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Edith Wharton’s Higher Provincialism: *French Ways* for Americans and the Ends of *The Age of Innocence*

MICHAEL NOWLIN

“How much longer,” Edith Wharton lamented in a July 1919 letter to Barrett Wendell, “are we going to think it necessary to be ‘American’ before (or in contradistinction to) being cultivated, being enlightened, being humane, & having the same intellectual discipline as other civilized countries?”¹ She was having her publishers send him her most recent book, *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919), a collection of essays written in large part to instruct her compatriots in the ways of an exemplary civilization. Wharton’s complaint found its way into her 1920 novel *The Age of Innocence*, which she began working on soon after *French Ways* was published; though in this instance it was voiced from a different quarter and had potentially radical implications. Responding to staid, old New Yorker Newland Archer’s complaint that “the country was in the possession of the bosses and the emigrant, and decent people had to fall back on sport or culture,” his friend Ned Winsett—a struggling writer who affects what Newland thinks of as “the boring ‘Bohemian’ pose”—declaims:

Culture! Yes – if we had it! But there are just a few little local patches, dying out here and there for lack of – well, hoeing and cross-fertilising: the last remnants of the Old European tradition that your forebears brought with them. But you’re in a pitiful little minority: you’ve got no centre, no competition, no audience. You’re like the pictures on the walls of a deserted house: “The Portrait of a Gentleman.” You’ll never amount to anything, any of you, till you roll up your sleeves and get right down into the muck.”²

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Wendell, a professor of English and comparative literature at Harvard, was one of the many friends and acquaintances—including Charles Eliot Norton, William Crary Brownell, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Henry James, Theodore Roosevelt, and Gaillard Lapsley—with whom Wharton shared in varying degrees a high regard for what Winsett calls here “the old European tradition,” entailing as this did a sense of the “Anglo-Saxon” origins of America’s civic and cultural virtues, a belief in the superiority of European cultural institutions, and a residual, if critical, attachment to the genteel tradition in art and letters. But for all the evidence of Wharton’s enduring ties with the guardians of a besieged genteel tradition and Anglo-Saxon America, she took seriously the cultural yearnings of a host of younger, “new” New York intellectual radicals who posed a crucial challenge to them.

I would argue that Ned Winsett’s declamation has an anachronistic dimension to it, and brings to the scene of mid-1870s New York a discourse about the nature of and prospects for a distinct “American culture” that flourished in the 1910s, the formative decade of American modernism. Though Winsett is historically plausible as a dissident figure (like the Free Love advocate Dr. Agathon Carver and the “long-haired men and short-haired women” connected to Emerson Sillerton), the term “Bohemian” as applied to a denizen of lower New York suggests Wharton’s familiarity with the Greenwich Village intellectual scene that had gained notoriety by 1919. *French Ways and Their Meaning* and *The Age of Innocence*, in obvious respects so qualitatively different, are in fact complementary cultural nationalist texts, as I shall demonstrate, uniquely interesting for the way in which they underscore the shared assumptions and anxieties of both “traditionalists” and “modernists” about America’s need for “culture” at the moment of America’s ascendency to a position of global power and influence. In navigating both

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3 The term “Anglo-Saxon” was flexible, and certainly could include those with Dutch ancestry such as Wharton and Roosevelt. Furthermore, though Wharton’s *French Ways and Their Meaning* found “Anglo-Saxon” ways wanting in some respects, it did so in fundamental accord with this class-based complex of values and beliefs. Thus a reviewer for the *New Republic* had good grounds for quipping, “Some American snobs adopt England; others adopt France. Mrs. Wharton has adopted France” (*Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Review*, eds. James W. Tuttleton, Kristin O. Lauer, and Margaret P. Murray (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 273).

4 That Wharton’s habits of reading and correspondence, not to mention her friendships, suggest a sustained engagement with American intellectual life even after she permanently left the United States in 1911 has been well established by Elizabeth Ammons, in *Edith Wharton’s Argument with America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980) and by Dale Bauer, in *Edith Wharton’s Brave New Politics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994). On the emergence of “Bohemian” New York with origins in the 1890s, see Christine
sides of an apparent cultural divide, Wharton made an intricate, personal case for the virtues of elitism, cultural authoritarianism, and social custom in grounding the very critical self-consciousness, liberalty, and even iconoclasm essential to national “growth.” “Culture” was an equivocal key term, I shall argue, that enabled her to engage “young America” with skeptical sympathy: she drew on its different but entangled meanings to make a usable past of her girlhood “province,” and exhibited in her critical relation to “old New York” a kind of higher provincialism by which she also took the measure of a hazy cosmopolitanism divorced from cultural tradition and social power. That higher provincialism, finally, was in her view thoroughly compatible with embracing America’s imperial prospects, the necessary attitude cultivated Americans must assume if they hoped to see their nation rank alongside the great European empires of the past.

Ned Winsett was singled out in Van Wyck Brooks’s contribution to the 1922 volume Civilization in the United States as typifying – in his failure and frustration – the man of letters in a predominantly commercial and materialistic society. He surely serves to sound the “knell,” as George Santayana put it in a landmark essay of 1911, “that tolls the passing of the genteel tradition.”


this in his 1915 book, *America’s Coming-of-Age*, in an allusive trope with which Wharton’s greatest post-war novel resonates:

It is, in fact, the plain, fresh, homely, impertinent, essentially innocent old America that has passed, and in its passing the allegory of Rip Van Winkle has been filled with a new meaning. Hendrik Hudson and his men, we see, have begun another game of bowls, and the reverberations are heard in many a summer thunderstorm; but they have been miraculously changed into Jews, Magyars, and German socialists.\(^7\)

Winsett, who takes Newland to German beer parlors, proves to have given his more privileged friend an uncannily effective warning about his cultural responsibilities. Reviewing his life in the epilogue to the novel set a quarter century after the main action, Newland is like a latter-day Rip in feeling like a relic from the past—even “prehistoric,” as his son jokingly puts it.\(^8\) His prim Victorian wife has been long dead; the city he grew up in has been dramatically transformed; he speaks on the telephone to his son across the continent, uses electric lighting, and is scheduled to make a five-day transatlantic voyage to France. But, more significantly, we find him presiding over the expansion of a world-class museum rather than being a wall-piece within it, and anticipating the marriage of his son to the daughter of Julius Beaufort (the novel’s Jewish parvenu) and his former mistress Fanny Ring—a marriage across blood and class lines that signals growth and expansion rather than decay.\(^9\)

*The Age of Innocence* certainly spoke to modernist sensibilities. Sinclair Lewis wrote Wharton expressing his admiration for the work, despite the irony of its having been chosen instead of his *Main Street* by a Pulitzer Prize committee under the possible veto power of Columbia University’s arch-conservative president Nicholas Murray Butler.\(^10\) She responded warmly, grateful for this “first sign” that “‘les jeunes’ at home had ever read a word of me.”\(^11\) (Lewis would dedicate his 1922 novel *Babbitt* to her, and Wharton would go on to praise Lewis and Theodore Dreiser as important American novelists.) A young Edmund Wilson wrote an enthusiastic appreciation of the novel for *Vanity Fair*, praising it for attacking “the tradition of the people of education and taste from the point of view of the artist and citizen of the world.”\(^12\)

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\(^3\) Unlike Simon Rosedale of *The House of Mirth*, Julius Beaufort is never explicitly described as a Jew; nonetheless in several respects he fits the profile of the Jewish character who has successfully “passed”; see Knights, “Forms of Disembodiment,” 33–34; and MacMaster, “Wharton, Race, and *The Age of Innocence*,” 199–200.


\(^6\) Edmund Wilson, Jr., “Things I Consider Underrated: Three Essays in Constructive Criticism,” *Vanity Fair*, 16 (March 1921), 38.
Francis Hackett, reviewing for the *New Republic*, emphasized the similarities between the novelist’s treatment of Old New York and the relativistic ethnographic method of Elsie Clews Parsons, an ardent feminist and student of Franz Boas.\(^{13}\) And, of course, the novel contains a radical critique of the institution of marriage, one resembling that found not only in the writings of Parsons but of Emma Goldman, the notorious anarchist deported from the United States in December of 1919. Paraphrasing “sex-radical” Edward Carpenter, Goldman wrote in her 1911 pamphlet “Marriage and Love” that “behind every marriage stands the life-long environment of the two sexes; an environment so different from each other that man and woman must remain strangers.”\(^{14}\) The passage might have served as the epigraph to the novel.

Still, if self-styled “moderns” saw *The Age of Innocence* intervening on the side of the angels in debates about the basis of a vital national culture, *French Ways and Their Meaning* seems to do precisely the opposite. And yet the earlier text, however inferior to the novel, cannot be dismissed as an aberration.\(^{15}\) Her idealistic model of French civilization bears the same argument about enlightened cultural stability and continuity being necessary conditions of intellectual freedom, moral growth, and social revolution as her thickly described portrait of the provincial, homogenous, and seemingly vanished “tribal” order of old New York. Both works are haunted by the rhythm of modernity – by discoveries of buried cultures; by war-ruined villages; by technological transformations that make realism out of romance overnight; by heralds of the new in philosophy, art, politics, and morals; by a wartime visit to Africa; by museums that would preserve civilizations and private passions against what Newland Archer thinks of, with respect to Ellen Olenska’s fragile beauty, as “the stupid law of change.”\(^{16}\) “Culture” is the
equivocal keyword linking both texts, affiliating Wharton with both the apologists for an older America and with American modernists, and dividing her sympathies between the provincial Newland Archer and such deracinated citizens of the world as Ellen Olenska, Ned Winsett, and Monsieur de Rivière. Wharton was fully conversant with ethnographic and sociological understandings of “culture,” to the point, arguably, of recognizing the modernist turn in anthropology away from an evolutionary and towards a cultural relativist paradigm. But she was even more deeply conversant with the concept of “culture” in the sense so famously articulated by Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) – the shared body of humanistic ideals, institutions, art objects, and critical and aesthetic practices that make for humankind’s growth, through education, toward spiritual perfection. “Culture” in this rarer sense is something that a “culture” in the more common, descriptive sense may have or lack. Wharton thus would have sympathized with any effort to establish “culture” in America, while regarding as self-deceptive or delusional the notion that it could be founded on native grounds alone. As she wrote to her friend Daisy Chanler of Van Wyck Brooks (after reading his 1925 book *The Pilgrimage of Henry James*), “as no one could possibly write as good English as he does, & really believe that [human relations in America are intrinsically as interesting as in the old centres of civilization & social life], I conclude that, like the rest of his wistful minority, he is whistling to keep his courage up.” Try as they would to disavow it, America’s young cultural nationalists and modernist rebels were fundamentally dependent on notions of culture and criticism derived from

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18 In Bentley’s formulation, “Wharton appears to transcend blithely the distinction between a humanist tradition, in which culture signifies a set of prized Western values that advance human perfectibility, and a sociological sense of culture as the web of institutions and lived relations that structure any human community . . . .” (*Ethnography of Manners, 3–4*). For a standard discussion of the interrelationship between Arnoldian humanistic “culture” and E. B. Tylor’s founding anthropological definition of “culture,” see George W. Stocking, Jr., *Race, Evolution and Culture: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), 69–90. 19 Cited in Lewis and Lewis, eds., *Letters of Edith Wharton*, 493.
Victorian England and most fully realized, to Wharton’s mind, by the deeply traditionalist French.

Let us recall Ned Winsett’s speech. Calling for the “culture” that “we” lack, Wharton’s Ned Winsett speaks nationallyistically and yet as one spiritually homeless within a nation witnessing the decay of the Anglo-Saxon elite. His outburst is noteworthy for conflating in a tortuous but revealing way the Arnoldian ideal of “culture” with “culture” in the sense of a whole, customary way of life. With a sleight-of-hand facilitated by her due regard for etymology, Wharton makes patches of vegetation the figurative vehicle for rooted peoples whose isolation, dwindling numbers, and indifference to potential sources of cultivation—“cross-fertilising” and/or recognition of their proper cultural heritage—will prove fatal. And it will prove especially fatal before the onslaught of “the bosses and the emigrant”: the powerful “them” whom Winsett insists Newland’s “pitiful minority,” bearing “the last remnants of the Old European tradition,” must become if a collective “we” is to have “culture.” Wharton reveals here the resilience of the ideal of a higher culture and more “cultivated” citizenry, adaptable as it was to more radical visions of social and aesthetic perfection. It surfaced under various pressures: class and ethnic strife, as in the particular scene in question, but also the rise of mass culture and consumerism, the prospect of women’s emancipation, and, not least, the war. And it tended to be entangled in metaphors of organic growth (and stagnation or decay), suggesting the inextricability of higher notions of “culture” from evolutionary-ethnographic conceptions of what we might call embedded or enculturated bodies, individual and collective.

“American civilization is still in the embryonic stage,” wrote Harold Stearns in his preface to Civilization in the United States, “with rich and with disastrous possibilities of growth. But the first step in growing up is self-conscious and deliberately critical examination of ourselves, without sentimentality and without fear.” Having conquered the Western frontier,

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20 The elitist cultural tendencies of left-wing American modernists have been documented and commented upon by various scholars. In her far-reaching study, Susan Hegeman, for example, has traced the confluent development of Franz Boas’s school of anthropology at Columbia University and of the cultural criticism emerging from Greenwich Village to show how easily, in “the more elite realms of intellectual discourse, relativist and hierarchical conceptions of the term [culture] coexisted and even intermingled” (Patterns of America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 18). Also see Stansell, American Moderns, 133–59, on the cultural high-mindedness of the most politically radical of Villagers, Emma Goldman; and Alexander, Here the Country Lies, 70–71, on the shared faith in cultural elevation linking cultural nationalists to apologists for the genteel tradition.

“we” Americans “nearly the period of culture,” Waldo Frank told his French and American readers in Our America (1919): “The American body was full grown. … What we needed now was self-control of our vastness, self-consciousness, articulation.”22 “A focal centre,” demanded Van Wyck Brooks in America’s Coming-of Age, “that is the first requisite of a great people”: by this I do not mean the sense of national and imperial destiny which has consolidated the great temporal powers of history. I mean that national “point of rest” … that secure and unobtrusive element of national character, taken for granted, and providing a certain underlying coherence and background of mutual understanding which Rome, for example, had in everything the name of Cato called up, or England in her great remembered worthies, or the elder Germany in Martin Luther. “National culture,” to speak in the dialect of our own time, is only the perhaps too conscious equivalent of this element in which everything admirably characteristic of a people sums itself up, which creates everywhere a kind of spiritual team-work, which radiates outward and articulates the entire living fabric of a race.23 Brooks takes pains here to distinguish “national culture” from the aggressive sense of imperial destiny that he and the likes of Frank, Stearns, and Randolph Bourne deplored, but his examples betray the complementary relation these tend to bear to one another. Wharton more boldly acknowledged the imperialist underpinnings of America’s need for cultural distinction: “We are a new people, a pioneer people, a people destined by fate to break up new continents and experiment in new social conditions,” she announces near the outset of French Ways and Their Meaning. “America is now ripe to take her share in the long inheritance of the races she descends from,” she elaborates later, “and it is a pity that at this time the inclination of the immense majority of Americans is setting away from all real education and real culture.”24 The radical proponents of a “real,” vital, national culture tended to argue that its sources lay not in the “Anglo-Saxon” culture young America bore a colonial relation to, but in the ethnic cultures being carried over by its disparate immigrant populations.25 Differences of opinion on this issue reveal less, however, than the shared assumptions and anxieties about the threat to

22 Waldo Frank, Our America (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919), 22. Frank’s book bears an uncanny kinship to Wharton’s French Ways and Their Meaning, the latter being an explanation of French culture to Americans initiated by mass-market magazine interest, the former an explanation of American culture to the French instigated by French publishers Jacques Copeau and Gaston Gallimard. 23 Brooks, America’s Coming of Age, 64. 24 Edith Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning (New York: Appleton, 1919), 19, 72. 25 See, for example, Stearns, Civilization in the United States, vii, and Frank, Our America, 164–64. Another important argument was being made on behalf of the African-American basis to the national culture – most influentially articulated in W. E. B. DuBois’s The Souls of Black Folk (1903) and reiterated in James Weldon Johnson’s anonymously published Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912). But there is no evidence I know of that Wharton ever
“civilization” posed by America’s culture-less state. For Wharton, the menace inherent, for example, in laissez-faire attitudes toward the common language – one that might be offset by the presence of a regulatory Academy along French lines – readily warrants tropes of savagery and primitive regression:

It is not difficult to discover what becomes of a language left to itself, without accepted standards or restrictions; instances may be found among any savage tribes without fixed standards of speech. Their language speedily ceases to be one, and deteriorates into a muddle of unstable dialects. ... [T]he lover of English need only note what that rich language has shrunk to on the lips, and in the literature, of the heterogeneous hundred millions of American citizens who, without uniformity of tradition or recognised guidance, are being suffered to work their many wills upon it.26

An analogous vision of anarchy surfaces in the most memorable argument from the period on behalf of a multi-ethnic American culture – Randolph Bourne’s “Trans-national America,” which appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in 1916. Bourne’s essay betrays a remarkably hostile picture of the most tangible sign of disintegrating centers of cultural cohesion, namely, “masses of people who are cultural half-breeds, neither assimilated Anglo-Saxons nor nationals of another culture.”27 Just as Wharton refuses to hear what H. L. Mencken was codifying as the “American” language in the barbaric exchanges in the street, so Bourne refuses to see anything but the repudiation of real “culture(s)” in the drift toward American mass culture:

Just so as we tend to disintegrate these nuclei of nationalistic culture do we tend to create hordes of men and women without a spiritual country, cultural outlaws, without taste, without standards but those of the mob. The influences at the centre of the nuclei are centripetal. They make for the intelligence and the social values that mean an enhancement of life. ... The influences at the fringe, however, are centrifugal, anarchical. They make for detached fragments of peoples. ... They become the flotsam and jetsam of American life, the downward undertow of our civilization with its leering cheapness and falseness of taste and spiritual outlook, the absence of mind and sincere feeling which we see in our slovenly towns, our rapid moving pictures, our popular novels, and in the vacuous faces of the crowds on a city street. This is the cultural wreckage of our time, and it is from the fringes of the Anglo-Saxon as well as the other stocks that it falls. America has as yet no impelling integrating force.28

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26 Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning, 49–50.
28 Ibid., 114.
Like the more radical advocates of a spiritually unifying American culture, Wharton speaks from the post-provincial, cosmopolitan standpoint increasingly accessible to Americans as an effect of both the centralizing tendencies in the nation since the end of the Civil War and, more recently, of the United States’s emergence as an aggressive global power. Defenses of what Josiah Royce conceptualized as culturally vital provincial centers (and which Bourne and Horace Kallen found analogues for in ethnic “nuclei”), coupled with denunciations of the vulgarizing, standardizing tendencies in American life, were by the 1910s a familiar theme in American letters. A greater urgency begins to attach to these because of their coming international impact. Hence the horrific revelation afflicting Carol Kennicott, the heroine of Lewis’s Main Street: everything represented by the small midwestern town “is no longer merely provincial, no longer downy and restful in its leaf-shadowed ignorance. It is a force seeking to dominate the earth, to drain the hills and sea of color, to set Dante at boosting Gopher Prairie, and to dress the high gods in Klassy Kollege Klothes.” Whether the coming American century made it imperative to create “a consciousness of American life,” as Frank describes Brooks doing, or imperative to find the basis for American culture in an already existing “common mind and a common will that shall be coherent, continuous, and self-consistent,” as Wharton’s friend Gaillard Lapsley put it, the fundamental problem shaping the discourse of American cultural nationalism, in its dominant strands, was how to ensure the continuity of a Eurocentric “civilization” in the hands of a new people whose cultural uniqueness might lie precisely in its contact with “primitive” tribes on native grounds, its multi-ethnic urban cacophony, and its vulgar popular culture.

Bourne countered his real antipathy toward American mass culture in “Trans-national America” with an idealistic vision of America as exemplary among nations for being “already the world-federation in miniature, the continent where for the first time in history has been achieved that miracle of hope, the peaceful living side by side, with character substantially preserved, of the most heterogeneous peoples under the sun.” This image – conjured as it was before America entered the war – looks very much like a federation of peacefully coexisting European states, whose citizens are destined to carry

29 Sinclair Lewis, Main Street (1920; New York: Penguin, 1995), 241–42.
31 Bourne, “Trans-national America,” 117.
the light of the “novel international nation” they have helped build back to the old countries: they return, tellingly, like “missionar[ies] to an inferior civilization”; “they return with an entirely new critical outlook, and a sense of the superiority of American organization to the primitive living around them.”

For Bourne, finally, America had an imperial duty to stay out of—or, more precisely, above—the European conflict, as much as for someone like Wharton, America had an imperial duty to enter it on the side of France and England: at stake from both perspectives was Eurocentric “civilization” itself. Poles apart though they were on the issues of America’s cultural makeup and wartime responsibility, Bourne and Wharton were in harmony on the global implications of America’s possession of “culture.” *French Ways and Their Meaning* advances Bourne’s contention that “only America … can lead in this cosmopolitan enterprise.”

Bourne’s vision of “trans-national America,” despite charging “the Anglo-Saxon element” in America with imposing “its own culture upon the minority peoples,” finally works as much to redeem as it does to bury Anglo-Saxon America. Speaking “as an Anglo Saxon,” Bourne invites “the Anglo-Saxon [to] ask himself where he would have been if these [other] races had not come?” For an answer to this rhetorical question, the Anglo-Saxon need only look to the American South, the region supposedly representing the last stronghold of pure Americanism. Bourne’s stereotyped description of the South here strikingly resembles Wharton’s portrait of old New York in *The Age of Innocence*: “The South … still remains an English colony, stagnant and complacent, having progressed culturally scarcely beyond the early Victorian era. It is culturally sterile because it has had no advantage of cross-fertilization like the Northern states.” If we hear Bourne’s essay echoed in Ned Winsett’s outburst, we might be tempted to identify Winsett with those naturalized immigrants whom Bourne describes as the “true friends” of the culture-starved Anglo-Saxon. (“These friends are oblivious,” he adds, “of the repressions of that tight little society in which he so provincially grew up. He has a pleasurable sense of his own liberation from the stale and familiar attitudes of those whose ingrowing culture has scarcely created anything vital for his America of to-day.”) But unlike Bourne’s unpressed and culture-rich ethnic Americans, Winsett is himself starving for culture, and looking...
ultimately not to the denizens of Bohemia but to a more established “minority,” represented by Newland Archer, to supply or create it. The ending of the novel, I repeat, reveals this encounter to have borne fruit, which suggests the “cross-fertilisation” that helps transform old New York into the emerging metropolitan center of the Western world owes as much to the impact uprooted “Anglo-Saxons” have had on the self-reflexive but rooted Anglo-Saxon subject as to the “new blood and new money” wrung from outsiders.37

In The Age of Innocence, the transplanted harbingers of the modern – Ellen Olenska, Ned Winsett, and Monsieur Rivière – provoke in Newland a self-consciousness about his provinciality that leaves him forever discontented. At the same time, deliberately or otherwise, they awaken him to the liberating imperatives of “the old European tradition,” which at once undergirds the cohesion and homogeneity of “the tribe,” justifies its perpetuation, and, most importantly, sanctions the transgressions against itself essential to social evolution. “The Old European tradition,” in effect, is Ned Winsett’s term for that spiritually elevating resource that Arnold called “culture,” by which entitled Americans, tied to distinct “local patches,” may imagine themselves citizens of someplace else, because they may imagine themselves as universal people. “Culture” facilitates what Royce called “the Higher Provincialism” – the capacity to be “servants and lovers of your own community and its ways, as well as citizens of the world,” and not incidentally an attitude conducive to “assimilating to our own social order the strangers that are within our gates.”38 It includes what Lapsley insisted was England’s most precious bequest to America: the cultural ideal of “the rule of law,” which “constitutes the true unity of the American people and the strangers who have cast their lots with America. It has led them by paths they little expected to tread, but the guidance has never been in doubt.”39 The “culture” that Newland turns to in his private library – which includes the latest British and French literature as well as “the Books of Primitive Man that people of advanced culture were beginning to read”40 – provides him with that “inward condition” that makes a specifically modern, post-provincial, ethnographic mode of seeing possible and valuable.41 Newland’s “growth” from tribal specimen to modern citizen initially comes at the diminution of his culture. Coldly observing the ritual of his own wedding, he bemoans the “unreal

37 See Wharton, Age of Innocence, 1059.
40 Wharton, The Age of Innocence, 1051. 41 See Bentley, Ethnography of Manners, 74.
manner and custom of his little tribe.” And yet it is precisely the presence of such a self-conscious cultural subject capable of regarding his culture as archaic, arbitrary, or strange — as historical and relational, in effect — that signals his province’s capacity to shape and even lead a responsible, enlightened, imperial nation.

In *A Backward Glance* (1934), Wharton made plain her genealogical connection to “the Americans of the original States, who in moments of crisis still shaped the national point of view ...”; at the same time she presupposed this to be insufficient grounds for cultural authority because of the more modern nation’s “total” rejection of “the old tradition of European culture” borne by them. She knew her authority to stem, rather, from her capacity to register — as a French resident who had imbibed what Bourne called “the cosmopolitan spirit” — what it means to have learned to see her “original” American home as strange, as an ethnographically circumscribed “culture” defined by arbitrary codes of behavior that may be incommensurate with the ways of others. In *French Ways and Their Meaning*, Wharton makes the measure of her “growth” her enlightened attitude toward the childhood self who feared “bogies,” an attitude that, through an analogy readily available to the reader of E. B. Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1871) or Sir James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890, 1900, 1911), also signifies her distance from “the childhood of the human race, where terror and taboos lurk in every bush ...” She makes her own evolutionary emergence from a primitive state, in effect, illustrative of the natural course the American nation should take, even as nature cannot come into its own, it seems, without the intervention of the cultural virtue of “intellectual honesty,” so honored by the French and here modeled by Wharton herself: “Till a society ceases to be afraid of the truth in the domain of ideas, it is in leading-strings, morally and mentally.”

Sounding as much like Emma Goldman or H. L. Mencken as Matthew Arnold here, Wharton seems to be encoding her genuine revolt against that provincial, Puritanical society, a revolt manifested in her choice of vocation, her interest in modern ideas, her secret affair with Morton Fullerton and divorce from her husband, her decision to settle in Europe.

And yet Wharton’s writings about old New York, even at their most ironic and satirical, consistently suggest that the seeds of her capacity to grow, and to benefit from the experience of her own alienation, were sown in that

42 Wharton, *Age of Innocence*, 1159.
44 Bourne, “Trans-national America,” 121.
45 Wharton, *French Ways and Their Meaning*, 58.
46 Ibid., 58–59.
“local patch,” where exposure to the higher “culture” of European art, literature, ideas and manners (abetted greatly by the substantial capital her family had made in the new world) helped her develop the rich, agonistic inner life that modernist cultural criticism so assiduously promoted and often despaired of finding. In the old New York of The Age of Innocence, the European presence is everywhere visible and audible – in cultural institutions like gentlemen’s libraries and opera houses, in extended trips to Europe and European visitors, in the hyper-consciousness of more liberal European mores suggested by the existence of kept women, even in its more modern, unsettling manifestations such as Mrs. Lemuel Struthers’ salon and those German beer parlors, the kinds of makeshift institutions that would eventually have their destructive impact on the genteel tradition. Wharton’s ostensibly radical commitment to criticism per se is so evidently conditioned by a commitment to the regulatory power of civilized precedent and cultural memory.

In the chapter on “Continuity” in French Ways and Their Meaning, Wharton draws on a stock mythos of American origins to define Americans in terms of their exceptional experience of discontinuity. Against the centuries-old continuity and resilience of French culture – sustained, as Wharton imagines it, in the face of revolution and occupation – she contrasts “the sudden uprooting of our American ancestors and their violent cutting off from all their past, when they set out to create a new state in a new hemisphere, in a new climate, and out of new materials.” No people committed to the expansion of “civilization” has so starkly faced the prospect of losing all connection to it. Whereas recently discovered prehistoric paintings in caves throughout Spain and France supposedly reveal a genealogical connection between the “men of the dawn” who created them and the modern French, similar findings in America suggest a more unsettling cultural narrative to Wharton:

The traces of a very ancient culture discovered in the United States and Central America prove the far-off existence of an artistic and civic development unknown to the races found by the first European explorers. But the origin and date of these vanished societies are as yet unguessed at, and even were it otherwise they would not count in our artistic and social inheritance, since the English and Dutch colonists found only a wilderness peopled by savages, who had kept no link of memory with those vanished societies. There had been a complete break of continuity.

47 As Bauer argues, Wharton would make the rich, inner life she had already cultivated a flexible instrument with which to critique various forces of standardization that threatened it in the last decades of her life: see Edith Wharton’s Brave New Politics, 3–12.
48 Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning, 82.                      49 Ibid., 77–79.
Discontinuity and savagery go hand in hand in this picture, savagery occupying a spatial and temporal “wilderness” between “cultures,” the one lost and irreclaimable, the other a prospective “new race” poised to conquer a continent. More importantly, savagery is defined here by a failure to remember, which is also a failure to imaginatively relate one’s living culture to a dead one under the sign of a common human history. Clearly, the “savages” in the wilderness figure forth the culture-less condition of the American colonists themselves, who, having no connection to what Frank called the “buried cultures” of the New World, and being “uprooted” from the Old World cultures that sustained them, stand poised to descend into barbarism.

Those imaginary pioneers, the first “Americans” who orphaned themselves to build a new land, are cautionary figures in turn for “the new race” of Americans Wharton figuratively regards as coming into its majority:

We [Americans] are growing up at last; and it is only in maturity that a man glances back along the past, and sees the uses of the constraints that irritated his impatient youth. So with races and nations; and America has reached the very moment in her development when she may best understand what has kept older races and riper civilizations sound.50

Both her uprooted first Americans and her crucial trope of maturation are glaringly inconsistent with the micro-history of New York that informs Wharton’s better writings and indeed determines her relation to America. For, as I have established, she more typically represents her English and Dutch forebears as having brought with them “the old European tradition,” which, however attenuated though centuries of material development, geographical expansion, and patterns of immigration, remains a latent resource to be called upon at such critical moments as the present, when the United States is assuming its place of partnership with the great empires of Britain and France. Young America stands to inherit what was always already its own. The sideward glance at France and its ever-vital traditions also incorporates a backward glance at the “constraints” that helped sustain an older America metonymically represented by old New York, “the tribe” Wharton later described as “the conservative element that holds new societies together as seaplants bind the seashore.”51

France, for Wharton, models both an old civilization for the new, and a civilization so stable that terms like “old” and “new” carry different valences. In French Ways and Their Meaning, France is at once the most highly evolved of civilized societies—“the most human of the human race, the

50 Ibid., 36.
most completely detached from the lingering spell of the ancient shadowy world in which trees and animals talked to each other, and began the education of the fumbling beast that was to deviate into Man” – and one of many all too human “cultures” whom Americans might learn from. The “faults of France” sound remarkably like the faults of old New York: “faults inherent in an old and excessively self-contained civilization …” And yet these are offset by specifically modern virtues. Inconsistencies aside, Wharton’s “French ways” are an exemplary synthesis of the conservative virtues of “reverence,” standards of “taste,” and “continuity,” on the one hand, and the progressive virtues of “intellectual honesty” – the capacity to see one’s cultural condition as it really is and thus improve it – and sexual egalitarianism, on the other. With respect to the latter practice, French ways preclude the necessity of women’s suffrage (a right gained by American women in 1920), since “grown up” men and women experience “equality” as a cultural condition rather than a legal fiction. Wharton’s discussion of “the new Frenchwoman” again oddly resonates with the writings of a radical like Goldman, who also held the vote to be of superficial significance; but whereas, for Goldman, grown up men and women use their complementary powers to advance a radically new social and economic order, for Wharton they share a common interest in maintaining France’s uniquely liberal but traditional way of life. French ways, finally, are an exemplary synthesis of old New York traditionalism and the more general American tendency toward irreverence and “idol-breaking.” Though she glosses over France’s history of violent revolution, Wharton is clearly attuned to the paradox whereby “the most conservative of western races” has earned a reputation for being so emancipated. The French are clearly admired by Wharton for their capacity to contain – in the sense both of harboring and channeling – revolutionary impulses in politics, in mores, in art and ideas. Balancing “risk” with “reverence,” a willingness to “take[...e] the open seas instead of staying in

52 Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning, xxii.
53 Compare Wharton’s chapter on “The New Frenchwoman” (French Ways and Their Meaning, 98–121) and Goldman’s essays on women’s suffrage and emancipation in Anarchism and Other Essays, 191–223. French Ways and Their Meaning has been of some interest to feminist scholars since Ammons drew attention to this chapter for its feminist implications; see Edith Wharton’s Argument with America, 146–47. But whatever feminist sentiments Wharton expresses there are inseparable from a deeper social conservatism: for a useful critique of Ammons and others on this point, see Julie Olin-Ammentorp, “Wharton’s View of Woman in French Ways and Their Meaning,” Edith Wharton Review, 9 (Fall 1992), 15–18; and for a response to Olin-Ammentorp, see Laurel Fryer-Smith, “Another Reading of Wharton’s View of Women in French Ways and Their Meaning,” Edith Wharton Review, 11 (Fall 1994), 13–14, 16. 54 See Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning, 30, 32, 34–35.
55 Ibid., 84.
port” without fear of moral anarchy, 56 Wharton’s French make an ideal imperial “race.” For their claim on the universalist ideals of aesthetic and intellectual “culture” – “culture” in the sense that Arnold, with his eye on France, had in mind – has long proven compatible with the experience of longstanding racial customs and provincial practices that have given the French a unique, national “culture” over time and made them model caretakers of exotic, indigenous cultures worldwide. 57

The America Wharton idealistically summons in French Ways – an America poised to dominate the globe without threatening the vital “ways” of other cultures – contains the fundamental ingredients of this ideal conservative-revolutionary nation. No clearer description of what Ned Winsett means when he casually invokes “the old European tradition” can be found than in the concluding pages of the chapter on “Continuity”:

America has, in part at least, a claim on the great general inheritance of Western culture. She inherits France through England, and Rome and the Mediterranean culture, through France. These are the indirect and remote sources of enrichment; but she has directly, in her possession and in her keeping, the magnificent, the matchless inheritance of English speech and letters. 58

This passage reveals how readily a notion of culture inseparable from nation coexisted, for Wharton, with a trans-national “culture” binding the great civilizations of the world (not surprisingly, the recent Allies minus revolutionary Russia) in an evolutionary, genealogical relationship, the new world child being the most prominent heir. It also reveals the extent to which America’s filial relationship with England mediates its connection to France, which suggests that America has the potential to be something more than England or France themselves can ever be. In order finally to come into its own as “a new race,” however, the American nation must draw from the

56 See ibid., 120.
57 See Wharton’s tribute to General Hubert Lyautey, résident général of the French protectorate of Morocco, especially for his good work of preserving indigenous Moroccan culture, in In Morocco (New York: Scribner’s, 1920), 220–22. Wharton took the self-servingly paradoxical view common to imperialists like her friend Roosevelt that civilized nations had a duty to preserve “cultures” from native disregard or the potential destructiveness of imperialism. In Morocco, published in the same year as The Age of Innocence, has recently been the object of critical attention focused on Wharton’s unabashed apology for French colonialist practices; the best of several “post-colonial” readings of the book is Charlotte Rich’s “Edith Wharton and the Politics of Colonialism: The Good Public Relations of In Morocco,” Edith Wharton Review, 11 (Fall 1999), 8–14. For an excellent study of Wharton’s imperialist outlook in general and its expression in her fiction, see Frederick Wegener, “‘Rabid Imperialist’: Edith Wharton and the Obligations of Empire in Modern American Fiction,” American Literature, 72 (December 2000), 783–812.
58 Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning, 96.
lesson of “French ways” – already a model synthesis of centripetal and centrifugal, transcendental and worldly, energies – a new synthesis comprising “the qualities of enterprise and innovation that English blood has put in us” with “that ‘sense of the past’ which enriches the present and binds us up with the world’s great stabilising traditions of art and poetry and knowledge.”

The revolutionary and conservative strands of Wharton’s cultural criticism – the adventurous, dispassionate realism, even iconoclasm, on the one hand, and the commitment to cultural memory, on the other – are represented most compellingly by Ellen Olenska and Newland Archer, the two lovers left forever severed from one another in *The Age of Innocence*, but whose intimate encounter has had far-reaching effects. Uprooted from old New York since childhood, Ellen is the chief catalyst of Newland’s awakening. We can only surmise that she finally found herself “at home” in France, for, repeatedly associated with Napoleonic France, she carries French ways with her throughout the novel, having gotten rid of bogies, cleared her mind of shams, and “gone up to the Medusa and the Sphinx with a cool and a penetrating question,” without ever losing her deeply realistic sense of the binding power of culture.

It is the aptly named Newland whom Wharton is more interested in; for though he ultimately capitulates to the power of the tribe, he prefigures her autobiographical persona in *A Backward Glance* and the posthumous “A Little Girl’s New York” (1938) in embodying – in the process of remembering – an evolutionary bridge between past and present, or, in the figurative terms of both the novel and the memoirs, between pre-historic old New York and modern America. In the end it is he who best embodies the prospects of a national culture. More than a Rip Van Winkle figure registering the shock of modernity, he has not just suddenly grown old but gradually “grown up,” which entails, like Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne, overcoming the transitional sense of alienation that led him to regard social law and ordinary social practices as “unreal.” He has been instrumental in shaping the new nation: among his three children is a self-consciously modern architect revolting against the use of the term “colonial” as applied to America’s pre-revolutionary heritage; he has served a term in the state legislature under the tutelage of Theodore Roosevelt; and he is presiding over the opening of new galleries at the Metropolitan Museum, “crowded with the spoils of the ages.”

He has clearly done what he could to make a “pitiful little minority”

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59 Ibid., 97. 60 Ibid., xxi–xxii; and *Age of Innocence*, 1208, 1244.
61 Wharton, *Age of Innocence*, 1289.
representing a “little local patch” of America something akin to what Wharton calls in French Ways and Their Meaning “a ruling caste of grown-up men and women.”62 His association with the museum in such an honorary capacity comes as an ironic but appropriate sequel to the fact that it was the scene of his last private meeting with Ellen, when, staring jointly at “the recovered fragments of Ilium,” they both squarely faced the inevitability of old New York’s doom and agreed to consummate their socially unlawful passion.63 Having had his dreams of erotic bliss and cosmopolitan freedom thwarted, but not extinguished, by a powerful but dying tribe, Newland finds consolation in philosophy, as well as in a higher provincialism that promotes both a more liberal bearing toward his children and the future, and a dedication to turning the rapidly changing province he remains so embedded in into a new cosmopolitan center of the civilized world.64

Reviewing from his library the events and changes that bestow an aura of continuity on his personal/cultural history, Newland can genuinely honor the cultural order that inadvertently paved the way for its supersession. He can affirm without appearing simply ambivalent, in effect, that “there was good in the old ways” and “[t]here was good in the new order too.”65 His affirmation, nonetheless, cannot conceal deeper forebodings—forebodings similar to those we see in Bourne’s “Trans-national America” and Wharton’s French Ways—about the trajectory of an American culture unmoored from genuine communities that foster a critical consciousness while committing one to actively remembering: “of what account was anybody’s past,” Newland asks himself rhetorically, “in the huge kaleidoscope where all the social atoms spun around on the same plane?”66 For Wharton, as we have seen, America’s growth as a nation might just as well entail a descent into

62 Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning, 113.
63 Wharton, Age of Innocence, 1261–64.
64 “Museums are cemeteries,” Wharton would later write in her last autobiographical reminiscence, “as unavoidable, no doubt, as the other kind, but just as unrelated to the living beauty of what we have loved” (“A Little Girl’s New York,” Harper’s Monthly Magazine, 176 (March 1918), 518). Wharton’s uncanny sense of encountering her own culture as museum material, however, must be read against her implicit regard for museum-building cultures (such as France) over those that need the museum building done for them (such as native tribes of Morocco). Thomas Peyser’s suggestive discussion of the elusive, aesthetically registered power of the Ververs in Henry James’s The Golden Bowl—of their subjective capacity to be something more than Anglo-Saxon inasmuch as they can make objective room for “Anglo-Saxon” objects in their idea of a universal museum of humanity’s achievements—has obvious implications, I think, for understanding the crucial presence of the museum in The Age of Innocence and of Newland’s role in overseeing its expansion; see especially the chapter “The Imperial Museum,” in Utopia and Cosmopolis: Globalization in the Era of American Literary Realism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 135–68.
65 Wharton, Age of Innocence, 1291–92.
66 Ibid., 1296.
savagery – or a de-humanizing breakdown of distinctions altogether, as the above metaphor suggests – as a graduation to a place among the great civilizations of the world. The “new race” idealized in *French Ways and Their Meaning* may be finally more akin to some other “gifted races” she thought were “still only a people in the making”: those whom she describes in *In Morocco* as “[r]evering the dead and camping on their graves, elaborating exquisite monuments only to abandon and defile them, venerating scholarship and wisdom and living in ignorance and grossness . . . perpetually struggling to reach some higher level of culture from which they have always been swept down by a fresh wave of barbarism … ”  

67 These native North Africans, whose promise depends on the political as well as the cultural intervention of the French, too neatly exemplify “the custom of the country” she was born in. As a daughter of “the Americans of the original States, who in moments of crisis still shaped the national point of view,” she summoned the energies integral to such an uprooted and mobile people as her modern compatriots in order to direct these energies to the cause of advancing “civilization.” A notebook entry from the period sums up her more radical “American” proclivities – and her Arnoldian reservations about them – as succinctly as anything she ever wrote: “I want the idols broken, but I want them broken by people who understand why they were made . . . .”  