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An Unpublished Sonnet by Edith Wharton: The "Apollo & Marsyas" of Perugino

Edith Wharton, best known for her novels and short stories, wrote poetry throughout her life. Her first published book was a volume entitled *Verses* and privately printed in 1878. Then came *Artemis to Actaeon and Other Verses* (1909) and *Twelve Poems* (1920). Some of her poems were published in newspapers and literary magazines and later collected in volume; others appeared individually but were never collected; a few others have remained unpublished. Among these latter, is "The *Apollo and Marsyas* of Perugino," held at the Beinecke Library and here published for the first time.[1] Although the manuscript is undated, I surmise it belongs with the other sonnets drawn from mythology, literature, and works of art, which were published in *Scribner's Magazine* before 1900, such as: "Botticelli's Madonna in the Louvre" (1891), "The Tomb of Ilaria Giunigi" (1891), "Two Backgrounds: "La Vierge au Donateu" and "Mona Lisa" (1892), "The Cinquecento" (1894), "Chartres" (1895), and "Phaedra" (1898).

Wharton's mythological and ekphrastic poetry has not received much critical attention, and when it did, it was not favorable. One of the earlier critics, E.K. Brown, considered it imitative and mechanical, and the sonnets technically flawed (229). Undoubtedly, this early poetry is rather conventional, both in terms of style and content: mythological subjects and descriptions of works of art are recounted in traditional forms such as sonnets and dramatic monologues. Wharton herself was critical of it. In a 1902 letter to William Crary Brownell, Scribner's literary consultant, she wrote that "there are degrees in prose & in poetry – below a certain point – well, it simply isn't poetry; & I am not sure I've ever reached the 'poetry line.'"[2] She sought perfection, and often felt she could not reach it. In particular, she considered the sonnet a "sublime" form, practiced by great poets difficult to approach, let alone equal. In "The Sonnet," included

in *Artemis to Actaeon*, she addresses it as "Pure form, that like some chalice of old time / contain'st the liquid of the poet's thought," a chalice that gathered the wine of Petrarch, Shakespeare and Shelley, while she can offer only tears of failure. She wonders how she even "sought to pour [her] verses with trembling hand untaught / into a shape so small yet so sublime?" (20).

Probably, the sonnet that is published below did not attain her high standards. Even a recent collection of Wharton's poetry edited by Louis Auchincloss for The Library of America, which published a number of manuscript poems, did not include it. In spite of some flaws, this neglected poem deserves to be known as another significant example of her ekphrastic poetry. Wharton possessed an impressive knowledge of art, in particular of Italian painting, and critics who have stressed her reliance on the visual arts in her fiction have largely overlooked her ekphrastic poems. One important exception is to be found in John Hollander's *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art*, which includes Edith Wharton's poem on the Mona Lisa. The book is a celebration of the sister arts of poetry and painting, and an anthology of some of the most famous examples. In his Introduction, Hollander highlights how she concentrates on the background of Leonardo's painting rather than its subject. This is a frequent technique of Wharton's who, in *Italian Backgrounds,* insists on the conventional quality of the foreground compared to the unconventional backgrounds in painting. In the same way, she is interested in less known sights and art, beyond common tourist attractions and acknowledged masterpieces.

The "Apollo and Marsyas" by Perugino is an exquisite piece of Italian Renaissance painting, if not one of the most famous. Originally thought to be by Raphael, it has been definitively attributed to Perugino, who most likely painted it between 1483 and 1492, when he was in Florence at the court of Lorenzo Il Magnifico. A rather small piece (39 cm x 29 cm), it was purchased by the Louvre in 1883 and exhibited there in the Salon Carré. In *A Motor-Flight to France* Wharton mentions it as an example of a work of art that is not a great masterpiece, but holds a special appeal for some observers who go beyond the obvious.

> Every wanderer through the world has these pious pilgrimages to perform, generally to shrines of no great note… [and is drawn] to lesser works, first seen, perhaps, at a fortunate moment, or having some special quality of suggestion and evocation that the perfect equilibrium of the masterpieces causes them to lack. So I know of some who go first to "The Death of Procris" in the National Gallery; to the little "Apollo and Marsyas" of the Salon Carré; to a fantastic allegorical picture, subject and artist unknown, in an obscure corner of the Uffizi; and who would travel more miles to see again, in the little gallery of Rimini, an Entombment of the school of Mantegna, than to sit beneath the vault of the Sistine (22).

This mysterious painting probably held for Wharton that "special quality of suggestion and evocation" that appealed to her and made her return to it and write about it. In the background there is a hilly landscape, with a valley in the center, and a river flowing through it, a walled city beneath a hill, and some birds flying in the sky. In her detailed description of the painting, Wharton does not miss the background landscape, which always attracts her attention. In the foreground there are two naked youths: on the left, one is sitting on a rock playing a flute; the other is standing on the right, with a bow and arrows on the ground and a lyre hanging from the stump of a dead tree. The nudity of the two men and their posture recall classical sculptures such as the Hermes by Praxiteles and the Hermes reposing by Lysippos. "Apollo and Marsyas" was the traditional title of the painting. While there is no doubt about the identification of the standing figure as Apollo, the identity of Marsyas has been questioned because he was supposed to be a satyr, and the youth on the left doesn't have the pointed ears characteristic of a satyr or any other animal features. More recent interpretations consider him as more likely to be Daphnis, a beautiful young shepherd who was an excellent musician and singer, son of Mercury and a nymph, and protected by Apollo.

Wharton based her description on the traditional identification, current at her times, of the young man on the left as Marsyas. We know that she was well versed not only in the Italian masters, but also in ancient mythology. According to the myth, the satyr Marsyas, proud of his music on the flute dropped by Athena, challenged Apollo to a contest. The god accepted, won, and condemned Marsyas to be flayed alive for having dared to challenge

him. While in other ekphrastic poems, such as "Botticelli's Madonna in the Louvre" and "The Tomb of Ilaria Giunigi," the poet directly addresses the painting, in this case she describes it and tells the story behind the painting. The poet is the beholder of the art object, speculates on what the silent medium of painting is trying to say, and utters it. According to her reading, the scene depicts the moments preceding the contest between Apollo and Marsyas. The satyr challenges the god and is not afraid of the impending evil, while Apollo, who can foresee the future, is "inscrutably serene," and smiles in expectation of revenge, the bloody death of his rival. Perugino's gentle painting does not have any of the dramatic horror of Titian's late painting of the flaying of Marsyas, the brutal punishment inflicted by the immortal god on a mortal creature, half human and half animal. The elegance of Apollo, the calm attitude of the seated youth, the peaceful scenery, in fact, all support the identification of the flute player as Daphnis, the inventor of pastoral poetry protected by Apollo. However, the enigmatic smile of the god, the apollonian disdain and cruel distance leaves the subject of the scene open to doubt. As does the comparison with a preparatory drawing held at the Accademia in Venice, where the sitting figure appears to have the pointed ears of a satyr.

Wharton's interpretation is layered with cultural, aesthetic, and psychological perspectives. She seems to identify with Marsyas, the intrepid musician who attempts to compete with the vengeful god and is doomed to failure. She is conscious of her limits as a poet, she feels she cannot compete with the great masters ("gods") of the past, and is destined to remain "unsorrowed." If the sonnet is flawed, it is not so much for the possible wrong assumptions in terms of contents, as for a faulty style and technique. The presence of long abstract words of Latin origin, while fitting with the mythological theme, betray the effort to maintain an elevated tone and to search for the right rhythm and rhyme. The words beginning with "in" and "un," like "inscrutably," "inaccessible," "unfaltering," "undaunted," "unsorrowed," "untended," sound arduous and reveal Shelley's influence not fully assimilated. They also contribute to a certain melodic weakness. The poem is in the form of an Italian sonnet, divided into two stanzas, the octave rhymed abba abba, and the sestet, rhymed cdd cdc. The technical need to maintain this scheme and the iambic pentameter rhythm makes

it sound at times constrained and unnatural. However, this sonnet is a brilliant example of Wharton's ability to "look" at a painting and make it "speak." Her deep love of poetry and the visual arts produces strikingly ekphrastic encounters.

Notes

[1] Edith Wharton Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, Box 20, Folder 644. Reproduced by permission of the Watkins/Loomis Agency. Transcribed by Gianfranca Balestra.

[2] Edith Wharton, Letter of 6 Nov. 1902 to William Crary Brownell. *The Letters of Edith Wharton,* p. 75.

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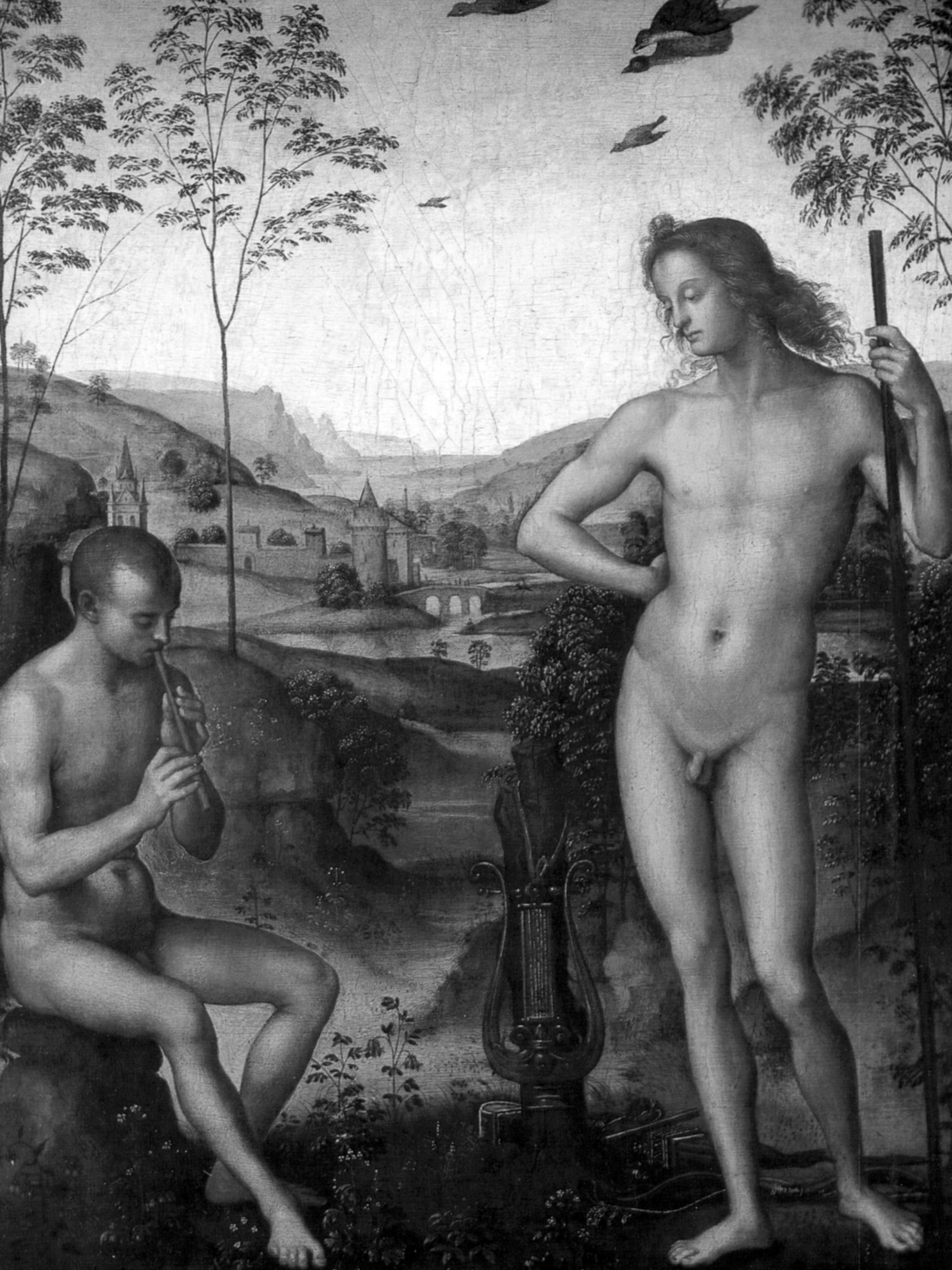

The "Apollo & Marsyas" of Perugino.
(~~Salon Carré~~ [illegible], Louvre.)

Inscrutably serene the young god stands
In prescience inaccessible, his eyes
Bright with the fumes of mortal sacrifice,
The unfaltering lyre impatient for his hands.
Far valley-ward the windless pasture-lands
Whose ~~[illegible]~~ sheltered paths his worshippers despise
Slope to the small walled city where the wise
Move tranquilly within fulfilled demands;

But on the hill-top, challenging the god,
Sits Marsyas, fluting his undaunted tune —
And smiling the god waits, foreseeing soon
The ultimate hour of him whose feet have trod
That perilous eminence, his bloody swoon,
His end unsorrowed & untended sod.

Edith Wharton

The “Apollo & Marsyas” of Perugino (In the Louvre)

Inscrutably serene the young god stands
In prescience inaccessible, his eyes
Bright with the fumes of mortal sacrifice,
The unfaltering lyre impatient for his hands.
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Whose sheltered paths his worshippers despise
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Sits Marsyas, fluting his undaunted tune –
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