caused this gap between our creative and our critical thinking?

Wright Morris has stated his problem autobiographically:

I had led, or rather been led by, half a dozen separate lives... In an effort to come to terms with this experience, I processed it in fragments... The realization that I had to create coherence, conjure up my synthesis, rather than find it, came to me, as it does to most Americans, disturbingly late.

Like all Americans, he had been confused by the fragmentation of modern life. Like all good artists, he had processed it in fragments, "creating" his coherence from his materials as he went along. But like all idealists, he also felt the need to "conjure up" some synthesis. And now he sought to define the synthesis: We must free ourselves from bondage to the frontier myth of a perpetual "territory ahead."

But American myth is a very different thing from American history. In history, Americans first followed the frontier, and then settled in cities when the frontier closed. In myth, Americans have always explored the unknown, and then "lit out" for new territory when they had settled (or failed to settle) their old problems. American fiction has continued to celebrate "the frontier myth" long after the closing of the actual frontier because this continual process of exploration and discovery is not temporal but timeless. "The Territory" for which Americans continue to "light out"—whether it be the West or Mexico—is not really a place, but a state of mind. And the primitive places that Americans continue to explore are often actually within themselves.

All Wright Morris's novels have taken as their true theme this interior exploration of the human psyche, and they have traced new contours of this undiscovered country. At their worst, this exploration has failed of realistic narrative interest. But at their best, they have symbolically combined physical and psychological discovery, until the territory within has merged with the territory ahead to recreate the timeless patterns of the American myth—even though Morris the critic still professes to view this myth with alarm.

The Age of Innocence:

Edith Wharton's Weak Faust

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In The Age of Innocence (1920), Edith Wharton plays with the names of her three main characters obviously and subtly, positively and ironically. When May Welland appears at the opera, pink-faced and fair-haired, dressed in white tulle caught modestly at her breasts with a gardenia, and holding a bouquet of lilies of the valley, one immediately associates her name with youth and virginity. When she makes her second formal entry at the van der Luydens’ dinner party, Wharton labors the point: "In her dress of white and silver, with a wreath of silver blossoms in her hair, the tall girl looked like a Diana just alight from the chase" (Modern Library text). This is the first
of several explicit equations of May and Diana, but as one proceeds further into the book, the connotations of innocence, chastity, and wholesomeness give way to the overlapping ones of conformity, sterility, and even masculinity. Newland Archer, Wharton’s protagonist, to whom May is engaged, has followed his fiancée to St. Augustine: he walks beside her in the Florida sun, and her blown hair glitters “like silver wire,” her eyes are “almost pale in their youthful limpidity,” and “her face wore the vacant serenity of a young marble athlete.”

In the movement of the novel, although Newland has followed May from New York to St. Augustine to urge an earlier marriage than convention approves, his pursuit of her is much less the positive action of the eager hero desiring to be with the lovely heroine than the negative one of protecting himself from the fascinations of a beautiful temptress. Ellen Olenska serves this function as the dramatic foil of her cousin May. Appearing like May at the opening scene of the opera, Ellen is described as “a slim young woman, a little less tall than May Welland, with brown hair growing in close curls about her temples and held in place by a narrow band of diamonds . . . which gave her what was then called ‘a Josephine look,’ . . . carried out in the cut of the dark blue velvet gown rather theatrically caught up under her bosom by a girdle with a large old-fashioned clasp.” Ellen, momentarily separated from her husband, a Polish count, is everything that May is not. She has just come from the ancient society of Europe into the nouveau society of New York in the 1870’s, and Newland, ever the amateur sociologist, psychologist, and anthropologist, conjectures: “Rich and idle and ornamental societies must produce many more such situations . . . in which a woman naturally sensitive and aloof would yet, from the force of circumstances, from sheer defenselessness and loneliness, be drawn into a tie inexcusable by conventional standards.” There is the paradox of Ellen’s grace, her femininity, her exquisite taste, and a suspected taint of corruption. Newland cannot shake the sense of this taint from his mind, and in a typically Jamesian manner, Wharton continually teases the reader without ever clarifying the actual situation. Newland is torn between May, dressed in white, but with whalebone in the proper places, and Ellen, dressed always in dark colors (she even wore black at her coming-out party!), but in clothes that are flowing and supple. Ellen is a kind of Aphrodite in contrast to May’s Diana; indeed, it is highly probable that Wharton gave her the name Ellen consciously as a variation of Helen, the Greek protegée of Aphrodite and herself a prototype of beauty and passion. We shall see that several patterns point to such a pun on Wharton’s part.

The novel opens with a production of Gounod’s Faust at the old New York Academy. The prima donna is singing “M’amam . . . non m’amem . . . M’amam”—Margaret’s “artless” song of “love triumphant.” A few pages later, looking at the white-clad May sitting in her opera box, Newland assures himself that May does not even know what the scene of Faust’s seductive wooing of Margaret is all about. “He contemplated her absorbed young face with a thrill of possessionship in which pride in his own masculine initiation was mingled with a tender reverence for her abysmal purity.” “We’ll read Faust together . . . by the Italian lakes,” he thinks to himself as he imagines their projected European honeymoon. Newland seems repeatedly to see himself as a kind of Faust who will initiate May into the realities of life, but Wharton’s tone of course suggests not a seduction of May but a freeing of her from conformity. The supreme irony is, as in the case of Eliot’s Prufrock, that although Newland can ask the overwhelming questions and perhaps
even articulate “the answers, he has no strength to “force the moment to its crisis.” He has a Faustian thirst for knowledge; he reads all the new books on anthropology, which enable him to see his own society in its proper perspective of time, but there is no faculty for translating his relativistic attitudes into action. He becomes increasingly pathetic in that with his new learning, he cannot undo the trap of his society. At best he is a mock Faust in that rather than initiating May, our Margaret, it is she who tightens the hold of society on him. She sends a telegram saying that she will wed him soon, this at the end of Part I just when he first reaches out to touch Ellen, and she refuses to see Europe through his eyes. Without saying a word, this innocent employs strategies to keep him forever with her in her narrow and proper environment. He marries her in a society wedding that he is sophisticated enough to describe as a tribal rite, but he soon has a sense of drowning in her world, of stifling in her drawing room, of sitting beside her in the pony carriage as she handles the reins. Somehow our Margaret, maintaining the outward appearance of complete innocence, has managed to emasculate our Faust!

In a chapter in which Newland, returned from his honeymoon, expresses surprise that “life should be going on in the old way when his own reactions to it had so completely changed.” May wins an archery contest at a lawn-fête given by the rake Beaufort. “Gad,” says Lawrence Lefferts of her literal skill, “not one of the lot holds the bow as she does.” “Yes,” replies Beaufort, “but that’s the only kind of target she’ll ever hit.” May, however, is satisfied at winning diamond-tipped arrows in recognition of her athletic prowess. It is Newland, whose name after all is Archer, whose never hitting any other kind of a target is a pathetic miss. Wharton is hardly the kind of writer who would consciously make Newland’s ineffectual arrow a sexual image, but the sad fact of his recurrent misses is nevertheless in the novel and not unrelated to his being an emasculate Faust in his lack of true strength. He has intellectual curiosity, he seeks passion, he wants to develop his aesthetic sense, but he has none of the Faustian tragic intensity that would enable him to experience either the grand damnation of the classical Faust or the grand redemption of Goethe’s protagonist.

I am about to suggest, of course, that Ellen is a half-mock version of Goethe’s second heroine, Helen of Troy. One general interpretation of Goethe’s Helen is that she is aesthetic beauty in a classical sense and that Faust through his union with her—that is, through the appreciation of the classical aesthetic which she represents—approaches the attainment of ideal beauty. Although he ultimately loses her in Goethe’s dramatic poem, Faust nevertheless produces by her Euphorion, who symbolizes the spirit of poetry created by the joining of the romantic and the classical, and is himself ennobled by his relationship with her. Wharton goes to great lengths to associate Ellen with intellectual freedom, with a sure artistic taste, with a sense of feeling at home with painters and musicians. As he becomes more drawn to her, Newland imagines an almost bohemian utopia where he and Ellen can enjoy free expression, personally, intellectually, artistically. He cannot even get May to be impressed by the Louvre when they visit Paris, but to him Ellen is taste, sensitivity, creativity, and consequently a woman with whom he would like to flee to a world “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.” “Oh, my dear—” she answers, “where is that country? Have you ever been there?” I have, she says, and there “I’ve had to look at the Gor-
gon,” who although she may not blind one, “dries up one's tears.” Newland’s choice, then, is between drowning with May and being turned into stone with Ellen. In the evolution of the book, he is forced to do the former, which is after all the proper and less dramatic kind of death.

In the next-to-last chapter, where Wharton really rings down her curtain before a summarizing epilogue, Ellen is sacrificed to the preservation of society, of which May has become the custodian and which Newland must endure. May’s family sends Ellen back to Europe in what Wharton describes as a rite in which the tribe devours its scapegoat. May ironically uses the announcement of her pregnancy to keep Newland from following Ellen to Europe.

While we are mentioning Newland’s futile pursuit of Ellen, we might point out that Wharton builds her structure on a scene from The Shaugbrun, a popular play of 1874 by Dion Boucicault. The scene which she describes and keeps before us as a paradigm in pantomime has the hero kissing a ribbon falling down the back of the heroine’s flowing, Ellen-like dress and then leaving the room “without her hearing him or changing her attitude.” In Part I of The Age of Innocence Wharton meticulously establishes Newland’s dilemma by vacillating between scenes of Newland-pursuing-May and Newland-thrown-with-Ellen; Newland’s movement is ostensibly toward May, but implicitly toward Ellen. At the end of Part I he kisses Ellen’s shoe, but she makes it clear that no consumption of their affection is possible — just when May’s telegram agreeing to marriage arrives. In Part II, after he is actually married to May, the movement is literally toward Ellen. He stands on a hill and looks down at her on a wharf, but she does not turn around and he does not call out to her. He follows her to the Blenkers’ summer place and kisses what he believes to be her dainty um-

brella beside the garden pavilion, only to discover that she is away and that the umbrella belongs to the absent sister of a silly girl who discovers him there. (This scene is watched over by a crippled wooden Cupid on the top of the garden house just as the previous one has in its background the cupids on Mrs. Mingott’s ceiling.) Newland follows Ellen to Boston, where he does go up the river with her to a private dining room, but at first their rendezvous is against the background of chattering old-maid schoolteachers and the entire meeting has over it the cloud of the arrival of Monsieur Rivièrè, the secretary with whom Ellen is rumored to have run away in Europe. A plan to meet her in Washington, D.C., is thwarted by the illness of Mrs. Mingott. And a final promise of Ellen to “come to him once,” given against the background of unidentified cultural implements from Ilium displayed in a case in a tomb-like museum room, is never fulfilled; Ellen leaves, and Newland remains. A recurrent emphasis of the novel is “near and yet far,” applied both to Newland’s cold relationship with his wife May and to his warm feeling for Ellen despite the apparent impossibility of his ever actually being with her. Newland is able to move neither from one position nor toward another — except, say, by going half of the distance each time, which will never get him there.

Newland Archer’s first name is too obvious a pun to define, but it should be pointed out that his name, like his dilemma, is highly reminiscent of that of Christopher Newman in James’s The American. As James’s men inevitably find, the European women of beauty, grace, and taste always have about them some taint of corruption — at least by the provincial American standards from which somehow the emasculate protagonists are unable to free themselves. One might even pursue the idea that Archer, the last name of Wharton’s protagonist,
is borrowed from Isabel Archer, the heroine of The Portrait of a Lady, who is torn in manifold ways between the milieus of America and Europe. Isabel has been said to be an arch, a bridge between American and European values; actually, she can be compared in innumerable ways to both Ellen, who marries a European, and to Newland, who would like to do so under the illusion that freedom, love, and art can be found abroad. The experienced Isabel could tell him otherwise, but she could also tell him that unless he is brave enough to take a step, he will never really know and perhaps never really develop from facing reality, the only effective teacher.

Actually, Wharton does not seem to include the tragic elevation of character through suffering in her scheme of things. At one point in her novel, she has Newland Archer’s spinster sister wonder why Ellen had not changed her name to Elaine, a more cosmopolitan name, as it were. Wharton may not be using Tennyson’s Elaine as a correlative, but one cannot help but think of a point that Tennyson makes in both “The Lady of Shalott” and “Lancelot and Elaine.” As long as one looks at life through a mirror, or vicariously through the medium of art, it is colorful and fanciful, but when one faces it directly, he meets only the awful reality of hurt, of aloneness, of death itself. That Perseus could kill the Medusa only by looking at her through the mirror of his shield has received an endless number of allegorical interpretations. Ellen keeps warning Newland that a look at the Gorgon’s head freezes emotion—almost as if she is an Elaine who has learned from the bitter experience of immersing herself fully in life.¹

¹At one point Newland expresses pleasure that May “had advanced far enough to join him in ridiculing the Idyls of the King”; ironically, he might have learned several truths from it himself.

One final suggestion about the American Archer’s last name. Wharton forces attention to it through her constant identification of May with Diana, the archer goddess who in this case never hits a real target, never involves herself passionately in anything. Is Newland, despite his Faustian illusions about his “advanced” ideas, really an inverted Apollo, the mock archer-god and brother to May’s sterile Diana? Is he incapable, like May, of true involvement—and even in a more pathetic way than she in that he knows the truth about the world but has no strength to “murder or create.” Apollo did both with his arrow-rays, often rashly, but nevertheless compulsively, strongly, warmly. Even in the final chapter, the epilogue to Wharton’s drama, when May in turn has been sacrificed to let the society relax its mores and move into a new stage, Newland is kept within the old society’s bounds. He goes at last to Europe with his son, who is about to marry a girl because he likes her and not because she belongs, a girl who incidentally is a protegé of Ellen. His son enters the door of Ellen’s apartment and climbs the stairs to—what will he find there? Newland, literally free, dares not enter for “fear lest that last shadow of reality should lose its edge.” He watches a servant come out on the balcony and close the shutters; then he walks back “alone” to his hotel. One thinks of James’s Strether in The Ambassadors standing before the balcony of his ward’s French apartment. However cautiously, Strether did enter and was drawn further and further into the mysteries of European life. Was this life natural and free? Was it an abomination? Which way lies the abyss: in American repression or in French expression of the true self? What ordinary man can choose between fire and ice?