities, determines to return to civilization, to humanity, and to his obligations. That this return was inevitable, if Weston were to become a fully mature artist, was earlier recognized by George Frenside. In his attempts to persuade Halo to marry Weston, for example, he remarks:

> We most of us need a frame-work, a support--the maddest of lovers do. Marriage may be too tight a fit--may dislocate and deform. But it shapes life too; prevents growing lopsided, or drifting. I know you've both felt that. . .[1]

When Halo insists on the freedom of the artist, Frenside continues:

> H'm--free as air. The untrammelled artist. Well, I don't believe it's the ideal state for the artist, any more than it is for the retail grocer. We all of us need chains--and wings.[2]

The "chains and wings" are perfect images for the function of the earlier Halo, for the disciplined intellectual freedom she furnished, and of Laura Lou, for the confining, possessive, but passionate human involvement she furnished. The marriage, the willing assumption of responsibility represents the framework, the form of life which is necessary for meaningful experience, and therefore a medium of reaching "The Mothers." Frenside implies that all these needs of the artist may be provided by one woman.

When Weston returns to civilization, he naturally returns to the Willows, the place of his beginning. In the meantime, however, Halo, having secured her divorce from Tarrant and now pregnant with Weston's child, prepares to re-occupy the Willows and to have her baby there.

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[1] Ibid., p. 311.

[2] Ibid., p. 312.

She and Weston meet at Eaglewood, Halo's parental home, and though Weston feels "unfit," "unworthy," of her, he cannot leave her. Not only does he love her, but at this point Halo represents the three aspects of experience which Mrs. Wharton felt were necessary to the artist. And paradoxically, Weston, now approaching artistic maturity, has become as a little child "just learning how to walk." Halo is now sole possessor of the symbolic Willows. When she and Weston marry, she will take him to the house where his art first expressed itself. She will lead him there, as Laura Lou had earlier, and she will remain there with him as she did when he wrote "Instead." Here are the suggestions of her assuming the double role of the Past, the imaginative experiences represented earlier by Laura Lou and the intellectual experiences she has consistently represented. In addition, although she retains the symbolic function of Artemis, the votress of pure form and intellectual beauty, the "chains" of art, she is nevertheless pregnant with a "love" child and thus symbolically assumes the role of Venus and Laura Lou, giving the impulsive "wings" of art but levying the burden of pain and responsibility. The simple fact of her pregnancy, in addition to her assuming responsibility for the "child-like" Vance Weston, indicates her symbolic role of the mysterious "Mothers." Finally, then, with Weston's union with Halo and her composite symbolic role, the Gods arrive. The narrative and symbolic conflicts are brought into balance through Halo, and with his acceptance of her, Weston arrives at artistic maturity.

The significance of these two novels in the study of Mrs. Wharton's literary theory lies in their suggestion of those mysterious areas of artistic creation which she was unable to formulate logically. Without

rigorous training in the discipline of logic or philosophical inquiry, Mrs. Wharton naturally turned to the novel, the myth, as the easiest medium of expression. In this medium, her suggestions are rich, but the relationships between her critical criteria are frequently no clearer than in her critical works themselves. For example, the artist's relationship with reason, tradition, suffering, and the past as well as the relationship between his intense personal experiences and the quality and form of his imagination are made clear enough through the relationships drawn between Weston, Halo, and Laura Lou. The bridge, however, between the full functioning imagination and the quality in the art product, as represented by "The Mothers," is never made. Indeed, the relationship established by implication is clear enough, but there is no indication that Mrs. Wharton ever thought out these relationships. In spite of this, these novels furnish a rewarding commentary on Mrs. Wharton's notions of artistic imagination, the richness of the soul of the artist, and the seriousness and gravity of his work. And it is only by a close reading of these novels that one may determine what Mrs. Wharton considered the necessary elements in the soul of an artist, and witness the reverence and humility with which she approached the secrets of the artistic gift.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

In "A Cycle of Reviewing" Mrs. Wharton wrote:

> However little importance [an artist] may attach to the verdict on an individual book, yet if he is at all interested in the process of his art, he cannot but be curious as to the standards on which such a verdict is based. And I am persuaded that all artists should be interested in the processes of their art, if not articulately, as the French are, yet at least inwardly, cogitatively, with the desire that some one who is articulate should try to divine and formulate the principles stirring in them.[1]

Mrs. Wharton's own critical impulse sprang partly from her conviction that the artist who is seriously dedicated to his craft should naturally be interested in the processes of his art and that he is somehow obliged to "divine and formulate" them as best he can. The formulation of such creative processes and techniques not only consolidates the individual artist's achievement, but also gives him a conscious structure beyond which he may develop. Moreover, the formulation of literary principles underlies the development of national literary standards and traditions. These standards and traditions hold fast the great achievements of the past and promote the rapid and full development of new artists, since the principles upon which past greatness was achieved are immediately available to them. Proof of this was indicated to Mrs. Wharton by her

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[1] Wharton, "A Cycle of Reviewing," p. 45.

comparison of the superior literature of France, where criticism flourished, with the inferior literature of America, where criticism languished. The superiority of French literature and French criticism was not, she thought, fortuitous.

In her own criticism, Edith Wharton missed the fullness of scope, minuteness of detail, and richness of suggestion which mark the works of such fine critics as Henry James, T. S. Eliot, and Kenneth Burke. Hers was essentially a creative mind, not an analytical one, and her approach to criticism was formed largely by her own creative practices and by what she felt literature ought to be. She could not bring to a work of art a rigid intellectual discipline or a fine analytical intelligence. She could bring, however, her own wide artistic experience, her refined literary taste, and a body of traditional literary values. Despite her limitations her critical work achieves at times a high level of competence and unity.

In her critical writings Mrs. Wharton tried to establish a balance between aesthetic theory and practical advice to writers. She did indeed strike this balance, but the weight of the thought she placed on either side of the intellectual fulcrum was sometimes disappointingly light. She did not have the intellectual curiosity and originality of Henry James, and certainly she did not have his subtlety. She obviously enrolled as a disciple of James, but there were areas of his thought into which she did not, or could not follow, just as there were some into which she did not choose to go. A clear instance of this may be seen in James's concept of literature as "picture," his analysis of the pictorial qualities of literary composition.

In some respects James's ideas of picturing are reproduced in Mrs. Wharton's theory of visibility in fiction. Both understand that a dense, concrete image must arise from the texture of the fiction; and both see this density and concreteness as functions of the subtle rhythms and relationships between the central perceiving intelligence and what he perceives. Henry James, however, carried his notion of picture in characterization one step further than Mrs. Wharton did. He pointed out that the "picturing" may be of the mind of the perceiving intelligence, as for example in The Ambassadors. Mrs. Wharton could see only the techniques by which the character emerged from the texture of the fiction. When character is understood as a fictional agent in the tradition of Dickens or Theophrastus, an important distinction between the quality of Mrs. Wharton's critical mind and James's may be seen immediately. Mrs. Wharton felt that visibility had been achieved when the individual character became visualized, distinguishable, recognizable, knowable, and credible. Indeed, these are high standards for any art. But James carried the notion one step further. A character, simply as character, became artistically adequate when he acquired these attributes. But the form and structure of the novel he saw as a kind of "picture" of the mind of the character, whereas Mrs. Wharton saw it only as a means of identifying the character. The techniques James recognized as conducing to this pictorial quality are an index of his critical superiority over his student; and that he even conceived the idea at all indicates his greater general critical awareness.

It is difficult to determine whether this was an area of James's critical thought which Mrs. Wharton could not or simply did not want to

enter. The indications are that her critical understanding would not support her here. It is evident that her exceptions to James's later style increased as he placed increasing emphasis on picturing mind, as in The Wings of the Dove and The Golden Bowl. However it is never on the score of picturing minds that Mrs. Wharton attacked his later novels. Instead, she used such generalizations as their lack of "thick human atmosphere" and "human fringes." Her apparent lack of insight here indicates not only the difference between her critical mind and James's, but also the source of difference between the quality of her characters and those of James. Indeed, many distinctions between their styles of writing, subjects, and themes may be made on just this score.

What Mrs. Wharton did see as the essence of characterization, however, was adequate to the best of her own fictional creations, and, in fact, satisfactory as a general aesthetic norm until the advent of depth psychology near the turn of the century. Whether Mrs. Wharton's art would have improved or suffered with her acceptance of depth psychology one cannot say. She did not accept it, however, probably because of her training at the hands of Walter Berry. Percy Lubbock records:

> Thus it came about that she was to be left high and dry for many a long year to come, upon the established rationalism of [Walter Berry's] day; and there she sat on, refusing to argue about a closed subject, while the queries and researches of the following days were so insidiously reopening it.[1]

Probably the suggestiveness of her fiction and the richness of her characters suffered because she would not approach those nebulous areas of mind which she could not articulate, though it must be added in recogni-

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[1]Lubbock, A Portrait of Edith Wharton, pp. 48-49.

tion of her excellent characterization, that she did point out the mystery of personality and that she left the central enigma of self intact, thus producing psychologically credible characters. On the other hand, her rejection of depth psychology saved her from explaining away character, as for example Paul Bourget did, and from producing imageless, unvisible characters like some of James Joyce's or William Faulkner's. But the superb balance between physical visibility and psychological illumination that James achieved in The Ambassadors was unmistakably not "to her hand." She recognized this double objective as one of the novelist's problems, but her limited definition of psychology, only that which forms a part of a character's articulate awareness, reduced her ability to achieve full psychological clarity in her characters and to speak with deep psychological insight about the techniques of characterization.

Of course, Mrs. Wharton's acceptance of depth psychology, with its overtones of determinism and probability, would have been contradictory to almost all the literary and moral values she supported. But this psychological blind-spot in her critical thought also caused her to criticise, perhaps too severely, the new literary methods which she could not understand. The stream-of-consciousness technique in fiction is a case in point; she never mentions it except to reprobate the method and its proponents. Of course, her greatest objection is that stream-of-consciousness produces no final image of character. But in all her uncomplimentary comments about it, there is nowhere an indication that she ever analyzed the possibilities of the technique or that she recognized that the apparently vagrant associations can be actually organized and structured about an identifiable personality. Evidently she could

not sufficiently overcome her antipathy to the apparent chaos to investigate the literary device and incorporate the best of it into her own fiction.

This same analytical reluctance holds true in her attitudes toward Naturalism. She mentions Naturalism only to condemn it, but in her critical writings she analyzed not one naturalistic novel, nor did she comment on any naturalistic writer, with the exception, of course, of Zola, whom she mentions in The Writing of Fiction. The philosophical and aesthetic principles of Naturalism were diametrically opposed to her own--philosophically it denied morality and significance in human life; aesthetically it denied basic principles of art, such as selection and form. Obviously Naturalism had little to attract Mrs. Wharton, but she apparently shirked critical responsibility by almost totally ignoring the men and the movement. In fact, though The Writing of Fiction was published in 1925, there is no American writer after Hawthorne and Melville (with the sole exception of Henry James, who became a British subject) so much as mentioned.

Mrs. Wharton's failure to analyze and criticise new literary tendencies may have been caused by her tacit agreement with Henry James that criticism dealing with bad books and bad artists--and the new literature was decidedly bad to her--simply wasted valuable publication space and drew public attention to inferior literature. An equally probable reason lies in the tendencies of her taste and the bent of her mind. At the turn of the century Mrs. Wharton was approaching forty. Her taste, her values, her ethical system and world view were at this age fully formed, and they were formed by the values prevalent during the mid and

late nineteenth century. In addition, her closest critical friends, Henry James and Paul Bourget, were even older than she, and brought to their association with her an even greater experience of the nineteenth century. The result was that the literary audacities of those who wrote from a sympathetic knowledge of Darwin and Haeckel (whom, incidentally, Mrs. Wharton also knew)[1] were either incomprehensible to her or irrelevant. Her taste demanded a closely articulated and rational structure of experience just as it demanded the sensible, logical arrangement of her drawing-room or her garden. Her values were based upon the orderly and moral behavior of reasonable man. Her ethical system was based upon the complete responsibility and the intense significance of the individual man. And her world view, though shot through with recognition of man's pain and suffering, was complacently taken for granted. The riddle of the universe did not disturb her, and the descent of man attracted her notice only when the descent was measured by morality.

Concerning matters of technique in fiction, Mrs. Wharton's theories as well as her practice coincided more with Henry James's than with those of any other contemporary artist. They both agreed that selection or selectivity is the sine qua non of literary art, that judicious selection is the essence of imitation, of re-presenting in the medium of words intense, personal impressions of reality. Both felt that the form and structure of a novel should be determined by the central intelligence and that all episodes should be held together by a cause and effect relationship; that is, that life should be represented not as it is but

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[1]Wharton, Hudson River Bracketed, p. 79.

as it should be, with form, continuity, and meaning. Similarly, both insisted on the density of the texture of the work of art and the visibility of the characters. They shared similar ideas about the quality of the central intelligence, and insisted that the novel have unity of effect, a unity partially achieved by consistency in the point of view and the centre of awareness.

Concerning the ultimate values and purposes of literary art, however, Mrs. Wharton's opinions differed not radically but significantly from James's. In her demand, for example, for moral significance in treatment and subject, she was far more rigid than he was. James believed that art had fulfilled its purpose if it revealed or pictured accurately, fully, and aesthetically any human mind or any intense experience. If the treatment were adequate, moral implications would take care of themselves. Mrs. Wharton would certainly have accepted this position but with one significant proviso: that the subject and treatment be executed in such a way as to illuminate clearly and unmistakably some aspect of our relation to established social and moral traditions. The result of this critical qualification is that Mrs. Wharton condemns most works not clearly moral in intent and that her own works may be more readily summarized by a moral, an aphorism, than can James's. For instance, one does less violence to The Age of Innocence by saying that it "means" it is better to miss the "flower of life" than to acquire it by breaking social and moral forms than one does to The Ambassadors by saying that it "means" it is better to go to France for awhile than to live out one's days in a small Massachusetts town editing an esoteric journal and humoring an elderly female industrialist.

Actually, Mrs. Wharton did not identify herself with any literary school or movement. Those that were new and current during her day, Naturalism, Realism, regionalism, and local color, she rejected. But concerning matters of value and purpose in literature, Mrs. Wharton's notions more nearly approximated those of W. C. Brownell and the New Humanists than they did James's. And it is probably not without significance that she was born within a decade of Brownell, Paul Elmer More, and Irving Babbitt. Mrs. Wharton's approval of Brownell has already been pointed out; she thought he was the next best critic after James and Bourget. Unlike James, however, Brownell believed that literary art should be judged in part, at least, by absolute standards, and this notion attracted Mrs. Wharton's critical sympathies. Indeed, her definition of the proper subjects for literature as well as her definition of the "crucial moments" which literary art disengages from the welter of experience are based upon what she considered absolute standards.

The standards of morality and value which Mrs. Wharton embraced were almost identical with those of Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt, but in spite of the similarity between her thought and the New Humanists', she never mentioned either the names of the men or the movement in her critical writings. With Babbitt she agreed that the proper study of man was man; hence, her avoidance of questions concerning the nature of the universe, God, reality, and so on. Like him, too, she was a strong proponent of measure and judgment (taste, proportion, form) and objectivity. Both thought that the standards by which literature ought to be judged, or written, were to be derived from literary tradition and from the talent of the individual writer.

> Such a standard employs the universal part of the individual, that which he shares with all men, and a discipline based upon past practice without being purely traditional. By constant and clear thinking it adjusts the experience of the past to the changing needs of the present.[1]

Along with More, Mrs. Wharton considered man a moral creature completely responsible for his thought and behavior, and although she does not mention the "inner check," she obviously assumed some control like it to be common to all men. Like More too, she believed that a "canon of taste" and a body of good literary criticism were indispensable to the flourishing of literature. Like both More and Babbitt, she attacked and feared the idea of a democratic American literature. Editors, she insisted, wanted stories of "just folks" and condemned the artistically complex as false. Moreover,

> [America] has reduced relations between human beings to a dead level of vapid benevolence, and the whole of life to a small house with modern plumbing and heating, a garage, a motor, a telephone, and a lawn undivided from one's neighbors. The safe and uniform life resulting from [this] offers to the artist's imagination a surface as flat and monotonous as our own prairies.[2]

Like More too she maintained a profound respect for the critical genius of Sainte-Beuve, whom she called the greatest critic of all time.[3]

The relationships between Mrs. Wharton's theories of artistic

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[1]John P. Pritchard, Criticism in America (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), p. 206.

[2]Wharton, "The Great American Novel," p. 650. This is a noteworthy parallel between Edith Wharton's criticism of America and that found in Sinclair Lewis's Babbitt.

[3]The information in these pages concerning W. C. Brownell and the New Humanists is taken largely from Pritchard, Criticism in America, pp. 200-210, and William C. Brownell, Standards (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917).

technique and James's theories, as well as the coincidence of her literary values with those of the New Humanists, indicate that both her theories and values were basically those of the classical tradition. Although she never mentions Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus, they were undoubtedly available to her, if not in her reading of such critics as Sainte-Beuve and Arnold, at least through the writing and conversation of the more learned of her friends, like Henry James, Paul Bourget, and Bernard Berenson. Her notions, for instance, concerning artistic transmutation and re-presentation are equivalent to Aristotle's idea of imitation, though expressed in different words. Similarly, her ideas concerning the nature of the artist, the quality of his vision, and the depth of his intelligence are actually no different from those of Longinus concerning the artist's greatness of soul. Again, she does not mention the name of Longinus in her critical writing, and fairly obviously this idea was one she formulated after her experience with James, but the resemblance to the classical idea nevertheless remains.

At a time, then, when the positive moral values in fiction based on individual responsibility were being decried, indeed, scarcely heard above the clamor of pessimism, determinism, and despair, Mrs. Wharton staunchly supported the values and the morality traditional in western literary culture. At a time, too, when the realistic impulse and its corollary "fallacy of imitative form" (the fallacy that art may be formless since it imitates chaotic life) threatened the art of the novel, Mrs. Wharton, along with James and the minority, vigorously supported integrated form, articulated, meaningful structure, and moral significance. Hers, however, was a minor voice, and when at mid-twentieth

century critical tastes returned to the necessity of form and selectivity, they returned to Henry James and not to Edith Wharton.

In spite of Mrs. Wharton's critical anonymity, she did compile a creditable body of sound, valuable literary criticism. In contrast with Henry James and the more subtle and intellectual literary critics, her theory seems sometimes colorless, sometimes superficial. But in contrast with the criticism of such minor contemporary critics as Hamlin Garland or Ellen Glasgow, her criticism seems competent. The two main divisions of Mrs. Wharton's criticism coincide with those of Longinus. Significantly, she uses the two words "divine" and "formulate" in her description of the analysis of the principles of literary creation. The one, divine, deals with "what for want of a simpler term, one must call by the old bardic name of inspiration." This inspiration, imagination, intellectual creativeness, these aspects of the "soul" of the artist, Mrs. Wharton described as a personal experience in A Backward Glance and as a general or universal artistic experience in Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive. The process of art which depends simply upon techniques, devices, and figures, these aspects of the artist's practical execution, she described in The Writing of Fiction and in some fifteen or twenty theoretical articles and reviews.

The comments which Mrs. Wharton makes in these two areas of critical investigation, the practical and imaginative, differ both in their quality and in their validity. In both areas, however, she was aware of the major problems which faced the artist. And when she did not offer full and entirely adequate solutions to these problems, she at least had the distinction of pointing them up and asking the "right" questions.

There is a remarkable disparity, however, between her comments on the practical devices of art and her remarks about the soul and imagination of the artist. Her remarks on the techniques of fiction are much more subtle, much more sophisticated than her treatment of imagination. The cause for this disparity probably lies in the fact that devices and techniques in fiction are pre-rationalized structures of what happens in the artist and in the imagination of his sympathetic reader. Mrs. Wharton, with her emphasis on reason, was more qualified to examine things with form "out there" than she was to examine relatively fluid and formless structures such as the imagination and states of mind. In a device or a technique she could see the relationships of purpose, form, and effect, could rationalize the relationships between them. In this area, then, she spoke with clarity, assurance, and sophistication.

The relationships, however, between what happens inside the artist, in his imagination and attitudes, and how this finds expression in his work are not so easily rationalized nor so logically connected. Rejecting new scientific discoveries and psychological research--indeed, she does not even show an acquaintance with William James's work--Mrs. Wharton apparently felt unschooled and unsafe in these areas of thought. As a result, whenever possible she emphasized not what is ordinarily considered the imaginative quality of art, but its rational, reasonable quality. And in this respect, it is significant in the development of Vance Weston's imagination, dramatized by his relationship with the two women, that the qualities of Halo, reason, tradition, form, are not added to the qualities of Laura Lou, emotion, sympathy, suffering, but that Halo herself, reason personified, becomes the basis and foundation of

the entire imagination and experience of the artist.

Mrs. Wharton's emphasis on reason and what could be logically rationalized caused her to omit some of the more imaginative stages of artistic imitation. Her description, for example, of the process of selection is not entirely satisfactory, judged either as it relates to her own work or to the body of ideas current in her day. First, she does not attempt to name the criteria by which an author should select the data which presents itself in his imagination, with the exception of course of the larger controls established by her ideas of visibility and unity of effect. Second, if she perceived the relationship between the image, say of a character, that presented itself to her imagination and an actual phenomenon in human life, she never mentioned it. Indeed, excluded from her analysis of selection and imitation is the entire area of how the artist manipulates his data from reality to make it art. She, of course, recognized the principle, perhaps intuitively, but she did not articulate it. The result is that a discrepancy occurs between her description of selection and her description of her own creative exercise. She speaks of selection as if it were a principle which operated exclusively upon the materials of external reality, as if, that is to say, the action really occurred in actuality, and she, as author, simply abstracted story from it and trimmed it of excessive detail. Her description of her own creative exercise, however, does not follow this pattern. Her analysis begins after the image and personality of her character have intruded into her imagination. Unlike James, who clearly describes (for example in his preface to The Ambassadors) how experience or idea becomes mental image, she completely ignores this process. And

whereas James describes the process of imaginatively recreating an external reality (the germ), she describes the recreation of a reality existing only in her imagination. This results not only in a discrepancy between her description of selection and her practice, but it also leads her to describe her writing as a kind of automatic writing rather than as a recreation of actuality. Thus she writes, "As soon as the dialogue begins, I become merely a recording instrument, and my hand never hesitates because my mind has not to choose, but only to set down what these . . . people say . . ."[1]

A similar inability to express the relationships between the irrational imagination and the rational art object is evident in the general treatment given to her concept of the imagination in Hudson River Bracketed and The Gods Arrive. As a dramatized record of cultural and personal experiences which form the imagination, and as a statement of the dual functions of the imagination, the literary myth in these two novels is a remarkable twentieth-century creation. But a certain dissatisfaction arises from Mrs. Wharton's failure to make a more definite correlation between the stages in the development of Weston's imagination and the various levels of his artistic competence. That this might have been her original intention seems to be indicated by her rather lengthy analysis of Weston's first novel, "Instead," both in the narrative portions of the novel and through the critic George Frenside. If this were her intention, she could not, or at least she did not follow it, for Weston is never represented as actually producing a satisfactory

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[1] Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 203.

novel, although his ability to write one at the close of the story is unmistakable.

Mrs. Wharton had a restless curiosity to know how it all happened, how the creation of the imagination was finally embodied in words; and she ineffectually pursued this question for many years. Finally and admittedly she relegated the solution to the unknowable. The point is not that she did not provide the solution, for perhaps she was right: perhaps the solution is unknowable. There is nothing to indicate that Coleridge was right or provided a solution when he described the artistic imaginative process as one analogous to the process of God's creation. Likewise, there is no indication that the psychologists have provided a solution or are necessarily right in describing the imaginative process as one of reproducing phantasy by means of expressing the quality of an inner state. But there is a significant difference between the attempts of Coleridge or those of the psychologists and Mrs. Wharton's: most critics commit themselves to some ideological position. Whether the position is absolutely right or wrong is irrelevant. They assume a stand which is tenable from past experience and develop their thought on the basis of what they see and feel in art. The result is that they produce a more cogent, more self-consistent, and a deeper body of thought. Thus they may have a basis for the demonstration of more relationships, and many of these may be true and real relationships even though the original premise is wrong. A striking example of this principle in science is Newtonian physics. Though based upon wrong ideas and no longer scientifically tenable, this system works and credibly "explains" many physical relationships.

But Mrs. Wharton did not commit herself to a system of thought on the perplexing problem of the entire creative imagination and how it works; she offered no explanations. The result is that many of her general aesthetic principles, like selection, are built around a nucleus of hazy, perhaps non-existent thought, and because her thought springs from no well-defined philosophical viewpoint, minor discrepancies occur between her aesthetic principles and her discussions of her techniques.

In her discussions of specific techniques designed to produce particular effects, Mrs. Wharton's thought was more self-consistent, clear, and positive, but significantly the best are those in which she could correlate the technique with the functions of the imagination. For example, in her discussion of the techniques of characterization, she points out that the double objectives of the artist coincide with the dual aspects of his imagination. To produce good, credible, and understandable character the artist must empathize in the thought and feeling of his imaginary creature--must, to use her own figure, move into his mind, almost literally "live-into" his character. This he achieves by the sympathetic function of his imagination, a function and quality the development of which is symbolized in Laura Lou. By the creative function of his imagination, a quality and function symbolized in Halo Spear, he must objectify his character creation, construct a setting and situation for him, and then picture him, visualize him as he moves among these.

In fact, character creation is the central matter in Mrs. Wharton's discussion of the techniques in fiction, and in her investigation of the problems and methods of characterization, her critical intelli-

gence and insight into her art show to best advantage. The critical subtlety she shows in her analysis of characterization occurred probably not only because she conceived of character as the most important single element in the novel, but also because in this particular area she could draw the precise points of relevance between the artistic imagination and the thing created. Had she been able to achieve this same insight into the other devices and techniques she discussed, her critical thought would undoubtedly have taken a more prominent place in the history of American literary criticism.

As her theories concerning characterization stand, they are subtle, sophisticated, and remarkably complete. They serve both as practical advice to accomplished and aspiring artists and as illuminating comments to analytical readers who want consciously to know what happens in a novel. For she points out the dramatic relationships, the latent character determinants which exist between a character and an object in his setting, for example, between Zeena Frome and her pickle dish, or Cash and his hammer, or Eugene Gant and the prurient sores on the back of his neck. Much of the subtlety of her ideas concerning characterization derives from her conception of character as the controlling figure in the novel. She conceived of the setting, description of scenes, and the action not simply as part of the credible milieu into which the character was introduced, but as things which derived from character and commented on character. Thus she explicated a dramatic relationship between the principal character and everything else in the novel. A landscape, for example, which the principal character views is not something to be described simply within the limits of that character's awareness. The

creative artist is in addition obliged to imply the subtle correlations both between the character and what he sees and between what he sees and what he is.

The fulfillment of this last qualification of characterization did much to compensate for Mrs. Wharton's comparative ignorance of formal psychology, for it allowed her to do more artistically almost anything the formal literary psychologist, like Paul Bourget, could do. The psychology of a character in one of her novels is never articulated or verbalized. It is not put into words either by her, in narrative sections, or by other characters in dialogue. But the psychology of the character is shadowed forth by the dramatic relationship she saw between the character and his setting; that is to say, the things around the character become an extension of his self. Thus the character becomes known through the medium of images and concrete, dramatic relationships. He becomes visible and artistically presented. The strictly psychological writer can seldom do more--except by showing the origin of character and the nature of motives--and frequently he does far less.

Almost equally as sophisticated as her theories of characterization were Mrs. Wharton's notions concerning illuminating incidents. Though they deal with character, illuminating incidents are specifically those episodes which not only fall inevitably into the plot of the novel and conduce to the progression of the action of the story, but also give a statement of the theme and significance of the entire novel. What happens, then, in an illuminating incident is that the author presents in a brief episode both an action necessary to his entire story and one which indicates the direction and the significance of the actions to follow.

The illuminating incident becomes a node into which flow all the threads of theme, character, and action which preceded it, and out of which flow again all the threads of theme and actions which must be bound to the beginning of the novel. By means of the illuminating incident, the writer may present a moment of culmination of all that has preceded, give an indication of the meaning and tempo of the action to follow, and restate his entire theme. The presence, then, of illuminating incidents in a work of fiction indicates a writer's firm and complete control of his medium and his theme, as well as his accomplishment of the complete inner organization of his story. These almost guarantee the effectiveness of his work.

Some of Mrs. Wharton's analyses which do not rise to the high level of critical competence that she shows in her discussions of characterization and illuminating incident at least have the virtue of relatedness. All of them are actually practical approaches to the very real problems which face a novelist. Moreover, almost every idea and subject in her analysis of the novel may in some way be related to the central notion of characterization. This, of course, is obvious in the case of dialogue, style, quality of experience, consistency of effect, expression, and point of view. The relationship is less obvious but nonetheless real in her discussions of such things as form and creating the effect of passing time. For instance, she thought that the impression of passing time was in part conveyed by the success with which an author visualized his character, and in part by the way he showed the symptoms of his character's changing and developing personality as he moved from crisis to crisis in the plot. Thus the slow process of time's

accretion or attrition could be objectified and dramatized. Similarly, the fulfillment of two of her three senses of form depend almost solely on the principal character. The first sense of form, the arrangement in time and importance of the episodes, must conform to the values and awareness of the central intelligence. The second sense of form, universality, is too obviously related to character to warrant discussion. But the third sense of form, the imaginative structure which is the embodiment of the author's intention and vision, is accomplished not by the character but through him, by means of the form which his action and the significance of this action assume.

Just as her technical considerations cluster about the devices designed to imitate a human being, a character, so do Mrs. Wharton's aesthetic principles and values in literature cluster about the history of man's artistic accomplishments, his awareness of his past, and his entanglement in moral and social predicaments. The result is that her statements about literature, whether in her first volume of short stories or in her last posthumously published novel, achieve a remarkable degree of cogency and consistency, especially considering that Edith Wharton's critical activities were always secondary in importance to her artistic creation. The all-importance of the human mind and the image of man in both her criticism and her art makes her criticism especially dignified when it is projected against the intellectual temper of her times. Both in her art and in her criticism she preserved the figure of the whole man as he was presented in our earliest literature, with pain and sometimes despair, of course, but never without some autonomy, dignity, and responsibility. She consistently refused to see

man as a curious, accidental organization of glands, as a helpless piece of protoplasm moulded, modified and buffeted by forces it could neither understand nor organize, or as a machine driven crazily and meaninglessly about on the fuel of impulse. Literature, in the degree that it propounds this view of man, departs proportionately from the system of her values and her criticism, and, it should be added, from the values which are generally re-emerging in literature and criticism.

Indeed, it seems that literary values are currently returning to those which Edith Wharton endorsed and supported. Needless to say, her voice was neither the strongest nor the most persuasive in effecting this change, but the values she represented are now returning to favor. The impact of Realism and Naturalism was enormous. By their astonishing power, they made traditional literature seem colorless, weak, and prudish. Like the Romantic movement, however, the life of Naturalism was brief, but also like the influence of the Romantic movement, Naturalism has left an indelible mark on literary history and modified the general course and quality of subsequent letters. Like Romanticism again, Naturalism presents a distortion of the life we see and feel; it fails, somehow, to coincide with what we feel or know ourselves to be, and unmodified it could not become a literary standard or norm. Since irresponsibility, one of the principal tenets of Naturalism, is culturally recognized as an aberration from the human norm, or is, in short, insanity, the modifications in contemporary literature have been toward individual responsibility and morality, as represented, for example, by Jack Burden in Robert Penn Warren's All The King's Men and in both the later poetry and criticism of T. S. Eliot.

Though Edith Wharton was not an imaginatively or intellectually great critic, she was a practical and sensible one. Her criticism forms a cogent statement of the traditional values in literature, supports a norm of taste, and gives an intelligent discussion of the techniques by which these norms and values may be fulfilled. But probably the greatest value of her criticism lies in the commentary it offers about her own literary creations. Her works have been subjected to critical abuse, her social exclusiveness has been used to deprecate the significance of her novels and short stories, and her critical principles have been pronounced too superficial to be valuable. Nevertheless, her best novels have never failed to attract perceptive critics and discriminating readers. The formulation of her own critical principles is to date the best available commentary about what she intended to do and how she set about to do it. So long, then, as historians of American literature are obliged to include the name and an account of the works of Edith Wharton, a study of her critical principles and literary values will be important.

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APPENDIX

THE CRITIC OF POETRY AND DRAMA

The name of Edith Wharton does not often call up associations of poetry and drama since her performances in these forms of literature were not distinguished. By far the greater part of her most valuable critical and literary speculations also dealt with prose fiction, the novel, the short story, and the novelist. However, some notice of poetry and drama lies on the periphery of her critical career. Shortly after the incident involving her mother's disapproval of her first novel, Edith Wharton started courting the Muse in other ways. She reports in A Backward Glance:

> My poetic experiments . . . were destined to meet with the same discouragement as my fiction. Having vainly attempted a tragedy in five acts, I turned my mind to short lyrics, which I poured out with a lamentable facility.[1]

Actually, Mrs. Wharton did publish three volumes of poetry: Verses in 1878, Artemis to Actaeon and Other Verse in 1909, and Twelve Poems by Edith Wharton in 1926. In addition she published numerous poems in popular magazines, mostly love lyrics and dramatic monologues in the Browning manner. With Robert Norton she co-edited one anthology of verse, Eternal Passions in English Poetry. Critical opinion of her

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[1]Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 74.

verse varies. Robert Sencourt, for example, writes that her verses in Artemis to Actaeon contain "some of the best from the pen of an American." He compares her to Browning, Tennyson, and Longfellow, states that she is better than Emily Dickinson, Lowell, Emerson, and Sara Teasdale, and concludes that her poetry will take its place between that of Longfellow and Whitman.[1] On the other hand, in his review of Verses, Professor Nevius writes that the

> Four or five poems which she selects to translate from the German may be described as elegiac, and inasmuch as they conclude the volume, their simplicity of diction and quiet sincerity provide a damaging commentary on the original poems.[2]

Judged by Mrs. Wharton's "Vesalius in Zante," a dramatic monologue which appeared in the North American Review in 1902,[3] and "Had I Been Only," a lyric which appeared in Scribner's Magazine in 1928,[4] Sencourt's appreciation of her poetry is entirely too enthusiastic. Neither these nor other of her periodical verses show unusual poetic craftsmanship or remarkable poetic talent. She was not, however, without good taste for poetry. She records in A Backward Glance the pleasure she took in hearing James read Whitman, and phrases and allusions in her fiction as well as in her critical writings indicate that she knew the best poetry of Marlowe, Wordsworth, Keats, Goethe, and Browning.

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[1] Robert Sencourt, "The Poetry of Edith Wharton," Bookman, LXXIII (July, 1931), 479.

[2] Blake Nevius, "'Pussie' Jones's Verse: A Bibliographical Note on Edith Wharton," American Literature, XXIII (April, 1951), 497.

[3] CLXXV (November, 1902), 622-31.

[4] XXXIV (August, 1928), 215.

Mrs. Wharton left only two reviews of poetical volumes and only a few scattered, apparently unconsidered remarks about poetry in her non-fiction works. From all appearances her mature interest did not lie in the poetic art, and she seems not to have given the techniques of poetry much consideration. For example, her only attempt at a definition of poetry has nothing to do with the art of poetry but rather with the mental equilibrium of the poet. In her report of a somewhat disappointing dinner conversation with M. Bergson, she writes:

> It was only afterward that I saw he had really said all there was to say: that the gift of precision in ecstasy (the best definition I can find for the highest poetry) is probably as rare in the appreciator as in the creator. . .[1]

The fact that this is her only definition of poetry, that it is given so casually, and that it deals not with the art of poetry but with the attitude of the artist indicate the superficiality of her involvement with poetics.

Aside from her reticence about poetic art and her apparent lack of intense concern with poetry, another difficulty arises in the face of any attempt to establish her poetics. The two reviews she wrote dealt with the poetry of close personal friends, and it is impossible to determine how much her judgments and her remarks were conditioned by her friendship. The fact remains, however, that she gave warm and almost unqualified praise to the work of two poets whose fame time has not supported. Her first article treated the Sonnets of the Wingless Hours by Eugene Lee-Hamilton. Hamilton was the half-brother of Vernon Lee, and Mrs. Wharton had met him when she visited Vernon Lee in Italy.

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[1] Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 170.

Suffering then from a nervous malady, Hamilton later recovered and paid an extended visit to Mrs. Wharton's home, The Mount. In view of this personal friendship, it is difficult to say exactly what she thought of Lee-Hamilton's poetry. She places him among the great poets, yet the examples she gives of his greatness are not convincing. And the remarkably detailed biographical sketch she includes in her article seems to serve more to lengthen the review than to explain the poet's work. Though conclusions drawn from common use of cliches, as has been shown, are not always safe, the oily, smooth phrases she used to describe Hamilton's poetry do not seem entirely free of irony. For example, she writes:

> He is indeed distinguished not only for sustained dignity of thought and felicity of image, but for a verbal flexibility which almost always enables him to control the exigencies of the sonnet, instead of being controlled by them.[1]

There seems to be little doubt that Mrs. Wharton could not in this instance escape the exigencies of friendship and that conclusions drawn from this article about her values in poetry would most likely be misleading if not erroneous.

Though George Cabot Lodge was a much closer and more intimate friend than Lee-Hamilton, Mrs. Wharton's review of his poetry[2] has the ring of sincerity. It must be admitted that time again has not supported her praises of him, but the fact is that she probably knew and loved Lodge so well that she did believe his poetry was great. She praises him for the same qualities that allow the novelist to achieve visibility

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[1]Edith Wharton, "The Sonnets of Eugene Lee-Hamilton," Bookman, XXVI (November, 1907), 252.

[2]Wharton, "George Cabot Lodge: An Appreciation of His Poetry," p. 236.

in his characterization: the ability to empathize completely with the character and yet stand far enough aside from him to describe and present him objectively and realistically. She praises Lodge, then, for his "power of dissociation, and the ability to project one self far enough for the other to focus it."[1] She also remarks his "harmony of thought and form," and observes that in his poetry the "beauty of form grew with the richness of content."[2] In addition she indicates that his poetry is enriched by his sensibility to external beauty, the simplicity and directness of his phrases, and the concreteness and color of his images. "Here [she writes] the beauty of visible things speaks no longer in images, but directly, without need of interpretation, in that fusion of thought and sense which makes the magic of poetry."[3]

In spite of the length and sincerity of this essay there is little new or original analysis of poetry in it. But Mrs. Wharton does indicate that some of the attributes of good poetry are simplicity, directness, concreteness and colorfulness, the harmony of thought and form, the fusion of form and content, and the oneness of thought and sense impressions. Her warmth and enthusiasm are unmistakable, but they are reserved for the description of her friend's poetry instead of for the analysis of poetry itself.

Mrs. Wharton's only other criticism of verse, which is actually associated with dramatic verse, demonstrates again her not too clever manipulation of generalities rather than her ability to analyze the texture and form of the verse itself. In her criticism of Phillips's verse,

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[1] Ibid., p. 238. [2] Ibid. [3] Ibid.

for example, she observes that "rhymed pentameter (is) a doubtful vehicle for majestic speech,"[1] and that he writes "stately blank verse . . . which achieves the masculine quality of Tennyson's 'Ulysses' rather than following the same poet's effeminate pattern set in the Idylls."[2]

Mrs. Wharton's criticism of poetry, then, indicates that she was not able to analyze poetry thoroughly. She sought for safety in generalizations, and sometimes camouflaged her ignorance of poetic techniques in a haze of personal praise and appreciation. Though she continued to write poetry until late in her literary career, her poems do not indicate that she gave much study to formal poetics or spent much time in trying to improve her own poetic expression. Poetry was apparently simply a clever mode of expression subsidiary to the expression she sought in her prose fiction. None of her poems, therefore, are either profoundly serious in theme or remarkably artistic in construction. After 1910 she wrote no other reviews or comments on poetry, and her silence seems to indicate that she never became seriously involved with poetic techniques and expression.

She had a similar indifference to drama. In A Backward Glance she writes:

> Though I had not escaped the novelist's usual temptation to write for the stage, I had never taken my dramatic impulses very seriously, and after the appearance of my second novel, "The House of Mirth," I thought no more of the theatre--indeed, as nothing in the way of drama between the extremes of Racine's "Phedre" and "The Private Secretary" has ever given me much pleasure, I went to the play as seldom as possible.[3]

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[1] Wharton, "Stephen Phillips' Ulysses: A Drama," p. 169.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Wharton, A Backward Glance, p. 160.

Mrs. Wharton was, however, involved in some dramatic activity. With Clyde Fitch, "the dramatist of the day," she wrote the dialogue for The House of Mirth, which failed in 1906 with Fay Davis playing the role of Lily Bart. The Pulitzer Prize was awarded to Zoe Aikins' dramatization of The Old Maid in 1935, and in 1936 a dramatization of Ethan Frome by Owen Davis, Jr. and Owen Davis, Sr. enjoyed a creditable run. Mrs. Wharton's participation in the writing of the plays was greatest in The House of Mirth, but she acted as consultant to the others who dramatized her novels.

In 1902 Mrs. Wharton reviewed four plays in two articles. One article dealt with three versions of the Francesca da Rimini story and the other with a dramatization of the story of Ulysses.[1] In these essays Mrs. Wharton shows no great insight into drama, but her analytical vocabulary seems more adequate to the drama than it does to poetry. Interestingly, she condemns and condones the structure of the plays on the basis of her judgments on plot in narrative fiction. In narrative fiction she insisted that the plot be an externalization of the motives and psychological structures of the characters involved, that the plot should properly arise from conflicts within the characters themselves. Working on the same principle, she condemns Stephen Phillips's Ulysses because the hero is "centrifugal." She sees the hero wandering through a maze of predesigned episodes which bear only a casual relation to his character. The play, then, fails as "plotted fiction" fails, because there is not a necessary correspondence and rhythm between the identity of the character

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[1]Wharton, "The Three Francescas," p. 23.

and what happens to him. The plot, in short, becomes episodic and the events "accidental." Moreover, the central character, Ulysses, becomes "fluid," in the worst sense. He does not follow a distinct line of development, but is simply modified by the exigencies of the prearranged episodes.

Following the figure of the centrifuge, Mrs. Wharton says that the play has "detached beauties, even detached dramatic effect," but these are not, she implies, welded into beautiful form or singleness of effect. Anticipating Phillips's objections to her criticism, she imagines him saying, "to centralize the different emotions of the fluid Ulysses would have been to recast the hero of the Odyssey." She admits this is true but insists that it only indicates the "dramatic unfitness of the subject." Corollary to her complaint that the hero is fluid is her complaint that he is animated by no definite purpose and is making for no fixed goal. As the principal character is passive and undirected, then, the drama fails to achieve cogent, integrated form and final emphatic effect.

Upon the same basic principle of the character's control of plot, Mrs. Wharton praises one version of the Francesca plays. The "action is more rapid and simpler," she writes, ". . . and has a higher quality of dramatic inevitableness." It is not fortuitous, then, that "the psychology of the principal characters is firmly drawn." For only through the correspondence of character structure and episode could Mrs. Wharton see the inevitability of events and the unity of plot. Unity, simplicity, then, become important criteria in her judgment of a play as well as in her judgment of narrative fiction. Since the action as well as the

characters in a drama (as it appears on the boards) are already visible, Mrs. Wharton felt that the drama as an art form should contain only those details which were absolutely necessary to action and tone. Prose fiction, with its obligation to make its characters and actions imaginatively visible, was not restricted to such essentials. She found cause, then, to praise Mr. Crawford's version of Francesca for his "dramatic instinct" which "saved him from clogging [his play] with unessential detail."

Mrs. Wharton's dramatic criticism is based on almost the same criteria by which she judged narrative fiction. The play had to achieve dramatic wholeness through the correspondence of character, personality, and episode, and thus the development of the form of the play had to be evident and controlled by the development of its principal characters. This gave inevitability to the actions and relationships between the scenes. Although she criticised novels and plays according to the same basic principle of organic unity and unity of effect and meaning, she did draw a distinction between the ways in which a novel and a play create their effects. She states in The Writing of Fiction:

> The inference is indeed almost irresistible that the farther the novel is removed in treatment from theatrical modes of expression, the more nearly it attains its purpose as a freer art, appealing to those more subtle imaginative requirements which the stage can never completely satisfy.[1]

Here Mrs. Wharton's distinction lies in the "theatrical modes," which she considers colorful and striking clashes which occur in situations rather than in moral or psychological conflicts. And since she believed that conflicts in moral values and personality structures produced the

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[1]Wharton, The Writing of Fiction, pp. 138-39.

finest narrative fiction, she automatically relegated the good drama to a position of less value than the good novel, since drama--even though its episodes occur inevitably from the nature of the characters--depends on conflicting situations for its characteristic effects.

Without necessary approval, Mrs. Wharton observes that

> The traditions of the Theatre Francais used to require that the number of objects on the stage--chairs, tables, even to a glass of water on a table--should be limited to the actual requirements of the drama: the chairs must all be sat in, the table carry some object necessary to the action, the glass of water or decanter of wine be a part of the drama.[1]

She also observes that these traditions were "submerged" by the "stage-realism introduced from England a generation ago." She does, however, use this tradition to point out that both the novelist and the dramatist will produce a "far profounder effect . . . by the penetrating study of a few characters than by the multiplying of half-drawn figures."[2]

Both poetry and the drama, then, lie well outside the circle of Mrs. Wharton's particular interest. She had a poetaster's interest in poetry, knew many of its conventions, and had developed a good taste for it. She continued to write verses throughout her literary career, but none of them were worthy of especial comment and attention. Similarly, she had but a passing interest in the drama, but here her actual efforts of creation were more confined. She wrote at least one verse drama as a child and the dialogue for The House of Mirth. But she held the drama as a form inferior to the novel, and therefore gave it little of her critical attention. Indeed, it is clear that neither literary activity called forth much effort of analysis and thought. Her poetry maintains

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[1] Ibid., p. 83. [2] Ibid., p. 84.

a dead-level of superficiality, and her efforts at mastering drama were early given over. Moreover, her comparative silence on the problems of these arts and her apparent lack of insight into their nature indicate that her own efforts at their creation were casual and that her interest in them was not sufficient to stimulate her to analyze or think long about them. Her greatest efforts and her principal interests, then, lie with narrative prose fiction, where her achievements were greatest.