

The Achievement of Edith Wharton

By Irving Howe

"JUSTICE TO EDITH WHARTON"—this was the title, as also the motivating plea, of an essay the distinguished American critic Edmund Wilson wrote soon after Mrs. Wharton's death in 1937. Years have passed; a modest quantity of critical writing about her work has appeared; she still commands the respect of a certain number of readers, just as some, though not enough, of her books are still in print. But if one judges by the treatment she receives in our standard American literary histories, the attention given her in the U.S. universities, the influence she exerts upon present-day writers, the feelings serious literary people are likely to have about their faded memories of her novels—then justice has not yet come to Edith Wharton. And this seems particularly true if one believes her to be a writer of wit, force and maturity, not the peer of Hawthorne, Melville, and James, but several strides ahead of many 20th-century novelists who have received far more praise than she has. The amount of first-rate criticism devoted to Mrs. Wharton's novels is small, but what matters is that the critical issues posed by her work should again be raised, so that she may take her rightful place as a living figure in our literary world.

In writing the following I have chosen not to compose still another formal essay, but instead to present a few critical notes that will isolate the problems faced by Mrs. Wharton's critics. I have borrowed from and where it seemed necessary, quarrelled with readers and critics, all in the conviction that Mrs. Wharton, if not a great writer, is a genuinely distinguished one.

IRVING HOWE is the well-known American critic who edits *Dissent Magazine* in New York and whose study "Politics and the Novel" was published in London by Stevens last year.

IT IS DIFFICULT to imagine a study of Mrs. Wharton's apprentice fiction in which sooner or later the word "clever" failed to appear. I quote a few characteristic sentences from her early stories:

The most fascinating female is apt to be encumbered with luggage and scruples.

Her body had been privileged to outstrip her mind, and the two... were destined to travel through an eternity of girlishness.

His marriage had been a failure, but he had preserved toward his wife the exact fidelity of act that is sometimes supposed to excuse any divagation of feelings; so that, for years, the tie between them had consisted mainly in his abstaining from making love to other women.

Such writing yields pleasure of a kind, but in the context of Mrs. Wharton's early stories it often seems wilful and strained. One senses too quickly the effort behind the cleverness, the claw behind the glove. Dealing with personal relationships among the leisured and cultivated classes, these stories are usually brittle and contrived, reflections of the conflict in Mrs. Wharton between a worldliness that has not yet been raised to a style and a moralism that has not yet broken past the rationalistic and conventional.

The early stories hardly prepare one for the work to come. For with *The House of Mirth* (1905), a full-scale portrait of a lovely young woman trapped between her crass ambitions and her disabling refinements of sensibility, Mrs. Wharton composed one of the few American novels that approaches the finality of the tragic. The book is close in philosophic temper to European naturalism, though constructed with an eye toward "well-made" effects that are quite distant from the passion for accumulating evidence that we associate with the naturalistic novel. At its best Mrs. Wharton's style is terse, caustic and epigrammatic, a prose of aggressive commentary and severe control. At points of emotional stress, however, she succumbs to a fault that is to mar all her novels except *The*

Age of Innocence: she employs an overcharged rhetoric to impose upon her story complexities of meaning it cannot support and intensities of feeling it does not need. If not her most finished work, *The House of Mirth* is Mrs. Wharton's most powerful one, the novel in which she dramatises, with a fullness and freedom she would never again command, her sense of the pervasiveness of waste in human affairs and the tyranny that circumstance can exert over human will and desire.

Technically, Mrs. Wharton was not an audacious writer. She felt little sympathy with the experiments that were being undertaken during her lifetime by the great European and American novelists. In reading her books one is always aware that for Mrs. Wharton the novel is essentially a fixed form, a closely-designed if somewhat heavy container of narrative, the presence of which we are never invited to forget. For unlike such impressionist writers as Conrad and Faulkner, she does not seek for that illusion of transparency which might tempt a reader to suppose he is "in" the world of the novel. She wishes her audience always to be aware of her firm, guiding hand, to regard it as a force of assurance and control. In the several senses of the term, she is a *formal* writer.

Mrs. Wharton composed the kind of novel in which the plot stands out in its own right, like a clear and visible line of intention; in which the characters are taken to be rationally apprehensible, coherent figures to be portrayed in outer conduct rather than dissolved into a stream of psychology; and in which the narrative point-of-view is quickly established and limited, even if most of the time it comes through the austere tones of Mrs. Wharton's own voice. Her locale and subject-matter are usually American, but her view of the possibilities and limitations of the novel as a form makes her seem closer to such Europeans as Flaubert than Americans like Melville and Twain.

She is a writer of limited scope. The historic span of her novels is narrow, being usually confined to those late nineteenth-century realignments of power and status that comprise a high moment in the biography of the American bourgeoisie. The social range is also narrow, dealing usually with clashes among segments of the rich or with personal relationships as these have been defined, or distorted, by the conventions of a fixed society. Mrs. Wharton had no gift for the large and "open" narrative forms, those sprawling prose epics which in modern fiction have been employed to depict large areas of national experience. Nor, despite an intense awareness of the pressure of impulse in human life, does she care to encounter the murk and puzzle of the unconscious. She respects it, she

fears it, she would as soon keep it at a distance. The arena of her imagination is the forefront of social life, where manners reveal moral stress or bias, and accepted forms of conduct may break under the weight of personal desire. "Civilisation and its discontents": the phrase from Freud could stand as an epigraph for her books. She writes as a convinced rationalist, but in her best work as a rationalist who knows how desperately besieged and vulnerable human reason is.

WITHIN THESE TRADITIONAL limits, and despite her coolness to modernist innovations, Mrs. Wharton was a restless writer, forever seeking new variations of tone and theme, and in her several important novels after *The House of Mirth* rarely troubling to repeat a success. In *The Reef* (1912) she composed a subtle though tenuous drama of personal relations, Jamesian in manner and diction, which deals largely with the price and advantage of moral scruple. In *The Custom of the Country* (1913) she turned to—I think it fair to say, she was largely the innovator of—a tough-spirited, fierce and abrasive satire of the barbaric philistinism she felt to be settling upon American society and the source of which she was inclined to locate, not with complete accuracy, in the new raw towns of the mid-West. Endless numbers of American novels would later be written on this theme, and Sinclair Lewis would commonly be mentioned as a writer particularly indebted to *The Custom of the Country*; but the truth is that no American novelist of our time, with the single exception of Nathanael West, has been so ruthless, so bitingly cold as Mrs. Wharton in assaulting the vulgarities and failures of our society. Her considerable gifts for caricature—what Edmund Wilson calls her "method of doing crude and harsh people with a draftsmanship crude and hard"—reached their fruition in *The Custom of the Country*, a novel that is hard to endure because it provides no consoling reconciliations and has therefore never been properly valued or even sufficiently read. And finally in the list of her superior novels there is *The Age of Innocence* (1920), a suavely ironic evocation of New York in the 1870s, blending Mrs. Wharton's nostalgia for the world from which she came with her criticism of its genteel timidities and evasions. Simply as a piece of writing *The Age of Innocence* is Mrs. Wharton's masterpiece, for it is difficult to think of many American novels written in a prose so polished and supple.

On occasion Mrs. Wharton was also a master of the shorter forms of prose fiction. A fine selection could be made from her short stories,

and there are three short novels or novelettes—*Ethan Frome* (1911), *Summer* (1917) and *The Bunner Sisters* (1916)—which are of permanent interest. *Ethan Frome*, a severe depiction of gratuitous human suffering in a New England village, is a work meant to shock and depress; it has often been criticised, wrong-headedly, for being so successfully the *tour de force* Mrs. Wharton meant it to be, that is, for leaving us with a sense of admiration for the visible rigour of its mechanics and a sense of pain because of its total assault upon our emotions. *Summer*, a more complex and thoughtful piece of writing, is also set in rural New England, displaying a close knowledge of locale and character which would surprise those who suppose Mrs. Wharton merely to be the chronicler of the New York rich. And *The Bunner Sisters*, an account of the sufferings of two poor women in New York, is not only a masterpiece of compressed realism but a notable example of Mrs. Wharton's ability to release through her fiction a disciplined compassion that is far more impressive than the rhetoric of protest cultivated by many liberal and radical writers. One or two other novelettes by Mrs. Wharton, such as the melodramatic *The Old Maid*, also have a certain interest, for this was a form in which her fondness for economy of effects—a sweeping narrative line, a brisk prose, a rapid disposition of theme and figures—served her well.

The remaining novels? A few are dull and earnest failures, like *The Fruit of the Tree*, and too many others are barely superior to ladies'-magazine fiction, like *The Glimpses of the Moon*. In the novels written during the last fifteen years of her life, Mrs. Wharton's intellectual conservatism hardened into an embittered and querulous disdain for modern life; she no longer really knew what was happening in America; and she lost what had once been her main gift, the accurate location of the target she wished to destroy. But the failures do not matter.

The Heiress of Henry James?

ONE REASON justice has not yet come to Edith Wharton is the widespread assumption that she is primarily a disciple of Henry James, a gifted disciple, to be sure, but not nearly so gifted as the master. Now it is true that if you come to Mrs. Wharton's work with the expectation of finding replicas of the Jamesian novel, you will probably be disappointed; but then the expectation itself is a mistake. The claim that Henry James exerted a major influence upon Mrs. Wharton's fiction, repeated with maddening regularity by American literary his-

torians, testifies in general to the power of laziness over the human mind and in particular to the reluctance of scholars to suppose that anything can spring directly from the art of a writer without also having some clearly specifiable source in an earlier writer.

The literary relationship between James and Mrs. Wharton is too complex to be fully examined here, but I should like to make a few assertions and dispute with a few of the critics. I wish to contend that Mrs. Wharton is not primarily the disciple of James; that James's influence upon her work has either been overstated or misunderstood; and that, within certain obvious limits, she is an original writer.

In one large and pleasant way Mrs. Wharton did regard herself as permanently indebted to Henry James. For her, as for so many later writers, he loomed as a model of artistic conscience and selflessness; his example made their calling seem a sacred one, his devotion to craft made everything else seem trivial. James persuaded her that the composition of a novel should not be a mere outpouring, but a craft to be studied and mastered; he was, as she said in tribute, "about the only novelist who had formulated his ideas about his art." In this respect, then, James was her "inspiration"—which is something rather different from an influence.

There is some evidence of a direct literary influence. A number of James's early novels left their mark upon that side of Mrs. Wharton's work which is concerned with the comedy of social manners. To say this, however, is to indicate a serious qualification: for if James began as a novelist of manners he soon became something else as well, and while Mrs. Wharton was skilful at observing manners and in most of her books more dependent than James upon the use of such observation, it is finally for the strength of her personal vision and the incisiveness of her mind that we should value her work. Perhaps one could say that it was the lesser James who influenced the lesser Mrs. Wharton.

In her valuable essay Q. D. Leavis cites Mrs. Wharton's remark that James "belonged irrevocably to the old America out of which I also came," and that he was "essentially a novelist of manners, and the manners he was qualified by nature and situation to observe were those of the little vanishing group of people among whom he had grown up." Such statements form part of Mrs. Leavis's ground for calling Edith Wharton "the heiress of Henry James," but in taking those statements at face value she is, I think, being led somewhat astray.

Mrs. Wharton's description of James's novels is clearly inadequate, for it transforms him into a writer excessively like herself. His dependence

on the manners of "the little vanishing group of people among whom he had grown up" was never very great and, as his art matured, was left almost entirely behind. And while a figure of "the old America," James came from a milieu quite different from the one in which Mrs. Wharton was raised and upon which she drew so heavily in her fiction. Though a New Yorker by birth and occasional residence, James had his closest ties of intellect and temperament with the New England of philosophical idealism, both as it came down to him in its own right and as it was recast in the speculations of his father, Henry James Sr. Now it is precisely this element of American thought to which the mind of Mrs. Wharton was closed: both to her literary profit, since she escaped its vapidty, and her literary loss, since a major lack in her writing is any trace of that urge to transcendence, that glow of the vision of the possible, which lights up even the darkest of James's novels.

The intellectual backgrounds of the two writers are quite different, and that is one reason Mrs. Wharton could not respond favourably to James's later novels. The whole Emersonian tradition, so important a formative element in James's sensibility and so pervasive in his later books, was alien to her. E. K. Brown has noted this difference in more personal terms:

Edith Wharton both in her life and her work seemed to have missed happiness. Something tense and thin and a little sharp marked both. . . . Beneath all the tensions of James, there was a place where life was sweet and warm; and despite the nervous precisions of his style. . . there was something large and rich about his work which is absent from that of Mrs. Wharton.

The truth is, I would maintain, that in Mrs. Wharton's most important novels it is hard to detect any *specific* Jamesian influence. Perhaps it can be found in her conception of the novel as a form, her wish to write with plan and economy; perhaps in the style of *The Custom of the Country*, which may owe something to the cold brilliance of James's prose in *The Bostonians*. But Mrs. Wharton's novelettes are in setting, theme and characterisation quite alien to James, while each of her three best novels—*The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence*—is a work notably different from either the early or late James. The somewhat naturalistic method of *The House of Mirth* and Mrs. Wharton's preoccupation with Lily Bart as victim of her social milieu; the caustic satire of *The Custom of the Country*, and Mrs. Wharton's impatience with its feeble hero as an agent of traditional values; the modulated style of *The Age of Innocence* and Mrs. Wharton's complex involvement with

the world of her birth—all this seems her own. Her characteristic style is sharper, clearer, more aggressive and less metaphorical than James's in all but a few of his novels. Her narrative line is usually more direct than his. And her sense of life is more despondent, less open to the idea or even possibility of redemption.

If Mrs. Wharton was the heiress of Henry James, it did not take her long to start living off her own literary capital.

A World and Its Changes

MRS. WHARTON'S best novels portray the life of "old New York" during the latter third of the nineteenth century. Economically and socially, this world was dominated by an established wealthy class consisting of the sons and grandsons of energetic provincial merchants. In the 1870s and 1880s this class did not yet feel seriously threatened by the competition and clamour of the *nouveaux riches*; it had gained enough wealth to care about leisure, and enough leisure to think of setting itself up as a modest aristocracy. The phrase "modest aristocracy" may seem a contradiction in terms, but it should serve to suggest the difficulty of building an enclave of social precedence in the kind of fluid bourgeois society America was then becoming or had, indeed, already become.

Quite free from any disturbing intensities of belief or aspirations toward grandeur of style, this class was strict in its decorum and narrow in its conventions. With tepid steadfastness it devoted itself to good manners, good English, good form. And it cared about culture too, culture as a static and finished quantity, something one had to possess but did not have to live by. Its one great passion was to be left alone, unchallenged and untroubled by the motions of history; and this of course was the one privilege history could not allow. For as the nation became industrialised, waves of immigrants descended upon New York, and new financial empires were established in the alien cities of the mid-West as well as in Wall Street itself, this provincial ruling class was doomed to suffer both assault and assimilation by newer, more vigorous and less cultivated segments of the American bourgeoisie.

In his charming memoir, *Portrait of Edith Wharton*, Percy Lubbock has left a description of "old New York" which blends irony and affection in a manner somewhat like Mrs. Wharton's own:

Her New York . . . has there the appearance of a well-rounded polity, as compact within its circuit as an old walled township, *la cité antique*, before the days of spreading suburbs and liberties

without the gates: such was the comfortable self-containment of its life. . . . [It was] a society conscious of itself, aware of its order, sufficient for its needs, beyond any to be seen today, or perhaps in its own day either. It was in no way large enough to be unwieldy or out of hand. It had its choice traditions, not old enough to have loosened or diverged; its organised forms, too plain to be ignored; its customary law, too distinct and categorical to be evaded. I have heard that Edith's mother, a high authority on the subject, would count the names of all the families, in due order of degree, who composed the world to which her daughter was born; and there her world stopped short, it was implied, and no mistake about it.

In "old New York" no one soared and no one was supposed, visibly, to sink. Leisure ruled. Husbands rarely went to their offices "downtown," and there were long midday lunches and solemn entertainments in the evening. Good conversation, though of a not too taxing kind, was felt to be desirable. Taste and form were the reigning gods, not the less tyrannical for their apparent mildness of administration. As Mrs. Wharton remarked with gentle sarcasm in *The Age of Innocence*, it was a world composed of people "who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than 'scenes,' except the behaviour of those who gave rise to them." In the same novel she wrote: "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." And above all, "old New York" was a world that had entered its decline. What was happening in the years of Mrs. Wharton's youth, as Louis Auchincloss has remarked, was "the assault upon an old and conservative group by the multitudes enriched, and fabulously enriched, by the business expansion of the preceding decades." Mrs. Wharton kept returning to this theme, half in the cool spirit of the anthropologist studying the death of a tribe, half with the nostalgia of a survivor mourning the loss of vanished graces.

TOWARD THE WORLD in which she grew up Mrs. Wharton retained a mixture of feelings that anticipates those of later American writers toward their immigrant childhood and youth in a new New York. It was too fatally *her* world, beyond choice or escape, and it would serve her as lifelong memory, lifelong subject, perhaps lifelong trauma. She loved "old New York" with that mixture of grieving affection and protective impatience Faulkner would later feel toward Mississippi and Saul Bellow toward

the Jewish neighbourhoods of Chicago. Yet it also left her dissatisfied, on edge, unfulfilled. Her work, as Edmund Wilson has remarked, "was the desperate product of a pressure of [personal] maladjustments. . . . At her strongest and most characteristic, she is a brilliant example of the writer who relieves an emotional strain by denouncing his generation." For she yearned for a way of life that might bring greater intellectual risks and yield greater emotional rewards than her family and friends could imagine, and only after a time did she find it in her dedication to writing. Just as Faulkner's attitudes toward his home country have kept shifting from one ambiguity to another, so Mrs. Wharton combined toward her home city feelings of both harsh rejection and haughty defence. There are moments, especially in *The House of Mirth*, when she is utterly without mercy toward "old New York": she sees it as a place of betrayal, failure, and impotence. In her old age, when she came to write her autobiography, she was mellow—though perhaps the word should really be, harder—in spirit.

It used to seem to me [she wrote] that the group in which I grew up was like an empty vessel into which no new wine would ever again be poured. Now I see that one of its uses lay in preserving a few drops of an old vintage too rare to be savoured by a youthful palate. . . .

For a novelist to be so profoundly involved with a known and measured society offers many advantages. Mrs. Wharton wrote about her segment of America with an authority few of our novelists could surpass, for she was one of the two or three among them who knew, fully and from the inside, what the life of the rich in this country is really like. Henry James had used that life as an occasion for fables of freedom and circumstance in his later books; F. Scott Fitzgerald, an interloper in the world of wealth, was to collect brilliant guesses and fragments of envious insight; John O'Hara has felt his way along the provincial outposts of the America that made its money late and fast. But no American writer has known quite so deeply as Mrs. Wharton what it means, both as privilege and burden, to grow up in a family of the established rich: a family where there was enough money and had been money long enough for talk about it to seem vulgar, and where conspicuous effort to make more of it seemed still more vulgar. While a final critical estimate of her novels can hardly rest on such considerations alone, one reason for continuing to read *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, and *The Age of Innocence* is the shrewdness with which Mrs. Wharton, through an expert scrutiny of manners, is able to discriminate

among the gradations of power and status in the world of the rich. To read these books is to discover how the novel of manners can register both the surface of social life and the inner vibrations of spirit that surface reveals, suppresses, and distorts.

THERE WERE OTHER advantages in being so close to her materials. As with Faulkner, the subject seems to have chosen the writer, not the writer the subject; everything came to her with the pressure and inexorability of a felt memory; each return to the locale of her youth raised the possibility of a new essay at self-discovery. And in books like *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* she could work on the assumption, so valuable to a writer who prizes economy of structure, that moral values can be tested in a novel by dramatising the relationships between fixed social groups and mobile characters. In the friction thus engendered, moral values come to be seen not as abstract categories imposed upon human experience but as problems, elements in the effort of men to cope with conflicting desires and obligations. At every point in *The House of Mirth*, the history of Lily Bart is defined by her journey from one social group to another, a journey both she and her friends regard as a fall but which she, after great confusion and pain, comes to see may have positive consequences. Because Mrs. Wharton is so completely in control of her material, the meanings of the book emerge through a series of contrasts between a fixed scale of social place and an evolving measure of moral value.

But as she herself knew quite well, there was little in Mrs. Wharton's world that could provide her with a subject large in social scope and visibly tragic in its implications. Had "old New York" gone down in blind and bitter resistance to the *nouveaux riches*, that might have been a subject appropriate to moral or social tragedy; but since there was far less conflict than fusion between the old money and the new, she had little alternative to the varieties of comedy that dominate her books. Only once in her novels did she achieve a tragic resonance, and that was in *The House of Mirth* where Lily Bart is shown as the victim of a world that had made possible her loveliness and inevitable her limitations. Even here we must reduce the traditional notion of the tragic to the pathetic on one side and the bleak on the other, if the term is to be used with approximate relevance. In discussing this novel Mrs. Wharton would show a complete awareness of her problem. How, she asked herself, "could a society of irresponsible pleasure-seekers be said to have, on the 'old woes of the world,' any deeper bearing than the people com-

posing such a society could guess?" And she answered:

A frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideas.

Toward the end of her career Mrs. Wharton found it more and more difficult to employ her material with the success that marks her work between 1905 and 1920. Her later novels are shoddy and sometimes mean-spirited in the hauteur with which she dismisses younger generations beyond the reach of her understanding or sympathy. These novels bristle with her impatience before the mysteries of a world she could not enter, the world of 20th-century America, and are notable for a truculence of temper, a hardening of the moral arteries. I would offer the speculation that Mrs. Wharton, whose intelligence should never be underestimated, was aware that the ground on which she took her moral stand was dissolving beneath her. At best the world of her youth had been an aristocracy of surface ("In that simple society," she would recall, "there was an almost pagan worship of physical beauty"), but she had always wanted it to be something better, something beautiful and truly distinguished. She had wanted to look upon it as potentially an aristocracy of value, and throughout most of her life she struggled with this desire and her recognition that it was an impossible, even unreasonable desire. But when she recognised this, she still wondered to what extent the style and decorum of "old New York" had at least made possible some of the aspirations she had cherished since childhood. Having a thoroughly earth-bound mind, she sought for tangible embodiments, in social groups or communities, of the values to which she clung—for she could not be content with the fabulous imaginings Henry James spun in his later novels. She turned, at times with open savagery and at other times with a feeling as close to wistfulness as she could tolerate, to the world of her birth, hoping to find there some token of security by which to satisfy the needs of her imagination. In the inevitable disappointment that followed, Mrs. Wharton, though extremely conservative in her opinions, proved to be the American novelist least merciful in her treatment of the rich. She kept harassing them, nagging at them in a language they could not, with the best will in the world, understand; and then she would become glacial in her contempt, almost too willing to slash away at their mediocrity because she did not know anyone else to turn toward or against.

AT THE END she was alone. If the incongruity between desire and realisation is a recurrent

motif in her writing about personal relationships, it is an incongruity she also observed in her dealings with the public world. There were always available to her, once she settled in France, a number of personal friends, men and women of high if somewhat forbidding culture. But what emerges from a scrutiny of her work as a whole is that Mrs. Wharton, like so many of those younger deracinated novelists who both interested and disturbed her, was a solitary, clinging to values for which she could find no place, and holding fast, with tight-lipped stoicism, to the nerve of her pride. She was a writer haunted by what she disliked, haunted by the demons of modernism as they encircled her both in life and literature. She would have nothing to do with them, yet in her most important books they kept reappearing, both as agents of moral dissolution and as possibilities of fresh life that needed sternly to be kept in check.

A Personal Vision

THE TEXTURE of Mrs. Wharton's novels is dark. Like so many writers whose education occurred during the latter decades of the 19th century, she felt that the universe—which for her is virtually to say, organised society—was profoundly inhospitable to human need and desire. The malaise which troubled so many intelligent people during her lifetime, the feeling that they were living in an age when energies had run down, meanings collapsed, and the flow of organic life had been replaced by the sterile and mechanical, is quite as acute in her novels as in those of Hardy and Gissing. Like them, she felt that somehow the world had hardened and turned cold, and she could find no vantage point from which to establish a protective distance from it. This condition is somewhat different from the strain of melancholy that runs through American literature, surely different from the metaphysical desperation that overcame Herman Melville in his later years or the misanthropy that beset Mark Twain. What Mrs. Wharton felt was more distinctly "European" in quality, more related to that rationalist conservatism which is a perennial motif in French intellectual life and manifests itself as a confirmed scepticism about the possibilities of human relationships.

In Mrs. Wharton's vision of things—and we can only speculate on the extent to which her personal unhappiness contributed to it—human beings seem always to prove inadequate, always to fail each other, always to be the victims of an innate disharmony between love and response, need and capacity. Men especially have a hard time of it in Mrs. Wharton's novels. In their notorious vanity and faithlessness, they

seldom "come through"; they fail Mrs. Wharton's heroines less from bad faith than weak imagination, a laziness of spirit that keeps them from a true grasp of suffering; and in a number of her novels one finds a suppressed feminine bitterness, a profound impatience with the claims of the ruling sex. This feminist resentment seems, in turn, only an instance of what Mrs. Wharton felt to be a more radical and galling inequity at the heart of the human scheme. The inability of human beings to achieve self-sufficiency drives them to seek relationships with other people, and these relationships necessarily compromise their freedom by subjecting them to the pain of a desire either too great or too small. Things, in Mrs. Wharton's world, do not work out. In one of her books she speaks of "the sense of mortality," and of "its loneliness, the way it must be borne without help." I am convinced she meant by this more than the prospect of death. What "must be borne without help" is the inexorable disarrangement of everything we seek through intelligence and will to arrange.

Mrs. Wharton's general hostility toward "modern" ideas must have predisposed her against Freudian psychology, yet one is repeatedly struck by the fact that at least in regard to the *possibilities* of the human enterprise there is an underlying closeness of scepticism between her assumptions and Freud's theories. Mrs. Wharton had a highly developed, perhaps overdeveloped, sense of the power of everything in organised social existence which checks our desires. Like Freud, she believed that we must endure an irremediable conflict between nature and culture, and while she had at least as healthy a respect as he did for the uses of sublimation, she also knew that the human capacity for putting up with substitute gratifications is limited. From this impasse—what Philip Rieff has called, in discussing Freud, "the painful snare of contradiction in which nature and culture, individual and society, are forever fixed"—she could see no easy way out.

A GOOD MANY of Mrs. Wharton's critics have assumed that she was simply a defender of harsh social conventions against all those who, from romantic energy or mere hunger for meaning in life, rebel against the fixed patterns of their world. But this is not quite true for many of her books, and in regard to some of them not true at all. What is true is that most of her plots focus upon a clash between a stable society and a sensitive person who half belongs to and half rebels against it. At the end he must surrender to the social taboos he had momentarily challenged or wished to challenge, for he either has not been able to summon the resources of cour-

age through which to act out his rebellion, or he has discovered that the punitive power of society is greater than he had supposed, or he has learned that the conventions he had assumed to be lifeless still retain a certain wisdom. Yet much of Mrs. Wharton's work contains a somewhat chill and detached sympathy for those very rebels in whose crushing she seems to connive. Her sense of the world is hardly such as to persuade her of its goodness; it is merely such as to persuade her of its force.

Mrs. Wharton understands how large is the price, how endless the nagging pain, that must be paid for a personal assertion against the familiar ways of the world, and she believes, simply, that most of us lack the strength to pay. Yet she has no respect for blind acceptance, and time after time expresses her distaste for "sterile pain" and "the vanity of self-sacrifice." It is hard to imagine another writer in American literature for whom society, despite its attractions of surface and order, figures so thoroughly as a prison of the human soul. And there, she seems to say, there it is: the doors locked, the bars firm. "Life," she wrote in *The Fruit of the Tree*, "is not a matter of abstract principles, but a succession of pitiful compromises with fate, of concessions to old traditions, of beliefs, old tragedies, old failures." And this sense of fatality has, in her best work, a certain minor magnificence, what might be called the magnificence of the bleak.

In a final reckoning, of course, Mrs. Wharton's vision of life has its severe limitations. She knew only too well how experience can grind men into hopelessness, how it can leave them persuaded that the need for choice contains within itself the seeds of tragedy and the impossibility of choice the sources of pain. Everything that reveals the power of the conditioned, everything that shreds our aspirations, she brought to full novelistic life. Where she failed was in giving imaginative embodiment to the human will seeking to resist defeat or move beyond it. She lacked James's ultimate serenity. She lacked his gift for summoning in images of conduct the purity of children and the selflessness of girls. She lacked the vocabulary of happiness.

BUT WHATEVER Mrs. Wharton could see, she looked at with absolute courage. She believed that what the heart desires brings with it a price and often an exorbitant price. Americans are not trained to accept this view of the human situation, and there is nothing to recommend it except the fact that it contains at least a fraction of the truth. How well, with what sardonic pleasure, Mrs. Wharton would have responded to the lines of W. H. Auden:

*Every farthing of the cost
All the bitter stars foretell
Shall be paid.*

Song

Far wind, old sea-wind, you
That wake me from my dream,
Your soft airs waft to me
Memories of some sea
That I was moving through
Forever in my dream.
I wake, yet all things seem
So dream-dark, falsely true—
Dark is the night, the dream
Dark I was moving through.
Oh, what is false, what true?
Oh, that the soft airs blew
A breath from some far sea
To wake me from this dream.

John Hall Wheelock