

‘Embattled tendencies’: Wharton, Woolf and the nature of Modernism

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Edith Wharton eyed Bloomsbury as an intellectually remote and morally murky world, admiring only one of its members, Lytton Strachey. After Mary Berenson urged her to read Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* in 1928, Wharton responded viscerally to the advertising photographs of Woolf, claiming the images made her ‘quite ill’. The novel’s portrait of Vita Sackville-West, who had had an affair with Wharton’s friend Geoffrey Scott just prior to her liaison with Woolf, pressed a nerve: ‘I can’t believe that where there is exhibitionism of that order there can be any real creative gift’. Woolf’s ‘creative gift’, however, could not be dismissed easily; Wharton grudgingly gave with one hand and took with the other. ‘Virginia had a very imaginative mind, perhaps a very poetic mind’, Wharton conceded in a conversation with Lady Aberconway, ‘but was she fundamentally endowed with true curiosity?’¹ The sentence turns midway, curling into a question that exposes her sense of Woolf as a rival.

Woolf, too, could give and take. After reading Wharton’s autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, in 1934, she wrote to Ethel Smyth, praising Wharton’s prose style: ‘I like the way she places colour in her sentences’; but on the subject of intellect, Woolf pulled back: ‘There’s the shell of a distinguished mind’.² Wharton was by this time, after all, a woman in her seventies, and the word ‘shell’ may have referred to the frailty of age. However, the letter descends, as Wharton’s conversation had, into suspicion: ‘I vaguely surmise that there’s something you hated and loathed in her. Is there?’ Her search for the ‘hated and loathed’ in Wharton signals Woolf’s own anxiety over a rival’s genius.

And we might simply leave the transatlantic quarrel there: Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf, perhaps the two most articulate and influential literary women of the modern period, gossiping with friends.

The two women apparently never met, never talked directly across the Atlantic or, indeed, across the English Channel. We might leave them if not for the insistent sound of their voices, wrangling in letters, diaries, essays, even in novels, disrupting our view of them as novelists and the literary world they both inhabited. Their indirect dialogue about the nature of the novel typifies the often loud and sometimes angry cacophony of literary opinion that clashed early in the twentieth century and has reverberated ever since.

'Down with Henry James! Down with Edith Wharton!' was the rallying cry of Left-Bank literary radicals in the early years of the twentieth century, according to Kay Boyle, herself a younger member of the group of American expatriate writers living in Paris. In the 1980s Boyle remarked that her contemporaries were in 'revolt against all literary pretentiousness, against weary, dreary rhetoric, against all the outworn literary and academic conventions'.³ The term Modernism, as we have come to understand it, surfaced in Harry Levin's 1960 essay, 'What Was Modernism?' Since that time, scholars have sought ways of grouping early twentieth-century writers, pulling the literary fabric into two distinct pieces. In that configuration, Wharton and Woolf can be seen as proponents of two opposing impulses, one 'traditional' and the other Modernist. Most of the studies of Modernism written during the 1960s, however, feature male experimenters, ignoring female contributions on either side of the divide.

Feminist scholars in the 1980s and 1990s grappled with the term Modernism, seeking ways of expanding our understanding of how women writers may have participated in the male-defined literary movement. Most have come to see Edith Wharton as a transitional figure on a literary journey from the traditional novel forms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries toward the supposedly braver, bolder experimental Modernist forms of the twentieth century. Elaine Showalter, in 'The Death of the Lady (Novelist)' (1985), proclaims: '*The House of Mirth* is a pivotal text in the historical transition from one house of American women's fiction to another, from the homosocial women's culture and literature of the nineteenth century to the heterosexual fiction of Modernism'.⁴ Amy Kaplan acknowledges Wharton's 'un-easy dialogue with twentieth-century Modernism' in her essay 'Edith Wharton's Profession of Authorship' (1986).⁵ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *Sexchanges* (1989), classify Wharton as an 'antiutopian skeptic' yet exclude her from Woolf's somehow more evolved group, 'apocalyptic engendering'.⁶ Bonnie Kime Scott in her reappraising anthology *The Gender of*

Modernism (1990) appears to agree.⁷ Although she promises to look hard at new patterns and to take into account issues of gender, race, and class, she ignores Wharton in what she calls ‘A Tangled Mesh of Modernists’, although she includes Jessie Fauset, the Harlem Renaissance writer who followed in Wharton’s tradition of the novel of manners.

In her first treatment of Wharton as a resident of the Left Bank, Shari Benstock portrays her as a hold-over from the nineteenth century: ‘Wharton belonged totally to the nineteenth century’, Benstock tells her readers, ‘although she spent thirty-seven years of her life in the twentieth’.⁸ Benstock’s later biography of Wharton, *No Gifts from Chance* (1994), while seeking a closer link between Modernist experimenters and Wharton, still maintains the notion of a clear divide. Andrew Delbanco likewise characterises Wharton as ‘a woman who, though contemptuous of the saturated Victorian interiors in which she had grown up, had not yet made the turn into the modern’.⁹ Yet those thirty-seven years, containing half of Wharton’s life and nearly all her writing, were synchronous with Woolf’s life and writing.

Reading Wharton and Woolf together allows us to hear the dialogue between the writers, two dissonant yet overlapping voices. Mikhail Bakhtin, no stranger to the literary and ideological antagonisms of the 1920s, theorised that language is layered – words exist in constant interaction between meanings conditioned by surrounding language. In ‘Discourse in the Novel’, he depicted the play of language as a raucous drama:

Such is the fleeting language of a day, of an epoch, a social group, a genre, a school and so forth. It is possible to give a concrete and detailed analysis of any utterance, once having exposed it as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language.¹⁰

The utterance modern or Modernism is an especially contradiction-ridden term, full of the drama Bakhtin had in mind. Wharton’s voice yields meaning in juxtaposition to Woolf’s voice; their argument intones the social, ideological, and literary tensions of their literary epoch. Listening to both women may allow us to ‘penetrate’ (Bakhtin’s suggestively male metaphor) the ‘heteroglossia’ or semantic layering of the term modern or Modernism, freeing us to hear and see the ‘movement’ more clearly.

The nature of Modernism, I am arguing, is not a radical shift from traditional to experimental literary forms but rather a sharp dialogue, here a transatlantic dialogue, over literary possibilities.

Wharton's book *The Writing of Fiction* (1925) and Woolf's essay 'Modern Fiction' (1919; included in *The Common Reader*, 1925) set the stage for their dialogic battle. 'Modern fiction really began,' Wharton asserted, 'when the action of the novel was transferred from the street to the soul.'¹¹ By 'modern' Wharton has two ideas in mind: first, she distinguishes modern fiction from classical and medieval literature; and second, she refers to the writers of her own age. She claims that the seventeenth-century novelist Madame de Lafayette gave birth to 'modern fiction' with her novel *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678). Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Thackeray, and George Eliot were her literary progeny, adding subtle refinements and individual distinctions to the novel as a study of manners and a chronicle of social history. Any novelist, indeed any human being, comes embedded in culture, society, and history: 'the bounds of a personality are not reproducible by a sharp black line,' Wharton argues in the essay, 'each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things.'¹² Novelists as well as scholars have the job of fusing seemingly disparate characters; in this drama, she casts herself as literary heir to the social realism she celebrates. Wharton perceives modern fiction as 'an art in the making, fluent and dirigible,' capable of flight yet, like the airships of her day, subject to guidance.¹³

Actually, Woolf would have agreed with Wharton that 'each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things' and that fiction is 'fluent and dirigible'. In 'Modern Fiction' she sees the 'soul' as literary animator, especially the spirit expressed in Russian fiction; by the term 'soul' she has in mind, as Wharton does, psychological truth. Woolf is not, however, having any part of Wharton's argument for literary progress: 'It is doubtful whether in the course of the centuries, though we have learnt much about making machines, we have learnt anything about making literature.'¹⁴ The term 'modern' fiction denotes, for her, the writing of the twentieth century. Unlike Wharton, she distinguishes the merely fashionable writers from serious experimenters, especially James Joyce, who proclaim a revolutionary break with past tradition. Singling out H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy for scorn as mere writers *à la mode*, Woolf launches her (in)famous attack:

The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour.¹⁵

The very conventions that Wharton venerates Woolf castigates; what should animate embalms; Madame de Lafayette metamorphoses from mother to tyrant. The unfortunate trio of male writers continue to look ridiculous to us as we imagine them parading down Bond Street, buttons flashing.

Wharton had met Wells and Galsworthy in 1908, befriended Wells, but rejected Galsworthy, probably for the same reasons Woolf did. Listen to her derisory tone in a letter she wrote to her lover Morton Fullerton about an essay by Henry James: ‘After being bracketed in Henry’s article with Galsworthy & Hichens (wasn’t it?) I feel that my niche in the Hall of Fame is in the most fashionable of its many mansions.’¹⁶ The idea of being merely *à la mode* irked her as much as it did Virginia Woolf – both women kept a contemptuous distance from writers who pandered to popular taste.

In *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton tried to turn the tables on Woolf, accusing contemporary experimenters of slavish devotion to literary fashion, the ‘now-that-it-can-be-told school’ or ‘dirt-for-dirt’s sake’. James Joyce’s *Ulysses* typified for her ‘dirt-for-dirt’s sake’. Writing to Bernard Berenson in January 1923, Wharton reported that she had ‘tackled’ the novel and ‘cast it from her’: ‘It’s a turgid welter of pornography (the rudest schoolboy kind) & unformed & unimportant drivel.’¹⁷ What may seem surprising, in light of the fact that she celebrates *Ulysses* in ‘Modern Fiction’, is that Virginia Woolf’s diary of 6 September 1922, registers the same revulsion that Wharton felt: ‘The book is diffuse. It is brackish. It is pretentious. It is underbred’. Judging it a ‘mis-fire’, she hears in the novel the same voice Wharton heard, that of ‘some callow board school boy’.¹⁸

At another point of agreement, both women admired the maturity of Proust and Conrad. The two women’s voices blend almost into a single note. Woolf might have spoken for Wharton in assessing Conrad’s talent when she wrote: ‘For when the question is asked, what of Conrad will survive and where in the ranks of novelists we are to place him, these books, with their air of telling us something very old and perfectly true, which had lain hidden but is now revealed, will come to mind and make such questions and comparisons seems a little futile’.¹⁹ Likewise, Wharton might have spoken for Woolf in praising Proust: ‘There are many ways of conveying this sense of the footfall of Destiny; and nothing shows the quality of the novelist’s imagination more clearly than the incidents he singles out to illuminate the course of events and the inner working of his people’s souls’.²⁰ Both novelists valued a writer’s ability to reveal old truths and to record impressions hidden with the soul.

They both struggled, however, with the form such revelations might take in their own writing. Wharton fretted over the shape of her fiction and even assigned genders to modes of novel building. Consider her letter to Robert Grant after the failure of her industrial novel, *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907):

The fact is that I am beginning to see exactly where my weakest point is. – I conceive my subjects like a man – that is, rather more architectonically & dramatically than most women – & then execute them like a woman; or rather, I sacrifice, to my desire for construction & breath, the small incidental effects that women have always excelled in, the episodic characterisation, I mean.²¹

She implies that male design – architectonic and dramatic – carries more intellectual and artistic weight than female design – episodic and incidental – and wonders how she can become a successful novelist, wedged, as she sees herself, between genders.²²

Woolf, in 'Modern Fiction', wages war against the conventional structure of realism, the novel of social history and manners that Wharton worked so hard to build. Her 'modern' manifesto urges young novelists to embrace the episodic; she might have said, in Wharton's words, that novelists should write 'like a woman'.

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.²³

'Disconnected and incoherent', the far reaches of 'incidental' and 'episodic', unnerved Wharton, who agonises over the necessity of conventional linear (male-styled) plotting. 'Stream of consciousness', she lectures young writers, has always been used:

This attempt to note down every half-aware stirring of thought and sensation, the automatic reactions to every passing impression, is not as new as its present exponents appear to think. It has been used by most of the greatest novelists, not as an end in itself, but as it happened to serve their general design.²⁴

She insists that the fictional rendering of mental activity be placed in 'some recognizable relation to a familiar social or moral standard'. Balzac and Thackeray (we might add Edith Wharton) 'have made use of the stammerings and murmurings of the half-conscious mind whenever – and only when – such a state of mental flux fitted into the whole picture', she argues.²⁵ Woolf posits that the 'half-conscious' mind might be the 'whole picture'.

The two women became more directly aware of each other's criticism after Woolf's essay, 'American Fiction', appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature* in 1925 (their gossiping with friends begins at this time). Wharton followed with her essay, 'The Great American Novel', in the *Yale Review* in 1927. The two critics are sceptical about the ability of a writer or a critic to cross cultures, to create convincing characters or to judge literary works across the Atlantic. As Wharton puts it, 'It is doubtful if a novelist of one race can ever really penetrate into the soul of another'.²⁶ Woolf, as a critic, casts herself as a transatlantic tourist: 'Thus having qualified the tourist's attitude, in its crudity and oneness, let us begin our excursion into modern American fiction by asking what are the sights we ought to see'.²⁷ Claiming bewilderment over the number of American writers, she lets her reader know that, as a tourist, she intends to 'concentrate on two or three at most' in order 'to sketch a theory' of American literature. The truth is that neither woman took American writers as seriously as one might expect.

Of nineteenth-century writers Woolf prefers Whitman to Emerson and Hawthorne because he appears as an 'undisguised' American to a British reader. Agreeing with Woolf on the significance of Whitman in the American canon, Wharton once wrote to her editor William Brownell that he, along with Poe and Emerson, 'are the best we have – in fact, the all we have'.²⁸ *Leaves of Grass* was apparently exotic enough to earn the admiration of both women in their youth. Woolf notes its 'very unlikeness becomes a merit'. And Wharton, in the same playful tone, remembers that when Whitman's poem began to circulate among intellectuals in Old New York, it 'was kept under lock and key, and brought out, like tobacco, only in the absence of 'the ladies', to whom the name of Walt Whitman was unmentionable, if not utterly unknown'.²⁹ He, in fact, appears in her Old New York novel, *The Spark* (1924), as Old Walt, a hero to the Civil War soldiers he had nursed, although his experimental poetry seems like 'rubbish' to them.

Melville, a distant member of Old New York society, is another nineteenth-century writer who intrigued both women. Wharton, who read *Moby-Dick* in 1911, considers his place in the canon in 'The Great American Novel': 'The writer who sees life in terms of South Sea cannibals, as Herman Melville did, will waste his time (as, incidentally, Melville did) if he tries to depict it as found in drawing-rooms and conservatories'.³⁰ In a *Times Literary Supplement* essay marking the Melville centenary in 1919, Woolf notes that most British readers had lost contact with the American writer: 'Somewhere upon the horizon of the mind, not

recognisable yet in existence, *Typee* and *Omoo*, together with the name of Herman Melville, float in company'. Woolf too describes his South Sea islanders: 'They were savages, they were idolaters, they were inhuman beasts who licked their lips over the tender thighs of their kindred'. Woolf registers an ambivalence that both women felt about Melville, a writer whom most Modernists had yet to rediscover: 'perhaps it would be wrong to call him an artist'.³¹

In 'American Fiction', Woolf applauds Sherwood Anderson for his psychological vignettes and criticises Sinclair Lewis for his social analyses. Wharton, exactly to the contrary, sees Lewis among the best writers that twentieth-century American literature has to offer. He had become her friend during the dispute over the Pulitzer Prize in 1920. She eventually won the prize for *The Age of Innocence* although his *Main Street* had been the original choice of the committee and was discarded because it was deemed un-American. She wrote him to express her own disappointment over the insult to them both, and he dedicated his next novel *Babbitt* to her (and he had, we might note, named a child after Wells). Reading Woolf's essay, one gets the sense that she would like to place Wharton with Lewis, and by association with Bennett and Wells, and dismiss them all. Yet Woolf grudgingly admires Wharton's literary talents and couples her instead with Henry James, a friend of her father's.

Her analysis is subtler than Kay Boyle's manifesto. The expatriates Wharton and James, to her mind, suffer from anglophilia and cultural displacement in their transatlantic flight from their mother country. Ironically, though they admire English culture, it remains foreign territory to them. One can again hear Wharton's voice warning that it is 'doubtful if a novelist of one race can ever really penetrate into the soul of another'. Woolf is talking about literary form and how difficult it is to depict one culture using the literary modes of another. The British novel of manners in the hands of an American writer, she argues, distorts the significance of social class. 'What their work gains in refinement it loses in that perpetual distortion of values, that obsession with surface distinctions – the age of old houses, the glamour of great names – which makes it necessary to remember that Henry James was a foreigner if we are not to call him a snob', Woolf snobbishly asserts.³²

The literary tourist Virginia Woolf criticises the Old New Yorkers Wharton and James for not offering English readers 'anything that we have not got already', as though pleasing the English reader ought to be their first order of business. Whitman and Anderson, especially, along with Ring Lardner from Michigan and Willa Cather from Nebraska seem

to her closer to the American terrain she wants to explore: ‘in America there is baseball instead of society; instead of the old landscape which had moved men to emotion for endless summers and springs, a new land, its tin cans, its prairies, its cornfields flung disorderly about like a mosaic of incongruous pieces waiting order at the artist’s hands’. Baseball, tin cans and the cornfields of the Midwest suggest America as an exotic world across the ocean, clearly and significantly different from the culture of England. Wharton, too, saw the American landscape as disorderly and incongruous; New York to her always appeared ugly, vulgar and chaotic on the surface. Wharton sought in her fiction an underlying order, a mosaic perhaps hidden from Woolf, who was herself an outsider in America.

Wharton’s and Woolf’s letters, diaries and essays allow us to view a drama of ‘embattled tendencies’ between individuals and cultures. Their voices speak to us, too, in their novels, filtered through the medium of art. Both novelists depict the psychological complexities of daily living, the rough edges of prosaic reality as they intrude on and disrupt individual lives. Both women are shrewd readers of culture, especially its elaborate rituals and encoded values, and are perhaps at their best when recording the layers of individual voices and thoughts during social gatherings – dinner parties and chats over tea.

Wharton’s configurations foreground the narrative voice, often entwining it with a thinly disguised version of her own voice; she illustrates the significant points of the narrative with dramatic dialogue interspersed with soliloquy. Woolf’s more episodic design foregrounds the half-conscious musings of individual characters and their often fragmented conversations, moving the narrative/authorial voice to the background. Wharton employs two distancing devices; she speaks in a detached, ironic, at times satiric tone, and she sets many of her narratives in the past, especially in the mid- to late nineteenth century, allowing her an historical view of events surrounding the immediate action. Woolf remains closer to her narrative in tone, using at times subtle traces of irony, and she places most of her novels in twentieth-century England, before and after the First World War.

Reading their novels together, we can see how their literary debate spilled over into their fiction. Woolf first read a Wharton novel in 1905, proclaiming *The House of Mirth* ‘a serious work of fiction’ in her review for the *Guardian*. Wharton’s portrait of the American moneyed class struck her as true: ‘The members of the community in which the heroine, Lily Bart, is placed are bound together not only by the possession of

wealth, but also by a certain gift, which has its equivalent with us, too, perhaps – “a force of negation which eliminated everything beyond their own range of perception”³³ The irony in Woolf’s metaphor ‘certain gift’ and the quotation she selects from the novel capture Wharton’s intention exactly. The myopia of New York society ultimately destroys the novel’s heroine, Lily Bart.

Woolf’s first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), has a good deal in common with *The House of Mirth*; both are novels of manners detailing the trials of heroines who must find their way through the business of romance and marriage without the guidance of a mother and against the prevailing ‘force of negation’. Lily Bart and Woolf’s heroine Rachel Vinrace have a heightened sense of aesthetics; Lily knows instinctively how to dress well, furnish a room, and create a *tableau vivant*; and Rachel has considerable talent as a musician and sees the world in abstract shapes and colours. They might, the novelists hint, do just as well, even better, without a mate and without conventional social claims on their time and talents. Lily’s story takes place in Old New York although she longs for a world beyond its stultifying culture; she seals her letters with ‘Beyond!’ beneath a flying ship. Rachel’s story begins on such a ship that takes her beyond England to South America. Once there, Rachel journeys into the interior, a female version of Conrad’s ‘heart of darkness’, and explores sexual passion, a form of Wharton’s ‘Roman Fever’.

Both novelists try to manoeuvre around the traditional plot of domestic fiction, disrupting courtships with intrusions by sexually aggressive older married men.³⁴ Gus Trenor lures Lily Bart to his house at night, when his wife is away, in order to ‘collect’ sexual favours. Likewise, in Woolf’s novel *Richard Dalloway* (of all people) boards the ship mid-voyage with his wife, lectures on the inferiority of women, and gropes the unsuspecting heroine. Rachel Vinrace, confused by the sensations aroused in her, has nightmares about a demonic male figure, yet ironically finds herself thus awakened to sexuality. In what seems an odd reversal considering Wharton’s later squeamishness about *Orlando* (1928), Lily Bart is repulsed by heterosexual contact and drawn instead to the homosexual comfort of the social worker Gerty Ferrish in a suggestive night of female affection.

Neither heroine marries; rather, the novels end in the only other conventional way for a domestic novel to end, the death of the beautiful woman. Both novelists deliver the final thoughts of their heroines as heightened stream-of-consciousness; Lily, under the influence of laudanum, imagines a baby nestled against her body; Rachel, racked with fever,

separates mind from body and drifts into solitude. At the deathbed (Woolf may well have had Wharton's novel in mind), the heroes hover over the corpses as 'words' supposedly float between the living and the dead.³⁵ Wharton never gives us the 'word', although Lily's emblematic 'Beyond!' comes to mind in that heroine and hero are realistically beyond communication; indeed the hero seems to prefer his woman dead.³⁶ The grim exchange, truncated in this way, parodies the deathbed convention of sentimental fiction. Woolf's hero bends over the heroine as she dies unaware of whether he speaks or thinks the words: 'No two people have ever been so happy as we have been. No One has ever loved as we have loved.'³⁷ This scene is much harder to read ironically in light of the fact that we now know Woolf's own last note to her husband Leonard, before her suicide, will echo the line: 'I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been.'³⁸

By the time Wharton and Woolf get to what many critics consider their finest novels, however, they have moved sharply apart in form and, though less so, in content. *The Age of Innocence* (1920) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) continue to tell stories about the shape of the family and its force on individual members, especially on women. Woolf reduces the cast to a single family, the Ramseys, and some few friends; Wharton's world encompasses all of Old New York and its tending of one family, the Welland/Archers.

The most dramatic feature of both novels involves the splitting of the female protagonist into two opposing figures: one the conventional domestic, maternal woman and the other a creative, sensitive, even artistic woman (a character close to the novelists themselves). The bifurcation permits variations on the theme of femininity and frees the artist/heroine from the trap set in the conventional mode of their early novels: marriage or death. Woolf's Mrs Ramsey and Wharton's May Archer marry and live traditionally sanctioned female lives; they have children, manage households, and exercise considerable influence over their husbands, men who need female encouragement in order to feel more powerful than, in reality, they are. Woolf's Lily Briscoe and Wharton's Ellen Olenska, by contrast, free from convention, devise aesthetically, intellectually and financially independent lives. By killing off the domestic women and making the artistic women too formidable to be chosen as second wives by the widowers, Wharton and Woolf experiment with a new narrative for females.³⁹ Lily Briscoe finishes her painting (with her vision as inviolate as Woolf desired her own to be), and Ellen Olenska expatriates to Paris (to live among artists and bohemians in Wharton's own neighborhood in the Rue de Varenne).

The two novels, however, differ significantly in texture and tone, in movement and emphasis. Long lyrical soliloquies carry Woolf's story, presented as pools of consciousness, requiring the reader to take on much of the task of interpreting the images and constructing the plot. The opening scene between James and his mother gives the reader a clue to reading the novel: 'any turn in the wheel of sensation has the power to crystallise and transfix the moment'. Such turns of the wheel move us through the novel, placing us moment by moment in sensations experienced by different minds. The narrator's job is to record the 'atoms as they fall' in an order that gives the impression of her not being there at all. No voice sorts and arranges a clear linear sequence, although at times we know, through traces of irony, that a narrator exists. James Ramsey's thought: '[he] endowed the picture of a refrigerator, as his mother spoke, with heavenly bliss', that opens the novel, for example, blends into his mother's observation of him at the line 'though he appeared the image of stark and uncompromising severity'. The narrator then intrudes, pulling us back from their thoughts – 'so that his mother, watching him guide his scissors neatly round the refrigerator, imagined him all red and ermine of the Bench' – allowing us to see Mrs Ramsey in the role of doting mother, looking foolish, as parents often do.⁴⁰

The reader's satisfaction and delight come as much from the weaving of images and the beauty of language as from the interplay of meanings inherent in the word 'family'. Woolf invites us to read viscerally with aesthetic awareness, an experience close to the reading of poetry. Bakhtin argues that poetry breaks through 'heteroglot' language with its semantic layers to create unitary speech, so that the intended meaning correlates word with object more clearly than fiction can do. The lyricism of Woolf's novel, the intricate patterning of consciousness, often takes the mind away from history and culture into Bakhtin's world of pure language.

Wharton's prose comes almost always embedded in the 'heteroglot' ooze of competing meanings, 'still warm from that struggle and hostility, as yet unresolved and still fraught with hostile intentions and accents'.⁴¹ Less poetic than Woolf's prose, Wharton's prose loosens the connection between word and object and plays with variations on meaning. Wharton's narrator, restricted most of the time to reporting Newland Archer's moments, keeps an ironic distance from the hero, pointing out to the reader various absurdities and inconsistencies in his thinking. The reader, in this way, is encouraged to separate from the hero and to identify with the narrator who exhibits superior reason and wit. Early in the novel, Newland returns from a cigar with Sillerton Jackson to ponder the

ramifications of his hasty ‘feminist’ assertion: ‘Women should be free – as free as we are.’⁴² Newland knows that Old New York codes deny equality between the sexes, and the narrator lets us know that Newland’s fling with Mrs Thorley Rushworth, his sense of superiority to the virginal May Welland, and his powerful sexual attraction to Ellen Olenska all leave him only dimly aware of the implications of the word ‘free’ and of his own ambivalence concerning the meaning of female freedom. Even less does he see that in most situations throughout the novel women run the show. Much of the pleasure and satisfaction in reading Wharton’s novel arises from the reader’s sense of being a step or two ahead of the hero, dissecting and analysing the culture and all the possible meanings of Newland’s words, ‘Women should be free’.

The epistemological difference between Wharton and Woolf, a difference that becomes more apparent over time, affects how they create characters and how they construct narratives. Wharton’s protagonists, rarely as smart as she is, struggle to understand the ramifications of their social, cultural, even psychological situations. For that reason, she employs a narrator (one hard to distinguish from her own presence in the novel) to act as liaison between characters and readers, a group she hopes will be as perceptive as she is. In a letter to John Hugh Smith about her novel *A Mother’s Recompense* (1925), Wharton explains her heroine, Kate Clephane’s limitations: ‘I felt, in writing it, all the force of what you say about the incest-element, & its importance in justifying her anguish – but I felt it wd [sic] be hardly visible in its exact sense to her’.⁴³ Lily Bart, Newland Archer and Kate Clephane all face a world ‘hardly visible’ to them, but a world the narrator knows quite well.

Virginia Woolf, perhaps trusting more in human insight and certainly believing that scattered impressions are all we ultimately have, records the conscious and semi-conscious musings of characters who are, for the most part, as intellectually complex, sensitive and perceptive as she herself is. Her novels eschew an intermediary voice, an intellect who can make random details cohere. Her technique requires readers, as Wharton’s does, to detect subtleties of tone and nuances of detail, but Woolf also asks her reader to puzzle over the incoherence of a world that does not provide a narrative guide.

In the middle of the 1920s, a British reviewer depicted the relationship between Woolf and Wharton as the rivalry of youth versus age, contrasting the innovative vigor of *Mrs Dalloway* with the ‘old-fashioned’ flatness of *A Mother’s Recompense*. Wharton’s letter to John Hugh Smith records her chagrin: ‘I was not trying to follow the new methods, as May Sinclair

so pantingly & anxiously does; & my heroine belongs to the day when scruples existed'.⁴⁴ Ironically, she soothes herself with the knowledge that other reviewers, as well as friends like Percy Lubbock, had often misread and misjudged her work.⁴⁵

The novels *A Mother's Recompense* and *Mrs Dalloway* typify, perhaps better than other pairings, the striking difference between the two writers, especially clear because both novels depict the same situation: the effect of ageing on a woman's psyche. What Virginia Woolf presents as pools of half-conscious murmurings, Wharton dramatises as spectral encounters, dressed as ghostly figures that float into the heroine's mind. The heroine Kate Clephane, in her youth, had abandoned both husband and three-year-old daughter in order to free herself from the constraints of Old New York society that allowed almost no air for a young woman to breathe. Adrift for twenty years in the socially nebulous atmosphere of expatriate Europe, Kate had taken a youthful lover, resisted the responsibilities of adulthood, and ignored the signs of her ageing. The novel opens with the death of her husband and the invitation from her grown daughter to return to New York, a world that has little interest in her prior rebellion and no qualms about her past sins. Wharton's story has an elaborate social stage; she presents enough of Old New York and the new Jazz Age to set Kate Clephane's 'ghosts' in relief, culminating in the incestuously suggestive image of her daughter and her former lover in an embrace. Her moral dilemma in the novel is whether or not to tell her daughter about her past affair with the still youngish man. Only by returning to her dilatory expatriate life in Europe can the heroine exorcise the ghosts and thus define her ageing self.

As Wharton divides youth and age into the characters of mother and daughter, Woolf pairs two seemingly disconnected characters: Clarissa Dalloway, a wealthy wife in her fifties, and Septimus Warren Smith, a disturbed war veteran of thirty. Woolf juxtaposes their philosophies, experiences, and patterns of thought, and links them by proximity of time and place and, on a deeper level, by metaphor. She records, for example, Clarissa's mind as she watches the omnibuses in Piccadilly and thinks about her own early affair with Peter Walsh:

somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself.⁴⁶

The past does not appear before her as a series of ghostly figures, as it does for Wharton's heroine, rather the past appears as a tree, a natural outgrowth. As the novel moves from Clarissa's thoughts to those of Septimus, Woolf retains the metaphor:

But they beckoned; leaves were alive, trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement.⁴⁷

Woolf uses an organic metaphor, tree and branch, to depict a vital world, although the reassurance of organic unity gives way to a vision much darker than any Wharton imagined as Septimus moves toward suicide: 'Scientifically speaking, the flesh was melted off the world. His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock.'⁴⁸ The plot moves episodically, pitting one metaphor against another – we read the image of rack against that of tree, of maceration against connection – in the movement toward the death of youth, a grim reversal that Wharton's novel never considers. Yet both Wharton and Woolf allow the ageing female protagonists to survive.

After the open clashes between Woolf and Wharton in 'Modern Fiction' and *The Writing of Fiction*, their dispute over the nature of the novel surfaces sharply in Wharton's fiction, especially in *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929) and its sequel *The Gods Arrive* (1932), the last novel she completed before her death in 1937. The novels are ideologically driven, brittle and shrill in their response to experimental writers such as Woolf. The hero Advance G. Weston, Esq., a 'Middle-Western yahoo',⁴⁹ from Euphoria, Illinois, by way of Pruneville, Nebraska, and Hallelujah, Missouri, has as his intellectual and cultural roots a college degree, a week in Chicago, a brief stint as editor of *Getting There*, an even briefer affair with Floss Delaney, and faith in his own newly invented religion.

As Weston reads modern novels, he puzzles over their resemblance to life itself; through his musings Wharton answers Woolf's questions in 'Modern Fiction'.

WOOLF: Is life like this? Must novels be like this?⁵⁰

WHARTON: No, life's not like that, people are not like that. The real stuff is way down, not on the surface.⁵¹

The central question of Wharton's novel is what type of literary form carries more mimetic power? Wharton's hero, in a jumble of metaphors, catches a 'literary infection' in the back of Jane Megg's bookshop that causes him to write 'a masterpiece according to the new recipe'.⁵² The

novel's heroine Halo Spear, Vance's intellectual mentor, speaks in a voice indistinguishable from Wharton's. We can hear the echo of Wharton's letter to Mary Berenson where she explains she is 'quite ill' from looking at photos of Virginia Woolf:

. . . Vance had been too much influenced by the stream-of-consciousness school which Jane's group proclaimed to a bewildered public to be the one model of modern fiction.

Jane Meggs! How a woman of that sort would know how to flatter Vance, astonish his inexperience, amuse him by her literary jargon, fascinate him by her moral perversity. Even the ugliness which Jane flaunted as though it were *her* kind of beauty, the kind she wanted and had deliberately chosen, might have a coarse fascination for him.⁵³

The hero finds the 'modern' literary world appealing, sexually and aesthetically, but comes to suspect that: 'The fishers in the turbid stream-of-consciousness had reduced their fictitious characters to a bundle of loosely tied instincts and habits, borne along blindly on the current of existence'.⁵⁴ The hero's quest, though 'hardly visible' to him, is to free himself from salons, like the ones frequented by Virginia Woolf, and make his way back to the heroine who waits pregnant, both literally and figuratively. Halo Spears, so very thinly veiled, asks Wharton's question: 'Why not try giving your readers the exact opposite of what all the other on-the-spot editors are straining to provide? Something quiet, logical, Jane Austen-y'.⁵⁵ We can imagine her voice chiding novelists to write something 'Wharton-ian'.

Literary criticism seeps into Woolf's later novels as well. In *Jacob's Room* (1922), she doubts the ability of the novel to grasp human experience: 'It is thus that we live, they say, driven by an unseizable force. They say that the novelists never catch it; it goes hurtling through their nets and leaves them torn to ribbons'.⁵⁶ Again in *The Waves* (1931), she presents a portrait of the artist as a young man who takes his lines from her essay 'Modern Fiction':

But why impose my arbitrary design? Why stress this and shape that and twist up little figures like the toys men sell in trays in the street? Why select this, out of all that, – one detail?⁵⁷

In a voice as thinly veiled as Wharton's, the critic Virginia Woolf poses questions about the nature of literary form.

In her final novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), Woolf turns attention, literally and figuratively, on her audience, a group she comes to trust less and less. The literary artist as a mature woman, the playwright Miss La Trobe,

stages her work for an intellectually and aesthetically obtuse crowd. Socialites and townfolk have been invited to a luncheon and tea interspersed with the villagers' annual pageant about English history performed in an outdoor theatre. In the background, Isa Oliver, a symbol of female literary reticence, hides her poetry from her husband's gaze in a 'book bound like an account book'. The bold Miss La Trobe, to the contrary, parades her words before the village gossips, who suspect that she cannot really be British; such brazenness must come from the taint of Russian blood. Her passion for language surely cannot be feminine either:

Outwardly she was swarthy, sturdy and thick set; strode about the fields in a smock frock; sometimes with a cigarette in her mouth; often with a whip in her hands; and used rather strong language – perhaps, then she wasn't altogether a lady?⁵⁸

Woolf offers us a colourful, witty self-portrait. The gramophone's 'chuff, chuff, chuff' punctuates the silences between chronological scenes of British history, building to the climactic representation of the modern world, where La Trobe turns a literal mirror on the townfolk who are clearly unsettled about her intentions. Woolf playfully threatens both the audience and her own readers: 'Words this afternoon ceased to lie flat in the sentence. They rose, became menacing and shook their fists at you.'⁵⁹

What if the experiment remains a mystery to the audience? 'If they had understood her meaning; if they had known their parts; if the pearls had been real and the funds illimitable – it would have been a better gift', La Trobe concludes, pronouncing her work a 'failure'.⁶⁰ All the good humour of the novel moves toward doubt. The writer's final struggle, Woolf reminds us, is with the audience, both reader and critic, and what they will make of the 'gift'. Wharton was in much the same mood in 1925 when she wrote to close friend Daisy Chandler about the seeming inability of critics to understand her intention: 'You will wonder that the priestess of the life of reason should take such things to heart, & I wonder too. I never have minded before; but as my work reaches its close, I feel so sure that it is either nothing, or far more than they know. . . . And I wonder, a little desolately, which?'⁶¹

Wharton and Woolf, the odd transatlantic pair, end their writing careers in considerable doubt about how they will be read, interpreted, and catalogued by future readers and critics. Reading the two women together, we hear their common lament. The two writers represent 'embattled tendencies' that overlap and, at times, merge in the early years of the twentieth century. As readers and critics, we reduce the tension,

deny the contradictions, and ultimately lose the texture of the period we have come to call Modernist if we ignore their rich dialogue. Passionate disagreement over form and content characterises Modernism and links these two writers. The voices of Wharton and Woolf resonate throughout the period, not one or the other, not one and then the other, but rather the two together.

Notes

- 1 R.W.B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography*, New York, Scribner's, 1988, p. 474.
- 2 Virginia Woolf, *The Sick Side of the Moon: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume V: 1932–1935*, ed. Nigel Nicolson, London, Hogarth Press, 1979, p. 305.
- 3 Leo Litwak, 'Kay Boyle – Paris Wasn't Like That', *New York Times Book Review*, 15 July 1984, 2.
- 4 Elaine Showalter, 'The Death of the Lady (Novelist): Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*', *Representations*, 9 (Winter 1985), p. 134.
- 5 Amy Kaplan, 'Edith Wharton's Profession of Authorship', *ELH*, 30:2 (1986), 433–57.
- 6 See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century, Volume 2: Sexchanges*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989.
- 7 Bonnie Kime Scott, *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 10.
- 8 Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900–1940*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1989, p. 37. Benstock portrays Wharton as something of a Neanderthal: 'We try to trace our descent from her'. Yet in her later biography, *No Gifts from Chance* (New York, Scribner's, 1994), Benstock situates Wharton in the period but maintains the view of her as outside 'Modernism'; see p. 290.
- 9 Andrew Delbanco, 'Missed Manners', *New Republic*, 25 October 1993, pp. 31–7.
- 10 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 272.
- 11 Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction*, New York, Scribner's, 1925, p. 3.
- 12 Wharton, *Writing of Fiction*, p. 7.
- 13 Wharton, *Writing of Fiction*, p. 8.
- 14 Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', in *The Common Reader*, New York, Harcourt Brace & World, [1925] 1953, p. 150.
- 15 Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', pp. 153–4.
- 16 Edith Wharton, *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, eds R.W.B. Lewis and Nancy

- Lewis, New York, Scribner's, 1988, pp. 316–17; on friendship with Wells, see pp. 596–7.
- 17 Wharton, *Letters*, p. 461.
 - 18 Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, Vol. 2, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977, p. 199.
 - 19 Woolf, *Common Reader*, p. 235.
 - 20 Wharton, *Writing of Fiction*, p. 161.
 - 21 Wharton, *Letters*, p. 124.
 - 22 See Katherine Joslin, 'Architectonic or Episodic?: Edith Wharton, Gender, and *The Fruit of the Tree*', in Clare Colquitt, Susan Goodman and Candace Waid, eds, *Edith Wharton: A Forward Glance: New Essays on Edith Wharton*, London, Associated University Presses, and University of Delaware Press, 1999, pp. 62–75.
 - 23 Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', p. 155.
 - 24 Wharton, *Writing of Fiction*, p. 12.
 - 25 Wharton, *Writing of Fiction*, p. 13.
 - 26 Edith Wharton, 'The Great American Novel', in Frederick Wegener (ed.), *Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 157.
 - 27 Virginia Woolf, 'American Fiction', *Saturday Review of Literature*, 2:1 (1925), 1–3.
 - 28 Wharton, *Uncollected Critical Writings*, p. 34.
 - 29 Wharton, 'A Little Girl's New York', *Uncollected Critical Writings*, p. 282.
 - 30 Wharton, *Uncollected Critical Writings*, p. 153.
 - 31 Virginia Woolf, 'Herman Melville', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 August 1919, in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 3, 1919–1924, ed. Andrew McNeillie, London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988, p. 77.
 - 32 Woolf, 'American Fiction.'
 - 33 Virginia Woolf, Review of *The House of Mirth*, *The Guardian*, 15 November 1905.
 - 34 See Louise DeSalvo, *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1989. She sees the incestuous step-brother Gerald Duckworth as the root cause of Woolf's sexual anxiety that surfaces in her fiction and expresses itself most forcefully in the psychotic episodes that punctuated her life. See also Gloria Erhlick, *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992, for an analysis of how Wharton's early sexual guilt, more imagined than real, may have influenced her fiction and affected her long bout with neurasthenia over the first twelve years of her marriage to Teddy Wharton.
 - 35 Cynthia Griffin Wolff discusses the final scene of the novel in the context of popular drama where the dying heroine and the unspoken word were rather commonly used devices. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, 'Lily Bart and Masquerade Inscribed in the Female Body', in Alan Price and Katherine Joslin (eds),

- Wretched Exotic: Essays on Edith Wharton in Europe*, New York, Lang, 1993, pp. 259–95,
- 36 For a fuller discussion of the novel's final 'word' as 'Beyond!' see Katherine Joslin, *Edith Wharton*, Women Writers Series, London, Macmillan, New York, St Martin's Press, 1991, pp. 49–69.
- 37 Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1920, p. 353.
- 38 Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972, p. 226.
- 39 See Showalter, 'The Death of the Lady (Novelist)' for a discussion of Wharton's use of the dead heroine. Showalter argues that Lily Bart dies to free Gerty Ferrish, a model of the new professional woman.
- 40 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1927, p. 9.
- 41 Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, p. 331.
- 42 Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, New York, Appleton, 1920, p. 43.
- 43 Wharton, *Letters*, p. 480.
- 44 Wharton, *Letters*, p. 480.
- 45 See Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 372.
- 46 Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, [1925] 1953, p. 9.
- 47 Woolf, *Dalloway*, p. 22.
- 48 Woolf, *Dalloway*, p. 68.
- 49 Edith Wharton, *Hudson River Bracketed*, New York, Scribner's, 1929, p. 267.
- 50 Woolf, *Common Reader*, p. 154.
- 51 Wharton, *Hudson River*, p. 320.
- 52 Edith Wharton, *The Gods Arrive*, New York, Scribner's, [1932] 1960, p. 101.
- 53 Wharton, *Gods Arrive*, p. 108.
- 54 Wharton, *Gods Arrive*, p. 116.
- 55 Wharton, *Gods Arrive*, p. 224.
- 56 Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, [1922] 1950, p. 156.
- 57 Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1931, p. 188.
- 58 Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1941, p. 58.
- 59 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, p. 59.
- 60 Woolf, *Between the Acts*, p. 209.
- 61 Wharton, *Letters*, p. 483.

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