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A Backward Glance over Traveled Roads: Edith Wharton and Expatriation (*)

In search of a title for her autobiography, Edith Wharton thought of Whitman's last Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, "A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads," where the septuagenarian poet sits "gossiping in the early candle-light of old age," meditating on the book which he considers his "definitive *carte [de] visite* to the coming generations of the New World" (296). On the surface no two writers would seem more incompatible than Walt Whitman and Edith Wharton, the all-American poet of democracy and the expatriate cosmopolitan chronicler of the Old New York aristocracy, but in fact Wharton was a great admirer of Whitman, made him a character in *The Spark*, and even planned an essay on him. She chose *A Backward Glance* as a title for her book and dedicated it "To the friends who every year on All Souls' Night come and sit with me by the fire" (769). In 1934, when she was over seventy, she too could cast backward glances over traveled roads, a fitting metaphor for someone who had been a tireless traveler throughout her life.

A Backward Glance is, in fact, a revisitation of both her life's journey and the real journeys that filled her life and work. She was called by Henry James "the pendulum woman" (916) because she crossed the Atlantic every year for almost thirty years, first traveling extensively in Europe and finally settling in France. But her expatriation had begun much earlier, with her first years spent traveling in Europe as a child, from 1866 to 1872, and living in Rome, Florence, and Paris. It was an experience that filled her eyes with "shapes of immortal beauty and immemorial significance" (824) that found no equal in New York, a city of "mean monotonous streets, without

architecture, without great churches or palaces, or any visible memorials of an historic past." From the very beginning a comparison is established between "the nobility and harmony of the great European cities, . . . the glories of Rome and the architectural majesty of Paris" (817) on the one side, and "the intolerable ugliness of New York" on the other (824). In "Life and I," an earlier autobiographical fragment, the disappointment produced by the first impressions of her native country is even more bitter and final: "I was only ten years old, but I had been fed on beauty since my babyhood, and my first thought was: '*How ugly it is!*' I have never since thought otherwise, or felt otherwise than as an exile in America; and that this is no retrospective delusion is proved by the fact that I used to dream at frequent intervals that we were going back to Europe, & to wake from this dream in a state of exhilaration which the reality turned to deep depression" (1080-81).

The pattern, I think, is already clear, and seems to reproduce the well-known one, established by Henry James before her, of the "passionate pilgrim" going back to Europe and its wealth of art and history, trying to reconnect with the old tradition of European culture that shaped America. The curious thing is that James is recognized as a master, among other things, of the "international theme," while Edith Wharton is generally known as the writer of "Old New York." In the pivotal case of James, in fact, the pattern has been studied in all its complexities and ambiguities; in Wharton's case, scholarship has only recently been paying more attention to this aspect of her life and work,¹ while attempting to rescue her from the somewhat cumbersome presence of the Master: Edith Wharton is not a character in a James novel, as was once suggested by Percy Lubbock (6) in what is now considered a misleading portrait of her. Moreover, the above-quoted passage already introduces a psychological variable—the feeling of being an exile in America, exhilaration *us* depression—which deserves attention. What follows is, therefore, a necessarily sketchy overview of Wharton's variations on the pattern of expatriation, both at the biographical and the narrative level.

Wharton's autobiography is structured on departures and arrivals: even the most important events of her life are often related to journeys. Her second trip to Europe was determined by the ill health of her father but, as she recalls, "as dearly as I loved him, the impending joys of travel were much more vivid to me than any fears for his health" (847). Even more

significant is her way of introducing her marriage: "At the end of my second winter in New York I was married; and thenceforth my thirst for travel was to be gratified" (853). We know that her marriage was not a happy one and did not quench her other thirsts, but it established a new routine of annual trips to Europe: they would live at Newport (later in New York and Lenox) from June till February, when they would take off for four months of travel. She confesses that "[she] was never very happy at Newport" (853), while it was abroad that she "really felt alive," thus summing up the psychological contours of her early conflict between America and Europe. The idea of departure would energize her, whereas coming back to the States would plunge her back into depression. In fact, we know that she suffered from serious depression and escape to Europe seems to have acted as a kind of treatment for this.²

However, if her travels gave her "the kind of mental refreshment"³ she needed, her life was ever more divided and her feeling of deracination increased. The following passage demonstrates her sense of frustration:

My first few weeks in America are always miserable, because the tastes I am cursed with are all of a kind that cannot be gratified here, & I am not enough in sympathy with our "gros public" to make up for the lack on the aesthetic side. One's friends are delightful; but we are none of us Americans, we don't think or feel as the Americans do, we are the wretched exotics produced in a European glass-house, the most *déplacé* & useless class on earth! All of which outburst is due to my first sight of American streets, my first hearing of American voices, & the wild, dishevelled backwoods look of everything when one first comes home! You see in my heart of hearts, a heart never unbosomed, I feel in America . . . out of sympathy with everything.⁴

As a "wretched exotic" she would continue her exploration of Europe. Eventually, as Schriber points out (1987, 257), she would reverse the pattern of her journeys, making France her home and America a place to visit, before giving up even the visits. But in the early years her favorite destination was Italy, a land that was for her full of enchantments and inspired much of her early work: *The Valley of Decision* (1902), *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904), *Italian Backgrounds* (1905), and many short stories. In 1895 she wrote from Milan to Ogden Codman, co-author of *The Decoration of Houses*: "The older I grow the more I feel that I would rather live in Italy than anywhere—the very air is full of architecture—'la ligne' is everywhere. Everything else seems so coarse or banal beside it. I never

wearry of driving through the streets and looking at the doorways & windows and courtyards & walls & all the glimpses one gets. What an unerring sentiment for form!"⁵

The reasons for her choice of France over Italy or England as a place of residence can only be surmised. In Italy she probably never found the intellectual circles she desired. As she writes in a 1903 letter, "I think it is almost a pity to enjoy Italy as much as I do, because the acuteness of my sensations makes them rather exhausting; but when I see the stupid Italians I have met here, completely insensitive to their surroundings, and ignorant of the treasures of art and history among which they have grown up, I begin to think it is better to be an American, and bring to it a mind and eye unblunted by custom."⁶ In Paris, in contrast, she could find not only beauty but also "the kind of human communion [she] cared for" (976): there she could see people who shared her interests, she could attend the literary salons and be accepted as a professional writer. She had been introduced into the salon world of the *belle époque* by Paul Bourget, and in that rather conservative milieu she found social and intellectual traditions akin to her own. In fact, the Paris she moved in was separate and distinct from the avant-garde circles of experimental writers and painters like Gertrude Stein and Picasso. However, as Shari Benstock has explained, that "world, so stuffy and remote, represented to Edith Wharton a liberation from the even narrower world of Old New York, where custom enforced a rigid morality and weakened intellectual vigor" (*Women of the Left Bank*, 40-41).

Moreover, as Wharton expounds in *A Backward Glance*, in Paris "as a stranger and a newcomer, not only outside of all groups and coteries, but hardly aware of their existence, [she] enjoyed a freedom not possible in those days to the native-born" (977). This statement seems to give an important clue for understanding her expatriation: being a stranger, and a foreigner, was a liberating experience in itself. As Susan Goodman points out, "expatriation provided an artificial country because it conferred more freedom than either the native or adopted land" (53). In all probability, England would have proven too familiar to her. Apart from the meteorological explanation offered by the writer herself, this is one possible reason for her choosing not to reside there, in spite of James's call and her proclaimed preference for London over Paris (976). As Millicent Bell suggests, "she liked the special status of privileged outsider—someone admitted inside the gate yet allowed eccentricities—that was inevitable in

France; in England, a certain assimilation would have been possible, but, then, one would have had to give up the advantages of not-belonging" (67-68).

In fact, I would like to suggest that Edith Wharton was always an exile, both geographically and metaphorically. She was an exile in America, a wretched exotic, *expatriated in patria* before she became expatriated in France; she was an exile in France, out of joint with her time, displaced, writing on the cultural margins. Like Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, she was an "expatriate everywhere" (157). Recent feminist criticism has underlined the etymological connection of the term expatriation with the patriarchal, and has explored the difference of women's writing in exile. Traveling and living in Europe enabled Edith Wharton to externalize the internal exile, writing texts which largely reproduce patriarchal discourses but which are also very perceptive of dissonances in that culture. However, as Broe and Ingram write, "the ambiguities and paradoxes inherent in finding a place to write are at least partly resolved by finding a 'home' in writing itself."⁷ Wharton states this very clearly, recalling the publication of her first volume of short stories: "I felt like some homeless waif who, after trying for years to take out naturalization papers, and being rejected by every country, has finally acquired a nationality. The Land of Letters was henceforth to be my country, and I gloried in my new citizenship" (873). To become a citizen in the land of letters she had had to go abroad, since she had grown up "in an atmosphere where the arts [were] simply nonexistent" and where her aspirations were "ignored, or looked at askance" (874). She had "had to fight [her] way to expression through a thick fog of indifference, if not of tacit disapproval" (875). Paris was on the way to the land of letters, since there, according to her, "no one could live without literature, and the fact that [she] was a professional writer, instead of frightening [her] fashionable friends, interested them" (979).

It would be impossible to explore here all of Wharton's expatriate writings, which include literary accounts of travels in Italy and France, novels of international theme and expatriate characters, portraits of America shaped by a European perspective and *vice versa*. I shall, however, attempt to trace some of her formulations and strategies.

The first formulation concerns her European travel writings and implies bringing to Italy or France "a mind and eye unblunted by custom," where her being an American becomes an advantage. She returns to this

subject in the preface to *French Ways and Their Meaning*, a book of "disjointed notes" written during the war, where she talks about the two ways of judging a foreign people: "at first sight, impressionistically, in the manner of the passing traveller; or after residence among them" (vi). She considers the first way often the most fruitful because "once the observer has gone beyond the happy stage when surface-differences have all their edge, his only chance of getting anywhere near the truth is to try to keep to the traveller's way, and still see his subject in the line of contrasts" (VII-VIII). The book itself demonstrates the phenomenological risks of being both a participant and an observer at the same time since, in spite of some very perceptive comments, it shows Wharton's expatriate eye as less capable of full illumination, blurred, perhaps, by a long residence in France or by the propagandistic urgency of the moment. This is not the case, however, with the articles collected in *Fighting France from Dunkerque to Belfort* (1915), which, according to Alan Price, represent "some of the best reportage to come out of the war" (225). But it was above all in her early travel writings that she cast fresh and discerning glances at her European material, brought to the foreground marginalized aspects of the picture observed, and introduced insightful comparisons between the European and the American scene. Moreover, these works were important pathways to her personal aesthetic; they initiated a process of self-discovery relevant both to her creative writing and to her decision to expatriate.⁸

Somewhat connected to her travel writing, in fact chronologically preceding it, is her attempt at the historical novel with *The Valley of Decision*, set in late eighteenth-century Italy, which represents an important phase in her literary apprenticeship and a full immersion in the past.⁹ *The Valley of Decision* received the important endorsement of Henry James, together with his admonishment "in favor of the *American Subject*." ¹⁰ Edith Wharton will in fact "do New York" in some of her most celebrated novels like *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920) but her perspective will be informed by her European experience. As she perceptively recognized, James "belonged to the old America out of which I also came, and of which—almost—it might paradoxically be said that to follow up its last traces one had to come to Europe" (*B.G.* 915). We could consider this vision of America through the expatriate eye as the second articulation of her personal mythology, perhaps the most subtle and complex one, rich in developments and tonal variations.

The third and most obvious formulation consists in bringing an American character to Europe, a Jamesian strategy to which Wharton added her own personal twists. In *The Touchstone* (1900), her first attempt at the novella form, the international theme was associated with one of the most relevant, albeit rare, figures in Wharton's canon: that of the artist. In this case it is a woman novelist, already dead and famous at the beginning of the story, who had expatriated because "London offered more scope than New York to her expanding personality" (57). The portrait of this woman is only indirectly evoked but it foreshadows problems and anxieties Wharton was working out at the time. She was to explore in some depth the figure of a writer only at the end of her career in *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929) and *The Gods Arrive* (1932), in both of which the writer is male. In the latter book Vance Weston escapes to Europe with Halo Spears, an intelligent and refined woman who acts as his guide and mentor. But he is unable to respond fully to the beauty around him and is benumbed by it, incapable of turning it into his own art. The episode in Chartres is emblematic: "She had decided that they must spend the night there, that Vance should see the cathedral in all its aspects, at dusk, at sunrise, under the stars, and when noonday jewelled its windows, she gave him the impression that they were going on a kind of spiritual honey moon" (79). But honeymoons, spiritual or otherwise, are generally disappointing in Wharton's fiction. The Monet-like vision of the cathedral does not materialize for Vance, who simply cannot "see" it: "the masculine longing to be left alone was uppermost; he wanted to hate Chartres without having to give any reason." Aesthetic differences mingle here with emotional, sentimental, and specific gender problems that it would be difficult to disentangle without delving deeper into the novel.

Other American characters go to Europe on their journeys of aesthetic initiation in Wharton's books. Prominent among them is Lewis Raycie, the protagonist of *False Dawn*, a novella set in the 1840s and included in *Old New York* (1924). He goes to Europe where he meets with Ruskin and is influenced by him, experiences a sort of artistic awakening, and collects a number of early Italian paintings by Giotto, Mantegna, Piero della Francesca, and Carpaccio among others. When he goes back to New York, he gets disinherited by his horrified father and is derided for his choices by ignorant and narrow-minded New York society. Raycie will die in poverty and solitude, while the value of his collection will be recognized fifty years

later, only to be sold by his heir and exchanged for pearls and a Rolls Royce. The American traveler with a "seeing eye" can profit by his European experience, but will not be understood on his return home. The indictment of an uncultivated and money-oriented American society is complete.

Wharton's argument with America, to use the title of Elizabeth Ammons's book, is at its harshest when it comes to the role of women. She expounds on the subject in *French Ways and Their Meaning*, where she declares that "the Frenchwoman is *grown up*" while "the average American woman is still in the kindergarten"(101-02), and ascribes the difference mainly to the constant interaction between men and women in French society. This essay proceeds rather by axiomatic statements than by documented evidence, but it helps to clarify her portrayal of American and French women in her novels, as well as the influence of European society on American women. *The Age of Innocence* stages two conflicting versions of womanhood: May Welland represents the pure product of American society, while Ellen Olenska is probably Wharton's most brilliant portrait of the expatriate woman. In the eyes of the male protagonist, May has been carefully trained not to possess the experience, the versatility, the freedom of judgement that would allow for a marriage of equals (*A.I. 1050*). On the other hand, Ellen Olenska, American born but brought up and unhappily married in Europe, is a sophisticated and unconventional character who possesses intellectual independence and imagination. When she returns to New York with the intention of settling there, her tastes and experiences confine her to the margins of that traditional society which considers her a Bohemian and questions her morals. She does not fit in with the tribe any more and she will have to go back to Paris, to live as an expatriate in the same area where Edith Wharton lived. The exile's return is very difficult and, perhaps, impossible.

It is interesting to note that as early as 1896, in "The Valley of Childish Things," Edith Wharton had established a pattern of departure, experience, and failed return. A little girl from the Valley of Childish Things goes out into the world where she learns many useful arts and grows to be a woman, but when she returns with her new knowledge and important plans she cannot implement them because the other inhabitants have remained children, and the only man, who had been a traveler in the outer world, is too busy playing with a little girl. Through the parable formula she had made explicit some of the issues concerning the cultural and gender

oppositions that frame her more complex fiction of international theme, underlining the American preference for infantile females. A different version of the pattern of exile and failed return can be found in *The Mother's Recompense* (1925), where the female protagonist escapes to Europe from a suffocating situation, deserting her husband and baby. When, after twenty years of rather dingy expatriate life, she is called back to New York by her daughter, a rather melodramatic plot prevents her from settling there and makes her accept her final exile in Europe. A certain nostalgia for America can be detected in some of Wharton's novels of the twenties and thirties, but the expatriate's return is generally impeded. A notable exception is Halo Spears in *The Gods Arrive*, who, as Joslin observes, "can only find her real identity by returning to America, even to her ancestral home" (47).

In earlier books, like *Madame de Treymes* (1907) and *The Reef* (1912), the life of the expatriate American woman is explored in its different nuances in a French setting. *Madame de Treymes* is of particular interest because it portrays the changes that have transformed the American Fanny Frisbee, who "had the showiest national attributes, tempered only by a native grace of softness" (16), into the initiated Fanny de Malrive, whose experience within the French aristocracy has "lowered her voice, regulated her gestures, toned her down to harmony with the warm dim background of a long social past" (17). Her refined charm, however, has been acquired at a very high price, as the American male protagonist, who wants to free her from her unhappy marriage, soon finds out. In this subtle variation on the plot of James's *The American* there is no direct opposition between morals and manners, but rather a complex confrontation of cultural differences; French women and society, for all their repressions and traditions, are presented in a rather sympathetic light. In *The Reef* all the characters are American expatriates, shown in their different responses to the French world they move in. Henry James, while highly appreciating the psychological and Racinian quality of the drama, objects to its French setting, with "these non-French people 'electing,' as it were, to have their story out there."¹¹ This private comment, following his earlier advice to learn from his "awful example of exile & ignorance," strikes a note that will be echoed in much of Wharton criticism. Not only was *The Reef* her least reviewed book, but reviewers in general were more negative towards her novels set abroad (Lauer 80).

Most of her novels after the First World War, when her expatriation has become final, nonetheless continue to explore the international theme. One formulation, inspired by her wartime experience, will be the brave participation of the American youth in the war and the ironic exposure of the expatriates' selfish attitude in both *The Marne* (1918) and *A Son at the Front* (1923).¹² Another formulation will depict the new type of "wretched exotic," no longer a pilgrim to a land of art and culture but rather a tourist or superficial expatriate. An early prototype of this kind had been Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country* (1913), more interested in clothes and jewels than in art and landscape, and incapable of understanding French traditions. Already in that brilliant novel the French husband had spelled out one of Wharton's strongest indictments of that type of superficial American:

You come among us from a country we don't, and can't imagine, a country you care for so little that before you've been a day in ours you've forgotten the very house you were born in—if it wasn't torn down before you knew it! You come among us speaking our language and not knowing what we mean; wanting the things we want, and not knowing why we want them; aping our weaknesses, exaggerating our follies, ignoring or ridiculing all we care about—you come from hotels as big as towns, and from towns as flimsy as paper, where the streets haven't had time to be named, and the buildings are demolished before they're dry, and the people are as proud of changing as we are of holding to what we have—and we're fools enough to imagine that because you copy our ways and pick up our slang you understand anything about the things that make life decent and honorable for us! (982)

In the twenties the "drifting hoards" of Americans invading Europe will appear to her even more vulgar and devoid of values. The contemporary world depicted in *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922) and *The Children* (1928) is crowded with irresponsible, "rich aimless people" who move incessantly, pursuing their pleasures "from one end of the earth to another" (*Glimpses* 194). Although in the end the heroines seem to escape economic parasitism and emotional waste, Wharton portrays society in very negative terms, as made up of "people so denationalized that those one was inclined to ascribe to New York proved to have originated in Rome or Bucharest," people who have "inter-married, inter-loved and inter-divorced each other over the whole face of Europe, and according to every code that attempts to regulate human ties" (46).

In *A Backward Glance* Wharton writes: "It was growing more and more evident that the world I had grown up in and been formed by had been destroyed in 1914, and I felt myself incapable of transmuting the raw material of the after-war world into a work of art" (1057). The only fictional way for her to deal with this kind of society was through savage satire or a return to her "childish memories of a long-vanished America" (1056), as in *The Age of Innocence*. Again in her last unfinished novel, *The Buccaneers*, she revisited the nineteenth-century world she knew, attempting another version of the old American invasion of Europe, that of the American girl in search of an English titled husband, looking back with more sympathy at the "transatlantic pilgrims in quest of a social opening" (219).

Until recently, most critics found Wharton's late fiction less successful on various grounds, often attributing her decline to her expatriation, which had allegedly made her lose touch with her roots and the American idiom. They wanted "to send her imagination home,"¹³ but it was precisely residence abroad that set her imagination free, allowing her more latitude. The expatriate eye not only gave her a better perspective on American society but provided her with her true material: the interplay of cultural differences. In fact, the cross-cultural imagination frames and substantiates all her work. If most of her books are backward glances, they are illuminating ones that often reveal forward insights. She never regretted her choice of expatriation. In 1932 she wrote: "I am so sickened at the thought of what America has become, that I want to stop my ears and close my eyes when it is mentioned! I can't be thankful enough that I am ending my days among civilized people."¹⁴

(*) This paper was read at the Conference on "Departure, Arrival, Transit: The Expatriate Eye Revisited" held at the University of Trieste, November 10-11, 1994.

¹ See in particular *Wretched Exotic*, the collection of essays edited by Katherine Joslin and Alan Price. In Italy, see Sergio Perosa on James, and Andrea Mariani, who includes Wharton with James, Stein, and Santayana in his *Four American Fugitives*. See also the two masterly biographies by Shari Benstock and Eleanor *Dwight*, both published in 1994.

² Edith Wharton talks about her twelve-year case of "neurasthenia" in a letter to Sara Norton of April 1908. Both Lewis and Wolff, among others, believe that in 1898 Wharton took the rest cure invented by Dr. Weir Mitchell, while Benstock strongly doubts it (93-95),

³ Edith Wharton, letter to Sara Norton, 1 March 1906, *Letters 104*

⁴ Edith Wharton, letter to Sara Norton, 5 June 1903, *Letters 84*.

⁵ Edith Wharton, letter to Ogden Codman, April 1895, "Codman Family Manuscript Collection," Boston Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.

⁶ Edith Wharton, letter to Margaret Terry Chanler, 8 March 1903, *Letters* 77-78.

⁷ Broe and Ingram, introduction, *Women's Writing In Exile*, 5. Edith Wharton's voluntary exile follows very closely one of the typologies identified in this book, which does not examine her case.

⁸ Some of these aspects are examined at length by Foster, Schriber, St. Laurent, and Bailey in the third section of *Wretched Exotic*, Joslin and Price, eds.

⁹ On this rather neglected novel see Balestra 1992 and 1994.

¹⁰ Henry James, letter to Edith Wharton, 17 August 1902, Powers 34. James continues: "Profit, be warned, by my awful example of exile & ignorance. DO NEW YORK!"

¹¹ Henry James, letter to Edith Wharton, 4 and 9 December 1912, Powers 239.

¹² For recent analyses of this aspect, see Alberta Fabris Grube and Judith L. Sensibar.

¹³ Henry Seidel Canby, "Stories of Our Past," *Saturday Review of Literature* 16 Aug. 1924: 43-44.

¹⁴ Edith Wharton, letter to Mary Cadwalader Jones, 6 April 1932. Edith Wharton Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale U.

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