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978-0-521-64612-3 - Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit

Carol J. Singley

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Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit considers Wharton as a novelist of morals rather than manners, a novelist who in the exercise of writing sought answers to profound spiritual and metaphysical questions. Carol Singley analyzes the short stories and seven novels in light of Wharton's religious and philosophical development and her attitudes toward Anglicanism, Calvinism, Transcendentalism, and Catholicism.

Singley situates Wharton in the context of turn-of-the-century science, historicism, and aestheticism, reading her religious and philosophical outlook as an evolving response to the cultural crisis of belief. She further invokes the dynamics of class and gender as central to Wharton's quest, describing the ways in which the author accepted and yet transformed both the classical and Christian traditions that she inherited. By locating Wharton in the library rather than the drawing room, *Matters of Mind and Spirit* gives this writer her literary and intellectual due, and offers fresh ways of interpreting her life and fiction.

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For my husband, Gordon

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Preface

On se lasse de tout excepté de comprendre.
(One tires of everything except understanding.)
Edith Wharton, commonplace book

EDITH Wharton wrote a total of twenty-five novels and novellas, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Age of Innocence*; eighty-six short stories; three books of poetry; an autobiography; a book on the theory of fiction; eleven books or pamphlets of nonfiction; and scores of articles, reviews, and translations. At one point, her earnings from her writing exceeded those of any other living American writer. She continued to write until her death in 1937, collecting her ghost fiction in a volume the year she died and leaving another novel unfinished.

By any measure Edith Wharton's career was successful and her life full and adventurous. Yet expressions of longing appear throughout her letters and memoirs. Especially in the early years of her career, Wharton yearned for recognition from the New York aristocracy she so incisively portrayed in her stories and novels. Except for one cousin, however, her family and society treated her as an aberration, completely ignoring her literary achievements. Although Wharton later cultivated enduring, rewarding friendships with like-minded artists and intellectuals, she still voiced discontent. Cynthia Griffin Wolff detects a persistent tone of desolation and loneliness in her letters, noting that their most frequent refrain is "I have no one to *talk to*" (*Feast* 24). Wharton also desired better communication with her readers, wishing them to find deeper meanings in her fiction. For example, in response to the charge that sentimentalists found her work "cynical & depressing," she hoped that "those who see the 'inherences'

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recognize my ability to see them too" (*Letters* 39). By the same token, the view of her as a Jamesian disciple and chronicler of narrow, upper-class interests caused no end of consternation: "The continued cry that I am an echo of Mr. James . . . & the assumption that the people I write about are not 'real' because they are not navvies & char-women, makes me feel rather hopeless," she confided to her publisher in 1904 (*Letters* 91).

Always in Edith Wharton's writing there is an undercurrent of dissatisfaction, a sense that the full value of her work was unappreciated and her life-long project incomplete. Writing to Margaret Chanler in 1925, Wharton voiced doubt about her place in American letters: "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?" (*Letters* 483, original ellipsis). It is not unusual for writers to complain of slights or seek sympathy from their readers. Nathaniel Hawthorne, after all, had set the tone for novel-writing successors with his plea in "The Custom-House" for understanding by a loyal, select few (6). However, unlike Hawthorne, who struggled for years with barely a nod of recognition, or Herman Melville, who died believing that *Moby-Dick* had missed its mark, Edith Wharton enjoyed extensive popular and critical acclaim once she committed herself to the pen. Yet despite success, she always felt a lack of recognition and understanding from her readers.

Contributing to this misunderstanding is the early critical view of her as a novelist of manners, a view that persists despite fresh, insightful approaches by feminists, new historicists, and other critics who address the range and complexity of Wharton's themes and narrative techniques. Wharton, I argue, is also a novelist of morals: a writer not only of society but of spirit; a woman who, in life and in art, searched for religious, moral, and philosophical meaning. This search for fulfillment is evident in her comments about fiction. For example, she defends its power to transcend the mundane in an article on literary criticism, in which she argues that the "conclusions of the tale" "must be sought, not in the fate of the characters, and still less in their own comments on it, but in . . . the light it casts on questions beyond its borders" ("Criticism" 210). She similarly argues in another essay: "any serious portrayal of life must be judged not by the incidents it presents but by the author's sense of their significance" ("Vice" 519). Wharton's search for meaning is also abundantly clear in her numerous short stories and novels, as this book demonstrates.

How can we describe this kind of writer? Wharton is not didactic, insistent, or judgmental in her treatment of moral issues. On the contrary, she is circumspect to the point of appearing tentative; she strikes a note of inquiry rather than of declamation. Wharton's tireless and ultimately unful-

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filled quest for spiritual and philosophical answers is best thought of as longing – a desire that cannot be satisfied, yet endures. The dimensions of her quest encompass several forms: Christianity, from Calvinism to Catholicism; classical thought and religion; and modern philosophy – all negotiated within complex and rapidly changing American social structures. Because Wharton depicted turn-of-the-century society with such accuracy and detail, it has been all too easy for critics to focus on her social themes and neglect her deeper insights into human nature. This approach not only ignores her lifetime interests in religious and philosophical issues, but it relegates her to the status of second-rate novelist. And it obscures Wharton's roles in the American literary traditions of Calvinism, transcendentalism, and modernism, as well as realism.

We have looked for Edith Wharton in the drawing room; we must also seek her in the library, voraciously consuming volumes of philosophy, history, art, science, and religion, as well as literature. Wharton was well read in philosophy; she pored over volumes of Greek religious history and Christian theology; and she was fully informed about nineteenth-century science. Readers know of Wharton's expertise in interior design, architecture, and gardening, but few realize how deeply she was drawn to metaphysical questions, and that her library contained more books on religion than on any other subject (Lewis 510).

This book is the first to explore the dimensions of Wharton's religious, spiritual, and philosophical search, and to place her life and writings in the context of American intellectual thought and religious history. It owes debts to the many recent feminist readings of Wharton, which have not only illuminated her struggles as a female novelist but have affirmed the extraordinary quality of her mind. It was originally inspired by R. W. B. Lewis's descriptions of Wharton's religious reading in his groundbreaking 1975 biography. It also attempts to correct Percy Lubbock's myopic observation that "the lively leap of her mind stopped dead when she was asked to think . . . about any theoretic enquiry" (44). Wharton's writing, I argue here, reflects both a mind and spirit intensely engaged in abstract questions; one can no more separate her religious and philosophical perspectives from her fiction than one can divorce T. S. Eliot's Christianity from his poetry.

This book also owes a debt to Marilyn Lyde's early analysis of the relationship between Wharton's faith and conventionality. Lyde astutely notes that Wharton's upper-class background and grande dame image are obstacles to understanding her moral concerns, but she still approaches Wharton's morality through social forms and manners, concluding that Wharton solves the problem of "Absolute Ethics" by finding a "necessary balance between individual morality and group convention" (45). In con-

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trast, I argue that Wharton was a deeply religious person who never found completely satisfactory answers to metaphysical questions; social forms, although useful guides, always fell short of the ideals to which she aspired. I similarly resist the idea that for Wharton “morality is contextual” (White 80). Although circumstance and situation play major roles in Wharton’s plots, she never abandoned the search for absolute standards that can unify and transcend experience.

One’s thoughts and beliefs do not develop in a vacuum. I therefore consider Wharton’s religious, spiritual, and philosophical concerns in relation to nineteenth-century discoveries in science, history, anthropology, and philosophy, explaining how these developments challenged traditional systems of belief and, in some cases, led to unbelief. In so doing, I read Edith Wharton as a preeminently American author, despite her long years of French expatriation. Finally, I consider Wharton’s gender and class, tracing the meaning of faith and reason for an upper-class female writer of the Victorian and modern eras. Wharton, I argue, both reproduces and transforms the predominantly male, Christian and Neoplatonic traditions that she inherits.

Wharton’s grasp of religious, spiritual, and philosophical matters was deep and broad, and, as an explorer of uncharted territory, I have necessarily drawn some boundaries. An introductory chapter situates Wharton’s religious and spiritual development in the context of late nineteenth-century Christianity, evolution, aesthetics, philosophy, and feminism. Six chronologically arranged chapters address the relationship between Wharton’s life and writing by focusing on the short fiction and seven representative novels: *The House of Mirth*, *Ethan Frome*, *The Reef*, *Summer*, *The Age of Innocence*, *Hudson River Bracketed*, and *The Gods Arrive*. These chapters explore in detail Wharton’s intellectuality and interest in Darwinism (Chapter 1); her Episcopalian background and affinity for Calvinism (Chapter 2); her fascination with ancient goddesses and matriarchies (Chapter 3); her experimentation with aestheticism as a substitute for religion (Chapter 4); her construction of Platonic idealism (Chapter 5); and her near conversion to Catholicism (Chapter 6). Tracing the various intellectual and religious features of Wharton’s fiction reveals how systematically she pursued difficult spiritual and philosophical questions. Although Edith Wharton never found completely satisfactory answers, she never gave up her search. This book is a tribute to that search and the longing that accompanied it.

Many teachers, colleagues, and friends have generously guided this project. I thank Barton St. Armand, whose extraordinary knowledge of and enthu-

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siasm for nineteenth-century American literature helped me to place Edith Wharton in a rich literary and intellectual tradition. I also thank David Hirsch and Robert Scholes for their early readings of the manuscript and valuable suggestions for its development. The Edith Wharton Society provided welcome forums for presenting chapters-in-progress; I am grateful, in particular, to Kathy Fedorko, Susan Goodman, Katherine Joslin, Helen Killoran, Scott Marshall, Kay Mussell, Alan Price, Abbe Werlock, Cynthia Griffin Wolff, and Annette Zilversmit for their expert advice. Edward Kessler, Walter Benn Michaels, Kevin Moore, Carmen Nocentelli, and students from my seminars provided helpful comments on individual chapters. Warm appreciation goes to Gordon Kinsey, Mariah Martin, Roberta Rubenstein, and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney for their careful reading of chapters and unfailing intellectual and emotional encouragement. I also extend a warm thank you to Edith Wharton's godson, William Royall Tyler, whose many conversations helped me keep *le sacré feu* for Edith Wharton burning. Finally, a Research Council Grant from Rutgers University helped provide the necessary time and funds to bring this project to completion.

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