

‘All By Myself in the Moonlight’: Edith Wharton’s *Age of Innocence*

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要約

「月光の下で唯ひとり」：イーディス・ウォートンの 『エイジ・オブ・イノセンス』試論

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小論はイーディス・ウォートンの『エイジ・オブ・イノセンス』を作者の生きた時代、ヘンリー・ジェイムズとの遊交関係、そして現代におけるウォートン再評価との関わり、つまりこれらの違った「時代」=ages がどのように作用し合うかをバフチンのディアロジック理論を援用して証明するものである。すなわち、メイ・ウェランドは旧きニューヨーク=作者の青春時代を、エレン・オレンスカは自由な人間として生きたウォートンの晩年を、ニューランド・アーチャーは二人の女性（=ウォートンの人生の二つの時代）の接点あるいは過渡期を体現していると読む。

また、もう一つのディアロジックな関係、社会とジェンダーの差異に焦点をあて、小説『エイジ・オブ・イノセンス』、1993年度に上映された同名の映画（マーティン・スコセシ監督）、そしてジェイムズの短編「荒涼のベンチ」との比較・対照を試みる。

I

At the conclusion of Edith Wharton's prize-winning novel *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer sits alone on a bench in the darkening gloom of a Parisian square gazing up at the lighted window of the apartment where the woman he loved, but relinquished, the Countess Ellen Olenska, seems to wait for him still:

He sat for a long time on the bench in the thickening dusk, his eyes
ever turning from the balcony. At length a light shone through the
windows, and a moment later a man-servant came out on the
balcony, drew up the awnings, and closed the shutters. (p.303) ¹

The possibility of a romantic conclusion, of a passionate reunion, of even the 'quiet harvest of friendship' (p.300) which has been delicately proffered by Wharton only a few pages before — after all, Newland is 'only fifty-seven' (p.300) — is denied; the curtain of consummation is drawn shut even before Ellen has an opportunity to shed her array of flickering desirability into the novel one last time. Ellen Olenska remains unseen, while Newland Archer remains all by himself. The title of this essay, 'All By Myself in the Moonlight', is drawn from a 1930s popular song, but its evocation of the lonely figure lamenting his loveless state seems particularly apt for Newland himself; the whole chorus of the song runs as follows:

It makes no sense
Sitting on a bench
All by myself in the moonlight.

For the songster, the self-pity evoked by his lonesome vigil is senseless, that is without meaning in such a romantic setting, as well as impractical when, it is implied, he could be actively searching for a companionate body to share this lovers' seat. There is a self-mocking quality to the song, a sharp realisation that the vocalisation of the singer's plight will do nothing to remedy his single state. The song might provoke a response in the listeners, but what the singer says he longs for is a real interchange, an actual communication, someone sitting next to him on that bench in the moonlight. But if the popular song reveals an awareness of its inevitable insufficiencies, then Newland appears to be remarkably unaware of his own restricted position at the end of the novel. He derives more pleasure, what Wharton terms 'shadow [s] of reality' (p.303), from imagining Ellen, than from actually meeting her. For Newland it makes more sense to remain sitting on the bench and to walk 'back alone to his hotel' (p.303), than it does to join his son in the active dialogues taking place behind the closed shutters. There are, of course, questions to be asked here about the nature of reality, its shadowing in the realms of fiction, and the impossibility of reconciling it finally with song or book. Certainly, Wharton herself believed fiction and reality to be two, quite separate, entities.² Yet, throughout these self-conscious and/or unconscious textual manoeuvrings there is a constant articulation of a single and lonely subjectivity — of a word uttered into the

darkness without the possibility of reciprocation. What *appears* to occur is a silencing of dialogue, a denial of an answer word. But is this possible? Can any utterance, any positioning, any articulation of the subject, precipitate itself into the void? When Wharton allows Newland to move away, to fade into the grey absence of the novel's closure, she seems to terminate his dialogic presence within the textual form, but perhaps even the choice of negation necessitates a response from a reader who has already been constructed as desiring a continuation of the narrative, a happy reconciliation between Newland and his Countess.

The terminology of this paper has, no doubt, already activated its own dialogic process, alerting the reader of my articulation to the fact that I have incorporated the theories of the Russian critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, into my reading of *The Age of Innocence*. What I have found particularly useful for a treatment of Wharton's writing is Bakhtin's concept of the perpetual continuation of utterances and the necessity of encoding a response in any articulation. To quote Bakhtin himself, from *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975),

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, orientated toward a future answer word. . . forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said, but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word.³

Wharton's novels rely to a great extent upon such interchanges; often the very nuance of an utterance — either in the speech of the characters or in her own oblique descriptions of their movements and social interchanges — even these subtlest of suggestions elicit a similarly toned response from the textual and readerly subjects. For example, the conclusion to *The House of Mirth* (1905) demands a parallel desire/frustration response to that which Wharton suggests in *The Age of Innocence*, although in the earlier novel the Lily/Selden romance is denied in a more deeply etched tragic form than in the bleakly scratched withdrawal of Newland from Ellen. Yet, in each case Wharton's tentative presentation of the neat 'happy ending' elicits a perhaps overly keen acceptance from a readership schooled in the Victorian novel with its greater collusion with readerly desires. Instead, she turns that offer of comedy into the denial of tragedy. Wharton knew very well what her readers wanted and she didn't give it to them. But, she made sure they knew she knew their/our simplistic conceptions, easily understood conventions and predictable needs. Indeed, Wharton had drawn out her readers' traditional romanticism even more directly in the first version of *The Age of Innocence* where she has Newland marry his countess *before* ensuring that Ellen escapes to the unconventional air of Paris.

There is then a certain 'hauteur' about Edith Wharton's authorial presence in her novels, itself perhaps a shadow of Henry James' distancing processes, and Wharton, like James, was interested in the way form (both of the novel and of society) had existed and the way in which it was changing. In *The Age of Innocence* she focused on an earlier period — the 1870s — an 'age' which she subjected to a pointed scrutiny, to the acidic irony she reserved for the New York society she had known so well in her youth; she

undertook to 'do New York' as James had urged her to twenty years earlier.⁴ She positioned her authorial subjectivity, therefore, within a chronological enactment of varying discourses — if the New York of Wharton's early life is the first utterance we may trace, then *The Age of Innocence* responds to that initial stimuli, itself positing questions for a later age and a more internationalist readership. Moreover, this novel, like the majority of Wharton's canon, self-consciously positions its voice in relation to James' work. Towards the end of this essay I intend to return to the image of the lonely bench and to explore the possible associations between Wharton's use of the trope and James' evocation of a similar metaphor in his short story 'The Bench of Desolation' (1909). Today, however, these two dialogic strands (biography/text and Wharton/James) must be linked with a third, since in 1993 the director Martin Scorsese produced a film of *The Age of Innocence* which, while being fairly faithful to Wharton's original conception, also brought the text very much into a late-twentieth-century perspective by foregrounding its feminist aspects and magnifying its distaste with materialistic concerns. The 'age' of innocence seems, therefore, to propel itself into time, edging into the past of a middle-aged author and surging forward into a celluloid future of glorious Technicolor. But then this is the very essence of dialogue; it must exist within a temporal framework, perpetually evoking the past as well as preparing for the future. So, perhaps if we may leave Newland for a while, sitting alone on his bench in the deserted Parisian square, we may undertake a more companionable exploration of the plurality of ongoing discourses that reverberate behind the shuttered window.

II

I have used the metaphor of the 'shuttered window', imagining Ellen illuminated by the bright lights within, because in some senses it is a very appropriate way of illustrating the fluctuations in Edith Wharton's critical reputation. For, although she was an acclaimed novelist during her own life-time, she suffered from a loss of popularity during the late 1930s when her work was considered too narrow, too prudish and too elite; consequently, the shutters closed upon her authorial brilliance. However, when R W B Lewis published in 1975 his now almost infamous biography of Wharton, uncovering all sorts of illicit shadows and shades — the affair with the bisexual Fullerton being the most well-known revelation — the shutters came down, opening Wharton's fictional productivity to renewed interest.⁵ Instead of conforming to the conventions of her social group, it was perceived that Wharton had been a free-spirit, the embodiment of all that was antithetical to the sexual and social codes privileged at the turn of the century. She had left her husband, later divorced him, had had many affairs, supported herself with her writing and had lived a perfectly independent life. If Virginia Woolf wrote about the £500 a year and the room of one's own essential to a woman writer, Wharton actively went out and acquired them — although she was worth quite a bit more than £500 a year, and her 'room' was an elegant Parisian house in Saint Germaine with, as a summer home, a restored Medieval monastery on the French Riviera.⁶ Perhaps, to continue with

the same metaphor, as R W B Lewis removed the shutters from Wharton's life, a reciprocating light was allowed to shed its rays into her room in the form of feminist criticism. As Wharton became for many 1970s American feminists a shining exemplar of the early woman novelist whose life and oeuvre challenged the discourses of patriarchy, so Wharton's novels benefited from being uncovered and shown the light of day in the rapidly growing numbers of women's writing courses and through the newly-founded feminist presses of North America and Europe. Instead of being compared, always unfavourably, with Henry James, Wharton found her own place within the literary canon alongside other 'feminist' writers such as Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and *The Age of Innocence* was linked, not with *The Golden Bowl* (1904), but with *The Awakening* (1899) and 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892).⁷

The importance of Wharton's own life to the re-evaluation of her work is self-evident and was a critical stance specifically fostered by Lewis' biography; for example, of *The Age of Innocence* he writes:

Edith Wharton divided her own past self between Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska. . . [and] in the scenes between Newland and the Countess, Edith Wharton was performing, as it were, a retrospective act of self-confrontation.⁸

This particular interpretation of *The Age of Innocence* as an act of 'novelistic therapy' on Wharton's part, of the author coming to terms with the psychological tensions of her youth, has found considerable acceptance amongst critics, and there is certainly a great deal of circumstantial evidence to support the identification of Newland and Ellen with Wharton herself. To give a few examples: in the case of Newland Archer, he is the same age (57) at the end of the novel when he sits alone on that bench as Wharton was when she was writing the text, his first name — changed at the last minute from 'Langdon' to 'Newland' — recalls her middle name 'Newbold', and Archer like Wharton was very much the product of the stultifying conventions of old New York. But even as Edith Wharton belonged to the world of tradition and propriety, she challenged it. Like the Countess Ellen Olenska Edith was an independent woman who divorced her husband and travelled abroad, indeed, Ellen's home at the end of the novel — and her shuttered window — is in Saint Germaine in Paris, exactly where Wharton lived when she was writing the novel. What we may perceive from these parallels is a series of linked dialogues: between characters, themes, and — to follow Lewis — an internal authorial self-dialogue.

For Ellen and Newland the point at which their discourses confront one another is also the moment when their love is most apparent but also at the furthest remove, as they term it themselves, an 'impossibility' (p.153). This emotional impasse occurs when Newland confesses his love:

She started up, and freeing herself from him moved away to the other side of the hearth. 'Ah, don't make love to me! Too many people have done that,' she said, frowning.

Archer, changing colour, stood up also: it was the bitterest rebuke she could have given him. 'I have never made love to you,' he said,

'and I never shall. But you are the woman I would have married if it had been possible for either of us.'

'Possible for either of us?' She looked at him with unfeigned astonishment. 'And you say that — whe. it is you who've made it impossible?'

He started at her, groping in a blackness through which a single arrow of light tore its blinding way.

'I've made it impossible — ?'

'You, you, *you*!' she cried, her lip trembling like a child's on the verge of tears. 'Isn't it you who made me give up divorcing — give it up because you showed me how selfish and wicked it was, how one must sacrifice oneself to preserve the dignity of marriage. . . and to spare one's family the publicity, the scandal? And because my family was going to be your family — for May's sake and for yours — I did what you told me, what you proved to me that I ought to do.

Ah,' she broke out with a sudden laugh, 'I've made no secret of having done it for you!' (p.153)

It is at this moment when the widely divergent discourses which have governed the actions of Newland and Ellen not only meet, but intertwine with, and exert their influence over, one another. The woman begins by rejecting the man's advances, her subtext implies that his statement of love, albeit an oblique one, is a prelude to adultery — something which she rejects. In effect, Ellen informs Newland that she is not that kind of girl. The dialogic process enacted is a conventional one: his movement to clasp her hand is responded to by a withdrawal. Ellen assumes that the discourse is a patriarchal one, where the unattached female is necessarily prey to any male she invites into her domain. Newland, however, is very far from calling upon this particular privilege of patriarchy; his discourse has been one of love, of romance, of a passion that can only be linked to marriage; yet in its way, it is equally as conventional. He responds to Ellen's dialogic initiation by rejecting her discourse as unworthy (indeed, he blushes at the sexual intimation) and he introduces his own: a code where love is indivisibly linked to wedlock but where marriage can only occur between 'appropriate' people. And, as a woman who has left her husband, Ellen for Archer is totally *inappropriate*. Up to this point in the interchange female identity is categorised with neat expectability. There are virtuous women who are suitable as wives (this is the stereotype evoked by Newland) and 'fallen' women who are sexually available (the type of woman Ellen quickly asserts she is *not*). In other words, the novel presents us with the familiar dialectic of virgin and whore. But suddenly this mutual discourse breaks down and each character is forced into a process of redefinition.

Ellen reveals the cultural conventions of her Europeanised life when she understands 'impossible' to refer to the obstacle of her wedded state; if she had pursued the divorce, she suggests, then Archer would have found her perfectly desirable as a wife. This is not, of course, what the young man has implied, for in his world, the world of old New York,

divorce is unthinkable, and rather than liberating a woman to fall in love and marry again, it ensures precisely the opposite — the woman is tarnished with a so-called 'scandal' and cannot re-enter public life, let alone remarry! The dialogue has shifted, so that rather than articulating opposite positions within the same discourse (woman as virgin or whore), they are now vocalising two entirely different discourses, that of Europe and that of New York, with all the attendant resonances of liberation and repression that Wharton had loaded these tropes with. The void between the two characters and themes is expressed by Ellen's 'unfeigned astonishment' and Newland's 'groping in a blackness'. But he is beginning to understand. Light, the illumination from her discourse brings a response within his inner-self. The metaphor Wharton uses, 'a single arrow of light', is particularly suitable for the character, who is, after all, called Archer, and his emotional reaction is dramatic, both tearing and blinding. The acknowledgement of Ellen's difference, her distance from him, acutely discomforts Archer. To understand and encompass otherness demands an answer word which is, perhaps, too painful to give and he can only repeat her words, evoking and sustaining only the 'shadows' and not the 'light'.

For Newland the demands of a dialogue which is based upon difference is a wrenching experience since he is, in many ways, one of the innocents of the novel, caught between the safety of his own world and his sensitive awareness of a radical alternative. Indeed, compared with his seemingly naive expression of shock Ellen's bitter irony makes her appear as worldly-wise as a Jamesian European. Her 'sudden laugh' demonstrates that she is perfectly aware of his New York discourse, his loyalty to the 'dignity of marriage' and to 'one's family', and her tone implies that she has gone through a show of accepting it simply for him, simply because she loves him, an act which by its very privileging of individual desire over social responsibility reveals her own European system of beliefs to be firmly in place still. Moreover, her confession that she's 'made no secret of having done it' for Newland demands a reassessment on his part of an earlier dialogue in which he, again, has vastly misinterpreted her meaning. Both characters remain entrenched within their own worlds, yet at this moment of passion they are forced out of a conventional interchange into a fully self-aware dialogue. And, although this is a moment when consummation appears possible, the bitterness and pain necessitated by such an ingestion of otherness predicates the impossibility of a final union between man and woman and all that they represent.

Newland Archer inevitably marries May, as all his family and friends expect him to. Ellen Olenska returns to Europe alone, but has, as we learn later, had there an interesting and culturally stimulating life. Ellen might have entered the novel as one of Wharton's 'outsiders', but by the end of the book the camera-angle gaze of the author has shifted so that we perceive Paris to be an 'inside' and the countess at the very centre of it.⁹ Scorsese employs similar shifts of perspective in his opening sequence of the film version of Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. In a prolonged movement about the opera house, pausing to appreciate the ironic presentation of various New York 'characters', Scorsese captures Wharton's lofty overview and biting satire. But perhaps his most perceptive shot occurs when the camera comes to rest at the front of the stage gazing out at the

audience. The ambiguity of this position depends upon whether our gaze constructs the audience of old New Yorkers as the object to be viewed, or whether the camera eye, and hence the scrutiny of the late-twentieth-century film-goers, becomes the point of the spectacle. Who looks at who? Which society, the past or the present, formulates the other within its textual vision? This device is quite common in the representational arts, where the eyes of a portrait both catch and return the viewer's glance, allowing meaning to reverberate between the two fixed positions. The success of such works depends upon the skill of the artist, and Scorsese's filmic technique captures the biplay of vision superbly, leaving us wondering about our relationship with the New York society of the late-nineteenth century as portrayed in this encompassing opening shot. As the film progresses the association becomes clear, primarily through the character of Ellen Olenska.¹⁰

What made *The Age of Innocence* a novel acclaimed by 1970s feminist criticism is the cinema's lure for a 1990s audience, or at least, was supposed to be. The film eschews a soft-focus nostalgic evocation of a past ideal, such as Merchant and Ivory's productions of the Jamesian canon, and instead proves to be a film, appropriately made by a director of hard-edged movies, depicting and projecting an independent and tough female protagonist. The first few scenes reveal, in the guise of Michelle Pfeiffer, a feminist Ellen and a rather weak 'new man' Newland. Undoubtedly, the Hollywood star-system exerted certain pressures, ensuring that Pfeiffer got all the best lines and that the audience never really sides with anyone other than Ellen in the whole film. Moreover, Pfeiffer's self-confessed feminism no doubt influenced the way her part took shape. Overall, Scorsese's version of the story transforms the 'age' of innocence into the late-twentieth century, and, ultimately he leaves us in no doubt that the flaws we see magnified by the camera's harsh gaze as it sweeps over the opera-house audience are reflections of our own corrupt and decaying society. As Ellen Olenska carries the torch of the independent woman and a disregard for money into the 1890s shedding a cruel light on the outdated conventions and grasping conservatism of old New York, so Michelle Pfeiffer seems to blaze the way for a 1990s version of feminism and antimaterialism which sweeps aside the post-feminist backlash and the Reaganite moral majority of the monetarist 1980s. One cannot help but feel sorry for the actress Winona Ryder who was cast as May Welland — the Machiavellian villain of the film.

Scorsese's camera angle continually fails to locate itself at May's shoulder; she is resolutely the object of an unkind gaze and never the sympathetically viewed subject. The film version of *The Age of Innocence* might allow certain shifts of perspective, but others are clearly policed and contained — and May Welland, with her championing of conservative values, of the family, of sexual propriety and of good manners, is clearly the 'outsider'. Yet, it would be wrong to assume that May's isolation begins with Scorsese's attempt to draw in a ticket-purchasing audience or with Pfeiffer's popularity rating exceeding Ryder's. If we turn back to Lewis's biography we may recall that he excludes May from that closeted psychological reading of Newland and Ellen as Wharton's divided self. This emphasis upon duality is distorting, and by disregarding May and her thematic function in the novel we deny a very important aspect of the old New York society, of

social codes at the beginning of the twentieth-century, and especially of Wharton's own life. Edith Wharton may have ended up as an Ellen Olenska, but when she was still Edith Jones making her Fifth Avenue debut, she was very much a May Welland. Under the strict supervision of her domineering mother, Edith performed the required rituals of a young woman from the New York elite and it was this experience that enabled her to evoke the repressed and restricted lifestyle of May and her peers. The dialogue in *The Age of Innocence* is not solely an interchange between Newland and Ellen, but between Newland and May, as well as between May and Ellen, through Newland. Wharton's gaze is not simply a bifurcated one, but a constantly shifting perspective, and while the film encodes a duality, the novel opens itself up to multiplicity.

A brief example of the intricate nature of these negotiations may be seen in the way the two women respond to Newland's love-making, for he *does* go on to make love to Ellen Olenska in the scene already referred to:

He started up and came to her side.

'Ellen! What madness! Why are you crying? Nothing's done that can't be undone. I'm still free, and you're going to be.' He had her in his arms, her face like a wet flower at his lips, and all their vain terrors shrivelling up like ghosts at sunrise. The one thing that astonished him now was that he should have stood for five minutes arguing with her across the width of the room, when just touching her made everything so simple.

She gave him back all his kiss, but after a moment he felt her stiffening in his arms, and she put him aside and stood up. (p.154)

Their response to one another is mutually passionate and immediate; their kiss acts as a force of union, an ultimate exchange where all is given, received, acknowledged and understood, and Wharton revives the light metaphor, this time imaging the sunrise which dispels their 'terrors' and makes 'everything so simple'. Yet only a short while before (two chapters in the novel) Newland has embraced May with a similar declaration of love and an invitation to marriage:

They sat down on a bench under the orange-trees and he put his arm about her and kissed her. It was like drinking at a cold spring with the sun on it; but his pressure may have been more vehement than he had intended, for the blood rose to her face and she drew back as if he had startled her.

'What is it?' he asked, smiling; and she looked at him with surprise, and answered: 'Nothing'. (p.131)

There is little passion on either side in the embrace between Newland and May; for him it is refreshing and pleasant, easy and relaxing; for her it is embarrassing and startling. The kiss, which Archer assumes is acceptable because of their engagement, is unacceptable to May who finds the sexual undercurrent of her fiancée's touch to be indecorous and inappropriate for a couple not yet wed. A distance, both physical and emotional, develops between them and they find themselves unable to communicate, her reply

'Nothing' opening still further the void that separates them. The difference between the two kisses is absolute: one offers total union and a reciprocated passion, the other produces an ominous distance and silence which will only extend and deepen as the novel progresses.¹¹ Moreover, if Ellen's kiss is like the sunrise, May's is like 'a cold spring with the sun on it', the younger woman is cool with a superficial light and warmth, whereas her older cousin is the glowing dawn itself. Even this brief comparison ensures that May and Ellen are read as part of Wharton's exploration of female identity and that both are recognised as essential to a gendered discourse in its entirety. I am not in any way suggesting that Wharton agreed with May. Any author who could mistakenly begin a wedding ceremony with the opening phrase for a funeral service — as is the case in *The Age of Innocence* — could hardly idealise a character like May whose whole existence is dedicated towards and built around marriage.¹² But what I am suggesting is that Edith Wharton was equally reluctant to foreground and champion a romantic liaison such as that between Newland and Ellen, since this form of relationship is shown to be just as hollow as marriage in her novels, and at the end of this work Ellen leaves Newland and finds her own freedom and independence in Paris. When she was an older woman, a woman with a questionable reputation (like Ellen), Edith Wharton returned in *The Age of Innocence* to the idea of New York, but the roles she chose to excavate included those of young women who, like herself, had accepted convention and tradition in that earlier period (May), and she mediated the way that female, and her own, identity had changed in the interim through a character who is himself in the process of transition (Newland). Finally, however, Wharton resumes her association with the character of Ellen Olenska as she completed the novel and returned to her Parisian domain; perhaps, after all, it is the author who sits all alone in the moonlight at the end of the text.

III

Or is she above behind the illuminated, but shuttered, window? Certainly, the actual events which occurred when Wharton finished writing the novel placed her very firmly in the bright lights. When *The Age of Innocence* was published it received critical and popular acclaim; she won the Pulitzer Prize (1921) for her work on the book and two years later was the first woman to be awarded a Doctor of Letters degree at Yale University.¹³ Edith Wharton could ignore her shadows (of an unhappy childhood, a frustrated youth and a disappointed marriage) for a brief while, since they fled 'like ghosts' at the 'sunrise' of literary recognition. Moreover, the book, like Newland, was left behind as she went on to pursue her life and career with a renewed vigour — even though she was 57. Indeed, at the age of 75 she was still able to call herself 'a life-lover, a life-wanderer'. The texts, characters and themes of *The Age of Innocence* became part of an already spoken discourse, and Wharton's answer-word, her departure into the dawn, itself demanded a subsequent reciprocation, which it received in the revaluation of her work in the late-twentieth century and especially in Lewis' biography of her and in Scorsese's film of her novel. It is precisely because Wharton moved on, as she felt compelled to do, from *The*

Age of Innocence as a book, that the story could re-emerge as a pro-feminist movie. The text cannot be a static utterance caught within a single period but, like a 'word in living conversation' must be part of an ongoing dialogic process, part of the perpetual interplay between fiction and the real world. Thus, the age of innocence is the New York of the 1870s, of Wharton's youth; it is the textual response to that time in the novel's reconstruction of that past world; it is the rediscovery of the author and her canon by biographer, feminist critics and readers in the 1970s; and it is, most recently, Scorsese's reworking of those elements into a film which responds to the needs of a late-twentieth century audience. There is no one age of innocence, there are many.

But what about poor Newland who all this time has been sitting alone on his bench in the moonlight? Perhaps its time he had some company, and who could be more apposite than Herbert Dodd, who sits in his own lonely fashion in the Henry James short story, 'The Bench of Desolation'.¹⁴ The authorial dialogue, that of Wharton and James, may be briefly overheard through the parallels between the two texts and their protagonists. The male characters at first appear to be very different: in class terms they are far apart, Newland being wealthy and refined, whereas Dodd is poor and of the lower middle class. Their choices in life are also at variance, Newland finally accepting a selfless and, what he feels to be, honourable, role in staying with May, while Dodd breaks his promise of marriage to a woman and shows himself at the end of the story to be self-serving when he returns to her mainly because of the comparative wealth and security she offers him. But both men have to face a woman they are engaged to when they know that they no longer love her, and both women value marriage above all else and are determined to retain their reluctant suitors. In 'The Bench of Desolation' Dodd asks his fiancée, Kate Cookham, a question that could so easily have been asked by Newland of May Welland:

'Do you mean to say you yourself would now be *willing* to marry
and live with a man of whom you could feel, the thing done, that
he'd be all the while thinking of you in the light of hideous coercion?' (p.371)

Dodd imagines marriage as a union of individuals who must love one another. His assumptions are not unlike Newland's when Wharton's hero tells Ellen that his love for her can only be fulfilled through marriage; both characters activate a discourse which assumes marriage is about mutual desire and respect. But this is not the view taken by either May or Kate. Both women perceive their identities to be formulated by their married, or unmarried, state; Kate appears desperate to marry Dodd even if he hates her, while May, like her family, is perfectly aware that a break with Newland would make her appear 'damaged goods' when she had inevitably to re-enter the marriage market. But while these parallels may be drawn and it is highly likely that the two authors were aware of one another's use of a similar plot device and concluding metaphor (that bench), there are significant differences in their discourses which I believe may be traced to their identities as male and female.

When I first referred to James' 'The Bench of Desolation' I suggested that Newland could have asked May the question Dodd asks Kate, but the point is, he doesn't. Dodd's

understanding of marriage, like his creator's, is based upon the freedom given to men within a patriarchal society to determine who they marry. Newland, never questions May's continued determination to marry him because Wharton herself would never have doubted the need for a woman in that society to get married. At the turn of the century marriage for a man was a matter of choice, but for a woman it was essential. The characters in each work carry the gendered suppositions of their authors: Newland and May both accept the inevitability of marriage within their social system, but Dodd and Kate both express individuated desire, he by his initial rejection of her, and she by her sustained determination to 'win' him. These conventional discourses are, of course, undercut by Wharton and James, the former with the character of Ellen Olenska — a woman who can resist the pull of marriage — and the latter with a flow of irony against both the weak Dodd and the inflexible Kate Cookham. But their initial suppositions remain at variance, the two authors activate oppositional discourses even if both go on to challenge the ideologies they have drawn upon. Their gaze, as it were, looks at the same object (male-female relationships. . . and a bench) but from a different angle. Their dialogue occurs, but the relationship between novel and short story remains muffled and is never clearly articulated. The difference exists as an irreparable fissure, Wharton and James might be interested in the same issues, might use similar narrative forms and even the same metaphor, but their utterances do not join in unison and the contrary ending of the texts reaffirm their complete variance.

The bench in James's story is occupied throughout by Herbert Dodd, but at the very end of the tale he is joined there by Kate Cookham, 'she was beside him on the bench of desolation' (p.425). The authorial eye watches the couple, casting a mocking light over their belated and self-interested liaison. On the other hand, at the conclusion of Wharton's novel we find, as has already been discussed, Newland Archer sitting alone on his bench staring up at Ellen Olenska's window; she does not come down to join him and to sit beside him, as Kate returns to Herbert. Nor does Newland join his son in climbing to Ellen's apartment. Instead, he imagines Dallas entering the drawing room and greeting the Countess as she sits 'in a sofa-corner near the fire' (p.303). Newland's eye is that of the imagination and even as it envisages the meeting by that warm sofa, he realises that:

"It's more real to me here than if I went up," he suddenly heard himself say. (p.303)

Just as Archer's gaze turns inwards, so his 'living conversation' is with himself; he responds with his own answer-word, he enacts his own inner dialogue. The image and the voice are self-reflexive, transforming Newland Archer into an authorial entity, happier creating his own fictions, his own view of Ellen and Dallas, and of the warm fire-light and comfortable seating, than he is participating in the material activation of his bodily gaze and voice. Wharton's textual self slides yet again, moving imperceptibly from the brightly lit apartment to the dark square below, from Ellen to Newland. While James remains aloof from the pitiable figures of Dodd and Cookham, Wharton shifts constantly amongst her protagonists, taking a glance first through the eyes of one character and then another, and then. . . all the characters are gone.

At the end of *The Age of Innocence* Newland rises and leaves the square for his hotel, while Ellen remains in her apartment, still unseen. The void between them remains unbridgeable and this absence is symbolically evoked by the now vacant bench; a bench of desolation indeed. But Wharton's own gaze has simultaneously retreated into the closure of the novel and it is the reader who is left alone to imagine the darkness, the nothingness, the blank silence of a text which has ceased to exist. The irony of James' short story is that 'The Bench of Desolation' does not remain desolate. But the irony of Wharton's novel is that the desolation itself, the shadows, have become more desirable than any perpetuation of romance or narrative, than any light the novelist might shed upon events. *The Age of Innocence* concludes with the bitter-sweet realisation of the pleasures of cessation, the craving for absence, the imaginative evocation of silence, the light of shadows, the reality of imagination, the power of fiction. Like Newland, the reader comes to understand that there is something to be said for sitting all alone on a bench conjuring your desire out of the moonlight.

- 1) All references are to the Virago edition of *The Age of Innocence*. London: Virago, 1988.
- 2) *Ibid.*, pp.vii–viii.
- 3) Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* ed. Michael Holquist and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. p.280.
- 4) *The Age of Innocence*, p.v.
- 5) R W B Lewis, *Edith Wharton. A Biography*. London: Constable, 1975.
- 6) Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. London: Hogarth Press, 1929.
- 7) Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*. London: The Womens Press, 1978.; Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' New York: Yale University Press, 1973. For a discussion of Wharton's re-evaluation by feminist critics see: Candace Waid, *Edith Wharton's Letters From the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.
- 8) Lewis, p.431.
- 9) The idea of the 'outsider' is taken from Carol Wershoven, *The Female Intruder in the Novels of Edith Wharton*. London: Associated University Presses, 1982.
- 10) For two reviews of the film see: Linda Costanza Cahir, 'The Perils of Politeness in a New Age: Edith Wharton, Martin Scorsese and *The Age of Innocence*'. *Edith Wharton Review* X (1993), pp. 12–14 and 19, and Michael Wood, 'The Man Who Missed His Life'. *London Review of Books* 10 February 1994.
- 11) Ellen's kiss is equally as prophetic since at the end of the novel she will remove herself from Newland's presence and will 'put him aside'.
- 12) Lewis, p.430.
- 13) Wharton's novel was not the first choice of the judges but she won in default because there was a disagreement over the suitability of Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (R W B Lewis, p.433).
- 14) Henry James, 'The Bench of Desolation' in *The Complete Tales of Henry James* ed. Leon Edel. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, Vol 12 pp.369–425. All page references are made to this edition.

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