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This issue is dedicated to the writers of the winning and honorable mention essays of the second annual Edith Wharton Essay Prize. The judges were: Editor, Carole M. Shaffer-Koros; Co-Editor, Linda Costanzo Cahir; and EWS Secretary, Margaret Murray. The winner received an award of \$250. There were 19 entries.

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THE EDITH WHARTON 2006 ESSAY PRIZE WINNER

**Ascendant Obtuseness and Aesthetic
Perception
in *The House of Mirth***
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University of Wisconsin

This attribute was common to most of Lily's set: they had a force of negation which eliminated everything beyond their own range of perception.

—Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*

i. Early in *The House of Mirth* (1905), Edith Wharton's narrator observes an odd sort of double consciousness in Percy Gryce. We learn that discussion of his Americana collection provides Percy with a pleasure both "exquisite and excessive," allowing him momentarily "to remember himself without constraint, because he was at home in it, and could assert a superiority that there were few to dispute" (21, 20). The commentary seemingly suggests that Percy enjoys nothing more than the sort of doubled awareness and self-reflexivity that comes from simultaneously seeing himself, "remember[ing] himself," and knowing how he is seen by others. Yet, of course, it's fantasy Percy desires, not reality: he desires, even if temporarily, to inhabit a belief that others see in him a glorified and fantastic Percy, and even more so, he longs to see this Percy himself. His doubled yet uncritical consciousness—the opportunity to witness others witnessing the actualization of his ideal self—provides such tremendous value for Percy that it serves as "compensation" for the socially inept self from which he seeks to avert attention, both his own and that of others (21). Indeed, Percy reaches this heightened state of self-fantasy not only

by entering into conversation on his "art of accumulation," but also when seeing his own name in print, and he tailors his reading selection to maximize such an occurrence (23).

Critics of Wharton's novel most frequently focus on the lack of self-consciousness demonstrated by its heroine, Lily Bart. Yet Lily's inability to comprehend or contemplate herself are of a different sort entirely from those we find not only in Percy, but also in the rest of the social world in which Lily longs to permanently abide. Whereas Percy willfully blinds himself to his own appearance, Lily cannot contemplate herself except as others see her. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, for instance, notes that Lily "has learned so thoroughly to experience herself as an object that is being observed by others—not directly as an integrated human being—that her sense of 'self' is confirmed only when she elicits reactions from others" (34). Similarly, Joan Lidoff argues that "Lily's glow feeds on the absence rather than the abundance of internally animating energies. . . . Isolation is terrifying to her: her whole sense of being requires another's presence" (187).¹ The novel generously supports Lidoff's and Wolff's conclusions, noting Lily's failures of self-knowledge time and again. We hear, for instance, that "her faculty for adapting herself, for entering into other people's feelings . . . hampered her in the decisive moments of life" (53). We know also that Lily must maintain vigilant subservience in order to exist among the New York aristocracy: a state that Wharton aptly labels "enforced compliance" (76). Toward the novel's end, we are in no way surprised to hear that Lily "had never learned to live with her own thoughts" (178).

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This critique of what we might call Lily's un-self-consciousness, staged by both the novel and its critics, hints at the positive potential of a certain brand of double consciousness, one that remains for Lily consistently unreachable. Missing in Lily's life is the ability to form her own subjectivity—or, in Wharton's terms, her circumstances—into an object of potentially transforming inquiry: in short, to enter an experience of critical self-consciousness. Such consciousness, the novel suggests, depends not on the ability to "know" a stable "self," but on the ability to mediate between the shifting contingencies of one's encounters with a shifting self as it is perceived by others and, in Lidoff's terms, one's multiple "internally animating energies" (187). Worlds apart, Percy and Lily are nevertheless to some degree united through their failures of critical self-consciousness. Yet while Percy's temporary moments of doubled consciousness lead him to see a fantasized, idealized version of himself, Lily's permanent double consciousness prevents her from seeing any version of herself that is not mediated through another. Of course, this is not to say that Lily lacks critical awareness. Indeed, she has ability that the novel stresses time and again others of her set lack. She can manipulate situations and individuals by forming herself into whatever shape or manner will most please those around her. Her knowledge of how she appears or will appear to others is hyperaware and accentuated by her equally hyper awareness of just what type of reaction to her those others most desire—what version of themselves they most long to see. Lacking money, her value to Old New York is that she forms herself into what they consider the perfect sort of artwork: an attractive and expensive decoration that reassures, comforts, and reaffirms already held beliefs.

We see Lily's role acutely when she describes just how she will make herself a valued possession to Percy, more valuable even than his cherished Americana:

[S]he was aware that such a guarded nature [as Percy's] must find one huge outlet of egoism, and she determined to be to him what his Americana had hitherto been: the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it. She knew that this generosity to self is one of the forms of meanness, and she resolved so to identify herself with her husband's vanity that to gratify her wishes would be to him the most exquisite form of self-indulgence. . . . Her beauty itself was not the mere ephemeral possession it might have been in the hands of inexperience: her skill in enhancing it, the care she took of it, the use she made of it, seemed to give it a kind of performance. (49)

As an object whose beauty rises to the level of "performance," Lily will forge herself into a reflection that nurtures her potential husband's vanity and egoism. Just as discussion of his Americana gives to Percy a false sense of his own superiority, so too Lily will mold herself into exactly the sort of reflection that allows Percy to take his glorified sense of self all the way to the grave. Lily will

forever allow Percy to appear to himself as he most desires to appear to others. Like his Americana, she will give to him countless moments of exquisiteness and exhilaration. Indeed, the ease with which Lily already begins to succeed in this endeavor is clear from the moment she first meets Percy onboard the train and serves him a cup of tea: "He would never have dared to order it for himself, lest he should attract the notice of his fellow-passengers; but, secure in the shelter of her conspicuousness, he sipped the inky draught with a delicious sense of exhilaration" (19).²

Lily's genius extends not only to anticipating exactly what Percy will need in order to feel self-affirming joy in her presence; she also anticipates just how the attention others pay her will become valuable to Percy and his world. She fills this role—and, it must be said, fills it breathtakingly—throughout the novel. Take, for instance, the moment Bertha Dorset's guests first discover that Lily desires to forge a match with Percy. They react with delight: "Her friends," the narrator sardonically informs, "could not have shown a greater readiness for self-effacement had her wooing been adorned with all the attributes of romance" (46). But, of course, it is precisely the lack of romantic attributes that make Lily's quest so valuable to her "friends." Her desire to marry even the dullest and most ridiculous of wealthy men reaffirms to those friends that their luxurious life is indeed the fullest and most desirable state of existence, that even Percy Gryse cuts a glorious and attractive figure. Making wealthy New York seem to itself blessed, worthy, and ideal, Lily acquires value because she reasserts and naturalizes appearances.

And it goes without saying that *The House of Mirth* is most notably a novel about characters who are meticulously conscious of appearance, which is to say, of the way they appear to others—other members of their fashionable New York set and even others more broadly, the spectators who flock to gaze upon their weddings and public celebrations. Yet as Percy Gryse exemplifies, the novel is just as importantly about those who fail adequately to gauge their appearance—fail to know or see themselves as they are known by others; fail to know or see themselves through inquiry into their own subjectivity; fail, therefore, to call the very notion of their own "selves" into question, into anything less than absolute stability. As Lily herself observes, the failure to achieve self-consciousness is a requisite achievement, as it were, if one is to even begin acquiring position in the novel's Old New York social setting: "She liked their elegance; their lightness, their lack of emphasis, even the self-assurance which at times was so like obtuseness now seemed the natural sign of social ascendancy" (50).

To get at just what it means to succeed elegantly at obtuseness while failing, no doubt equally elegantly, at self-consciousness, I want to suggest a framework for successful self-awareness by approaching Wharton through Walter Pater and Virginia Woolf, writers and theoreticians for whom such awareness is primarily

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accessible through aesthetic perception. For Pater, heightened self-consciousness is the ideal aesthetic response to engagement with a work of art. Lily's performative labor in the novel connects to the aesthetic ideas of Pater because she so completely anticipates her viewer's desired reaction, foretells exactly how to bring such reaction about, and molds herself accordingly. Her success and attractiveness lie in her ability to craft moments of exquisite misrecognition; men, in particular, desire her precisely because they long to see the version of themselves she puts onto display. Indeed, Lily makes herself into what Pater might call anti-art, art that dulls sensations and produces sameness, rather than quickens through its production of friction and difference. This critique extends even to the novel's seeming outsider, Lawrence Selden, who, when measured by Pater's standards, becomes even more insidious than the novel's other elite New York characters because he defines himself as an aesthete, one who, like Pater, claims to open himself up to the many perceptions and sensations the world has to offer. Wharton depicts Selden in all his hypocrisy: as a chronic and stubbornly bad reader, one whose inability to perceive critically either Lily or art indicate an equal inability to think critically about himself.

Chances for some degree of critical self-consciousness in New York society, however, are not entirely hopeless. In its final section, this essay explores the possibility that *The House of Mirth* may itself have broken the inertia it depicts, producing Paterian responses in members of its Old New York audience. For Virginia Woolf, such a response would have been no less than Wharton's duty. Woolf figures critical self-consciousness as the writer's responsibility to her subject and her readers; by recording the mind's receptions of myriad impressions, the Woolfian writer creates in her readers an awareness of their own experience with sensations. Might, then, the critical self-consciousness at which the novel's aristocratic subjects fail have found actualization in those turn-of-the-century Old New Yorkers who read the novel? Certainly, Wharton's descriptions of *The House of Mirth* in both *A Backward Glance* and the introduction to the 1936

edition demonstrate her own guarded hope that this, indeed, may have been the case.

ii.

Walter Pater's "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* (1873), first published as "Poems by William Morris" (1868), combines a pedagogy of experiencing art with a pedagogy of living it. Art, for Pater, enables, exalts, differentiates, quickens, and enhances perceptions and sensations (which, given the seemingly anti-Cartesian nature of his project, perhaps amount to the same thing). Moreover, as art succeeds in bringing about this heightened state of being, it also produces a critical self-consciousness. He writes famously: "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end" (197). Reaching what Pater describes as "this hard, gemlike flame" requires us not only to accept the constant changes occurring in both the "physical life" and the "inward world of thought and feeling"; we must additionally alter our forms of experiencing the world, embracing a "speculative culture, towards the human spirit, ...[which aim] is to raise, to startle it to a life of constant and eager observation" (197, 196, 197, 196). Success in this endeavor yields the fruit of a "quickened, multiplied consciousness," expanding the interval of existence by increasing the number of moments or pulsations that one experiences in any given length of time (198). As Jonathan Loesberg writes in his book, *Aesthetics and Deconstruction*, "aesthetic perception . . . has as its epistemological purpose the capturing of sensation within a form that allows one to sense the act of sensation" (25). Such sensation is accomplished through the production of difference; aesthetic perception creates a newness of sensation or perception that rubs against or comes into intellectual tension with previous sensations, enabling the simultaneous observation and experience of what Pater calls the "perpetual flight" of impressions (196). In this way, aesthetic perception demands a heightened and malleable awareness of self, of one's body, one's sensory organs, one's framework for undertaking the world. For Pater, successful self-consciousness occurs when one sees oneself seeing, feels oneself feeling, knows oneself knowing, senses oneself sensing—all of which become possible only by seeing, feeling, knowing, or sensing somehow differently.³

In his reading of Pater's "Conclusion," Loesberg usefully animates what heightened self-consciousness might look like when characterized by such a multiplicity of perception: "art creates a continual series of different sensations, each of which in its own immediate, noninstrumental value enacts a different version of the self-contradictory, foundational, dissolving self-reflection" (24). The self-reflection becomes "self-contradictory" because it does not describe reflection based on a mirrored or narcissistic encounter. Rather, Paterian self-reflection entails encountering and incorporating difference into self-reflection so that experiencing an art object, rather than observing one's

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image in the mirror, becomes the ideal form of experiencing the self. Loesberg's term "dissolving" helpfully points to self-reflection as a necessarily fluctuating process; the self-reflective moment exists as the continual production of its own absence. Pater writes: "It is with this moment, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations that analysis leaves off—that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves" (196). For Pater, the perception and self-reflection enabled by one sensation must immediately yield to its own difference, which will arrive in the form of a new sensation.

Pater's version of aesthetic perception creates a clear value system of experiencing art: a mere spectator is a bad aesthete, a bad reader, a bad intellect. Foremost among the ways Pater argues we risk failing at perception is the creation of a ways of living designed to produce sameness: "In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations seem alike" (197). Failure, for Pater, thus lines up neatly with the habits and stereotyped worlds Wharton both satirizes and critiques in *The House of Mirth*, a novel whose "fashionable" characters pride themselves on their own "obtuseness" and "eliminate everything beyond their own perception" (48). For Pater, the tragedy of Wharton's Old New York might lie precisely in the singularity of this "perception," a static and unchanging field that obstinately refuses to accept difference even as it travels from city to country, from party to fashionable party, from America to Europe.

Furthermore, Lily's role in abetting such sameness through the manipulation of her status as art object flies in the face of the work Pater most wants art to accomplish. Even her seeming rebelliousness results in the reaffirmation of Old New York's previously held values. For instance, the bold costume she dons during her tableau vivant succeeds not in challenging her audience, but in reaffirming their sense of Lily's indiscretion, and thus their sense in the very rightness of their own set of pre-determined discretions and codes. Ned Van Alstyne notes, "'When a girl's as good-looking as that she'd better marry; then no questions are asked. In our imperfectly organized society there is no provision as yet for the young woman who claims the privileges of marriage without assuming its obligations'" (157). Though Ned acknowledges that his society is imperfect and even cautions a vague guess that it might some day change (the guarded: "as yet"), the force of his statement is to discipline Lily publicly for her transgressions. This, of course, does not mean that Ned fails to value Lily's performance, which gives him both the pleasure of its status as spectacle and the no doubt equally pleasurable occasion to reaffirm his own morality. Indeed, as Jennie A. Kassanoff notes, Lily's placement in the tableau vivant reaffirms her status as object. She becomes like an object in a museum, valued, like Americana, "for its rarity" (11). Lily's role in the tableau vivant, like her expressed desire to

play for Percy the role of his collection, thus restates, rather than questions or challenges, the work she performs for her Old New York audience. For the vast majority of Lily's audience, her tableau produces no difference, quickens no senses. Within a framework of Paterian aesthetic perception, then, *The House of Mirth* describes a self-sustaining system whereby "bad" perception leads to the desire to experience "bad" art, which desire, in turn, produces such badness in the all too malleable objects it demands to take the status of art in the first place. Moreover, even what Pater might consider "good" art—and Lily's work in her tableau might very well qualify—becomes "bad" art in the context of its reception by a crowd of "bad" perceivers.

iii.

The House of Mirth thus places under critical inspection the aesthetic perceptions of Old New York, even as it also frequently invites us to think differently about the aesthetic sensibilities and perceptive awareness of the man who fancies himself that world's critic from the inside, Lawrence Selden. We are told that Selden received educations in exquisite things early on. Both he and Lily picture him as a discriminating, even superior, Epicurean, to use Wharton's word. In a position that Lily observes with envy, Selden marks his own superiority by at least appearing to remove himself from the scene and turning the fashionable "set" itself into an object to be curiously studied; "he had preserved a certain social detachment, a happy air of viewing the show objectively, of having points of contact outside the great gill cage" (54). In the racialized language that Wharton so frequently invokes, Lily concludes that Selden is an entirely different species from those with whom she spends her days. She remarks especially on his "keenly-molded dark features which, in a land of amorphous types, gave him the air of belonging to a more specialized race" (65). Though Selden has not quite the artist's hand in decorating his flat, Lily takes great joy in the sensations his things provide. Glancing over his bookshelf, we hear that "some of the volumes had the ripe tints of good tooling and old morocco, and her eyes lingered on them caressingly . . . with the pleasure in agreeable tones and textures that was one of her inmost susceptibilities" (10). Moreover, Selden himself is open to the potential alterations caused through effects of sensation. The novel's final chapter describes him "cut loose from the familiar shores of habit, and launched . . . on unchartered seas of emotion; all the old tests and measures were left behind and his course was to be shaped by new stars" (324). Thus the novel sets Selden apart from the crowd towards which it directs the full thrust of its satiric critique. And it does so in part by marking his appreciation for the fineness of objects, the exquisiteness of texture, and the richness of color that others—others with the means to steep their lives in such luxury—simply lack. Does this mean, the novel encourages us to ask, that Selden achieves a sort of critical self-consciousness unavailable to the novel's other, less perceptive and

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more mundane characters? Does Selden enter into the "hard, gemlike flame" of Paterian aesthetic perception and experience?

We learn of Selden's aesthetic education only late in the novel, following his favorable impression of the tableau vivant, after which he admits to both himself and to Lily that he loves her. We learn, for instance, that his childhood home was, "if . . . shabby," "exquisitely kept" (152). And we learn that from his mother Selden "inherited his detachment from the sumptuary side of life: the stoic's carelessness of material things, combined with the Epicurean's pleasure in them. . . . and nowhere was the blending of the two ingredients so essential as in the character of a pretty woman" (152). The description combines Selden's aesthetic perceptions with his expressed desire for Lily, his "pretty woman." If, then, the novel seeks to mark a difference between Selden and the novel's other characters vis-à-vis the treatment of Lily, the difference will be an aesthetic one. All of the novel's elite treat her as art object; perhaps Selden will be the one for whom the art object marks an occasion for dialogue. Yet, moments later, when Wharton details the substance of Selden's craving for Lily, it begins to sound suspiciously similar to that Percy has for his Americana:

Selden was in the state of impassioned self-absorption that the first surrender to love produces. His craving was for the companionship of one whose point of view should justify his own, who should confirm, by deliberate observation, the truth to which his intuitions had leaped. (153)

The passage answers questions about Selden's faculty for critical self-consciousness with an emphatic "no." Like his fashionable, New York set, Selden too seeks Lily as an object to reaffirm and propagate the sameness of his previously held beliefs and ideas. Indeed, as though he himself were a misreader of Pater, Selden is Epicurean to a fault: the pleasure of self-affirmation is his sole end, and pleasure hence loses its role as an instrument for quickening consciousness. Where Pater would have Selden "be forever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy," Selden seeks in Lily precisely the means by which to acquiesce (197).⁴ As Wai Chee Dimock observes (though she discusses Selden in a different context), "Lily's delicacy of feeling, her rectitude and generosity—all these are lost on Selden" (78).

The text thus notes Selden's detachment not only from the fashionable New York set of which both he and Lily are at least sometimes a part; it notes as well his detachment from Lily, his inability to engage with her in such a way that will allow him to gain the knowledge he at least nominally seeks. Wharton heightens the affective and formal tragedy of Selden's detachment by writing into her novel a romantic quest narrative that continually suggests Selden's potential to change, to view Lily as something other than an object. When, in the novel's opening scene, Selden is at first unable to fix on a metaphor that aptly captures Lily's qualities, he finally

settles to himself that it might just be "possible that the material was fine, but that circumstances had fashioned it into a futile shape" (5). The metaphor sets off what many critics have noted is Selden's quest to discover the "real" Lily Bart. This quest seems to take on new direction when Selden first thinks that he too may play a part in Lily's future. Whereas before that moment he treated her with "admiring spectatorship" and "found in her presence . . . the aesthetic amusement which a reflective man is apt to seek in desultory intercourse with pretty women," we learn that finding himself "to be the unforeseen element in a career so accurately planned was stimulating even to a man who had renounced sentimental experiments" (69). Perhaps in part because of this transition, the novel later notes the fineness of Selden's aesthetic mind: for only those with a "responsive fancy" will detect within the tableaux vivants "magic glimpses of the boundary world between fact and imagination," and "Selden's mind was of this order" (133). As a final touch in this romantic narrative, when Selden apparently falls ever more in love with Lily, Wharton notes "the touch of poetry in her beauty that Selden always felt in her presence yet lost the sense of when he was not with her" (135). The chain of descriptions would seem to reveal a progressive narrative by which Selden moves from spectator to participant, from seeking in Lily a confirmation of previously held beliefs to finding with her a Paterian quickness of life, the kind that Pater suggests can come not only from one's interaction with a work of art, but from "the face of one's friend" (197). Wharton thus would seem to place a feminist twist onto the traditional romantic narrative structure; the hero simultaneously falls in love with the heroine and undertakes a remarkable conversion whereby he also shifts his perspective, viewing his newly beloved as herself a full-fledged subject.

Yet Wharton's seeming twist quickly and tragically falls apart. For not only do the text's observations on Selden's apparent transition come before its claim that he craves Lily for her abilities to mold her own ideas into a reaffirmation of his, but they also come before he misreads the significance of her late evening meeting with Gus Trenor. If, indeed, Selden finds his competing aesthetic desires fully met in "the character of a pretty woman," then his stunning inability to apprehend Lily, his artwork par excellence, demonstrates an equally stunning failure at aesthetic perception. When Selden compares Lily's grace to poetry, therefore, he reveals far more about his own poor treatment of poetry than about his attitude toward Lily. In this sense, the novel's final scene emphasizes and reemphasizes Selden's incomprehension of Lily, the object of his supposed love. The full brunt of Wharton's satire, however, comes when Selden uses Lily's corpse to accomplish for him what he most had desired when considering Lily as a wife, self-affirmation. Thinking back onto Lily's farewell, though gazing upon her dead body, Selden reassures himself that "he could now read into that farewell all that his heart craved to find there; he could even draw from it

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courage not to accuse himself for having failed to reach the height of his opportunity" (329). Lawrence Selden, like Percy Gryse, uses Lily to convince himself to see a glorified, idealized version of Lawrence Selden, one who can accurately perceive situations, even one who thinks critically. The novel is explicit on this last point:

He saw that all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart; since his very detachment from the external influences which swayed her had increased his spiritual fastidiousness, and made it more difficult for him to live and love uncritically (329).

As he simultaneously congratulates himself for what we might consider a Paterian ideal—living and loving critically—Selden simultaneously takes the "conditions of life" as a static given, and in so doing, he exposes his own inability to perceive critically and, hence, the utter falsity of his empty claims.

iv.

Virginia Woolf might direct us to look for aesthetic perception, for the production of critical self-consciousness, not in the novel's characters (and certainly not in Lawrence Selden), but outside the novel, in the readers' interaction with the page. In "Modern Fiction" (1919), Woolf is concerned with the writer's ability to record the mind's experience of sensations. She seeks fiction, like that of Joyce and Chekhov, which records the "crudity and coarseness" found in the interiority of its characters (286). Indeed, at first it seems as though Woolf might condemn not only Wharton's characters, for their lack of interior richness and their shallow stasis, but also Wharton herself, for creating such dim lot of characters in the first place. In her essay, for instance, Woolf lodges the following complaint against characters found in the fiction of H.G. Wells: "More and more they seem to us, deserting even the well-built villa in the Five Towns, to spend their time in some softly padded first-class railway carriage, pressing bells and buttons innumerable; and the destiny to which they travel so luxuriously becomes more and more unquestionably an eternity of bliss spent in the very best hotel in Brighton" (286). Woolf complains that, cushioned as they are by the conveniences of their richness, Wells' characters, like Wharton's, are unable to experience or even describe their own sensations, and it is precisely the experience of sensations Woolf most wants modern fiction to report: "let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" (288). Of course, *The House of Mirth* is hardly an uncritical inspection of its rich and famous subjects: Wharton uses the hardships of her heroine, Lily Bart, in part to expose what Woolf might describe as the "crudity and coarseness" of Old New York. And indeed, Wharton's searing critique extends even to those such as Selden who seem to pride themselves on a certain aesthetic awareness and interior richness.

Wharton addresses the problem Woolf raises in *A Backward Glance* (1934), the reminiscences she

collected almost thirty years after publication of *The House of Mirth*:

In what aspect could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the 'old woe of the world,' any deeper bearing than the people composing such a society can guess? The answer was that a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart. (28)

While gestures to genre, preexisting form, or what an adamantly modernist Woolf might disapprovingly call "method" pepper Wharton's description ("dramatic significance," "tragic implication," and so forth), her comments seem to address what we might call the H.G. Wells problem. Indeed, Wharton suggests that her novel takes this problem as its very subject, writing as an object of scrutiny the cushioned elite's frivolity and its inability to experience its own sensations. As such, we might say that Wharton's novel itself demonstrates critical self-consciousness: it doubles the object of its inquiry. We read the novel both as an investigation into the turn-of-the-century's frivolous Old New York world and as an investigation into representation of that world, both as Wharton represents it and as it (mis)represents itself. Wharton thus simultaneously presents us with a set of characters similar to those hated by Woolf in the Wells' fiction, and she asks, along with Woolf, of those same characters, "Is life like this? Must novels be like this?" (Woolf 287).

Wharton describes her own choice to engage *The House of Mirth*'s most prominent subject, "fashionable New York," as itself an act of transgressive and critical self-consciousness: the animation of a "condemned category," which, "in all its flatness and futility, ... I had been steeped in ... from infancy, and should not have to get it up out of note-books and encyclopædias" (*Glance* 28). For Wharton, the novel functions as exposé; its appeal for both her and her readers lies in its invitation to enter a world that the novel painstakingly reveals very few can enter and, moreover, to find that world deliciously debased. Yet in a gesture that complicates our investigation of fashionable New York, *The House of Mirth* demonstrates that, as readers of the novel, we see into the world with far greater acumen and penetration than her world can see into itself. It is perhaps for this reason that in her introduction to the 1936 edition Wharton is at pains to position herself as both insider and, as she continues to satirize and poke fun, as outsider to the world she depicts:

This supposed picture of their little circle, secure behind its high stockade of convention, alarmed and disturbed the rulers of Old New York. If the book had been the work of an outsider, of some barbarian reduced to guessing at what went on behind the stockade, they would not so much have minded—might have laughed over its absurdities, or, more probably, not even have heard of its existence. But

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here was a tale written by one of themselves, a tale deliberately slandering and defiling their most sacred institutions and some of the most deeply revered members of the clan! (35-36)

Wharton's useful conjecture leads to curious conclusions: identical representations of Old New York institutions and manners would, in her mind, nevertheless produce two radically different outcomes; one in which, as readers of the novel, the "rulers of Old New York" engage themselves and one in which they luxuriously deflect such recognition.⁵ If, in 1936, Wharton delights in her unique ability to force double consciousness upon her former circle of acquaintances, then perhaps we might guess it is because she hopes to succeed where her heroine fails. The point would not necessarily have been for those acquaintances merely to recognize their own lives in the pages of her fiction. Rather, Wharton's success would have been attained when the combination of her authorship and the book's subject created that thing her acquaintances most sought to avoid: that art event from which they could not emerge the same, in short, the anti-America.

Notes

¹ For more recent work on Lily's self-consciousness see Loebel.

² Elizabeth Ammons makes similar commentary on this scene, though her focus is on the fact that Lily's efforts amount to labor rather than on the substance, compensation, and value that labor provides. She writes: "Lily is hard at work using the skills of her trade—charm, sex appeal, solicitude—to entertain and give pleasure to other people . . . and it is work in Wharton's opinion, however degrading" (31). Further, Cynthia Griffin Wolff takes head on what exactly goes into the labor Lily exerts: "She learns to evoke approval and appreciation in others by a subtle and ingenious series of graceful postures. It is an art she has practiced so well and for so long that she can no longer conceive of herself as anything but those postures; she can formulate no other desire than the desire to be seen to advantage" (34).

³ A useful comparison is to what Foucault calls "a critical ontology of ourselves" and conceives "as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time an historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" ("Enlightenment" 50). Foucault describes his "ontology of ourselves" as aesthetic, specifically as an "aesthetics of existence": "From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art" ("Enlightenment" 50; "Genealogy" 350, 51). Reading Pater suggests to me that we might revisit Foucault's well-known pronouncement that we create ourselves as art, which has been traditionally seen as advocating a kind of agency over the self, an act of self-creation and re-

creation. Placing Pater next to Foucault suggests a strong correlation between making oneself into a work of art and making oneself into an object of one's own inquiry.

⁴ For an alternate view of Selden, see Coulombe, who concludes that: "Selden would deserve condemnation if he had forced Lily to conform to his wishes, if he had played what Wharton herself considered the false role of the brawny, always triumphant male hero. Instead, he remains on the threshold of society and rejects many stereotypical, and unrealizable, expectations for men" (8).

⁵ For an analysis of contemporary reaction to *The House of Mirth* that favors the latter option, see Blair. In her article Blair, who is more concerned with a middle-class reading public's response to the book than the response of Old New York itself, argues that reactions hardly demonstrated the kind of critical self-reflection Pater would have approved. Instead, they formed a pattern of what she calls "reading up," a process that "approaches all books as how-to manuals and rewards so-called misreadings that would enable vicarious participation in the lives of wealthy protagonists" (150).

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Chintz Goes to War: Edith Wharton's Revised Designs for Home and Homefront

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Edith Wharton is known as the author of New York high society and the Gilded Age in general, yet this is a truncated understanding of her legacy. Beginning in May 1915, writing initially from Paris, and later from the trenches, Wharton portrayed World War I for Americans in a series of Scribner's Magazine articles. Later these were collected in *Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belfort* (1918).¹ The collection included pieces on Paris, the Argonne, Lorraine, the Vosges, northern France, and Alsace, as well as relevant maps and stark photographs of the war's impact on domestic, civic, and religious structures. Critics have deemed her reports' attention to architectural detail, whether in the vaults of Chartres or the ruins of a living room, divested of humanity, classist and elitist. Annette Larson Benert describes the loss of French architecture itself as traumatic for Wharton, contending that "Wharton's most substantial contribution to the literature of World War I...[is] the way in which she concretized her concerns, the realism with which she portrayed French civilization in the actual physical structures that the Germans threatened and destroyed" (1). In *The End of the Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the First World War*, Alan Price writes that "the attack on French ways and their meaning was an attack on her own ability to make meaning imaginatively and to create hospitable and elegant spaces" (21). Price implies that the onset of World War I meant a dramatic transition for Wharton, as she departed from the world of manners and the "hospitable and elegant spaces" of Old New York to become involved with admirable large scale charitable and philanthropic work. Yet Wharton's writings on the war demonstrate an acute awareness of the human spectrum, not only in her descriptions of civilians and conscripts, but also in her writings about the designers and builders who contributed to the now-frayed fabric of France. These individuals, too,

would be sacrificed in the war. Along with her writings, Wharton's response to the disaster she watched firsthand was to create housing for war refugees.

Critical attention has focused on Wharton's considerable personal wealth and the implications of her class rather than her work. Most notably, in "Edith Wharton at War: Civilized Space in Troubled Times," Annette Larson Benert contends that Wharton "never inquired whether the civilized order she so valued might inevitably carry with it not only the physical and moral costs of construction but also the brutal shadow of enforcement. She never seemed to wonder whether the comfort and security of some is not usually purchased with the control and suffering of others" (343). It is true that Wharton's only interpellation regarded the United States' late entry into the war. Still, her reports from the front, considered in tandem with her relief work and her lifelong interest in interior design, indicate a continued compassion for the homeless first demonstrated in her fiction and make evident a novel, intimate and benevolent relationship with the disenfranchised. Her dual endeavors also demonstrate the changes the war wrought on Wharton's design principles and politics, causing her to welcome alternative constructions of domesticity as home and homefront were in peril. Wharton's wartime correspondence seems initially to reinforce ideologies of class. Yet its examination in the context of the author's work for refugees, wounded soldiers, women, children, the elderly, and infirm, reveals her battle against "the control and suffering of others" and hegemony on a number of levels. Wharton's literary reportage concerns the inhabitant, rather than the aesthetics of social order; it was never entirely about civilized or elegant minutiae but about the human condition, spanning class and country.

In 1914, after Germany declared war on France, Wharton utilized her hospitality skills to establish housing, sustenance, medical care, and employment for refugees in Paris and its environs. She instituted an *Ouvroir*, or workroom, for Parisian women who had lost their jobs with the war mobilization, while at the rest homes she offered a variety of trade courses such as lace making. Her charities also included the *Oeuvre des Enfants des Flandres*, which cared for hundreds of Belgian children and adult refugees, including the infirm; the American Hostels for Refugees, which cared for thousands of refugees, principally women, children, and elderly men; the *Maison de Convalescence Americaines*, which provided medical care for refugee women and children and treated tuberculosis and other chronic conditions; and the Tuberculosis War-Victims Committee. In 1916, Wharton conceived of and edited *The Book of the Homeless*, which featured contributions from writers, musicians, and artists, and raised fifteen thousand dollars for the hostel rescue organizations.² By 1917, the author had established independent rest houses and convalescent homes in Groslay and Arromanches. Ultimately, there were nineteen relief houses serving these assorted missions, throughout France and Belgium.

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