PURITY AND POWER IN THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

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... society does not exist in a neutral, uncharged vacuum. It is subject to external pressures; that which is not with it, part of it and subject to its laws, is potentially against it. ... ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created.

—Mary Douglas, PURITY AND DANGER

The classical house is a prefiguration of a society which affirms a hierarchy of values. These are the ground rules. All this is, of course, opposed to the contemporary odyssey of the self-centered self.

—Introduction to Edith Wharton's THE DECORATION OF HOUSES

"Once upon a time," begins one of Edith Wharton's earliest tales, a series of parables entitled "The Valley of Childish Things, and Other Emblems,"

a number of children lived together in the Valley of Childish Things, playing all manner of delightful games, and studying the same lesson books. But one day a little girl, one of their number, decided that it was time to see something of the world about which the lesson books had taught her; and as none
of the other children cared to leave their games, she set out
alone to climb the pass which led out of the valley.

It was a hard climb, but at length she reached a cold,
bleak tableland beyond the mountains. Here she saw cities and
men, and learned many useful arts, and in so doing grew to be
a woman. But the tableland was bleak and cold, and when she
had served her apprenticeship she decided to return to her old
companions in the Valley of Childish Things, and work with
them instead of with strangers.

On the way back she meets one of her old playmates, who has also been out in
the world. They talk of building bridges and draining swamps and cutting roads,
and she thinks to herself, "Since he has grown into such a fine fellow, what
splendid men and women my other playmates must have become!" But she is
disappointed. Instead of growing into men and women, her playmates have
remained little children, playing the same old games. When she tries to tell them
about the great things being done beyond the mountains, they pick up their toys
and go further down the valley to play. Turning to her fellow traveler, who is
making a garden out of cockleshells and bits of glass and broken flowers for a dear
little girl, she asks him if he wants to set to work building bridges, draining
swamps and cutting roads. He replies that at the moment he is too busy; and as
she turns to go, he adds, "Really, my dear, you ought to have taken better care
of your complexion." 1

This is a story that Wharton would retell the rest of her life. She herself
would leave the Valley, a confining space where women were expected to remain
as children, withdrawn from the grown-up activities of the outer world. She would
map out her own spaces, both figuratively—in her first book, THE DECORATION
OF HOUSES—and literally, in her own houses in Massachusetts and in France. She
would assert her self by plotting carefully the boundaries of her own retreat—the
place where she wrote every morning—and separating it from the as-carefully
zoned social spaces of the house for her afternoon entertaining. But in her novels
the women were usually confined to and trapped in the (with)drawing-room, the
room she had called in THE DECORATION OF HOUSES a place of "exquisite
discomfort." Posed there like the subject of a Sargent painting, the picturesque
woman became herself the chief decoration of houses.

The protagonist of THE AGE OF INNOCENCE is male. His name seems to
promise the reader a hero something like Henry James's Christopher Newman and
a novel something like THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY (which James intended, at
least, to center in the young woman's own consciousness). 2 Wharton's celebrated
Pulitzer Prize novel is not about her hero, however, but about the "little
hieroglyphic world" in which Newland Archer lives. In fact, despite its deceptively
innocent tone, THE AGE OF INNOCENCE is much more like James's "The Jolly
Corner" and Wharton's autobiography, A BACKWARD GLANCE, and for good
reason. Each of these is a tale written at the end of its author's life, "a backward
glance o'er travel'd roads" in order, as James says in his story, to wake "all the
old baffled forsworn possibilities . . . into such measure of ghostly life as they
might still enjoy." James's protagonist is a returned American who wanders by
night through the house of his youth in search of his lost self: "with habit and
repetition he gained to an extraordinary degree the power to penetrate the dusk
of distances, . . . to resolve back into their innocence the treacheries of uncertain light, the evil-looking forms taken in the gloom by mere shadows," until he meets his doppelgänger, a man with a mutilated hand, becoming "in the apparitional world, an incalculable terror."3 Wharton's search for her lost self is likewise a ghostly venture, as the reader is warned by the dedication to her friends who come each year on All Souls' Night—the night when the dead can walk. This is a literal invitation, for all of the characters in A BACKWARD GLANCE whom Wharton calls back for a visit are dead people; bringing them back in her own declining years helps her to fix her image. THE AGE OF INNOCENCE is played upon the stage of everyday life, but like its ghostly counterpart it represents—and for similar reasons—Wharton's search in her own past for a hidden treasure.

Like the hero of "The Jolly Corner" and like Ellen Olenska in THE AGE OF INNOCENCE, Wharton lived most of her life abroad: she stayed in France all through the First World War, an experience which fueled THE MARNE, A SON AT THE FRONT, FIGHTING FRANCE and FRENCH WAYS AND THEIR MEANINGS. At the same time, she had to distance herself from the deathly horrors of the war and the rape of her beloved country. She had seen, for example, the ruined town of Gerbéviller, "simultaneously vomited up from the depths and hurled down from the skies, as though she had perished in some monstrous clash of earthquake and tornado"; it filled her with cold despair to know that this was no accident of nature "but a piously planned and methodically executed human deed":

From the opposite heights the poor little garden-girt town was shelled like a steel fortress; then, when the Germans entered, a fire was built in every house, and at the nicely-timed right moment one of the explosive tabloids which the fearless Teuton carries about for his land-Lusitanias was tossed on each hearth. . . . One old woman, hearing her son's death-cry, rashly looked out of her door. A bullet instantly laid her low among her phloxes and lilies; and there, in her little garden, her dead body was dishonoured.4

In these same years, sorrows came for Wharton "not single spies but in battalions," bringing the death of her friends Henry James, Howard Sturgis, Egerton Winthrop, among others. She wrote in A BACKWARD GLANCE:

My spirit was heavy with these losses, but I could not sit still and brood over them. I wanted to put them into words, and in doing so I saw the years of the war, as I had lived them in Paris, with a new intensity of vision. . . . But before I could begin to deal objectively with the stored-up emotions of those years, I had to get away from the present altogether. . . . Meanwhile I found a momentary escape in going back to my childish memories of a long-vanished America, and wrote "The Age of Innocence."5

These two works, A BACKWARD GLANCE and THE AGE OF INNOCENCE, spring from the same impulse; and both begin with the purpose of fixing an image of security, the one with the child dressed for and engaged in the ritual of taking a walk with her father (the little girl, ruffled, muffled, veiled and encased "like a
Valentine" and the other with the childlike world of Old New York dressed for and engaged in the ritual of attending the Opera, standing for a good world in which, according to the epigraph from Goethe in A BACKWARD GLANCE, it is impossible to write poetry.\(^6\)

Wharton's intention, then, is similar in the two works (though I by no means wish to argue that a novel is the same as an autobiography): she journeys into her own past, a past which she had rejected, in order to recapture a time of lost stability and to achieve a reconciliation with that past. We know from both A BACKWARD GLANCE and THE AGE OF INNOCENCE that Edith Wharton and Newland Archer live divided lives. The novelist described both in A BACKWARD GLANCE as "real" and "tangible," as "totally unrelated," but coexisting "side by side, equally absorbing but wholly isolated from each other."\(^7\) Similarly, Newland Archer lives one life committed to his responsibilities to his family, profession and community, but at the same time he has another life which seems equally real, a "kind of sanctuary" for "his secret thoughts and longings," which becomes for him "the scene of his real life, of his only rational activities."\(^8\) It is not at all clear, however, that a reconciliation is achieved, either in A BACKWARD GLANCE or in THE AGE OF INNOCENCE. Both Edith Wharton and Newland Archer are fifty-seven years old at the end of THE AGE OF INNOCENCE, and Archer, a free man at last, having traveled to Paris to stand beneath the windows of the woman he has loved in tormented secrecy for twenty-nine years, says to himself, "it's more real to me here than if I went up"; and "the fear lest that last shadow of reality should lose its edge" sends him slowly back to his hotel alone (p. 381). If Archer has accepted his own past, we do not know what he has received from family and community which compensate him for the possibility of a companionate and passionate relationship with Ellen Olenska; we see only that he chooses to live in the world of his imagination rather than to risk the jeopardy of a relationship now, after so many years of denial. But this is not, finally, Newland Archer's story.

The two problems which Wharton investigated in this novel are related: one is the moral issue of the needs of the individual versus the claims of family, tradition and community; and the other is the nature of that community. Or, to put it another way, Wharton confronted with the engines of technology that had wreaked havoc on France in World War I was much like her contemporary Henry Adams, who, standing in front of the Corliss Engine at the Paris exhibition of 1900, saw two kingdoms of force which he called "Virgin" and "Dynamo," the one having inspired all the great works of art and the other responsible for the new era of technology—and between them an "abyssal fracture."\(^9\) Wharton's perception, however, was different from Adams's. While he unequivocally mourned the past, she was ambivalent about its comfort, particularly for women. The past stood for a kind of order that was a necessary counterbalance to war and death, but there was something to be said for disorder, too. Moreover, it was not all that clear that the family was nurturing, at least in America. If THE AGE OF INNOCENCE were a novel of reconciliation, one would expect to find serenity in the later novels and the kind of conservatism that pervades THE EDUCATION OF HENRY ADAMS. For one who felt stifled by family and defensive always in her family circle about her writing, the presentation of the family as destructive and oppressive in the early fiction is understandable: driving Lily Bart to suicide, for example, in THE HOUSE OF MIRTH (1905), when she chooses not to marry for convenience and thus becomes "unsphered," trapping a man and two women in a
living tomb of coldness and silence in ETHAN FROME (1911), full of incestuous attraction and distrust in THE REEF (1912) and in SUMMER (1917)—or as ineffectual in THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY (1913), a novel whose subject is the divorce between the sexes in American life. However, the novels which follow THE AGE OF INNOCENCE present even more devastating depictions of the family as perverted and destructive: a "hideous and degrading" competition between two women for one daughter in THE OLD MAID (1924), the competition between a mother and daughter for the same man in THE MOTHER'S RECOMPENSE (1925), the meaninglessness and outrage of all family intercourse in TWILIGHT SLEEP (1927), incestuous attraction again and the destruction of children by irresponsible parents in THE CHILDREN (1928). And while she was writing THE AGE OF INNOCENCE (in 1919), Wharton began an "unpublishable fragment" for a ghost story, "Beatrice Palmato." The story was never completed, but in the written fragment and plan for the tale, she described an incestuous relationship between a father and daughter and wrote an erotically-detailed scene of oral sexual intercourse between the two which takes place in the mother's drawing-room.10

Given all of this, it is difficult to see THE AGE OF INNOCENCE as a novel of reconciliation—or as a successful novel of reconciliation.11 Rather, it is the pivotal novel in the Wharton canon, the imaginative work in which the moral claims of family and of the individual are held in perfect tension. Anthropologist Edward Hall is helpful here: in THE SILENT LANGUAGE he describes times of transition as a time of breaking with prevailing group patterns and warns that new patterns must be generated, or else the parts of one's environment do not relate to each other in a meaningful way.12 It is because THE AGE OF INNOCENCE was written at a time of the breakdown of old patterns that Wharton turned to the past to consider a time of stability. Newland Archer might see "good in the old ways" and "good in the new order too" (pp. 347, 349). Wharton, however, saw the repression of the self in the old ways and fragmentation of the self in the new ways; the best she could do to achieve a reconciliation, or a resolution, was to tack back and forth between her own two created lives.

In this she was like her contemporary Virginia Woolf, who, likewise responding to the cataclysmic events of the early twentieth century, saw two structures in MRS. DALLOWAY—one of war and the other of roses. In this novel, Lee Edwards has written, Virginia Woolf was examining modes of social organization: "... solitude, fragmentation, rigidity, and death on the one side, or communion, harmony, spontaneity, and life on the other. Wars and parties, shell shock and roses, authority and individuality, death and life, 'manly' and 'feminine' are counters.... The polities of MRS. DALLOWAY are such that life is only possible when roses, parties, and joy triumph over war, authority, and death. Clarissa's celebrations—ephemeral and compromised though they may be—are a paradigm of sanity, a medium through which energy can flow in a world otherwise cruel, judgmental, and frozen."13

The masculine structure of war and the feminine structure of roses were horribly clear to Edith Wharton, but not in THE AGE OF INNOCENCE. In FIGHTING FRANCE she wrote of the war as a deliberate destruction of all that gave life meaning: "The photographs on the walls, the twigs of withered box above the crucifixes, the old wedding-dresses in brass-clamped trunks, the bundles of letters laboriously written and as painfully deciphered, all the thousand and one
bits of the past that give meaning and continuity to the present—of all that accumulated warmth nothing was left but a brick-heap and some twisted stove-pipes." And even worse was the violation of Ypres, bombarded to death, but with the outer walls of the houses still standing so that it presented the distant semblance of a living city, while nearby it seemed a disembowelled corpse:

Every window-pane is smashed, nearly every building unroofed, and some house-fronts are sliced clean off, with the different stories exposed, as if for the stage-setting of a farce. In these exposed interiors the poor little household gods shiver and blink like owls surprised in a hollow tree. A hundred signs of intimate and humble tastes, of humdrum pursuits, of family association, cling to the unmasked walls. . . . It was all so still and familiar that it seemed as if the people for whom these things had a meaning might at any moment come back and take up their daily business.

Wharton found that in hundreds of such houses in hundreds of open towns the hand of time had been stopped; she found a convent where the orderly arrest of life symbolized the senseless paralysis of a whole nation's activities: "Here were a houseful of women and children engaged in useful tasks and now aimlessly astray over the earth." But she found, too, women beginning to build again the structures that support life—nuns, for example, at work in the fields, one of whom, turning up a hob-nailed sole, told her: "All the women are working the fields—we must take the place of the men," and, Wharton wrote, "I seemed to see my pink peonies flowering in the very prints of her sturdy boots!"

Wharton carried these flowers back half a century to THE AGE OF INNOCENCE, which was for her an oasis, a compromised oasis, a frozen world of ritual that offered sanity in its very repetition: she held before her scenes in "suitable" rooms in Old New York houses and pictures from summers at Newport where athletic rituals were carried out on the hemmed turf of the small bright lawns (p. 204).

The repetition of rituals is characteristic of female structures, anthropologists tell us: woman's body, for one thing, assigns her to a repetitive role in the reproduction of the life cycle, while the male transcends the life cycle "artificially," through the medium of technology and symbols, asserting and declaring this transcendence ("culture") superior to "nature." Lacking in value or status to the extent that they are confined to domestic activities, cut off from the social world of men and from each other, women gain power and a sense of value in one of two ways: they can transcend domestic limits either by entering the men's world or by creating their own society. In a separate society, purity rituals become particularly important—elaborate norms for "strict dress and demeanor, modesty, cleanliness, prudishness"—because these are devices for contrasting their world with the men's world and of establishing grounds for order and status. The convent is the most extreme example of such a world: it is a pure and moral society of women, a world wholly their own in which "the very symbolic and social conceptions that appear to set women part and to circumscribe their activities may be used by women as a basis for female solidarity and worth."
We know that Wharton knew a great deal about cultural anthropology; one learns from A BACKWARD GLANCE that she had been reading Darwin, Huxley, Spencer "and various popular exponents of the great evolutionary movement." She made skillful use particularly of THE GOLDEN BOUGH in analyzing her own former world in tribal terms and in dramatizing its rituals, from the performance of the Old New York audience attending the Opera, with which the novel opens, to the final scene where Newland Archer waits beneath Ellen Olenska's windows until the lights go on, and "as if it had been the signal he waited for"—as if the play were over—he "got up slowly and walked back alone to his hotel" (p. 361). The repetitive rituals of THE AGE OF INNOCENCE are the signs of a female society—but a female society in decline, with frozen rituals. Old New York may once have been ruled by the matriarchal Grandmother Mingott, with her "strength of will and hardness of heart, and a kind of haughty efferontery" (p. 14); but by 1870 "Catherine the Great," as she is called, is fat and immobile: an "immense accretion of flesh" has changed her from an active woman into "something as vast and august as a natural phenomenon" (p. 28). Because of the burden of her flesh, she can no longer go up and down stairs, and all the family come to her, where with "moral courage" she still suggests the disorder of the "inaccessible wilderness near the Central Park" (p. 13), startling and fascinating her visitors with her ground-floor arrangement of sitting-room giving onto an unexpected vista of bed-room, recalling "scenes in French fiction, and architectural incentives to immorality such as the simple American had never dreamed of." It is, however, only "a stage-setting of adultery," as Newland Archer reflects when he goes with May, a Mingott granddaughter, to receive their betrothal blessings (p. 29)—like the stage-settings for the other scenes in the novel; in it old Catherine leads a blameless life. Her empty place in the family opera box signifies her diminishing importance; it is filled with the younger representatives of the female order, among them her daughter Augusta Welland and Augusta's daughter May, a young girl in white with fair braids who lowers her eyes now and then to her bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley (which Newland has sent her and will send every day until their wedding), touching the flowers softly with her white-gloved fingertips (pp. 5–6). There is one exception to the "abyssal purity" of this box, and that is another Mingott granddaughter, the Countess Ellen Olenska, who shocks the Old New York audience by her offense against "Taste" in wearing a simple dress which has no Tucker and slopes away from her shoulders; her grandmother will later say that Ellen is the only one of the family like her.

Wharton gives here two simultaneous performances. Onstage, the performers follow the "unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world [which] required that the German text of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences" (p. 5). It is significant that the opera is FAUST and that the first person we meet in THE AGE OF INNOCENCE is Christine Nilsson, the opera singer of whom Henry James had written, "What a pity she is not the heroine of a tale, and that I didn't make her!" James probably meant by this that Madame Nilsson seemed to him even more vital, more energetic, larger and bolder than someone like his own actress Miriam Rooth of THE TRAGIC MUSE. Christine Nilsson was no innocent Marguerite or Gretchen, but a woman of charm and experience who has chosen to play this part, and plays it with deliberation and genius. The contrast between Madame's Nilsson's power and the repeated ritual of performance—at the end of the novel the same people will gather again to see "the same large blonde victim . . . succumbing to the same small brown seducer" (p. 320)—must have been
striking to Wharton; knowing her Goethe, she was certainly aware that Part II begins with Faust's invocation to "The Mothers," dangerous powers of darkness. But for the audience the Opera is an occasion for another sort of performance, an ongoing ceremony which is taken for reality itself with laws unalterable and unquestioned: the pre-Opera dinner; the arrival in Brown coupes—late because "in metropolises it was 'not the thing' to arrive early . . . and what was or was not 'the thing' played a part as important in Newland Archer's New York as the inscrutable totem terrors that had ruled the destinies of his forefathers thousands of years ago"; the costumes of the audience, as prescribed and as elegant as those of the actors; and the visiting back and forth from one box to another. All of this seems as natural to Newland "as all the other conventions on which his life was moulded: such as the duty of using two silver-backed brushes with his monogram in blue enamel to part his hair, and of never appearing in society without a flower (preferably a gardenia) in his buttonhole" (p. 3-5).

All of these details of the social ritual of Old New York have little to do with Newland Archer's profession as a lawyer, or with his thinking self—for despite his dilettantish qualities he reads a great deal in his own library (in fact he reads the same books as Wharton, in A BACKWARD GLANCE, admits to reading); but they have a great deal to do with his day-to-day behavior, for after his brandy, cigars and conversation with the men, he must always return to the drawing-room world of the women. He values that world, and he even wishes to protect and preserve it, just because of the sense of continuity and stability it offers. When he turns his eyes to the Mingott box, therefore, his first response to the observation of something that offends against "taste" is to rush to the box to persuade May to announce their engagement early, adding the strength of his family to that of hers to affirm their respectability—or reinforce their boundaries—in face of what he perceives as disorder.

One way to read this novel is to see May Welland and Ellen Olenska as the traditional light and dark ladies of this script, as two ways of dealing with "reality"—the ways of the two girls in "The Valley of Childish Things"—two choices for Newland Archer in this novel. He perceives May as "a light under ice" (p. 193); she embodies "the steadying sense of an inescapable duty" (p. 207). Where Newland has originally imagined her as a comrade, once freed from her "abysmal purity" by his "enlightening companionship," he will come to see that "such a picture presupposed, on her part, the experience, the versatility, the freedom of judgment, which she had been carefully trained not to possess"; he will come to fear that her "niceness" carried to the supreme degree is only "a dull association of material and social interests held together by ignorance on the one side and hypocrisy on the other" (pp. 44-45). May is the "terrifying product of the social system he belonged to and believed in, the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything" (p. 43). Repeatedly described as Diana, as May Archer she will still have that kind of innocence "that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience."

In contrast to the safe and ordinary way of May, Ellen suggests "tragic and moving possibilities outside the daily run of experience" (p. 115). Her eclectic education has been "expensive but incoherent," including such unimagined things as "drawing from the model" and playing in quintets with professional musicians (p. 60). Unlike May, who is stiffly bedecked and elaborately bejewelled for each social
occasion, Ellen chooses unadorned dark velvet for the Opera, a fur-trimmed lounging robe at home—clothes which seem exotic in their simplicity, and suited to no other occasion than Ellen's mood, her body. Unlike the varnished, tufted and gilded extension of her mother's house that May will furnish, Ellen's house—in which time literally has stopped—is "intimate, 'foreign,' subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments" (p. 71) pervaded by "the scent of some far-off bazaar, a smell made up of Turkish coffee and ambergris and dried roses" (pp. 72). Ellen Olenska offers the possibilities of individual freedom and experience, instinct and variety, cultural and sexual richness, and recognizing this, Newland sends her not lilies-of-the-valley, but yellow roses which are "too rich, too strong, in their fiery beauty" (p. 80).

The "too rich" tells us already which way Newland will choose, but to read the novel in this way is to fail to see that he is not really part of either world; it is to fail to take account of his limitations and of the limits of his perception. Wharton took repeated care to point up the differences between Newland and Ellen—they admit to each other, for example, that they don't speak the same language (p. 33)—but the most significant difference is that he is "at heart a dilettante, and thinking over a pleasure . . . often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realization" (p. 4), while she is characterized most of all by passion. (Wharton in fact tried other versions of THE AGE OF INNOCENCE in which Newland and Ellen marry, only to separate because of their difference from each other.) Likewise, however, Newland is excluded from the world of May. His sense of the power of her female world, which he does not understand and in which he has no part, makes him suspect that May's innocence is an artificial product—"Untrained human nature was not frank and innocent, it was full of the twists and defenses of an instinctive guile"—and to feel "oppressed by this creation of factitious purity, so cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers and long-dead ancestresses" (p. 46).

Newland Archer is trapped in this world—both by his own limitations and by forces he does not understand. A journalist-friend, Ned Winsett, sees these limitations clearly: "You're like the pictures on the walls of a deserted house: 'The Portrait of a Gentleman,'" he tells Archer. "... you've got no center, no competition, no audience." The accuracy of Winsett's perception is borne out by Archer's confession of his own passivity: he mentally responds, "A gentleman simply stayed at home and abstained" (p. 126). Similarly, his seemingly radical words about human freedom on another occasion—"Women ought to be free—as free as we are" (p. 42)—have been meaningless; he understands that "'nice' women, however wronged, would never claim the kind of freedom he meant, and that generous minded men like himself were therefore—in the heat of argument—the more chivalrously ready to concede it to them. Such verbal generosity were in fact only a humbugging disguise of the inexorable conventions that tied things together and bound people down to the old pattern" (p. 44). What Newland does not realize at this point, of course, is that the "freedom" of the chivalrous men is just as much of a humbugging disguise as their verbal generosity.

To read THE AGE OF INNOCENCE as a failed love story, then, is to believe that "the play's the thing"—that the script offers Newland Archer a choice between May Welland and Ellen Olenska, a Faust-like opportunity to transform his reality. But in fact he is fated to remain in the old pattern precisely because
there is in May's "innocent" world a shrewdness, even a worldliness which, without asking questions, instinctively protects that world, relentlessly patrolling its boundaries against the forces of disorder. The power of this world is such that the men can be called home from work to give their attention to domestic problems, and even the nature of their work—when it touches on family matters—can be dictated, as when the family makes clear to Newland what sort of legal decision he is expected to make about Ellen Olenska's divorce.

Because Newland's social conditioning makes him more comfortable in May's world than in Ellen's, he flees with "instinctive recoil" from Ellen, the very vocabulary of the freedom she suggests seeming "to belong to fiction and the stage" (p. 109), and from "an atmosphere ... thick with drama" (p. 116). He flees to May, for her script is safer; it calls for a woman to be static, fixed against a scenic backdrop with a "faculty of unawareness" that makes her blood seem a preserving fluid, and gives her a transparency, a "look of representing a type rather than a person; as if she might have been chosen to pose for a Civic Virtue or a Greek Goddess" (p. 188)—as indeed she does throughout the novel. Newland has one of two predictable responses to May's "Diana-like aloofness" (p. 210): either he feels a 'glow of proprietorship," as at that first Opera scene (p. 7), when he walks with her in the park (p. 81), or at the Newport archery match (p. 210); or he communicates with her in "the code in which they had both been trained" (p. 206), "an atmosphere of faint implications and pale delicacies ... [where] he and she understood each other without a word" (p. 17)—what their son will later call "a deaf-and-dumb asylum" (p. 356). His May stands for "a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs" (p. 45). In choosing her, "the world lay like a sunlit valley at their feet" (p. 25).

This hieroglyphic world of Old New York is a kind of "heaven"—a place for the "blessed," where other women do not feel the needs that Ellen Olenska expresses (p. 133), a place where no one cries (p. 78), where the people seem like "children playing in a graveyard" (p. 207), or like children "lighting a bunch of straw in a wayside cavern, and revealing old silent images in their painted tomb" (p. 214). It is the world of the luxurious Welland house and of "the density of the Welland atmosphere, so charged with minute observations and emotions" that it becomes for Newland a narcotic: "the heavy carpets, the watchful servants, the perpetually reminding tick of disciplined clocks, the perpetually renewed stack of cards and invitations on the hall table, the whole chain of tyrannical trifles binding one hour to the next, and each member of the household to all the others" (p. 217) makes any other less-systematized and less-affluent existence seem unreal and precarious.

On the other hand, the life Newland is expected to lead as May's husband seems equally unreal and irrelevant. When he flees from Ellen to May, his "here was truth, here was reality," upon seeing her standing Diana-like in the garden of St. Augustine (p. 141) carries the double-edged irony of Lawrence Selden's "This was the real Lily Bart" when she stands posed in the tableaux vivants of THE HOUSE OF MIRTH. In fact, it seems that it is impossible for Newland to tell what the "real thing" is at all. May's is the world where "the real thing was never said or done," but Ellen's is the world "of fiction and the stage." The only place where "real" things happen to him is in his library, with its "sincere" Eastlake
furniture, 23 or in the theatre of his imagination where he plays opposite Ellen Olenska. This is no random metaphor, for he identifies himself and Ellen with the hero and heroine of a play, THE SHAUGHRAUN, which he sees repeatedly for the sake of one scene. In it, after a sad parting from the woman he loves, the hero steals back into the room where she stands with her back to him, her face in her hands. He lifts one of the velvet ribbons of her dress to his lips, and then leaves the room without her having noticed him or changed her attitude.

Ellen has this exact quality of unreality for Newland—but so has he for her, and he and she will re-enact this very scene twice. The first time is when he stands by the shore of Granny Mingott's Newport house, watching Ellen, who faces away from him. She seems transfixed, and he says to himself, "If she doesn't turn before that sail crosses the Lime Rock light I'll go back" (p. 216). She does not turn; he walks back up the hill. The second time is at the end of the novel, when an older Newland turns away from Ellen's lit windows in Paris and walks back alone to his hotel. As in the play, Ellen knows Newland is there; in the case of the first scene, she later tells him so. And if one has been reading THE AGE OF INNOCENCE as a failed love story, then these scenes prefigure and explain their failed assignation.

That scene points up the difference between Newland and Ellen: it also points out the degrees of their belongingness to the "little hieroglyphic world." Ellen has returned from Washington to be with her stricken Granny Mingott, whose stroke literally threatens the demise of the old order. Though he feels "burnt up in a great flame" every time he sees her after an absence, Newland tells her when they meet that he understands her reasons "for not wanting to let this feeling between us dwindle into an ordinary hole-and-corner love affair." He has a vision, he tells her, of "much more than an hour or two every now and then, with wastes of thirsty waiting between." Ellen gives a hard little laugh at his and warns him to look not at visions, but at realities. What do you want, exactly, she asks him: "Is it your idea . . . that I should live with you as your mistress—since I can't be your wife?" Her question pulls him up with a jerk, and he flounders, "I want—I want somehow to get away with you into a world where words like that—categories like that—won't exist. Where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole of life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter." Ellen laughs again, asking, "Oh, my dear,—where is that country? Have you ever been there?" (pp. 288-290). But she offers to come to him once, and then to return to Europe alone. At first Newland thinks to himself, "If I were to let her come, . . . I should have to let her go again" (p. 312). Then, he agrees. He sees her face "flooded with a deep inner radiance," and his heart "beat[s] with awe"—but they look at each other "almost like enemies" (p. 313).

Ellen does not come to Newland; she sends his key back and does not see him again until she departs for good. The reason is that she has had a meeting with May instead. She and May have had "a really good talk," according to May (p. 315); they have understood each other. May has in fact lied to Ellen about her pregnancy, but she has acted with the knowledge and approval of the family and Granny Mingott has promised to guarantee Ellen's financial independence. The bargain to which Ellen has agreed is sealed in the ritual dinner, a ceremony of inclusion and exclusion, May's triumph.
While the love story of Newland and Ellen has been going forward, another
counterplot has been running, but so caught up does one get in the romantic
world of Newland and Ellen (perhaps because one is used to reading novels as fables of
courtship) that the irony of its language is not at first noticed, and the
inexorableness of the offensive which has been launched by the women in THE AGE
OF INNOCENCE is obscured. Ellen Olenska suggests disorder, but this is not all.
Her aunt, Medora Manson, "a gaunt and mincing lady . . . in a wild dishevelment
of stripes and fringes and floating scarves" (p. 184), suggests disorder, too,
especially in her association with Algernon Carver, itinerant leader of a free-love
community. Both Ellen Olenska and Medora Manson are marginal people—that is,
they exist on the margins of the community and as such are necessary in defining
its boundaries;24 but where Medora's kind of disorder is frivolous and ineffectual
(like Algernon Carver's "Valley of Love"), Ellen Olenska's spoils pattern and
suggests both danger and power in some potential pattern of its own. She is what
anthropologist Mary Douglas would call a "polluting person," who as such is always
in the wrong. She has "simply crossed some line which should not have been
crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone."25 It is not just that
Ellen has been married (to a notorious European count), for Medora Manson has
been married several times; it is not just that Ellen is rumored to have had affairs
(though this is never proved); she represents the European kind of threat to the
"official innocence" of May's world that Madame de Vionnet, for example,
represents to the world of Woollet, Massachusetts, in Henry James's THE
AMBASSADORS. She threatens to engulf the little world of order and purity in
a world of sexual and cultural richness that would destroy it.

We know from Wharton's earlier THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY that "the
money and the motors and the clothes" tossed to the American woman by her
preoccupied husband, do not constitute life; in such a world the woman is a mere
parenthesis.26 This is not to suggest that Wharton would have opted for a separate
world of women: we know from FRENCH WAYS AND THEIR MEANING, for
example, or from A BACKWARD GLANCE, that she valued a world in which men
and women intermingled, a world of conversation and stimulation, of continuity and
tradition embodied, for example, in Laura Fairford's dinner party in THE CUSTOM
OF THE COUNTRY, where conversation is a "concert," with Laura "drawing in the
others, giving each a turn, beating time for them with her smile, and somehow
harmonizing and linking together what they said."27 Nor is this to suggest that
Wharton believed that a society of women was a way to real power—power in the
world of men, political power. Surely she understood that the elevation of woman
deity on the one hand, the downgrading of her to child on the other produced
the same result—permanent residence in "The Valley of Childish Things." And yet
the community of women in THE AGE OF INNOCENCE has greater importance
than, say, Henry James gives a similar community in THE BOSTONIANS.28 This
is a useful comparison, for while both writers present a female society in decline,
Wharton's is the decline of the matriarchal vigor and daring of Grandmother
Mingott into a Bachofean kind of matriarchal deity—the Victorian "perfect woman"
of "unblemished beauty . . . chastity and high-mindedness."29 As woman's real
power declines, I think she would argue, so her need to protect her separate
world—a world characterized by purity and order—increases. The world of cultural
and sexual richness for which Ellen Olenska stands is impossible in America
precisely because Ellen's is a heterosexual world, a shared world, a world "rich and
deep" because it is "based on the recognised interaction of influences between men
and women." But the world to which she comes for relief, for escape from the "horrors" of the European world (in the person of her unscrupulous husband) offers some other qualities which even she—the intruder who cannot be tolerated in that world—sees as worth preserving. For May's world is not all bad: May herself is brave and strong and generous, as when she offers, during their engagement, to set Newland free to love another woman, or when she tells their son that she has understood Newland's sacrifice of what he wanted most in life.

And so May's triumphant dinner, the "tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe" (p. 334) is an expressive reaffirmation of female loyalty; it is a statement of where the boundaries of the community are and of an intention to protect and delineate those boundaries as a means of protecting the community. We have seen this motive in action throughout the novel—when the women decide at first that Ellen should be offered protection, that she must live in an appropriate neighborhood, that she should not seek a divorce, and finally that she should return to her husband, whatever his qualities, because in attracting Newland, who belongs to May, she threatens the community itself. And in all of these family judgments, once May has held up the straw to the wind to see which way his loyalties lie, Newland has been excluded—just as at the final dinner he is not even there: he floats "somewhere between chandelier and ceiling," the music he hears in the two syllables of Ellen's name flickering against the social reality of May, "a band of dumb conspirators" eating canvassbacks, taking life in the Old New York way "without effusion of blood" (p. 335). He does not understand how all of this has come about: the menu and the guest list and the flowers have been chosen by May, her mother and her mother-in-law in the same way as Ellen has gone in her grandmother's carriage to visit the shunned and humiliated cousin Regina Beaufort—while the men ignore her husband; and in the same way May and Ellen have had their talk which has led to the agreement that Ellen return to Europe. When he looks at Ellen's long pale fingers, Newland says to himself that he must follow her; but just as one has known that she would send back his key, one knows that he will not follow her, remembering his "A gentleman simply stayed at home and abstained." They have been able to remain near to each other only so long as they have not come too near; since she has told him, "I can't love you unless I give you up," it has depended on him to keep her "just there, safe but secluded" (pp. 173, 246). And that is the way she becomes for him—so dreamlike that he will not even be able to imagine what her life is like; he will come to think of her "abstractly, serenely, as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or picture: ... the composite vision of all he had missed" (p. 347).

Whatever kind of escape Ellen finds must remain for Newland conjectural, for choosing to live in the world of May, his vision is limited to the orderliness her boundaries impose. By the end of the novel, although May is dead, their daughter makes no attempt to maintain the twenty-inch waist, and their son marries a Beaufort bastard, it is too late for Newland Archer to redefine himself. If he has missed something, Ellen Olenska, apparently, has not: at least her life on the same street in Paris as Edith Wharton's suggests that she has created her own sources of tradition and continuity, of richness and of power. Newland Archer does well not to enter this world. Had he done so, no doubt Ellen Olenska would have received him graciously, but he would not have felt at home: he would have found the atmosphere "too dense and yet too stimulating for his lungs," an "incessant stir of ideas, curiosities, images and associations" (pp. 358-359).
NOTES


6"Gute Gesellschaft hab ich gesehen; man nennt die gute Wenn sie kum kleinsten Gedicht nicht die Gelegenheit gibet." Both the cited passage and the epigraph are from A BACKWARD GLANCE, p. 1.

7A BACKWARD GLANCE, p. 205.

8Edith Wharton, THE AGE OF INNOCENCE, (1920; rpt. New York: Scribner's, 1968), p. 262. All further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.


11This is Wolff's analysis in A FEAST OF WORDS.


14FIGHTING FRANCE, p. 58.


16FIGHTING FRANCE, p. 104.

17Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in Michelle
Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., WOMAN, CULTURE AND SOCIETY (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 67-87. Ortner points out that when woman is "civilized," she is assigned a mediating status between nature and culture and that often her role has polarized and contradictory meanings within the same symbolic system (pp. 86-87). See also Simone De Beauvoir, THE SECOND SEX, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1952); for example: "... man assures the repetition of Life while transcending Life through Existence; by this transcendence he creates values that deprive pure repetition of all value" (p. 59).


19A BACKWARD GLANCE, p. 94.


21Erving Goffman, in THE PRESENTATION OF SELF IN EVERYDAY LIFE (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, 1959), describes our nightmarish contemporary world as a place where the successful person learns to play a variety of roles by making smooth adjustments to the requirements of social scenes. "To the degree that a performance highlights the common official values of the society," he writes, it is "an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community... and that which is accepted at the moment as reality will have some of the characteristics of a celebration" (pp. 35-36).


23In fact this furniture—the "sincere" in quotation marks is Wharton's—is a tipoff. In 1868 Charles Eastlake had written that "the smallest example of anything which illustrates good design and skilful [sic] workmanship, should be acquired whenever possible, and treasured with the greatest of care... [so that it] may... become in turn a valuable lesson in decorative form and color." Quoted in 19TH CENTURY AMERICA: FURNITURE AND OTHER DECORATIVE ARTS, a Metropolitan Museum of Art catalogue (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1970), p. xxvi. Eastlake furniture was indeed repeated and copied, and Newland Archer's library, different though it may be from the rest of May's house, is very much an example of the domestic and moral lessons to be learned from art.


27 **The Custom of the Country**, p. 34.


29 Quoted in Jean Bamberger, "The Myth of Matriarchy," in Rosaldo and Lamphere. Bamberger also cites John Ruskin, whom Wharton would have read, as writing that women, by virtue of their innate moral perfection, would exercise power "not within their households merely, but over all within their sphere." This sphere was invariably exclusive of the male political arena, Bamberger notes: "The Victorian vision of woman elevated her to the status of goddess" but it did little "to promote her independence or to offer her opportunities to fulfill herself outside the home" (p. 265).