

EDITH WHARTON

I ventured to choose *The Age of Innocence* as a kind of retrospective prologue to our discussions. Edith Wharton, born in 1862, belonged to a middle generation between, on the one hand, Henry James and William Dean Howells, and on the other, most of the novelists of the twenties whom we shall be discussing. *The Age of Innocence* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1921, the year after it appeared, in competition with Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street*. And even then it was of course very much of a period piece. Most of it takes place during the 1870's, with the last chapter, the epilogue, taking place just after the turn of the century. Edith Wharton had gone through the various stages of her upper-class girlhood in old New York; had made her social debut, and then liberated herself to begin her career, to live abroad mostly and to become in her later years a Grande Dame of American letters. She had been alerted to her subject by Henry James, and let me read you the advice from James' letter. The Jamesian characteristics that you notice in his literary style are even more prominent when he writes in his own person:

Let it suffer the wrong of being crudely hinted at as my desire [he doesn't say "I want," and you'll notice he uses the passive tense: very impersonal, but he's talking about himself] earnestly, tenderly, intelligently [he piles up the words as if he were groping] to admonish you while you are young, free, expert, exposed (to illumination) –by which I mean while you're in full command of the situation– admonish you, I say, in favor of the American subject. There it is round you. Don't pass it by –the immediate, the real, the only, the yours, the novelists that it waits for. Take hold of it and keep hold, and let it pull you where it will.... What I mean to say in a word [as if James could say anything in a word] is: Profit, be warned, by my awful example of exile and ignorance. You will say that *ç'en parle à mon aise* [that's very easy to say] but I shall be paid for my ease, and I don't want you to pay (as much) for yours. But these are impertinent importunities– from the moment they are

not developed. All the same, *Do New York!* The first-hand account is precious.

Now, when we talk of old New York it must sound rather absurd to denizens of old Alcalá, and there is indeed an ironic undertone in talking of old New York. Edith Wharton or James would realize, as much as anyone, the parvenu elements involved. She raises the question at one point, "Could Columbus have come all that way just to have dinner at the Selfridge Merrys?" It's not the metropolis, then, that we envisage, although Edith Wharton would like us to think that she had treated it as Flaubert would treat *une ville de province*, or Trollope a cathedral town. This is not like Balzac's Paris or Galdos's Madrid. It occurs to me –but you must be the judge, given the triangular situation developed here– that this might make an interesting contrast, certainly not a comparison, with *Fortunata y Jacinta*, for all the distance, of course, between worldly experience and naive innocence. The irony is furthered here by the title, which refers to a rather famous painting of an infant by James Gainsborough which now hangs in the Huntington Gallery at Pasadena.

Edith Wharton's cast of characters is drawn from a limited group in her native city, an enclave. During the 90's, a New Yorker who set himself up as a sort of social arbiter had coined the phrase "four hundred"; with its suburbs included there were just four hundred people worth meeting in New York. By that time there were four million people living in New York, and O'Henry titled a collection of his metropolitan short stories *The Four Million*. Most of these would not have been invited to the balls of the plutocratic Mrs. Aster; four hundred was the number that her ballroom could hold; and those dimensions were the limitations from which Edith Wharton escaped. Escaped is the word if you're looking for what James liked to call the "figure in the carpet," the kind of configuration that runs through an author's work, perhaps predetermined to some extent by his or her experience.

For Edith Wharton I think it falls right there, in "coming out" as a debutante with the expectation of making a fashionable marriage. Actually, at Newport one summer –and that's the summering place that comes into the novel– she had fallen in love with a young man

named Walter Berry, who was from her class but not well off, merely a law student at the time. Nothing came of that seasonal romance. Later she was prodded into marriage by family and social conditions, an unhappy marriage with a much older man, who was a sportsman. She ultimately managed to get a divorce, which could have been considered something of a scandal in that society. Hence the figure of the young lawyer, the other man who might have been at the heroine's side, comes into her first important novel, *The House of Mirth*. Lilt Bart, the heroine, is a debutante into that society, but unfortunately her family has lost its money. No one wants to marry her, though she is courted, and the novel ends tragically with her suicide. All too late to rescue her comes the young lawyer, who has been interested in her, Lawrence Selden.

That kind of triangular entrapment is the figure in Edith Wharton's carpet; and it keeps coming out within her other stories even under very different circumstances. Many of her later summers were spent in western Massachusetts where she came to know the simple people who lived around there quite well, and some of her fiction deals with life as they knew it. Possibly her best known shorter piece is the novella *Ethan Frome*. There you have three people starkly trapped together: an unhappy married couple and the other man, with whom the young woman falls into reciprocal love. Then an accident intervenes to prevent any readjustments and condemns the three of them to go on living together in this state of mutual frustration.

Edith Wharton is one of the few American writers who practises the novel of manners, in its original sense: in the tradition of Jane Austen or Thackeray since she has similar people to write about. I have always thought it was significant that the English language has two words, "manners" and "morals", whereas the French can signify both with "moeurs". Thus Proust is interested in the superficialities of society, to be sure, but he probes much deeper.

Edith Wharton seems to stand apart, with the detachment of the anthropologist looking at tribal behavior, when she comes back to that old society. If I were to recommend a social scientist's analysis of the kind of American society that she is dealing with, it would be a book

that appeared in 1899 by Thorstein Neblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. This study is largely devoted to explaining how, in spite of democratic ideology, hierarchies could spring up which were dependent not upon ancestry or feudal distinctions, but on mercy of financial priorities. Status was "conspicuous consumption." If I were to single out two other major novels of Edith Wharton's besides *The Age of Innocence*, the first would be *The House of Mirth* and the second would be *The Custom of the Country*. The latter is more or less a humorous novel, lighter in tone, but much concerned with manners: with a newly rich family trying to climb upward in the world.

We have such a social-climbing family, the Struthers, in *The Age of Innocence*, where the top of the hierarchy is represented by the old Dutch van der Luydens. The Dutch have had a sort of priority, as with the Roosevelts, in New York society, having been there before the Anglo-Saxons. Our novel begins with a panoramic spread, the set-piece at the Opera, where you can watch the local society parade before you, in full perspectus. Newland Archer arrives late. He doesn't have to be late; he has eaten his dinner on time, but has delayed to smoke a cigar because "it wouldn't do to get there on time, you never do." In other words, you're not primarily interested in the music or the show.

...in the first place, New York was a metropolis", and he was perfectly aware that in the metropolises, it was 'not the thing' to arrive early at the Opera; 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.

There speaks the anthropologist.

This attitude has its counterpart in Tolstoy. In *War and Peace* and elsewhere, Tolstoy presents a view of opera as an artificial, silly sort or feature of society; people go there, not to hear or see, but to be seen. In his reminiscences he recalls his own upbringing in the social code of the Russian aristocracy, where whatever happened was "comme il faut" or "not comme il faut." It was the same in Edith Wharton's New York. You get there late, and then you use your opera glasses to see

who's there tonight. Newland focuses on Mrs. Manson Mingott's box for the new arrival. You don't pay a whole lot of attention to the Scandinavian soprano, the famous Christine Nilsson, who is singing the second act of Gunod's *Faust*:

She sang, of course, 'M'ama!' and not 'He loves me,' since an unalterable and unquestioned law of the musical world required that the German texts of French operas sung by Swedish artists should be translated into Italian for the clearer understanding of English-speaking audiences. This seemed as natural to Newland Archer 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."

Here then the relay from a German play to a French libretto, sung by a Swedish soprano in Italian translation – suggests how far we are away from the old world. But the ultimate emphasis falls upon the distinction between what is "the thing" and what is "not the thing", "comme il faut," conventions and proprieties.

This is a structured novel. The first part and the second part are rather symmetrically put together by a tribal ceremonial, the opera in the first and the wedding in the second over which Newland can but exclaim to himself, "How like the first night at the opera!" Indeed, much later on, when the lovers are having to say farewell at the Metropolitan Museum, it seems quite appropriate that the death of their romance should take place in the Egyptian section, with mummies and sarcophagi in the background.

The masculine protagonist is a lawyer, and I've mentioned the figure that a young lawyer might make in Edith Wharton's personal carpet. Incidentally, Walter Berry never married. He lived to become an international lawyer, a doyen of the American colony in Paris, and a good friend of Marcel Proust's; later in life he renewed his close friendship with Edith Wharton, when she lived in France. In *Newland Archer*, you have the name to suggest the new world; Edith Wharton's mother's family name, her own middle name, incidentally, was Newbold. James had also emphasized coming back from one

world to the other: in *The American* the hero was Newman, while in *The Ambassadors* the formidable dowager who directs the operation, though she stayed back in America was named Mrs. Newsome.

You have, then, Newland Archer taking his opera glasses and looking at those two cousins in the box of their aunt, who was a kind of society leader, Mrs. Manson Mingott, and especially at the newcomer, Countess Ellen Olenska. Here one can see, somewhat in the background of the situation, the pattern established by American heiresses marrying into European aristocracy. Ellen has not had a very good marriage; the Polish count turned out to be a cad, and she's had to divorce him; and that has made her somewhat *declassée* in both worlds. At this point the old world seems to be rather corrupt and she is very glad to get back to the simpler life in New York. But it turns out, at first to be rather too simple for her; it's hard, for example, to get used to the gridiron patterned streets. This would probably be the feeling of many who have grown up in a European metropolis, on seeing that long Manhattan Island, with all those numbered streets and blocks that go on up into the hundreds.

The heroine has glamour; she is beautiful and intelligent, she's a liberated woman; but there is also around her an aura of scandal. The suggestion is made more explicit by the connection with Julius Beaufort, who, after his financial manipulations, is socially disgraced and ostracized. But Ellen is not affected by these conventions; in sympathy she pays a visit to a woman who has had nothing to do with it, but is looked down upon as the wife of a scoundrel nevertheless. Incidentally, there is a suggestion in Julius Beaufort of August Belmont, a representative of the Rothchilds, who came over from Germany operate on Wall Street, also a legendary hint in the background of the international Jewish financial manipulator. However, I'm not for a moment suggesting that this should be seen as a *roman à clef*. I'm simply trying to indicate a few of the possible associations that Edith Wharton would be touching upon, when she depicted her characters. Historically, there was no speculation concerned with August Belmont; it is part of the story that there should be a breach of morality, or at least of the social code.

"Women ought to be as free as we are." This is a quotation from Newland himself, and here it's a question of status. But their innocence can become a mask for hypocrisy, as we see in Ellen's victorious cousin, May Welland, a thoroughly conventional if attractive young woman. Her prototype we have seen sketched out in the one scene at Newport when, in an archery contest, she is compared to the chaste athletic goddess, Diana. Her kind of innocence, Newland realizes, "seals the mind and the imagination and the heart from experience."

There are two parts to the book. The first part culminates with the decision for marriage, and the second with another decision based on the wife's pregnancy, which gets in the way of a possible elopement; and that is the trap that is sprung. It is a stifling atmosphere that Edith Wharton conveys. May has spent her poetry and romance as an eligible young woman; and as a wife she is ripening into a copy of her mother and trying to make Newland into a copy of her father. There is one moment when he gets up impatiently, opens the library curtains, pulls up the window, and leans out into the icy night: "The mere fact of not looking at May, seated beside his table, under his lamp, the fact of seeing other houses, roofs, chimneys, of getting the sense of other lives outside his own, other cities beyond New York, and a whole world beyond his world, cleared his brain and made it easier to breathe," But May says, "Newland! Do shut the window. You'll catch your death." And he pulls the window down: "'Catch my death!' he echoed; and felt like adding, 'I've caught it already. I *am* dead -I've been dead for months and months.'" And then, in some recess of his mind, "What if it were *she* who was dead!" He does not dare dwell upon that liberation, but she at least understands that something strange has been going on in his mind. She asks, "Newland! Are you ill?" and he shakes his head.

She bent over her work-frame and as he passed he laid his hand on her head. 'Poor May!' he said.

'Poor? Why poor?' she echoed with a strained laugh.

'Because I shall never be able to open a window without worrying you,' he rejoined, laughing also.

For a moment she was silent; then she said very low, her head bowed over her work, 'I shall never worry if you're happy.'

'Ah, my dear, and I shall never be happy unless I can open the windows!'

In *this* weather?' she remonstrated, and with a sigh he buried his head in his book.

In other words, he has been trapped.

You will recall the Thanksgiving sermon at Grace Church. This would be the Episcopal church downtown; it still represents the most fashionable Protestant congregation. The minister's text from Jeremiah is noted but not quoted. You are not directly told, but this is the sentence: "There is no hope. No, for I have loved strangers, and after them I will go."

To go into a wider world and a richer life, that is Ellen's decision, and we do not see her or hear of her again for twenty-six years, until the epilogue, that final chapter, which finds Newland for the first time—somehow, he has been avoiding it—in Paris. He has been a good husband and father, and is now a widower, just recrossing the Atlantic with his son. New York has grown older with him, but he has been a figure in its municipal affairs, has done his duty as a citizen, and everything now seems to be for the better. It is a newer and wider world at home. He has had a perfectly decent and honorable career; but now he allows himself to think about all he missed, all that he has missed when that symbolic window sash went down: the very flower of life.

And so we are prepared for a recognition scene that does not take place. When the novel was made into a play, a brilliant actress played the part of Ellen, Katherine Cornell; but it was a failure, as of course it had to be, because the important event to which we are all looking forward does not happen. William Dean Howell, who was by then very old, but present on the opening night, consoled Edith Wharton for the play's fiasco by saying: "What the American public really wants is a tragedy with a happy ending." This was a real tragedy, alas, with an unhappy ending, and the American public was not ripe for tragedy. I doubt if it would have been interested in Racine's

Bérénice, which T.S. Eliot once thought the most perfect of all tragedies, although nothing happens there, really. Two people are in love, but they are not able to get together. The plot simply follows three words of Tacitus' Latin: "invitus invitam dimisit." He unwilling sent her unwilling away. It is not quite like that here; but neither of them is quite willing; again it is she who goes away.

This leaves us to contemplate what Robert Frost called the road not taken. Or else, as an earlier American poet, John Whittier, put it, "Of all sad things of tongue and pen,/ The saddest words are these: it might have been." And so it might have been, but so it isn't, and that is the conclusion. Nothing is concluded here, yet conclusions are very important; and the negative ones not less so. More and more we have come to recognize the prime importance of closure in the novel. Recently I reminded you of the passage at the closure of *The Great Gatsby*. I think this may be a way of testing a novel: you remember, of course, how the ocean rolls on and on over the Pequod at the end of *Moby Dick*. Or it can be something quite different, as in *Madame Bovary*, which seems to be a conventional summing up after the tragedy –what has happened since to the other characters, how do they get along. It ends with a very ironic description of M. Homais: it is he, the foolish, pompous busybody, who prospers and has just been made a member of the Légion d'Honneur.

Then you encounter the later Newland Archer coming with his son to the square in Paris. Dallas, the son, goes up to Ellen's apartment, while Archer remains behind, seated on a bench in the park, and imagining the situation:

Then he tried to see the persons already in the room –for probably at that sociable hour there would be more than one– and among them a dark lady, pale and dark, who would look up quickly, half rise... [he goes on trying to imagine her] and hold out a long, thin hand with three rings on it....

'It's more real to me here than if I went up,' he suddenly heard himself say; [Is that true? Is he rationalizing?] and the fear lest that last shadow of reality should lose its edge kept him rooted to his seat as the minutes succeeded each other.

He sat for a long time on the bench in the thickening dusk, his eyes never turning from the balcony. At length a light shone through the windows, and a moment later a man-servant came out...and closed the shutters.

At that, as if it had been the signal he waited for, Newland Archer got up slowly and walked back alone to his hotel.

That is the end of the story. What was he afraid of? we ask ourselves as we put the book down. Was he afraid of seeing Ellen Olenska again after all these years, or was he afraid of seeing himself reflected in her eyes?