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Women Writers on the Verge of the Twentieth Century: Edith Wharton *et al.*

The title of my essay reflects the uneasiness that admittedly assails the Wharton scholar when trying to place this writer in the twentieth century, in the context of modernity and modernism. Although she published most of her work in the twentieth century, she is often perceived as oriented towards the nineteenth century, as "looking backward."[1] Born in New York in 1862, Wharton was molded by an upper class Victorian education and in many ways maintained those values, but she started publishing at the turn of the new century and participated in the extraordinary changes and events of her times. Her early international experience and later expatriation in France gave her a certain distance and a valuable comparative perspective in her fictive representation of American culture and society. In spite of her popular and critical success, she is sometimes considered an aristocratic novelist of manners clinging to outmoded values or, more appropriately, "too advanced for the Victorians and too old-fashioned for the modernists" (Singley, *Edith Wharton* 7). Because of this double outlook, she is problematic to locate in the development of American literary history. Feminist criticism has recuperated a sense of Wharton's modernity by calling attention, among other aspects, to her critique of the commodification and exploitation of women at the turn of the century. These feminist readings have at times overlooked some of her more conservative positions and have caused the protest of critics like James Tuttleton against what he called "The Feminist Takeover of Edith Wharton."

At the beginning of the twenty-first century and after a few decades of important Wharton criticism, I think it possible to have a more balanced assessment of her work and its relevance. The purpose of this essay is to discuss how Edith Wharton fits into the turn of the century period and

its discontent as a writer accurately depicting society and its sometimes traumatic transformations, especially for women.

"Women on the Verge" evokes *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, the film by Spanish director Almodóvar, but also the title of a critical book by Mary Papke, *Verging on the Abyss: The Social Fiction of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton*.[2] Being on the verge implies hesitation, the fear of falling into something dangerous rather than taking a leap into something exciting and new. According to this critic, Chopin and Wharton portray female protagonists in conflict with their social order, caught between individual desires and social duty, facing defeat and punishment for unorthodox behavior and thus exploring new territories with caution.

While bearing in mind Wharton's refusal to be labeled as a woman writer, I intend to place her in the context of the social condition of women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and in connection with other women writers. I will briefly examine some crucial issues for women and women writers at the turn of the century before focusing on Edith Wharton's position in this rather complex picture in terms of her ideas and artistic achievements.

Women's History / Women's Stories

As historians have pointed out, the progressive era, lasting from the 1890's through the 1920s, was a period of great changes in American history, due to rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. Also, for American women it was a time of change and struggle. New jobs were open to them as factory workers, typists, stenographers, telephone operators, nurses, department store clerks. Most women worked at low paying jobs, but a minority had access to university and pursued careers as journalists, professors, doctors, lawyers and scientists. Many women moved from the private to the public sphere, became involved in social, political and economic problems, and engaged themselves in promoting reforms. A social reformer like Jane Addams in *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902) proposed a very accurate analysis of the conflicting forces at work at the turn of the century and wrote that the situation had all the "discomfort of tran-

sition," while urging women to work for change and a new consciousness. The issue of suffrage was central in the debate on women's rights until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Books and magazine articles addressed the woman question, from dress code to issues of legal and sexual freedoms.

Many women contributed to create modern culture and places of intellectual and artistic exchange. They were not only writers and artists in general, but also journalists, editors, founders of publishing houses and theater companies, or social and political activists. These women formed a complex network of human, political, cultural, and artistic relations on both sides of the Atlantic, promoting the emergence of a transnational culture.[3]

Moreover, the period saw the emergence of a new social phenomenon that came to be known as the "New Woman," a figure that challenged conventional roles and affected contemporary literature. As Cecilia Tichi points out, the new woman was a powerful social-literary figure by the late nineteenth century. She both embodied new values and posed a critical challenge to the existing order. And she affected the national literature. From the 1890s the new woman – independent, outspoken, iconoclastic – empowered the work of Kate Chopin, Alice James, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, Willa Cather, and the young Gertrude Stein. (Tichi 589-590)

Tichi's chapter on "Women Writers and the New Woman" in the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* is part of a significant process of re-writing American literary history supported by a number of critical books on individual women writers and paralleled by comprehensive overviews such as Elizabeth Ammons's *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century*, which identifies the turn of the century as a period of remarkable artistic achievement for women. Ammons argues that the pervasive cultural climate had "the effect of empowering women, including writers, and of transforming cultural expectations about how many women could be publishing writers, how many of them could be 'great', and what they could write about" (vii). She groups together the work of women writers previously kept separated and includes women of color such as Pauline Hopkins and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, a Native

American like Mourning Dove, a Chinese American like Sui Sin Far, and an immigrant like Anzia Yezierska. This approach reflects a widespread concern in contemporary literary criticism with the necessity to analyze together questions of race, class, and gender. Women writers of different class, race, religion, region, and education are united by gender, historical context, and the determination to become artists.

According to Ammons, who is also the author of a landmark study of Wharton's fiction, the women writers taken into consideration have the same profile: they are breaking with the past, educated, career oriented, not married or divorced, and with no children or few children (with some exception, like Chopin). These writers produced a large and important body of work, marked by differences as well as common themes and plots. Recurring themes include: the economic dependence and sexual exploitation of women, the institutionalized violence against women, the preoccupation with the figure of the woman artist, racism and other kinds of discrimination, and the social construction of motherhood.

Some writers, like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, were more directly involved in the social and political struggle of the period and developed ideas on the social transformation of patriarchal culture. In her groundbreaking *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898), she analyzed the economics of marriage and showed that women's lifelong dependence on men is neither natural nor healthy. The cause of the problem is not biology but the social fact that the human female, in order to subsist, has to develop exaggerated femininity and use sex-attraction. Gilman's indictment of the social structure of marriage is devastating: a wife is fed and cared for according to her keeper's pleasure and principles. Pleasing a man becomes woman's job in life, which means that the married woman, viewed economically, differs very little from the prostitute; both exchange sexual service for support. In her famous short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), Gilman portrayed a woman trapped in a confining marriage, who finds a possible escape in madness and/or a community with other women (like the one trapped behind the wallpaper, which works as a beautiful metaphor for woman's condition in general). But Gilman also created a utopian novel,

Herland (1915), where some of the problems are solved, where individual and social change can happen.

Other writers confronted the woman question in realistic and innovative ways. At the center of these often controversial plots we find the "new woman" as a character, seeking personal fulfillment through work instead of marriage, for example in *A Country Doctor* by Sarah Orne Jewett, or seeking freedom of choice, including sexual freedom, as in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin. The protagonist of the latter develops her consciousness through painful experience, an extramarital love affair, and sex; she also achieves a critical view of society, but in the end she is still faced with that same society, is caught in a double bind and commits suicide. Change was not without struggle both with outside forces and with inside psychological and cultural limits and this is reflected in the writing as well as in the career of the writers themselves. When breaking the rules of tradition, they had to face rejection and censorship, as in the case of Kate Chopin. The "new woman" writers were often torn between a frank representation of various forms of awakening and fear of rejection and ostracism. Their female characters are caught in a dilemma between convention and rebellion, the *status quo* and the overturning of patriarchal rule.

According to this critical perspective, Chopin, Wharton and other turn-of-the-twentieth-century women writers found themselves between worlds, trying to break with the past, but at the same time trying to enter the world of art which was shaped by men. There was inevitably tension between the artistic tradition they aspired to enter and the fiction they wanted to create. Women who were determined to be artists at the turn of the century often looked at male models and refused to be labeled as women writers. Edith Wharton is an example of this attempt to distance herself from other women writers, especially predecessors such as Mary Wilkins and Sarah Orne Jewett and their way of seeing life "through rose-coloured spectacles" (*A Backward Glance* 1002). Grouping women writers together, as Ammons and other feminist critics do, changes the canon of American literature and subverts traditional interpretations of the American novel, but it may involve the risk of segregation, a danger many writers as well as critics were and are aware of.

The Social and Sexual Politics of Edith Wharton

In *A Backward Glance* Edith Wharton wrote about

> the monstrous regiment of the emancipated: young women taught by their elders to despise the kitchen and the linen room, and to substitute the acquiring of University degrees for the more complex art of civilized living. The movement began when I was young, and now that I am old, have watched it and noted its results, I mourn more than ever the extinction of the household arts. Cold storage, deplorable as it is, has done less harm to the home than the Higher Education. (830)

As an upper class woman, Wharton was privately educated, read extensively in her father's library, and pursued her writing career with determination, but had to face strong opposition within her family and society. In 1923, she accepted an honorary degree from Yale University – the first woman to be awarded it – but undoubtedly her attitude towards women's education and emancipation was conservative.

Another often quoted passage denounces "the new theories ... that awful women rave about on platforms" (*The Reef* 564). Wharton was neither in practice nor in theory a feminist, but this statement has often been improperly used to demonstrate the writer's reactionary stance, even if it is pronounced by Anna Leath, the protagonist of *The Reef*, who is an upper class woman with a rigid moral education faced with what she perceives as disorderly sexual behavior. Although this was considered by Wharton herself her most autobiographical novel, it doesn't necessary imply a total identification with the protagonist. Written at the end of her love affair with Morton Fullerton, this novel appears to stage her passionate discovery of sexuality in conflict with her traditional moral standards, while exposing the sexual double standard. As Gloria Erlich has demonstrated in a book that illuminates Wharton's sexual education, the writer split aspects of herself between the two female characters, with Anna Leath playing the sexually repressed woman and Sophy Viner the new woman possessing the secret of passion (109). These complementary parts never become a whole in this novel; rather, they enact a recurring split in Wharton's work

between the sexually innocent woman and the woman in touch with her desires, marginalized by society.

Traditionally viewed as a sexually repressed product of Victorian education both in her life and work, Wharton has raised critical attention from a feminist perspective "as the writer of sexual consciousness in the era of the new woman" (Tichi 605). In fact, more recent assessments have stressed the ambivalence of Wharton's fictional representations of sexuality: "She yearned for women's freedom of sexual expression but saw it blighted by cooptation of sexuality and intimacy as a form of business exchange" (Bauer, "Wharton's 'Others'" 117). The sexual politics of her novels reflect her personal experience of repression and desire as well as her confrontation with social changes and moral issues at the turn of the century. This is already visible in early novellas that mark her attempt to establish herself as a writer: *The Touchstone*, written and published in 1900 when she was thirty-eight, and *Sanctuary* (1903). It could be argued that in both texts the female protagonists try to compensate for their lack of sexual satisfaction with success as a writer in the first case, with a hypertrophic maternal instinct in the second.[4]

The House of Mirth, published in 1905, inaugurates Wharton's career as a successful writer and important social critic. It stands as powerful criticism of consumeristic society and marriage along the lines of the already mentioned *Women and Economics* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) by Thorstein Veblen. Among other things, Veblen analyzed the role of the leisure class wife and argued that wives are economically dependent on men, but they do fulfill a significant function in the marital economy: that of the conspicuous consumer who displays his wealth. This is exactly what happens in *The House of Mirth*, which exposes the purpose and price of marriage for women in the American leisure class and examines the power structure in terms of economics and sexuality. This book offers a searching analysis of the destructive construction of femininity and its damaging effects. Excluded from production and money making, women are restricted to the business of marriage: their bodies are commodities on the marriage market.

The House of Mirth can be read parallel to *The Custom of the Country* (1913),[5] in spite of obvious differences in terms of plot and characteriza-

tion. While Lily Bart, the protagonist of the earlier novel, is an impoverished upper class woman who goes down the social scale, the protagonist of the second, Undine Spragg, is a *nouveau riche* who succeeds in her upwardly mobile ascent. Both female characters, however, are socialized to become decorative objects to be collected and displayed by men who can afford them. Their stories develop in opposite directions but represent two sides of the same picture: Lily's sensibilities lead her to social failure and death, while Undine manages to use her body to climb the social ladder through serial marriages. Their special skill lies in the exquisite representation of themselves as artificial/artistic creations, while their identity is defined through their reflections both in mirrors and the eyes of other people, especially admiring men. With bitter realism Wharton exposes the reification of woman, but her critique involves the whole problem of gender. The female body is a commodity for sale, while man is either a voyeur/connoisseur, or a buyer, when not a potential rapist, as in the case of Trenor, who makes money for Lily on Wall Street and expects sex as part of the deal.

Wharton's critique of the marriage system is not limited to the economic dependency of women but also extends to consider the loneliness and anxiety of men. Lily's father is an example of the defeated man, who is discarded when he doesn't fulfill his role as provider and becomes a marginal man. Selden is, as much as Lily, "the victim of his environment." In spite of his freedom and "Republic of the Spirit" ideals, his limitations and compromises are evident. The same is even truer for male characters in *The Custom of the Country*, who are manipulated by Undine and become her victims until one succumbs and commits suicide. She is the passionless *femme fatale* whose pioneering energy goes into "the business of buying and trading husbands" (Joslin, *Edith Wharton* 72). However, Undine's apparent success is at the expense of her identity and development: she fails to achieve maturity and self-consciousness.

Wharton's engagement with American culture and its stifling effects on women (and men) continues in her later masterpiece *The Age of Innocence*, which addresses once again the woman question through the perspective of a man attracted to two very different women: one is the product of a rigid, repressive education and the embodiment of traditional values that exclude passion and knowledge, the other represents a cosmopolitan nonconformist

type of womanhood, intellectually independent and socially marginalized. The woman with a free spirit, however, is aware of social restriction and the impossibility of escaping the social order. Set in 1870s' New York, the novel is critical of old customs that restricted women's freedom, but is also skeptical about the alternatives. The male protagonist can envision marriage as a passionate communion between a man and a woman, but realizes that it would entail, on the part of the woman,

> the experience, the versatility, the freedom of judgment, which she had been carefully trained not to possess; and with a shiver of foreboding he saw his marriage becoming what most of the other marriages about him were: a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other. (1050)

This indictment of American matrimony that is based on the conventional education of women is a recurring theme in Wharton's work, and one that she addresses in a comparative way in "The New Frenchwoman," a chapter of *French Ways and their Meaning*. In this comparison the Frenchwoman is seen as an adult while the American woman is considered still in kindergarten, in spite of her legal advantages.

In *The Age of Innocence*, as well as *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton stands out as a critic of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries American social life. She documents the effects of a consumerist society, shifting sexual and economic relations, and creates characters deeply affected by their social environment and struggling against restrictive conventions. These novels also illustrate Wharton's ambivalence towards new customs and morals and her subtle exploration of sexual politics.

In another, less studied novel, *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), the writer combines sexuality with labor reform and euthanasia, in a complex entanglement of plot. The typical triangle involves a man totally dedicated to improving factory work and two women he marries under false assumptions. As Dale Bauer demonstrates, in this as well as in the parallel triangle of *Ethan Frome* (1911) displaced passion results in death, paralysis, and alienation ("Wharton's 'Others'").

The role of sexuality in human life is more directly explored in novels such as *The Reef* (1912) and *Summer* (1917), where lower class women, connected with nature rather than culture, seem to have more sexual freedom but are made to pay dearly for it, especially if they mingle with men of higher social class. The female protagonist of *Summer* experiences sexual pleasure, becomes pregnant, is abandoned by the unaware father of her child, and marries the old man who had raised her. This sensational plot has been read as a complex dramatization of female resistance and capitulation to the symbolic order of the father, with at the center an inarticulate woman capable of experiencing through her body.[6]

If Wharton's fiction from the first two decades of the twentieth century includes some of her undisputed masterpieces and has attracted the most critical attention, new approaches have taken into consideration her later work and its problematic engagement with the cultural debates of her times. For instance, novels like *Twilight Sleep* (1927) and *The Children* (1928) are studied by Dale Bauer to show Wharton's unresolved conflicts in relation with mass culture and scientific discourse and to locate her in the context of modernism. A close reading of these and other late novels demonstrates Wharton's "discomfort with both high modernism, in writers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, and technological modernity" (Bauer, *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics* 114).

Edith Wharton, Modernity, and Modernism

In *Conflicting Stories*, Ammons argues that the important body of fiction by women she examined is unified not only by recurrent themes, but also by "an interest in radical experimentation with narrative form itself" (5). This does not exactly apply to Wharton, who was rather mild in her narrative experimentation, adopting Jamesian techniques as the limited point of view and the center of consciousness in some of her fiction, but distancing herself from the structural complexities of his late style. In *Ethan Frome*, for example, she used an interior narrator as a device to put together the story of a rural character who probably wouldn't be able to articulate his own story, thoughts, and emotions. Even wider is her distance from the new

writing that came to be known as modernism, which she expressed clearly in her letters and essays. She particularly objected to the "stream of consciousness method," which she saw used as an end in itself and not to serve a general design. What she found objectionable in the experimental novels of the modernists is also the description "of a pathological world where the action takes place between people of abnormal psychology" (*The Writing of Fiction* 27-28). She criticized the new fiction both for its technique and for its material, disliked Joyce's *Ulysses* and Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, but admired Conrad, Proust, Gide, and Cocteau, and, in the other arts, Cezanne and Gauguin, Igor Stravinsky, and Isadora Duncan. In many ways she was attentive to the artistic developments of her day and she was eclectic in her tastes.

In the 1920s and 30s she kept on writing as she had done at the turn of the century, in the form of the well written novel, refusing to adopt the "new methods" she stigmatized in her critical writings. In 1925, for instance, she published *The Mother's Recompense*, a rather traditional novel from the technical point of view, even if it engages with disturbing modern themes such as a middle-aged woman's love for a younger man and a tinge of incest. It was reviewed together with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, published the same year, and the comparison was not in favor of Wharton: "Mrs Woolf is a brilliant experimentalist, while Mrs Wharton is now content to practice the craft of fiction without attempting to enlarge its technical scope."[7] In a letter she defended her novel while admitting that "it is an old-fashioned novel. I was not trying to follow new methods ... and my heroine belongs to the day when scruples existed."[8] As Wegener points out, she associates the disappearance of scruples to the vogue of the new methods, linking form with morality and establishing a correlation between the social and the aesthetic. At the same time, she criticizes the conditions of modern America, the excessive material comfort and convenience as a perpetual incentive to standardization. She deprecates what Jackson Lears calls "the democratization of comfort" and seems to fit in the historical framework of conflicting impulses foregrounded in his illuminating study of modernity and antimodernism.

As critics and historians have pointed out, "the modern" and "modernism" are difficult categories to summarize and define, and Wharton's

inclusion or exclusion often depends on the boundaries of those definitions. For sure she did not espouse the avant-garde break with the past and the call "to make it new." Rather, she preferred the classical aesthetic of order and balance to the modern one of fragmentation and disjunction. In a valuable attempt to situate Wharton in the cultural and literary movements of her day, Amy Kaplan stresses her "uneasy dialogue with twentieth century modernism," at the periphery of the modern period. Further discussion of Wharton's controversial position in the modernist canon can be found in recent book-length studies by Robin Peel and Jennifer Haytock.

As Joslin points out, feminist critics "have struggled to find room for Wharton's philosophical and aesthetic conservatism in the Modernist landscape by pronouncing her a transitional figure" ("'Fleeing the Sewer'" 349), highlighting the audacious subjects she treated in her work as well as her moderate literary innovation. I agree with this idea of Wharton as a transitional figure, a critic of late nineteenth and early twentieth century American social life, and as a refined realist writer, capable of creating characters deeply affected by their social environment, struggling against restrictive conventions but rejecting contemporary solutions as equally destructive and often morally untenable. Concern over cultural and artistic shifts permeates Wharton's life and work, creating tension between preservation and reform, tradition and innovation. She contributed to the transformation of American fiction at the turn and into the twentieth century and has come to occupy a significant place in literary and cultural history.

I would like to conclude with two examples of Wharton's relevance for writers at the new turn of the century, even if not always with convincing results. In 1999 Tama Janovitz published *A Certain Age*, a novel that reworked *The House of Mirth* for the turn of the twenty-first century and tells the story of a woman who tries to find a suitable rich husband in a shallow and violent modern day Manhattan, where sex is free and often degrading and drugs are part of the problem. It is a satirical portrait that can only show differences in morals and culture, but ultimately misses the point, especially when compared to Wharton's masterpiece.

In a 2012 short story, "Hello, Martians. Let Moby Dick Explain," Canadian writer Margaret Atwood uses American literature to explain the present day United States to imaginary Martians who landed in her backyard.

At the end of the encounter, the Martians go back to Mars with the idea of starting an American book club, because they understand that, "It is the writers who convey the inner truth about a nation, despite themselves." They wish to read "David Foster Wallace, not to mention Edith Wharton and Raymond Carver and tons of others." It is significant that Margaret Atwood chooses to mention Edith Wharton together with contemporary writers like Foster Wallace and Carver, digging her out of the past to illuminate American culture.

Notes

[1] Wharton's autobiography is appropriately titled *A Backward Glance*, echoing Walt Whitman's *A Backward Glance O'ver Travel'd Roads*. It is worth quoting Shari Benstock's statement in *Women of the Left Bank*: "Wharton belonged totally to the nineteenth century, although she spent thirty-seven years of her life in the twentieth" (86). Benstock partially revised her evaluation in her *Biography* of Wharton and in her essay "Landscapes of Desire."

[2] *The Verge* (1921) is also the title of a play by Susan Glaspell (1876-1948), a writer better known for another play, *Trifles* (1916), and its short story version, *A Jury of Her Peers* (1917). In *The Verge* she stresses the entrapment of women confined by traditional roles and presents a female scientist who tries to breed a hybrid plant and go beyond tradional forms.

[3] For a revision of the turn-of-the-century and modernist cultural history, looking not only at the canonical works of modernism, but at the interplay with more popular forms and arts, see Camboni's *Networking Women*. The large number of women taken into consideration in this book significantly doesn't include Wharton.

[4] See my Introduction to the Italian version of *The Touchstone* (*La pietra di paragone*) and my essay on *Sanctuary*.

[5] I am here following my own discussion of these two novels in "The Body as Commodity," where I refer to other relevant criticism.

[6] For in-depth analysis of this novella, see Rhonda Skillern's essay and Dale Bauer's chapter "*Summer* and the Rhetoric of Reproduction" in her book *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics*. See also Emanuela Dal Fabbro's Afterword to the Italian version of *Summer* (*Estate*).

[7] Review quoted in Wegener, 116.

[8] Edith Wharton in a letter to John Hugh Smith on May 25, 1925 (*Letters* 480).

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