

# The Rich Garners of the Past and the Writer's Novitiate: a portrait of the artist (Edith Wharton) as a young woman<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract:

Her research focuses on American literature, with a particular emphasis on 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>- century American travel literature. Her doctoral dissertation, entitled *The Cruise of the Vanadis: in the footsteps of Edith Wharton*, explores Edith Wharton's 1888 travel narrative, *The Cruise of the Vanadis*. Wharton never thought fit to submit it to her publishers and, as a consequence, it lay in her drawers unpublished until it was rediscovered in 1992. This narrative is invaluable as it gives a clear picture of the underlying influences that nourished the vision of the future novelist. Publications: Dec. 2013: DELL'OLIO, Aurélie. « La genèse de l'œuvre littéraire d'Edith Wharton : imitation ou originalité ? », In: *Emprunts et Empreintes*, Babel Doctoriades 2012 : « Journées de la jeune recherche », 2013, pp. 83-102. Feb. 2012: DELL'OLIO, Aurélie. « Edith Wharton et le motif du départ : une vie marquée par l'exil », In: *Heureux qui comme Ulysse... : voyage et exil*, Babel Doctoriades 2011 : « Journées de la jeune recherche », 2012, pp. 29-45. In Press: to be published soon in Baghdad: "The Rich Garners of the Past and the Writer's Novitiate: a portrait of the artist (Edith Wharton) as a young woman". In Press: « Regards croisés en Méditerranée, une étude comparée des styles et des caractères chez Edith Wharton (*The Cruise of the Vanadis*) et D. H. Lawrence (*Sea and Sardinia*) », In: *Le prisme américain*, Babel-Littératures plurielles, n°28, 2013. In Press: « L'afflux transatlantique des Américains vers le « vieux continent » de 1830 à 1900 », In: *Horizons des mondes méditerranéen et atlantique : imaginaires comparés*, Babel-Littératures plurielles, n°29, 2014.

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**B**ack to New York after a prolonged stay in Europe, the young Edith Jones finds solace in the numerous works from English, French and German authors found on the shelves of her father's well-stocked library. More or less neglected by her parents, she fills the emotional void with these books and becomes a voracious reader. The intellectual imprint, left by the daily contact with the greatest European writers, is determining for the successful novelist to be. The first fruits are to be found in *The Cruise of the Vanadis*, a travel journal written in 1888, in the context of a Mediterranean cruise.

Later, she was to find a mentor in the person of Henry James (1843-1916). Many critics have dubbed her "the female Henry James" or "James's disciple". To what extent can it be said that the Jamesian model influenced Edith Wharton's literary creation? How and in what ways does she take her inspiration from the hours spent in her father's library? What is the lasting impression made by the authors she read during her adolescence?

**I. *The imprint left by the great European literary canons***

**a) *A social environment favouring her literary education***

Born in New York on January 24<sup>th</sup> 1862, Edith Wharton was the third child and only daughter of George Frederic and Lucretia Jones. She grew up in the New York high society of her parents. The Rhinelanders and the Stevenses, her forefathers on the maternal side, as well as the authentic "Jones clan" her father belonged to, emerged as the most representative families of the new American aristocracy, made up of families who had settled in New York back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, tracing their roots back to England and Holland. New York was buzzing with these "old money" society families, some of them powerful real estate owners who were ideally placed to benefit from the buoyant city's growth to consolidate their wealth.

In the wake of the Civil War, the Joneses, like many of their friends, set sail for Europe, accompanied by their four year-old daughter Edith. They were to remain there for six years, spending prolonged stays in Rome, Paris and Florence, and travelling to Spain and Germany. Edith Wharton was later to look back on the financial reasons that had led to this departure, the crux being the repercussions of the depreciating American dollar, as the country slowly recovered from civil war. With a view to securing their plummeting finances, the Joneses, like most of the New York elite, decided to settle abroad on the proceeds of the rent

from their property in New York and their country house in Newport. As she later pointed out: "The depreciation of American currency at the close of the Civil War had so much reduced my father's income that, in common with many of his friends and relations, he had gone to Europe to economize" (Eleanor Dwight, *Edith Wharton: an Extraordinary Life*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994, pp. 12-13).

They came back to New York in 1872, when Edith was in her tenth year. Oppressed by the ugliness of the New York of the time, she dreamt of escape and found her release and pleasure in the comforting thought of going back to Europe. Left to her own devices, she took solitary refuge in the books of her father's extensive library. This literary escape nourished the memory of the European years and formed the future art critic. In the autumn of 1880 (Edith was eighteen), the family was forced once again to leave the city — the doctors feared the harmful effects of the New York winter on Mr. Jones's failing health. To her delight, they set sail once again for Europe, Edith almost forgetting the terrifying reality hidden behind the news, for joy. Spending some time in London before moving to Cannes, the Joneses travelled to Hamburg, then to Venice, and finally to Florence. However, in the spring of 1882, after her father's death, Edith and her mother moved back to New York.

**b) From travelling to Europe to the discovery of the cradle of classical culture**

Edith's passion for English, French and German literature took on a further dimension on her return. She familiarized herself with the works of Swift, Sterne, Defoe, Shakespeare and Milton, as well as those of Corneille, Racine, La Fontaine, Lamartine and Victor Hugo, studied Schliemann, got to know Goethe's poems and plays, read widely in history, anthropology and philosophy. The collected poems of Keats and Shelley she was given as birthday presents from her parents became firm favourites. She had Paul Lacroix (1806-1884), a French polygraph, to thank for her precocious interest in art criticism and history. Best known under the pseudonyms of P. L. Jacob or "Bibliophile Jacob", this art historian contributed to the rediscovery of the Middle Ages which swept over Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Also on her reading list were the works of Joseph Gwilt (1784-1863), an English writer and architect (*Encyclopaedia of Architecture* (1842)), those of Franz Kugler (1808-1858), known for his handbook on art history, *Handbuch der*

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*Kunstgeschichte* (1842), which, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had a major influence on the development of art history, as well as the writings of the British writer and art historian Anna Jameson Brownell (1794-1860).

Of course, the most important of all was John Ruskin (1819-1900), the most influential art critic of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century — every traveller's bible, for the generation to which Edith Wharton belonged:

And then I came upon Ruskin! His wonderful cloudy pages gave me back the image of the beautiful Europe I had lost, and woke in me the habit of precise visual observation [...], & as an interpreter of visual impressions he did me incomparable service (Edith Wharton, "Life and I", In: *Edith Wharton: Novellas and Other Writings* [1907-34], New York: Library of America, 1990, p. 1084).

Ruskin was, for her, a model and a master. She discovered, through *Modern Painters* (1843-1860), a new way of looking at art and developed an appreciation of the principles of space, tone, chiaroscuro and colour; she also learned how to identify each element of a painting, to grasp an image as a whole.

Later, in the 70's and 80's, she developed a genuine interest in travel narratives, generally dismissed as the compositions of "gifted amateurs", the works, for instance, of Violet Paget (Vernon Lee), Walter Pater, and John Addington Symonds. At a later stage, she became fascinated by Bernard Berenson's scholarly work on Italian painting (in the 90's).

In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934), she can still picture herself as a child, pinned to the carpet, her father's towering library looming around her, unable to curb the obsessional desire driving her to take possession of the books and go through them one after the other:

I am squatting again on the thick Turkey rug, pulling open one after another the glass doors of the low bookcases, and dragging out book after book in a secret ecstasy of communion. I say 'secret', for I cannot remember ever speaking to any one of these enraptured sessions. The child knows instinctively when it will be understood, and from the first I kept my adventures with books to myself (Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* [1934], New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998, pp. 69-70).

In *Outre-mer, impressions d'Amérique* (1895), Paul Bourget (1852-1935) praises the depth, range and diversity of Wharton's

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scholarship; he presents a fascinating portrait of a highly educated and gifted woman, with a critical and enlightened mind:

The girl who is up to the times, who has read everything, understood everything, not superficially, but really, with an energy of culture that could put to shame the whole Parisian fraternity of letters [...], there is not a book of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Renan, Taine, which she has not studied, not a painter or sculptor of whose works she could not compile a catalogue, not a school of poetry or romance of which she does not know the principles (Paul Bourget, *Outre-mer, impressions d'Amérique*, New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1895, p. 93).

Wharton's memories of *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832) by Washington Irving (describing the history and legends of Spain under the Moors) remained with her throughout her life. In this extract, she remembers with what a wild stretch of the imagination how, as a child, still too young to read, she would become, for an instant, as she turned the pages, the hero of extraordinary adventures:

Well—the “Alhambra” once in hand, making up was ecstasy. At any moment the impulse might seize me; and then, if the book was in reach, I had only to walk the floor, turning the pages as I walked, to be swept off full sail on the sea of dreams. [...] The call came regularly and imperiously; and though, when it caught me at inconvenient moments, I would struggle against it conscientiously [...] the struggle was always a losing one. I had to obey the furious Muse (Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* [1934], *op.cit.*, pp. 34-35).

From her early childhood, she demonstrated her ability to grasp, interiorize and retain with precision the details of what she saw: “the European background [was] everywhere preparing my eye and imagination to see beauty and feel the riches of a long historic culture. All unconsciously, I was absorbing it all” (Eleanor Dwight, *Edith Wharton: an extraordinary life*, *op.cit.*, p. 18). For the young Edith, travelling became a precious source of inspiration, training her eye to see clearly and appreciate the most common object as particularly worthy of attention, and, later, leading the nib to render accurately and faithfully each element of a decor. Far from the stereotype of the child who merely goes with the flow, too young to value a landscape appropriately, Edith, on the contrary, showed signs of a great sensitivity to details: “[a] secret sensitiveness to landscape — something in me

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quite incommunicable to others, that was trembling and inarticulately awake to every detail of wind-warped fern and wide-eyed briar rose” (Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* [1934], *op.cit.*, p. 54).

Her personality was articulated around a set of singularities: her psychic torments and her constant need for escape, her surprisingly fine visual perception, her emotional response to beauty and ugliness, her tendency to decompose the world in a series of images and her thirst for knowledge. She was just like her father in many respects: Edith and George Frederic shared an equal sensitivity to the appeal of a place and both were gifted with an exceptional visual memory. This ability is largely dependent on concentration and requires a constant selection and analysis of the visual elements from the surrounding world. Both of them were also true connoisseurs of architectural art.

Unfortunately, these were not the accomplishments that found grace in her mother's eye, who was more intent on finding a suitable husband for her bookish daughter. After a number of false starts and disappointments, a suitable candidate was finally found. A major change thus came into Edith's life when she met Teddy Wharton, a Harvard graduate, twelve years her senior and of a similar background. She became her wife in 1885, when she was 23, but, as they shared no intellectual or artistic interest of any kind, except a great taste for travelling, they finally divorced, after 28 year's marriage, in 1913. On the bright side, this union at least enabled her to take numerous trips to foreign lands, especially in the Mediterranean and, in particular, in 1888, to depart on a memorable cruise on the *Vanadis*.

This particular trip should be set in the context of a series of international explorations, at a cost of long voyages and cultural disruption. It would appear that the driving force of this wanderlust was the need to seek refuge in exotic places, discover at last at first-hand, the places described in her childhood and adolescent readings. This was nourished with consistent cultural background information and knowledge. The aim was twofold; (i) to make direct contact with a lost and legendary part of European history — something she approached with avidity, even though she was frequently disappointed, as well as (ii) a gateway to something deeply rooted in her nature which she needed to rediscover — a quest for the holy grail of her unconscious being. This had nothing to do with a pleasure cruise: the wanderlust was conditioned by a specific psychological state, resulting from her deepest

unformulated aspirations. She was therefore constantly in search of landscapes, peoples, customs, climates which awakened these unusual feelings in her; emotions that went far deeper than the conscious framework of her life.

The rest of her life would be based on the recurring motifs of departure and arrival, and, like all travellers, she would endlessly move on in the hope of new discovery, a temporary sense of wonder, but also, more broadly, cultural enrichment.

**c) Intertextuality – tissues of connections and associations**

In 1888, thanks not only to her new status as an independent married woman, but to a windfall from a deceased uncle, Edith was at last in a position to satisfy her wanderlust. The cruise of the Mediterranean, so long dreamt of, became a reality. The notes she took during this cruise give an idea of the intellectual imprint left by the great European writers. These were subsequently transformed into a travelogue, and the title, found in the manuscript, “The Cruise of the Vanadis”, might give the impression that the account was initially destined for publication. However, this came to nothing as Wharton obviously regarded it as a “gallop d’essai”. As a consequence, it lay in her drawers unpublished until it was rediscovered in 1992.

For students and critics of Edith Wharton, the artist, it is invaluable, as it gives a clear picture of the underlying influences that nourished the vision of the future novelist. The scrupulous documentation, clearly perceptible in the narrative, often gives the impression of reading the carefully detailed work of an encyclopaedist. In the manner of a true scholar, Edith Wharton, quotes Goethe, makes subtle references to Shelley’s poems, to Pindar and his *Pythians*, to Theocritus and his *Idylls*, to the Homeric epics, to Lord Byron, A. W. Kinglake, Dante, or to the Greek mythology, to scripture — to mention but a few. She also demonstrates her knowledge in the history of painting, sculpture and architecture (Moresque, Roman, Norman-French, Byzantine, Gothic), identifying with great accuracy the various pictorial schools, providing details on each artist’s life, along with his place in the history of art. She always traces the historical path (quite a singular approach when it comes to travel writing), knows all about horticulture, and refers to most travel literature writers of her time (Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, *Italian Journey* (1816-17); Théophile Gautier, *Constantinople* (1853); John Addington Symonds, *Sketches in*

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*Italy and Greece* (1874); Augustus J. C. Hare, *Cities of southern Italy and Sicily* (1890), to name a few).

By way of illustration, in Syracuse, Wharton, barely off the steamer, is already engaged in an intensive description of the history and the architecture of the Cathedral "Our Lady of Pillar", the Temple of Athena celebrated for its possessions and, mostly, for its doors decorated with ivory and gold sculptures. She goes on explaining that one of the crimes for which Cicero accused Verres was the theft of these treasures, which he removed to Rome. She then includes historical facts, tells us, as she walks towards "the Ear of Dionysius", an artificial cave in Syracuse, how brutally Dionysius the tyrant used to subject his prisoners to hard work and punishment. Then, the picturesque ruins of the Roman amphitheatre become the main focus, as well as the remains of the sepulcher of Hiero II, tyrant of Syracuse, who, as she explains, rebuilt Sicily after the departure of Pyrrhus from the island (275 BC).

Once in Rhodes, she attempts to shed light on the forgotten facets of the history of the Knights Hospitaller, fragmented into various places: "As the most splendid exploits of the Hospitallers are associated with their rule in Rhodes, I will try to put into a few words an account of the growth of the Order before going on to describe the place itself" (p. 121). In place of a brief historical overview, the reader is treated to a lengthy description — a full page and a half. Later, while in Lindos, a casual visit to a village church gives rise to an excursus on a series of subjects, from the aesthetics to the historical, including geography, architecture and art history:

We were first taken to see the church, which is not described in any book of travel that I have read, and is merely mentioned by Newton. He calls it Byzantine, but unless he uses the term geographically, as dividing the East from the West, I don't see what he means. The church consists of a nave with pointed tunnel-vaulting, a semi-circular apse, and a dome over the intersection of the nave and transepts. The *eikonostasis* does not form a structural part of the church, but is merely a screen put up in front of the apse. It is evident that the pointed tunnel-vaulting of this church must have travelled from the East to the West and back again, instead of being taken direct from the Saracen, like the pointed arches of Monreale and Lazisa. Rhodes was taken in 1311, and Fulk de Villaret, who conquered it, was a Knight of Provence. The church of Lindos was

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probably built in his day or in that of his successor, Helion de Villeneuve, Grand Prior of St. Gilles in Provence; and as late as the middle of the thirteenth century the churches of Provence were all built with pointed tunnel-vault roofs. The church of Lindos, therefore, which was probably built not later than the first quarter of the fourteenth century, under the rule of Provençal Grand Masters, and most likely from the designs of Provençal architects, is apparently a faithful reproduction of the style which everywhere prevailed in the mother country at least until within fifty years of that time. If this is the case, the pointed arch of Lindos has performed a double journey, having been carried to Provence from the East either by the Greeks, or in later times by Provençal travellers, and taken back to Saracenic lands by the very Provençals who first made it known to western Europe. To call this church Byzantine is absurd. Pointed arches, it is true, were used in the Byzantine basilica of Monreale, but they were an accidental divergence from the Byzantine forms, which are essentially round-arched, and the accident which produced them—the strange blending of Norman and Saracenic forms in Sicily—was one which had no counterpart elsewhere. (pp. 129-130)

Much more than a simple tourist, Wharton offers the genuine reflexions of a vagabond scholar, showing a profound understanding of a territory steeped in history and rich in wonders for an appreciative traveller.

*Italian Backgrounds* (1905) gives the most vivid illustration of the author's culture, rigour, knowledge of art and, in particular, of Italian history, as well as of her critical judgment. The volume focuses on a different approach to travel literature, which differs from the picturesque bias predominant among most of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century travel writers, such as Irving, Hawthorne, Cooper, Longfellow, etc. In this volume, Edith Wharton not only casts her expert and analytical eye over art and architecture, but also strives to discover what she calls the "parentheses of travel" — little known and hard-to-reach sites, byways, etc. She divides Italy into a "foreground", to be equated to the information provided by a travel guide and to the mere tourist's approach, "the hasty traveller"; and a "background" belonging to the dreamy traveller, whose senses are permanently aroused, striking out into unknown territory, paying attention and understanding Italy in a completely different way,

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without preconceived, simplified or reductionist ideas, but with an open mind, along with a thorough study: "Italy is divided into foreground and background [...] its premier plan asterisked for the hasty traveller, its middle distance for the "happy few" who remain more than three days, and its boundless horizon for the idler who refuse to measure art by time" (Edith Wharton, *Italian Backgrounds*, New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1905, p. 179). The reader, finding enough to sustain his interest, is in a relatively good position to assess the diversity, the depth, the coherence and the pertinence of the work.

Through her travels, and mostly through her readings, the young Edith Jones developed memory skills and accumulated an encyclopaedic knowledge, which were to lay the foundations for the scrupulous scholarship of the future novelist. In addition to being necessary for her personal development, this cultural background paved the way to the future author's prose — fundamentally "intertextual" — contributing to its unique character.

More than a mere imprint, it represents a touchstone of authenticity in providing a basis for most of her works. The importance of this is born out by the fact that she devotes thirteen pages of her autobiography (pp. 64-76, 91) to compiling an inventory of her readings while confessing to being unable to provide a comprehensive list:

Hitherto my best beloved companions had been books, and to leave one out of this record seems like omitting the name of a human friend. But to enumerate even a fraction would turn my tale into a library catalogue, for I never stopped reading, and having new adventures in the realms of gold; and meanwhile the fate which had so long denied me any other intellectual companionship suddenly relented, and gave me a friend. Books are alive enough to an imagination which knows how to animate them; but living companions are more living still, as I was to discover when I passed for the first time from the somewhat cramping companionship of the kindly set I had grown up in, and the cool solitude of my studies, into the warm glow of a cultivated intelligence.

The young author thus felt the need to add the presence of fellow humans to her daily routine to make it more interesting, yearning for the opportunity to share with others and discover herself through dialogue. *The Cruise of the Vanadis*, written during the first years of her marriage, lays the foundation of her independent nature, as well as the basis of her

knowledge, but, at this early stage, she still lacked the maturity needed to become a genuine author and the intellectual friendships that were to guide her to her true vocation were yet to be made.

## **II. Decisive encounters in the writer's career**

### **a) A still rather tentative style**

It is important to note that Edith Wharton did not attempt to publish any of her writing until she was in her mid thirties. No more than five volumes appeared in print before her fortieth birthday, the forty-four volumes belong to the second half of her active life. Why such a delay in publishing? As for the account of her first Mediterranean cruise, *The Cruise of the Vanadis*, probably dating from 1888, as far as we know, she never thought fit to submit it to her publishers. True, there is something too personal in these pages, but perhaps also there are traces of a sensitivity, which could be considered juvenile. Compared to her mature writings, the style might be judged somewhat hesitant — due, probably, to a lack of experience in writing. Edith Wharton, an aspiring author, had not yet revealed the strength of her own particular vision. She had always regarded creative writing as the ultimate goal, as a continuation of the spiritual journey of reading, but she was conscious that she still had a long way to go before acquiring the intellectual maturity and technical skill needed to make her a fully-fledged writer.

What's more, in her autobiography, she confesses having been faced with a serious impasse when she decided to publish, in collaboration with Ogden Codman, a young Boston architect, *The Decoration of Houses* in 1897: “[we] sat down to write the book—only to discover that neither of us knew how to write! This was excusable in an architect, whose business it was to build in bricks, not words, but deeply discouraging to a young woman who had in her desk a large collection of blank verse dramas and manuscript fiction” (p. 107). She made the decision to submit the project to Walter Berry, the son of one of her family's old friends, who, according to her, “was born with an exceptionally sensitive literary instinct” (p. 108), and who was to provide her with the assistance she needed. She acknowledges, with considerable humility, the influence and imprint of this man on her personal and professional life: “no words can say, because such things are unsayable, how the influence of his thought, his character, his deepest personality, were interwoven with mine” (p. 115).

**b) A seminal event in Wharton's apprenticeship: the encounter with Paul Bourget**

In 1893, she also had the good fortune to come into contact with the French author and man of letters, Paul Bourget. The writer had embarked, with his wife, on a trip across the United States, following, as it were, Tocqueville's footsteps. The account of this voyage of discovery, in which the American society, customs, woman's condition, marriage and the Americans themselves are described with great curiosity, attention and accuracy are to be found in *Outre-mer, impressions d'Amérique*, (1895). During his visit to Newport, an invitation was extended to the couple to visit the Wharton residence (at Land's End, Newport). Her account of the visit gives an idea of her state of mind at that early stage:

What a thrill for a young woman passionately interested in literature, but who never dreamed of making herself part of the illustrious fraternity of writers! [...] At the time of our meeting I knew almost no man of letters. I had always led a purely social life, and the idea of entertaining in my house a great French writer frightened me at least as much as it flattered me. Not sharing my husband's taste for the frivolous and monotonous life of Newport, I didn't realize how the kind of life which appeared to me so desperately banal could have a documentary attraction for a foreigner as curious for novelty as Bourget was (Eleanor Dwight, *Edith Wharton: an extraordinary life, op.cit.*, p. 43).

They soon found common ground: Italy (Bourget had also written an account of an Italian journey *Impressions d'Italie*, 1890); from that moment, on a long-term friendship was established and, in this context, they travelled to Italy together.

It is largely thanks to these two friendships that Wharton gradually found herself through writing and, with the help and advice of her close friend Walter Berry and her new French acquaintance, her style matured and took shape. The first fruits matured in 1904 with *Italian Villas and their Gardens* and this was followed a year later with *Italian Backgrounds* (1905).

She now wanted to try her hand at writing fiction but was prey to many doubts. She discussed it with Bourget and submitted the subject of a short story close to her heart, that of a primary school teacher in a small provincial town. The latter was quick to dissuade her and his

categorical answer came without the slightest hesitation and faster than a bullet: “look around you”. American society was, to his mind, a goldmine of materials for fiction. He clearly showed her the path to follow, a route she eventually chose to take and which proved particularly successful, with a most definitely modern and utterly New York novel: *The House of Mirth* (1905). The novel met with immediate success in the United States.

It is therefore Paul Bourget who was the first to encourage Edith to write novels of manners, and not Henry James, as it is widely believed. Wharton and James had first met in 1903, when she was forty-one and he sixty-three. She greatly admired him and organized a meeting: “so that I might at last pluck up courage to blurt out my admiration for *Daisy Miller* and *The Portrait of a Lady*” (Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* [1934], *op.cit.*, p. 172).

**c) A “female Henry James”?**

Because of the similarity of theme — Wharton, like James, drew her inspiration for her fictional narratives from late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century high society — the comparison was inevitable. Very soon, the critics labelled her a “female Henry James” or “James’s disciple” without ever feeling the need to justify their positions. Irene and Allen Cleaton, in *Books & Battles: American Literature, 1920-1930* (1937), affirm: “Always slightly missing greatness, save with *Ethan Frome*, [Edith Wharton] has contributed a distinguished shelf of books to American Literature —books that are always well-bred and which never fail to reveal her high admiration of Henry James” (p. 249); no other explanation is given. In turn, Edward O’Brien, in *The Advance of the American Short Story* (1923), without referring to a work in particular, concludes “To sum up, her collected short stories form a superb pastiche of Henry James with little added” (p. 205).

However, some critics, such as Millicent Bell (*Edith Wharton & Henry James: the story of their friendship* (1965), “Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Literary Relation” (1959)) and Adeline Tintner (“Wharton and James: Some Literary Give and Take” (1986)), seek to illustrate the topic through tangible examples. James being the man Wharton admired the most, we cannot analyse her works without looking for James’s shadow and imprint, the influence of such an association. The danger, however, as Bell and Tintner point out, is to

over-emphasise it and to see meaningful coincidences where there are none.

They underline, for instance, similarities in the plots. Tintner focuses on Wharton's short stories. The plot of Wharton's "The Recovery" is based on James's "The Tree of Knowledge". And so on for the short stories "'Copy": A Dialogue" (1900), "The Touchstone" (1900) and "The Moving Finger" (1901). However, she also observes that, inversely, James's "The Birthplace" (1903) is similar to Wharton's "The Angel at the Grave" (1901) (two stories in which a person attends to the management and the development of a famous author's estate). Tintner, in a more recent book (*Edith Wharton in context: Essays on Intertextuality* (1999)), proposes a more interesting and original interpretation. She is convinced that the manner in which both authors resort to similar themes, making implicit references to one or the other under the cloak of fiction, cannot be mere coincidence but rather a game consciously played by the two authors. This explanation is favoured by the fact that many of Wharton's titles are direct quotations from James.

Putting aside such a hypothesis, other critics argue that, while the plots echo each other, the treatment of the characters is quite different. James's interest in the main characters is unlimited, while Wharton adopts a completely different approach. She is likely to attach more weight to the situation, to the event that will thwart the reader's expectations, while James has a genuine passion for the very essence and the deep interior conflict of a character, their personality, psychology, and the way these traits emerge and evolve; the reader is never deprived of this privileged intimacy with the character's consciousness.

The comparison between the two authors can be pursued *ad infinitum*, the central issue being the ability to measure each individual impact. The difference has to do with the handling of the situation and the development of the tale; these two elements being approached in radically different, even opposing, manners by both authors, even though the subject and the content sometimes seem identical.

Lynne T. Hanley, in "The Eagle and the Hen: Edith Wharton and Henry James" (1981), brings a fresh perspective to the debate. She starts at the beginning, i.e., at the foundations of their complex friendship. She mainly refers to the work published by Percy Lubbock, based on the letters written by Henry James and on Wharton's own autobiography (A

*Backward Glance*). Hanley details the first moments of their friendship, the charm, the subtlety, the jest, the emotion and the complexity of their interplay. She first contrasts James's passive nature to Wharton's dynamism; characteristics which are, to her mind, reflected in their works:

Fixed on the possibilities of freedom [James] overlooked, [Wharton] thought, the pressures of circumstance and history ... Passing time is a crucial force in Wharton's fiction, an essential motivation, while James suspends time in order to arrest the object of his attention... Such extreme refinement of consciousness, Wharton believed, neglected "the desultoriness, the irregularity, of life caught in the act, and pressed still throbbing between the leaves of the book..." She is the "glorious pendulum," he "a stopped clock." (p. 147).

Even if the quotations from James's literary creation are to be found within her text, she maintains that limiting Wharton's work to such an amalgam is a short-sighted and inappropriate shortcut, as it is obvious that each of her productions is evidence of a profile, a character, an identity of its own; a singularity which justifies her fame. The perspective or even the underlying fanciful desire that James's young friend be a mere product of the master — a budding heir — has often led the critics to take such shortcuts and to dismiss her as an inferior copy of James, the master.

As a consequence of focusing on the similarities that exist between Wharton's and James's works, the critics neglect the unique and totally original character of some of her short stories. For instance, Millicent Bell highlights the satire one finds in "The Pelican", which anticipates *The Custom of the Country* (1913) and provides a sharp analysis of the social customs of the time. "Souls Belated" also anticipates a stylistic feature specific to Wharton, which is the study of social ironies — a theme she will later deal with in depth with *The Gods arrive* (1932). These short stories prove her interest in this facet of irony and satire, which underlies every established society. One of her favourite subjects is the analysis of the consequence of failure to comply with the norm and with the social codes of conduct. James, for his part, does not focus on topics traditionally dominated by sociologic concerns.

And if there was a need for any additional justification to clinch the matter, in 1904, Wharton being no longer touched by James's prose, admitted she had stopped reading his production for about ten years. The

old pleasure, mingled with a profound admiration she had felt some ten years back, gradually vanished, as James's style had altered significantly: "the continued cry that I am an echo of Mr. James (whose books of the last ten years I can't read, much as I delight in the man) ... makes me feel rather hopeless" (a letter wrote to Brownell on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1904).

In 1905, Edith Wharton thus published *The House of Mirth*, her first true success, which launched her career as a writer. This novel not only brought her recognition and established her as a prominent figure of American literature, but also proved her absolute emancipation from James — from the James of the time as well as the James of the early days.

Millicent Bell points out that if *Madame de Treymes* (1907) and *The Reef* (1912), contrary to *The House of Mirth*, draw on James's work, dealing as they do with cultural comparison, exploiting the French-American combination which had seduced James at the beginning of his career, this was because, having now proved her individuality, she felt at last free to be open about the influence she had prevented herself from expressing for so long, for reasons that are obvious.

It seems inevitable that there should be striking similarities between the works of both writers, even so, each has their own particular way of addressing the themes which correlate. Wharton, who scrutinizes society as closely as James does, has an overall perspective, which is systematically outward-looking, as opposed to James's inward-looking approach.

### **III. Toward a poetry of the Whartonian fiction...**

#### **a) A refined mastery of the "foreground"**

We come now to the crux of the problem, i.e., how can the artist extract himself from all the influences that have forged his particular vision of the world? In Edith Wharton's case, there is not only the encyclopaedic knowledge of philosophy, literature, horticulture and visual arts (painting and sculpture — music, curiously, is absent) but also the intrusive presence of a literary giant, in the form of Henry James.

Wharton seems to have had an extraordinary propensity for absorbing and apprehending foreign cultural components, and her talent consists in being able to absorb and transform them in her own personal creations. She consciously adopted an inductive approach which tends to gradually disregard the read and analysed models that have been the object of analysis. Ruskin, for instance, was a true aesthetic paragon, whom

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Wharton adulated at first, but against whom she quickly positioned herself. In chapter 8 of *Italian Backgrounds*, entitled "Picturesque Milan", Wharton offers a personal perspective on internationally reputed painting, sculpture and architecture, and challenges quite daringly not only Ruskin's principles but those of a whole generation of art critics, whom she describes as being submissive, going against the current aesthetic fashion in her praise of Baroque art and architecture. She expresses her difference of opinion in an iconoclastic and almost provocative way, thereby acting as the principal champion of a mode, despised by her contemporaries, who had all rediscovered the beauties, under the influence of Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites, of gothic and medieval art. Wharton showed her intellectual courage and independence in following the Baroque precepts, and extolling a syncretic approach with respect to the themes and representations (of sounds, colours, impressions, etc., conditioning perception and memory) which assemble to compose a work of art.

According to Wharton, the sole means of claiming any innovative skills is to first master what she calls the "foreground", which corresponds to the cultural knowledge. It is indeed certain that before claiming the ability to go beyond a system and renew or replace it, one needs to understand its main components and master its principal concepts. Once she had acquired this "foreground", Wharton felt able to manifest her singularity by introducing her concept of the "background" — bearing witness to a sensitivity of her own:

It is only in the background that the artist finds himself free to express his personality. Here he depicts not what some one else has long since designed for him, in another land and under different conceptions of life and faith, but what he actually sees about him, in the Lombard plains, in the delicately-modeled Tuscan hill-country, or in the fantastic serrated landscape of the Friulian Alps. One must look past and beyond the central figures, in their typical attitudes and symbolical dress, to catch a glimpse of the life amid which the painting originated. Relegated to the middle distance, and reduced to insignificant size, is the real picture, the picture which had its birth in the artist's brain and reflects his impression of the life about him" (*Italian Backgrounds* [1905], *op.cit.*, pp. 173-174).

In *A Backward Glance*, she remembers her fondness for the travel literature of the 70's and 80's, written by talented amateurs such as Violet Paget (Vernon Lee), Walter Pater and John Addington Symonds. For Wharton, they represented "a high but unspecialized standard of culture". In the 90's, Bernard Berenson, whose volumes on Italian painting combine scientific accuracy and aesthetic sensitivity, finally started, according to

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Wharton, to move away from the very romantic direction taken by these talented amateurs, favouring a more scholarly and intellectual approach. She had, however, to face the facts: pure technique and knowledge cannot possibly reflect the true soul of the contemplated work or painting. Wharton insisted on order, form and discipline in the art critic, making sure that her travel narratives and, more extensively, her novels, although enriched by her cultural, literary, historical and architectural knowledge, should suggest precision but also sensitivity.

**b) The part played by what she calls the “background”**

Henceforth, Wharton would continue to distance herself from the personal bias of other authors. Intent on grasping the essence of each foreign environment on her own, she preferred to opt for a more objective approach, in blatant disregard for previous travellers' accounts. Her purpose was to avoid viewing works of art through the filter of previous travellers' eyes, a *modus operandi* she recommended every traveller to follow. Her own particular approach is clear from her travel narratives. Culturally speaking, these accounts are thoroughly documented — geography, history, mythology, architecture, literature, pictorial universe, etc., often including bibliographies in several languages. However, the charm of these travel narratives lies in the hint of amateurism, of a writer with no real professional experience who, ignoring the established critic, insists on casting a fresh eye on a subject familiar to most of her readers. It is precisely these quasi-fictional digressions that give her travel writing that personal touch which sets her prose apart from that of other scholars, such as her friend Berenson, for instance.

It is undoubtedly this desire for originality which drove her to seek new vistas, off the beaten track, far away from the tourist routes. She obviously felt that this was the best way to forge her own personal vision, untrammelled by the conventions of the day. It is precisely this desire for intellectual independence, often characteristic of a certain dilettantism, that gives Edith Wharton's travel writing its unique flavour. Her extensive knowledge of her subject matter made it possible to bypass the conventional wisdom of the day and create something intensely personal and conferring it the status of creative writing.

**c) The Whartonian “other self”**

The surfeit of cultural references described above obviously makes great demands on the reader, making it unintelligible to some. Edith Wharton, even though she was aware of this, refused to adapt her prose to make it more accessible to readers who lacked her cultural background. She gives a justification in *The Writing of Fiction* (1925):

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No writer—especially at the beginning of his career—can help being influenced by the quality of the audience that awaits him; and the young novelist may ask of what use are experience and meditation, when his readers are so incapable of giving him either. The answer is that he will never do his best till he ceases altogether to think of his readers (and his editor and publisher) and begins to write, not for himself, but for that other self with whom the creative artist is always in mysterious correspondence, and who, happily, has an objective existence somewhere, and will some day receive the message sent to him, though the sender may never know it. (Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction*, New York: Scribner, 1925, p. 19).

From this we gather that Wharton herself felt, when composing *The Cruise of the Vanadis*, that she had not as yet established this singular link with the “other self”. This implies that this travel narrative is lacking in the so-called “fictional dimension”, as this other self *is* the projection of the self — the fictional self. *The Cruise of the Vanadis* thus seems to be the first step on the road leading to the long journey of the apprentice who was to become such an accomplished writer of fiction.

In her subsequent travel accounts, the narrator — now in touch with her “other self” — is able to transcend the linear succession of adventures, that go to make up the account given of that first cruise of the Mediterranean made on the Vanadis. Each journey takes the form of a fresh quest for identity, a new pilgrimage for the confirmed expatriate, in search of the holy grail of intellectual and personal riches. This search of an expatriate sometimes takes the form of a pilgrimage, requiring an unflinching faith in her project, which might lead her to an intellectual and personal wealth.

**Conclusion:**

Thanks to the fortunate circumstances of her early life, her privileged position in “old” New York society, the benefits she reaped from extensive international travel and exposure to culture in all its forms, Edith Wharton benefited from the solid resources which Pierre Bourdieu calls “the connoisseur’s competence” — an expertise which involves an extended contact with a cultivated social environment and with places endowed with a cultural dimension. This contact with works of art, he maintains, can be more valuable than any formal academic training, as « un art qui, comme un art de penser ou un art de vivre, ne peut se transmettre exclusivement sous forme de préceptes ou de prescriptions et dont l’apprentissage suppose l’équivalent du contact prolongé entre le disciple et le maître dans un enseignement traditionnel, c’est-à-dire le contact

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répété avec l'œuvre (ou avec des œuvres de la même classe)<sup>2</sup> » (Pierre Bourdieu, « Elément d'une théorie sociologique de la perception artistique » dans *Revue Internationale des Sciences Sociales*, Vol XX (4), 1968, p. 653).

This is what differentiates Edith Wharton's travel narratives from the many accounts of her contemporaries. The former attest to an in-depth knowledge of art and architecture, an ability to combine it with a complex context of theology, classical mythology, history and literature. Her cultural expertise, as well as her judgment, allow her to favour an approach to travel which is both erudite and imaginative.

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<sup>2</sup> "[Connoisseurship is] an art which, like the art of thinking or the art of living, cannot be imparted entirely in the form of precepts or instruction, and apprenticeship to it presupposes the equivalent of prolonged contact between disciple and master in traditional education, i.e. repeated contact with the work (or with works of the same class)" (Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 228).