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Henry and Edith: The Artist and the Model and Writing American Women

Boris Vejdovsky

Ne te courbe jamais que pour aimer. Si tu meurs, tu aimes encore.
René Char

This article is a study of women as writing and reading subjects in the works of Henry James and Edith Wharton. It also examines how women become aesthetic objects of desire and of writing, in particular in James's novels and stories concerned with art and aesthetics. Writing American women is something James himself, but also his protagonists, do a lot, often with unforeseen consequences. Many of the stories written both by Henry and Edith complicate the relation between an apparently passive model and an active artist; from the *tableau vivant* in the *House of Mirth* to the portrait of Mariam in "The Story of a Masterpiece," women as written models become in their own way the writers of their life stories.

For more than half a century, biographers and critics have carefully traced Edith Wharton's development as a powerful writer, an accomplished woman and a successful businesswoman. Wharton herself details her trajectory in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, where she affirms that the publication of *The House of Mirth* in 1905 made her realize "[i]t was good to be turned from a drifting amateur into a professional" (209). Wharton became a prominent author as a result of a "long and tortuous apprenticeship," "personal growth and psychological in-tegration, achieved in rebellion against the social confinement of women to passive domestic roles" (Kaplan 433). That this was a complex process is attested by Wharton's record of her first encounter with

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Henry James. Although she was already the author of some notable texts in 1888, she did not think it proper to mention her writing to the (already) ess is attested by Wharton's record of her first encounter with Henry great man and decided to try to please him by "put[ting] on [her] newest Doucet dress, and try[ing] to look [her] prettiest" (*Backward* 172). Only later, after she had published her first collection of stories, did she dare to present herself as a writing American woman. Writing for Wharton had been emancipating and self-defining as it had been for other individuals whose birth, race or gender barred them access to the privileges and the power of language and self-expression.

In her writing, Edith Wharton forcefully redefines the relationship between the art of fiction and gender, as "[i]n most of her fiction, she concentrates upon the aspirations of women and reflects in a variety of situations the deprivations peculiarly theirs" (McDowell 520). Such a critical stance "relegated [Wharton] to the margins of American literary history as a novelist of manners or an aloof aristocrat clinging to outmoded values" (Kaplan 453). So while writing certainly offered Wharton psychological and material independence, it also exposed her to the public eye and criticism.

In what follows, I will consider the liberating and affirmative possibilities of writing, but I will also take into account the archaic sense of the verb to write that Shakespeare uses in Sonnet 17: "If I could write the beauty of your eyes / And in fresh numbers number all your graces, / The age to come would say 'This poet lies: / Such heavenly touches ne'er touch'd earthly faces.'" In this sense, writing American women would then be akin to "writing up" American women; the gerund then becomes a transitive verb, and American women are no longer the acting subjects of writing, but the direct objects of writing. I will therefore examine the objectification through writing or by writing of American women in stories about art and artists by Edith Wharton and Henry James. The possibility of reading "writing American women" in two ways suggests that there may be something in writing that resists its being instrumentalized; more familiarly, this suggests that writing is a double-edged sword that can easily wound those who try to use it for their own purposes. In the stories discussed here male artists paint or write the beauty of women. But, in a *mise en abyme*, and a reversal of the way writing works, the women in the stories who appear as social and sexual objects of desire and writing, uncannily acquire a level of agency that thwarts the artistic and aesthetic projects of male artists. These are dangerous stories in that they present the reader with the two edges of the sword and indeed cut both ways: the women of the stories are subjected to writing or painting *and* they acquire the agency that enables them to be writing American women, women who write their lives and fate.

Readers must be careful, therefore, not to fall victims to the other edge of writing and not get cut even as they think they can safely manipulate the sword or the pen.

Edith Wharton's subordinate position vis-à-vis Henry James within a master-model relationship has been critiqued by feminist critics for over half a century. In her seminal essays on the two novelists Millicent Bell admits that "There is . . . enough of the James tone in Edith Wharton's early stories to justify the critics in overlooking . . . subtler differences," but she rejects the argument that Wharton was "'Henry James's heiress'" and the frequent "conclusion that she was just a copy of the master" (624; 619). Edith Wharton certainly shares some of James's preoccupations, as "[n]ine of the fifteen stories of her first two collections deal in some way with writers or painters" (Bell 622).

In 1899 Edith Wharton published "The Muse's Tragedy" as part of *The Greater Inclination*, her first collection of stories. The story became part of the James-Wharton literary compound and has often been compared to Henry James's "The Aspern Papers" (1888). While James concentrates on the interiority of the anonymous male biographer determined to extract critical ore out of Juliana Bordereau, the lover of his diseased literary master, Wharton adopts the point of view of the *object* of the master's writing, the muse. In several of his art stories James establishes a form of conniving sympathy between his narrators and (in particular?) his male readers by making them embark on a quest for truth, or what appears as such by giving them insiders' tips and information on the characters. A good Jamesian reader is to make good use of these opportunities provided by subtle innuendoes and ironic comments by the narrator to unravel the tangles of the protagonist's mind. The narrator provides a tenuous Ariadne's thread into the labyrinth, which is not unlike the thread the protagonist seeks to follow in the story. James is a virtuoso at playing a complex meta-narrative game in which *inside* the story the protagonist seeks to know all about the fictional master he wants to unveil, while *outside* the story the reader seeks to reveal the workings of the protagonist's mind, and possibly, the workings of the mastermind of fiction behind the character, Henry James himself. That both the quest of the protagonist and that of the reader should always remain to some degree unrequited is also part of the epistemological game in the dark the protagonist and the reader play. In the end, Jeffrey Aspern's Papers remain inscrutable; by the same token there can be no completion of the figure in the carpet, and no reader can claim to have discovered the final word about James's stories.

In her story, Wharton's attitude is quite different. James's "interest lay in the psychology of the young man" (Bell 622) but Wharton replaces this by the gripping confession of an aging woman whose entire

life has been consumed by the artistry of the poet she inspired. Importantly, Wharton echoes the thoughts of that woman who feels that age is taking its toll; while male masterminds may be content when they assure their muses that "in eternal lines to time [they grow]," she is aware of the not so eternal lines that time has imprinted on her and that now wrinkle her face.

As Lewis Danyers, a young ambitious and uprising writer, contemplates forty-five year-old Mary Anerton, known to have been the muse of acclaimed poet Vincent Rendle, he reflects:

> She neither proclaimed nor disavowed her identity. She was frankly Silvia to those who knew and cared; but there was not trace of the Egeria in her pose. She spoke often of Rendle's books, but seldom of himself; there was no posthumous conjugality, no use of the possessive tense, in her abounding reminiscences. Of the master's intellectual life, of his habits of thought and work, she never wearied of talking. She knew the history of each poem; . . . she could even explain that one impenetrable line, the torment of critics, the joy of detractors, the last line of *The Old Odysseus.* ("Muse" 55-56)

Through a complex narrative frame (that one may call "Jamesian"), we learn of the main life events of a young American girl sent by her family to a European finishing school. Hers was in Tours, in France. Although this is not explicitly said in the story, it is rather clear that an arranged marriage in New York was the subsequent episode in the life of that young woman who becomes, as a result of that marriage, Mrs. Anerton. This is the name under which she appears most of the time. We also learn that her husband was a diplomat in Rome, and that while in Rome she met and fell in love with a famous poet, Vincent Rendle. Mrs. Anerton and Rendle have an affair and she becomes Rendle's "muse," known to all as "Vincent Rendle's Mrs. Anerton"; later "it [is] whispered she is Silvia" (59), after "the master" (that is the way the poet is usually designated by the narrator) publishes a collection of poems titled *Sonnets for Silvia.* When the biography of the then deceased master appears and his muse is identified in it as "Mrs. A." (51), the narrator tells us that "[Lewis Danyers] had included in his worship the woman who had inspired not only such divine verse but such playful, tender, incomparable prose" (51). From that moment onward, he starts dreaming of Mrs. A., alias Mrs. Anerton, alias Silvia.

So a young woman of twenty-two named Mary becomes the wife of Mr. Anerton and bears his name; she then becomes "Silvia," the muse and poetic figure of Vincent Rendle, before becoming a demigoddess for Lewis Danyers who "worships" her because she inspired the immortal master. Mary Anerton preceded but also rebels against the figure of

Lily Bart that Wharton would develop in *The House of Mirth*, a figure "locked into fixed positions that are social and economic as well as the products of the libido" (Showalter 134). The title, "The Muse's Tragedy," suggests that the tragedy it recounts is Mary's desperate attempt throughout her life to "escap[e] her destiny" (63), which has been to always be the product of men's writing and men's fiction – whether it be the social fiction of her husband, the vicariously erotic fiction of aging Vincent Rendle, or the aesthetic fiction of aspiring critic Lewis Danyers. All these male minds wish to know her for their different purposes, but at the same time they all ignore her as a flesh-and-blood woman. The story leaves little doubt as to the amount of sensuality there may have been between Mary and her husband; there was not enough of it by all accounts to enable Mary to bear a child; "was I so ugly" (62), she confesses to have repeatedly wondered when her "lover" let her live a lonely life by his side "in a sort of Arctic winter" (62). Danyers meets Mary at the Hotel Villa d'Este, not among throngs of fashionable New Yorkers, but as a solitary figure whose life is out of season, as it were, as the deserted and mausoleum-like marble halls of the Roman hotel suggest.

At this point, we may be inclined to think that the turn will be Jamesian, and that not unlike in "The Aspern Papers" or "The Figure in the Carpet," we shall follow the meanderings of the protagonist's critical inquiry. This is certainly what the free indirect speech of the narrator suggests; thus, Mary tells Danyers (direct speech), "'You must write,'" and the ironic narrator comments (free indirect speech): "she said, administering the most exquisite flattery that human lips could give" (57). The typical displacement of the narrative perspective is a favorite technique (almost a *ficelle*) of both Wharton and James. As in cinematic shot and reverse shot, the effect is ironic, as we get the same situation (a dialogue between two characters) seen from two different points of view. Here, the irony depends on the stark opposition between Mrs. Anerton's simple empathic declaration and its bombastic transformation in Danyers' mind where Mrs. Anerton is reduced by synecdoche to "human lips."

This synecdoche by which women are reduced to parts of their bodies is typical of many of James's male protagonists. In "The Landscape Painter," for instance, John Locksley observes Miss Blunt and notes her "black hair," her "eyebrows," her "eyes," her "teeth," her "eminently intelligent" smile, "her chin," and notes that "Her mouth . . . is her strong point."[1] Despite "tormenting [his] brain," however, the parts

[1] Originally published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1866, James revised "The Landscape Painter" for the second volume of his 1885 *Stories Revised*. In that version he changed the

never form a whole and "the tolerable catalogue" makes him see "no picture" and certainly no real woman (74). The effect of the synecdoche is perhaps most developed in James's later story "The Last of the Valerii" in which Count Valerio exhumes a statue of Juno and falls in love with it. He makes "a relic of it" (812) and lives a passionate relation with the "masterpiece of skill and . . . marvel of preservation" (808) while Martha, the flesh-and-bone woman whom the Count married is no longer entitled to the Count's passion. While he offers libations under the moon to his marvelously preserved mistress of marble, his all too real wife languishes and wilts alone. Not unlike Wharton's Mary Anerton, Martha exclaims: "My sorrow is for the gulf of silence and indifference that has burst between us. *His Juno's reality; I'm the fiction*" (822; emphasis added). Wharton's story works with several effects that can be attributed to the influence of James, but these effects can also be read ironically when contrasted with the last part of the story.

Indeed, only the first two parts of "The Muse's Tragedy" are recounted in free indirect speech by an ironic third-person narrator; the third and concluding part consists of a long letter that Mary writes to Danyers in which she addresses him, even as she addresses the reader. Pen in hand, Mary Anerton expresses her despair at always being the subject of men writing her up. She refers to the month she and Danyers spent in Venice, allegedly to write a book together on Rendle, but really spent in courtship; Danyers's courting Mary was apparently sincere, but part of her tragedy is that she has become unable to entrust her life to another man who may write her into yet another fiction of herself:

> At first I was afraid – oh, so much afraid – that you cared for me only because I was Silvia, that you loved me because you thought Rendle had loved me. I began to think there was no escaping my destiny. (63)

It remains unclear whether Danyers overcomes his initial fascination with "Silvia" to fall in love with the actual Mrs. Anerton, or if he unwittingly fools her and himself when he courts her. In the end, Mary rejects him saying, "*It was good, for once in my life, to get away from literature. . . .*" (64; emphasis added). "Literature" is a reference to the poetry of Vincent

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name of the female protagonist from Esther Blunt to Miriam Quarterman. Kendall Johnson argues that James did that "to emphasize her ambiguous racial and cultural form" (62). James, however retained the magazine version for the 1919 New York Edition. The irony of Miss Blunt being particularly sharp in the story is of course very nice, though it may have appeared a bit too conspicuous to James at a time when he and Wharton were being increasingly paired. Wharton was often called – somewhat depreciatively – witty by critics; James may have wanted to avoid the association with what certain readers considered as somewhat facile feminine wit.

Rendle and her being turned into a marble statue in it, but also more generally to the first sense of that word, which is that which is written, that which is made of letters – Mary does want to be a woman of letters. Mary refuses to yield to what Judith Fetterley calls "the temptation to be a beautiful object" (quoted in Restuccia 224), for she knows that many women before her have been "destroyed by the consequences of that temptation" (Restuccia 224). Becoming a beautiful object is of course what happens to Lily in *The House of Mirth* and the most telling episode is that of the *tableaux vivants*, where Lily is written up and painted alive into an aesthetic form for the benefit of the spectators.

In "The Muse's Tragedy," as in much of her fiction, Edith Wharton focuses on the lives, the hopes and the desires of women who often appear as objects of aesthetic, economic and sexual desire in narratives written by her contemporaries. "The Muse's Tragedy" thus appears as a mirror image of stories by Henry James such as "A Landscape Painter," "The Story of a Masterpiece," "The Last of the Valerii," or "The Liar," that feature male artists, painters and writers who seek to conquer and control the women they desire through their art. All these men claim they love the women they use as material for their art, which is in most cases the expression of their vanity or anxious greed.

In "The Landscape Painter," John Locksley, dejected bachelor, feigns to be poor in order to spy on Miss Blunt because he distrusts women on the grounds of their "mercenary spirit" (67). He therefore goes to the seaside, full of Tennysonian fantasies, to "rusticate and sketch" (68). He gradually becomes fond of the daughter of his landlord, but the story (made of a mixture of two first-person narrators and a third-person narrator) shows that Miss Blunt only starts to interest Locksley when she becomes the object of his social "experiment" (76), or part of his aesthetic compositions. Only when Miss Blunt becomes the final touch of an aesthetic epiphany, does Locksley become genuinely interested in her and forms the project to propose to her. This takes place during the episode of the picnic that Miss Blunt organizes; Locksley (whose diary we are reading at that point) writes:

> It was a perfect summer day: I can say no more of it. . . . The deep, translucent water reposed at the base of the warm sunlit cliff like a great basin of glass, which I half expected to hear shiver and crack as our keel ploughed though it. . . . And how color and sound stood out in the transparent air! . . . The gleaming white beach lay fringed with its deep deposits of odorous seeweed, gleaming black. . . . I remember, when Miss Blunt stepped ashore . . . while her father and I busied ourselves with our baskets and fastening the anchor – I remember, I say, what a figure she made. (92)

All five senses are mobilized in this synesthetic moment that enables Locksley to see Miss Blunt as whole "figure" at last and that makes him exclaim, "Young woman . . . I do wish you might know how pretty you look" (93). But at that point, Miss Blunt has become an "individual object," a "figure" almost "*criardé*" in the "purity of Cragthorpe air" (92). The rhetorical insistence on Locksley's remembering emphasizes that this moment of vision is re-composition of the parts that all stand there for one of the sensations – the touch of the water, the sand, the anchor; the smell of the weeds; the prospect of taste of the food in the baskets; the sound of the wind and the ripples on the water; and of course sight which crowns all these impressions. Miss Blunt herself is not taken to parts as earlier in the story (though she *is* mostly reduced to the colors and texture of her dress) but she is a part herself: she is the keystone of the composition. Later, Locksley tells Miss Blunt, "One of these days I mean to paint a picture which in future ages, when my dear native land shall boast a national school of art, will hang in the *Salon Carré* of the great central museum, . . . and remind folks – or rather make them forget – Giorgione, Bordone, Veronese" (94). Locksley's interestedness is double: on the one hand he purports to dupe Miss Blunt with his little *mise en scène* and thereby shield himself from what he perceives as the deceitful character of women, and on the other, he hopes to take advantage of her to become a master of Western art. "He yearns both to marry an unaffected American girl who is unaware of his high social standing and to paint a nationally symbolic landscape that will promote an exceptional national culture and hang in a great U.S. gallery for the benefit of posterity" (Kendall 62). Locksley sees his grand oeuvre thanks to Miss Blunt, the muse that will make him enter the museum.

In "The Liar" the protagonist of the story is young painter who has enjoyed for some time "the honors and the emoluments" of a growing reputation and who meets with a woman he once loved but who rejected him because he was too poor (James, "Art of Fiction" 391). When he sees her again, she is married to Colonel Capadose, a gentleman whose main qualification is that he is an inveterate or maybe even a pathological liar.[2] Typically, the third-person narrator allows us partial and ironic insights into the tortuous mind of Oliver Lyon. He weaves a

[2] One of the many complexities of the story is that Colonel Capadose's lying is no secret: everybody knows that he is a "thumping liar" (341). As one of his sitters tells Lyon, "'[Colonel Capadose will] lie about the time of the day, about the name of his hatter.'" And he adds to the bewilderment of scandalized Lyon, "'This fellow isn't in the least a scoundrel. There is not harm in him and no bad intention . . .'" (342). Only Lyon who is allegedly after the "truth" operates in secret to deceive others. Capadose is a weaver of tales – he is a professional liar, like James himself who very seldom dined at home, for he was constantly invited by people who wanted to hear him tell stories.

complex plot at the end of which he has Colonel Capadose sit for him; using all his artistry, Lyon reveals in the painting the lying nature of his model. Although this seems to be a celebration of art that speaks louder than facts, it really reveals the "un-humane" nature of the painter, for all his scheming aims at getting back the woman he desires more for the sake of revenge than love (Bell 622). Lyon naïvely believes that she will be so awestruck by the revelation of the lies of her husband that repentantly she will return to him. He believes that art will be the cause of an epiphany of which the woman will be the centerpiece and he the tragic hero.

These examples show how James's male artists use women to promote their personal and artistic ambitions by transforming them into beautiful objects that decorate and animate their fantasized lives of the mind and of the libido. It is essential to note also that in these tales, punishment comes to these male masterminds whose plans are thwarted in the end. In all these stories, the women who seemed to be passive models or stultified objects of desire end up leading the narrative. This can be the result of witty invention as in "The Landscape Painter," in which Miss Blunt secretly reads Locksley's diary and therefore leads him on while he thinks he is keeping her in ignorance. In "The Liar," the melodramatic epiphany expected by Lyon turns out to be a scene of self-revelation: Lyon is revealed as a schemer and a false person while, paradoxically, the true characters are Colonel Capadose who is true to his nature of a weaver of tales and Mrs. Capadose who is true to her beloved husband.

Lyon the liar hangs on to the bitter end to his obsession. The tale ends with words we can but attribute to Lyon: "She was still in love with her husband – he had trained her too well" (371). Here, too, the words are in free indirect speech, which reinforces their bitter irony; the one thing Lyon and his "brother[s] of the brush" (James, "Art of Fiction" 395) do not understand is what Mary Anerton ponders and then tells Danyers in the closing of the letter she addresses him: "*Pour comprendre il faut aimer*" (55) and, quoting Pascal, "*Il faut de l'adresse pour aimer*" (61).[3] Oliver Lyon, Count Valerio, Stephen Baxter, John Locksley, et al are all skillful, but they are incapable of love; they are supremely intelligent and yet do not understand. Edith Wharton's inclusion of Pascal's *Discours sur les passions de l'amour*[4] (A Discourse on the Passion of Love) suggests that

[3] "It is necessary to love to understand" and "One must be skillful to love."

[4] The complete aphorism from Pascal's discourse reads: "*L'amour donne de l'esprit, il se soutient par l'esprit. Il faut de l'adresse pour aimer. L'on épuise tous les jours les manières de plaire; cependant il faut plaire, et l'on plaît*" (Love makes you clever and it lives on that cleverness. One must be skillful to love. Everyday we get to the end of our wits to know how to

it is a form of disinterested relationship to others that male artists do not understand. In "The Muse's Tragedy" we are reminded by the narrator that "Posterity is apt to regard the women whom poets have sung as chance pegs on which they hung their garlands" (56).

James portrays such male artists (with probably a deflected glance at James himself) who not only relate to women as aesthetic objects of desire, but who use them to promote their own interests, be they financial, libidinal or social. James's stories are remarkably complex as to the relation the male artists in the stories, but also the male narrators of the stories, entertain with the female characters. They have in common, however, that they are written from the point of view of the man who holds either the pen or the brush. Although in several of these stories the domineering desire of the male artists, narrators and readers is thwarted, the narrative point of view is always that of the acting man. Comparing Henry and Edith may allow us to gain an insight into what happens when artists, but also when we scholars deal with writing American women. What happens when we write? And can we enable women to "get away from literature" or are they always to be the prisoners of phallogocentric language, irrespective of the gender of the individual who uses that language?

I have noted that "The Muse's Tragedy" starts as the impersonal, albeit not neutral, narrator follows Danyers's gaze and thoughts. With perceptible irony, the narrator reports that Danyers regards Mary as "the door to the sanctuary [of Rendle's poetry]"; being such a door (with the sexual innuendo of the catachresis) is to him the highest possible function for a woman, and that is what makes him exclaim, "'You have had more than any other woman!'" (56). Nothing seems superior in the eyes of Danyers than to be the object of desire and inspiration of an immor-

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please our beloved; and yet please we must, and please we do [my translation].) Pascal opens the discourse by saying that "Man was made to think," yet he also proposes that love both emanates from and supersedes the *cogito*. The first sentence in French used by Mary in the story does not come from Pascal's discourse but it directly echoes it, suggesting that these are thoughts that are very present on Mary's mind. Pascal's aphorism also insists on the learning process that loving someone implies; *everyday*, Pascal insists, one must find a new way of loving. Baudelaire (who James read and commented on) had already defined as "modernity" the capability of the artist to express that "which is transitory, fleeting and contingent [and] which constitutes one half of art, the other half being the eternal and immutable." Failure to accept that modernity which lives in the transitory causes painters to "lapse into the void of the abstract and indefinable beauty of the unique woman before original sin" (518; my translation). Although this would take me beyond the scope of the present essay, I wish to suggest that it would be important to consider that the moral discussion of how far is art allowed to go in its prying into human lives is also (at least for James) a question that touches upon the development of modern(ist) aesthetics.

tal poet, but when Mary thinks of what Danyers regards as a high privilege she refers to herself as "a sort of female Tithonus." Like the Juno of James's "The Last of the Valerii," she is a "marvel of preservation" (808), so much so that she becomes a mythical figure imprisoned in "the dreariness of enforced immortality" (*Muse's* 58).

The transformation into a statue-like object of aesthetic desire and the allusion to the myth of Tithonus makes the story resonate with a number of Greek myths of creation where artistry and desire are crossed. The best-known of these myths is certainly that of Pygmalion in which a sculptor falls in love with his statue and implores the gods to endow that statue with life. This myth of male creation has of course a very rich lineage in Western art. Many versions in visual arts and in fiction glorify, but also deconstruct and critique, the male taking control and modeling with his art – with his mind and hands – the body and the soul of Galatea. In the myth of Pygmalion, non-animated matter becomes animated; ivory becomes flesh and a statue becomes a living and childbearing being. For Wharton and James, resorting to Greek myths is a way of extracting their tales from the particularities of their time, from the specificity of the comedy of manners of wealthy New Yorkers or Londoners, to give them timeless and universal resonance.

Wharton's title appeals directly to Greek myths, specifically the myth of Tithonus, evoked when Mary recounts what she calls her "destiny." In that myth, Eos (the Titanic goddess of dawn) kidnaps Tithonus from the royal house of Troy to make him her lover. Eos asks Zeus to give Tithonus immortality hoping that his eternal beauty would not fade, but forgets to ask for him eternal youth. Tithonus indeed lives forever, but what should have been a blessing becomes a curse:

> But when hateful old age was pressing hard on him, with all its might,
> and he couldn't move his limbs, much less lift them up,
> . . .
> she put him in her chamber, and she closed the shining doors over him.
> From there his voice pours out – it seems never to end – and he has no strength at all,
> the kind he used to have in his limbs when they could still bend.
> (Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite 233-38)

As is always the case in these myths which are also cautionary tales, there is a sort of hidden punishment for moving between the animated and the non-animated worlds and for breaking the natural laws of life. Punishment comes to those who think they can use the laws of creation and destruction to their advantage without having to pay the price. This is the hardship the male creators of James's stories seek to avoid. Their

relation to women is interested, as they want the libidinal recompense for investing into a relationship with a woman, but are unwilling to pay the price. Wharton's and James's stories echo the Greek myths and suggest that art and creation always happen at a cost; or, to put this differently, that art is not a disinterested activity. In James's and Wharton's stories the apparently light comedy of manners, the telltale of an aristocratic class, bears in its heart the tragedy of human destiny.

While in the myth of Pygmalion, the act of creation ascribes life to a non-human entity, in the myth of Tithonus, the result is imprisonment in eternity. The tragedy of Mary Anerton, the muse, is that she is condemned – though she commits no crime – to sing forever, or, as the myth has it, to babble forever, to inspire young men such as Lewis Danyers, and possibly many aspiring critics after him. Thus, the myth presents itself as a reversal of the myth of Pygmalion, just as Wharton's story presents itself as a reversal of the Jamesian stories on artistic creation told from the point of view of the male artist.

The myth haunts forty-five-years old Mary who remarks to Danyers, "'But then you are so young,'" and she adds almost as a warning: "'and one could not wish you, as yet, the experience that a fuller understanding would imply" (55). "*Pour comprendre il faut aimer*," but there is a price to pay for that "fuller understanding": Mary has loved and paid the price in time and mortality for it. There seems to be an unfair deal between the women written or painted in their works of art and the artist; on the one hand they are confronted with the spectacle of the eternity of their lovers (great artists never die), and on the other they feel how time affects them. Mary led a dispassionate life with a husband who tolerated her affair with her poet because he was very much in love with him himself. Indeed, when Danyers wonders why the Anertons never separated, he is told, "'[Mr. Anerton] never would have left Rendle! And *besides*, he was very fond of his wife'" (52; emphasis added). When she turns down Danyers's proposal, Mary confesses to him that she has known all along that Vincent Rendle had never loved her any more than her husband, and she poignantly asks: "Why had he never loved me? . . . Was I so ugly, so essentially unlovable that though a man might cherish me as his mind's comrade, he could not care for me as a woman? I can't tell you how that question tortured me. It became an obsession" (62). Rendle used Mary to write her up in his verse, just like her husband had written her up in his narrative of social respectability. Her former husband was in love with men such as Rendle who constituted "conquests" to whom he gave gifts and jewels (52); her lover was in love with himself and while he wrote her up in his verse, he never wrote *to* or *for* her: "'What are [his poems]? A cosmic philosophy, not a love poem; addressed to *Woman*; not to *a woman*!'" (60; emphasis added).

Mary becomes a heroine of this tragic comedy of manners. When Danyers sees Mary for the first time, the narrator gives us glimpses of his fast-working mind:

> The lady whose solitary entrance broke upon his solitary repast in the restaurant of the Hotel Villa d'Este had seated herself in such a way that her profile was detached against the window; and thus viewed, her domed forehead, small arched nose, and fastidious lip suggested a silhouette of Marie Antoinette. In the lady's dress and movements – in the very turn of her wrist as she poured coffee – Danyers thought he detected the same fastidiousness, the same air of tacitly excluding the obvious and the unexceptional. Here was a woman who had been much bored and keenly interested. . . . Danyers noticed that the hair rolled back from her forehead was turning gray; but her figure was straight and slender, and she had the invaluable gift of a girlish back. (54)

The apparently impersonal description is really an aesthetic composition that details the "pose" (55) of "the lady" as if she were already part of a painting or a narrative. The portrait results from the reconfiguring of aesthetic or narrative details. The queenly and tragic destiny of the character is adumbrated with the allusion to Marie Antoinette, while other details are added as the male protagonist's eye scans her from head to bottom – something, psychologists say, men do when they look at a woman. Thus, the hair, the brow, the lips, the figure are inspected as Danyers's eyes move down; each detail stands in the description as a synecdoche for the whole persona he is creating and each detail has its own story to tell. Mary Anerton becomes a visual composition caught in profile by the inspired eye of the aesthete and a narrative composition in the writer's mind. Again, the free indirect speech does not merely convey naturalistically what is there, what is, as it were, before Danyers's passively perceiving eyes; passing qualifying remarks such as, "Danyers noticed" (54) and "Danyers thought he detected" (54) suggest that the scene is the result of an aesthetic composition. Danyers "thinks" he *detects* what is really there, just as he lulls himself into the illusion that he recognizes Mary Anerton before she introduces herself. This is also the erroneous judgment the story opens with: "Danyers afterwards *liked to fancy* that he had recognized Mrs. Anerton at once; but that, of course, *was absurd* since he had seen no portrait of her." Immediately afterwards, however, "he is *almost* certain . . . that he had been thinking of Mrs. Anerton when she first approaches him" (50; emphasis added). Had we been in a Henry James story, the ironic distance of the narrator would have alerted us to the self-deception of the protagonist and the ironic turn that all this gives to the story. Although with James the men are by

no means the victors of the tales, the narrative point of view stays with the masculine consciousness of the narrative. With Edith Wharton we move to the other side of creation and are led to wonder what it feels like to be Mona Lisa – the woman, not the painting.

Unlike Pauline, the heroine of Wharton's later tale "An Angel at the Grave," Mary refuses to die so the great Master may live. Pauline is left as the guardian of the memory and the papers of the great man and she exclaims to George Corby who has come to study the legacy: "'I gave up everything . . . to keep *him* alive. I sacrificed myself – others – I nursed his glory in my bosom and it died – and left me – left me here alone" (269). Pauline warns her visitor, and maybe all of us who visit the house of the great man with George Corby: "'Don't make the same mistake!'" (269).

How can we avoid that mistake? I have discussed what happens to women in the stories by James and Wharton; it seems only fair ethically and critically to give their voices for too long suppressed a chance to be heard. On the other hand, we may wonder if, as in these stories and as in the myths they echo, there may not be a price to pay for not allowing these women to "get away from literature," for not allowing Edith Wharton to get away from literature. In the central scene of the *tableaux vivants* in *The House of Mirth*, Lily becomes a work of art, but as Kaplan rightly points out, "At the moment that she is most transformed by art, she is also most exposed" (449). May it be that when we try to give Edith Wharton a voice, when we try to hear what her long-muted heroines have to tell us, we turn them into cicadas and condemn them to sing forever? This might be another question posed by these stories to the readers who cannot comfortably sit and think they can understand this literature without loving it, and as the stories show, it is impossible to love without exposing oneself.

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