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## Introduction

DEBORAH ESCH

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Inscribed in a recollection by Philomène de la Forest-Divonne of an afternoon visit to the Pavillon Colombe in St. Brice in 1935 or 1936 is another reminiscence: that of her host and longtime friend, Edith Wharton: “‘I was writing little stories when I was four,’ she said to me, not at all boasting about her gift, but also not seeking to deny it.”<sup>1</sup> Months before her death, the accomplished author made her visitor “a participant in her earliest memories,” and recalled fabricating fictions even before she learned, at the age of six, to read. The nascent career took a decisive turn during Edith Newbold Jones’s twelfth year, when, according to her biographer R. W. B. Lewis, she “decided to write a story: she would, that is, set down one of her inventions on paper. She would ‘make up’” (Lewis, 29–30). Taking her own immediate circumstances as point of departure, she again put pen to paper: “‘Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Brown?’ said Mrs. Tomkins. ‘If only I had known you were going to call, I should have tidied up the drawing room’” (quoted in Lewis, 30).

The reception of this early attempt was swift and severe: Lucretia Jones promptly returned the page her daughter had shyly proffered with the curt judgment that “drawing rooms are always tidy” (Lewis, 30). In the wake of her mother’s response, the young Edith turned her talents to poetry, thereby earning the approval of her parents and eventually publishing a handful of poems. After a three-year hiatus, she reverted to narrative fiction with a secret but sustained effort, a novella of thirty thousand words entitled *Fast and Loose*. As Shari Benstock observes, “An irony of Edith’s early literary development is that she wrote a

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novella before she had ever *read* one."<sup>2</sup> This time around, she assumed as her own the function of unforgiving critic and "began at once to deprecate the work. She wrote a number of mock reviews, attributed to various New York and London periodicals, each denouncing [the novella] in uncompromising terms. . . . [A]dopting the authoritative voice of *The Nation*, she declared that 'It is false charity to reader and writer to mince matters. The English of it is that every character is a failure, the plot a vacuum, the style spiritless, the dialogue vague, the sentiment weak and the whole thing a fiasco!'" (quoted in Lewis, 31). With this harsh anatomy, Edith Newbold Jones cast herself in the dual role of storyteller and critical reader at the tender age of fifteen.

The biographer's reconstruction of these early episodes is remarkably consistent with Wharton's own account, in her memoir *A Backward Glance* (1934), of the composition of *The House of Mirth*. "Fate had planted me in New York," she relates, "and my instinct as a story-teller counselled me to use the material nearest to hand, and most familiarly my own."<sup>3</sup> After the fact, the critic elaborates the storyteller's dilemma:

There could be no greater critical ineptitude than to judge a novel according to *what it ought to have been about*. . . . As a matter of fact, there are but two essential rules: one, that the novelist should deal only with what is within his reach, literally or figuratively (in most cases the two are synonymous), and the other that the value of a subject depends almost wholly on what the author sees in it, and how deeply he is able to see *into* it. Almost – but not quite; for there are certain subjects too shallow to yield anything to the most searching gaze. I had always felt this, and now my problem was how to make use of a subject – fashionable New York – which, of all others, seemed most completely to fall within the condemned category. There it was before me, in all its flatness and futility, asking to be dealt with as the theme most available to my hand, since I had been steeped in it from infancy, and should not have to get it up out of note-books and encyclopedias – and yet! (*A Backward Glance*, 206–7)

The autobiographical account goes on to formulate the predicament posed by the most familiar material and its attendant thematics: "how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling one

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story rather than another" (*A Backward Glance*, 207). More particularly,

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 could 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. (*A Backward Glance*, 207)

With the critical question of "typical human significance" – which is to say, of a story's meaning and its figuration – provisionally articulated and answered, the narrative acquired the requisite momentum. The novel had been promised in advance to *Scribner's Magazine*, and the deadline moved forward to January 1905 when the novel that was to have preceded it was not submitted in time. *A Backward Glance* belatedly registers the alarm of a fledgling novelist torn between "critical dissatisfaction with the work, and the distractions of a busy and hospitable life, full of friends and travel, reading and gardening" (*A Backward Glance*, 207), to say nothing of the repeated nervous collapses of her husband: "The first chapters of my tale would have to appear almost at once, and it must be completed within four or five months! I have always been a slow worker, and was then a very inexperienced one, and I was to be put to the severest test to which a novelist can be subjected: my novel was to be exposed to public comment before I had worked it out to its climax" (*A Backward Glance*, 208). Just what that climax would be was not in doubt: "My last page is always latent in my first; but the intervening windings of the way always become clear only as I write, and now I was asked to gallop over them before I had even traced them out! I had expected to devote another year or eighteen months to the task, instead of which I was asked to be ready within six months; and nothing short of 'the hand of God' must be suffered to interrupt my labors, since my first chapters would already be in print!" (*A Backward Glance*, 208).

Under the enforced "discipline of the daily task" (*A Backward Glance*, 208), Wharton managed to deliver the manuscript to the

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publisher on schedule. She recollects her gratitude in the aftermath of her trial by fire: "It was good to be turned from a drifting amateur into a professional; but that was nothing compared to the effect on my imagination of systematic daily effort. . . . When the book was done I remember saying to myself: 'I don't yet know how to write a novel; *but I know how to find out how to*' " (*A Backward Glance*, 209).

2

In its serial version, *The House of Mirth* appeared in eleven installments in *Scribner's*, running from January to November 1905, and finding a receptive public; "readers who arrived late at their local newsstand found no available copy."<sup>4</sup> Wharton collected \$5,000 for the serial rights. The book was initially published in New York on October 14, 1905, in an edition of 40,000 copies. Readers paid \$1.50 for the volume, and Wharton's contract stipulated royalties of fifteen percent. As Lewis notes, "by the end of 1905 she had been paid \$7,000 against accrued royalties of more than \$30,000" (Lewis, 151). The tax-free figure translates to well over \$500,000 today.

*The House of Mirth*, in other words, was from the first a formidable commodity. Ten days after the novel appeared, the publisher notified Wharton that "so far we have not sold many over 30,000, but perhaps that will satisfy your expectations for the first fortnight" (quoted in Lewis, 151). The author recorded in her diary a subsequent printing of 20,000 by October 30, and an additional 20,000 on November 11. As the year drew to a close, 140,000 copies were in print, and Charles Scribner could report that *The House of Mirth* was enjoying "the most rapid sale of any book ever published by Scribner" (quoted in Lewis, 151; Benstock, "A Critical History," 310).

Contemporary reviews of the best-selling novel (it held the top spot on one list for four months) were on the whole more concerned with evaluation than analysis, and with the answer to Wharton's critical question ("in short . . . my heroine, Lily Bart") than with the possibilities inscribed in the question itself. For

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the most part, the work won praise from American as well as English reviewers (it appeared under the Macmillan imprint in Britain), whether they read it as realist chronicle or mannerist satire. Unfavorable responses focused on the hopelessness of the tale of Lily Bart's inexorable descent from privilege to destitution, and debated whether her death was the necessary price of the author's moral claim. Others took Wharton to task for her unsparing portrayal of New York society: either for not presenting finer exemplars of humanity in her chosen context, or simply for having selected in the first place material "utterly unsuitable for conversion into literature," which "demands all that such society has not – ideas, intellectual interests, sentiment, passion, humor, wit, tact, and grace."<sup>5</sup> (This assessment in *The Nation* thus anticipates aspects of Wharton's own subsequent judgment about her subject matter in *A Backward Glance*.) But a survey of early critical responses to the novel makes clear that even the most hostile contributors to the controversy surrounding the publication of *The House of Mirth* sought somewhat vainly to find fault with what was widely regarded as a work of great merit.<sup>6</sup> "Amid the favorable, the issue was whether *The House of Mirth* could be adjudged a masterpiece or whether it fell just short of that final accolade" (Lewis, 154). *The Saturday Review* summarily pronounced the work "one of the few novels which can claim to rank as literature" (Ammons, 313).

If *The House of Mirth* sealed its author's reputation as one of the major English-language novelists of her generation, and as a worthy "historian of the American society of her time," Wharton's restlessness as a storyteller and social critic would thenceforth transport her far from the New York of her day.<sup>7</sup> In only one other novel, *The Custom of the Country* (1913), would she return to that familiar time and place. At her death in 1937, she had been living as an expatriate in France for several decades, and was arguably best known to a new generation of readers as the author of *Ethan Frome* (1911), which had become available in an inexpensive and widely circulated library edition.

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The warm reception that had greeted most of Wharton's fiction in America as well as Europe cooled significantly in the 1930s, when, as Benstock observes, "her social chronicles, *The House of Mirth* first among them, were judged as mere 'curiosities' – nostalgic reminiscences . . . of a bygone age rather than condemnations of modern mores. With the rise of fascism and the fear of war in Europe . . . Wharton's comedies had little to say to a generation that anticipated the collapse of civilization" ("A Critical History," 315). But in "Justice to Edith Wharton," an essay written shortly after the author's death, Edmund Wilson sought to revive Wharton's flagging critical fortunes, and specifically "to throw into relief the achievements which did make her important during a period – say, 1905–1917 – when there were few American writers worth reading" (Wilson, 19). In the context of its measured defense of the novelist ("she was one of the few Americans of her day who cared enough about serious literature to take the risks of trying to make some contribution to it" [Wilson, 30]), the essay does at best equivocal justice to *The House of Mirth*: Wilson writes that "[t]he language and some of the machinery . . . seem old-fashioned and rather melodramatic today; but the book has some originality and power, with its chronicle of a social parasite on the fringes of the very rich . . . and finding a window open only twice, at the beginning and at the end of the book, on a world where all the values are not money values" (Wilson, 21).

It would fall to a subsequent critic to make a more compelling case for the persistent interest and lasting value of *The House of Mirth*, and arguably "to show Mrs. Wharton in her proper place in the main stream of American literature."<sup>8</sup> Diana Trilling's "*The House of Mirth Revisited*," which appeared in 1962, acknowledges that the quarter-century following Wharton's death "has delivered the mortal blow to the society in which she came of literary age, so that it is no small wonder that her extraordinary work has passed into the archeological shadows and that now, where she is known at all outside university English courses, it is merely, and pejoratively, as a society lady become society

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author" (Trilling, 103). But Trilling's polemic overturns this conventional wisdom, arguing that Wharton "knew the reality of class as no theoretical Marxist or social egalitarian can know it: not speculatively but in her bones" (Trilling, 105). Read in this light, *The House of Mirth* is for Trilling "nothing if not a novel about social stratification and the consequences of breaking the taboos of class," and indeed ranks as "one of the most telling indictments of a social system based on the chance distribution of wealth, and therefore of social privilege, that has ever been put on paper" (Trilling, 105, 106).

In crucial respects, Trilling's revaluation of the novel paved the way for later readers who would bring a range of theoretical approaches to bear on Wharton's text. In the aftermath of the New Criticism and the formalist tendencies that predominated in North American literary studies in the 1940s and 1950s (and that had little investment in, and as little to say about, the ethical, social, and historical stakes of a work like *The House of Mirth*), critics of the novel returned to the "issues that had drawn the attention of its earliest readers: the tension between character and situation, and the influence of gender, social class, race and the marketplace in shaping the moral climate of society – and, by extension, the literature it produced" (Benstock, "A Critical History," 317). Something of a "renaissance" (Benstock's term) or "revolution" (Annette Zilvermatt's) in Wharton studies took place following the opening in 1967 of the Yale archive, and the appointment by the Wharton estate of R. W. B. Lewis as official biographer (his *Edith Wharton* appeared in 1975, and garnered the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and Columbia University's Bancroft Prize for history). In the subsequent quarter-century, scholars and critics, many of them representing a diversity of feminisms informed by psychoanalysis, historical materialism, and deconstruction, have re-revisited *The House of Mirth*, generating a substantial and varied body of criticism on the novel.

Since the late 1970s, several landmark studies have sought to establish the interpretive authority of approaches that would do greater justice to Wharton's life and work. *A Feast of Words*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff's psychobiography, appeared in 1977,

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forging a path for further psychoanalytically oriented accounts by Lev Raphael, Barbara White, David Holbrook, and Gloria Ehrlich. In 1980, Elizabeth Ammons's *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* attempted to situate Wharton's oeuvre in the context of a feminist resistance to patriarchy and its institutions, notably marriage. Shari Benstock included Wharton in *Women of the Left Bank*, an historical account of expatriate modernism in France published in 1986.

Increasing scholarly interest in Wharton found fresh resources and outlets with the founding of the Edith Wharton Society and its journal, the *Edith Wharton Review*. In 1988, Scribner's published *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, a volume of her correspondence from 1902 to 1937 edited by R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis. A year later, the Beinecke Library recatalogued its Edith Wharton Collection, affording reader access to the significant archival holdings at Yale. Alongside the renewal of academic investment, popular interest in the author's life and work has likewise flourished. Evidence for this wider appeal includes the several films based on her fiction (including *The Age of Innocence*, directed by Martin Scorsese) and a host of articles in architecture, landscape, design, and travel periodicals as well as in mainstream literary reviews. Affordable paperback editions of *The House of Mirth*, including Ammons's Norton Critical Edition (1990) and Benstock's volume for the series *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism* (1994), have made available to teachers and students not only authoritative texts of the novel, but valuable critical histories and contextual material as well as recent interpretive accounts.

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It is fair to say that critical responses to *The House of Mirth*, from contemporary reviews to the most recent theoretically oriented interpretations, stand in some relation to the question posed by Wharton in her account of writing the novel in *A Backward Glance*: "how to extract from such a subject the typical human significance which is the story-teller's reason for telling one story rather than another." For the dilemma (again, in the last analy-



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sis one of narrative meaning and its figuration) is double: if it begins as the writer's problem, it inevitably becomes the reader's as well. And as such, it is thematized in the story of Lily Bart, the novel's central figure, who "was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate."<sup>9</sup>

At pivotal junctures in the unfolding of that fate, Wharton's heroine finds herself doubled, or more precisely self-divided. When a tacit comparison between Lawrence Selden and Percy Gryce prompts Lily to choose Selden and a certain freedom in the present over Gryce and a predictable future ("It was that comparison which was her undoing" [I, 5, 44]), we read that

There were in her at that moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears. But gradually the captive's gasps grew fainter, or the other paid less heed to them; the horizon expanded, the air grew stronger, and the free spirit quivered for flight. (I, 6, 52)

The self-division proves permanent (as Selden tells Lily much later, "The difference is in yourself – it will always be there" [II, 12, 239]). And over the course of its narration, Wharton's language spells out the constitutive temporal dimension that renders its structure allegorical. That structure is readable, for example, in Lily's reaction to the traumatic encounter with Gus Trenor in Book I, Chapter 13:

"I can't think – I can't think," she moaned, and leaned her head against the rattling side of the cab. She seemed a stranger to herself, or rather there were two selves in her, the one she had always known, and a new abhorrent being to which it found itself chained. She had once picked up, in a house where she was staying, a translation of the *Eumenides*, and her imagination had been seized by the high terror of the scene where Orestes, in the cave of the oracle, finds his implacable huntresses asleep, and snatches an hour's repose. Yes, the Furies might sometimes sleep, but they were there, always there in the dark corners, and now they were awake and the iron clang of their wings was in her brain. . . . She opened her eyes and saw the streets passing – the familiar alien streets. All she looked on was the same and yet changed. There was a great gulf fixed between today and yesterday. Everything in the past seemed simple and natural, full of daylight – and she was alone in the

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place of darkness and pollution. – Alone! It was the loneliness that frightened her. Her eyes fell on an illuminated clock at a street corner, and she saw that the hands marked the half-hour after eleven. . . . Oh, the slow cold drip of the minutes on her head! (I, 13, 117–18)

Something of Lily's predicament, here tellingly figured in terms of her own past experience of reading at the remove of translation, is discernible even to her casual acquaintances. In the opening chapter of the second book, Carrie Fisher remarks to Selden, "Sometimes . . . I think it's just flightiness – and sometimes I think it's because, at heart, she despises the things she's trying for. And it's the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study" (II, 1, 148).

If several generations of critics have confronted some version of the "difficulty of deciding" about Lily Bart, it is the fictive heroine's contemporary and friend Gerty Farish who poses the problem in the terms most characteristic of Wharton herself: those of telling, and attending to, stories. Following the revelation that Lily has been betrayed by Bertha Dorset and disinherited by her aunt, Gerty anxiously forces the question:

"But what *is* your story, Lily? I don't believe any one knows it yet."

"My story? – I don't believe I know it myself. You see I never thought of preparing a version in advance . . . and if I had, I don't think I should take the trouble to use it now." . . .

"I don't want a version prepared in advance – but I want you to tell me exactly what happened from the beginning."

"From the beginning?" . . . "Dear Gerty, how little imagination you good people have! Why, the beginning was in my cradle, I suppose – in the way I was brought up, and the things I was taught to care for. Or no – I won't blame anybody for my faults. I'll say it was in my blood, that I got it from some wicked pleasure-loving ancestress. . . . You asked me just now for the truth – well, the truth about any girl is that once she's talked about she's done for . . ." (II, 4, 176)

Shortly thereafter, Simon Rosedale formally withdraws his marriage proposal in terms that ironically echo Lily's, and underscore their stakes: the relation between "the truth" (i.e., what happened) and the stories to which the truth's occlusion gives rise: