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Walter Pater's *Renaissance* and Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence*

Newland Archer prided himself on his knowledge of Italian art. His boyhood had been saturated with Ruskin, and he had read all the latest books: John Addington Symonds, Vernon Lee's "Euphorion," the essays of P.G. Hamerton, and a wonderful new volume called "The Renaissance" by Walter Pater. He talked easily of Botticelli, and spoke of Fra Angelico with a faint condescension." The Age of Innocence (1071)

Like her fictional character Newland Archer, Edith Wharton prided herself on her knowledge of Italian art. The works of Ruskin and "the essays of P.G. Hamerton" had prominent places on the shelves of her father's library (Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 67), and on a visit to Italy as an adult she struck up a friendship with the art critic Vernon Lee. Walter Pater's *The Renaissance*, published in 1873, also occupied a prominent place in her personal library.

It is probably from Pater that Newland Archer learned to talk easily of Botticelli and condescendingly of Fra Angelico. Botticelli is the subject of one of the ten essays which comprise Pater's book, and in his penultimate essay on Winckelmann, Pater speaks of the "inadequacy" of Fra Angelico's art when compared to a masterpiece of Greek art such as the Venus de Milo (Pater, 170-1). But the influence of Pater's book on *The Age of Innocence* went far beyond this specific instance, informing much of Wharton's novel with its philosophy of experience and with its notions of classical and Renaissance art.

Edith Wharton's life-long interest in philosophy has been established by her biographers from a study of her reading and her own remarks about philosophical subjects. Her biographer R.W.B. Lewis has pointed out the influence of Herbert Spencer and Nietzsche on her work (Lewis, 56-57; 230), and a recent study by Carol J. Singley claims to be "the first to explore the dimensions of Wharton's religious, spiritual and philosophical search, and to place her life and writings in the context of American intellectual thought and religious history"(Singley, xi). Singley, however, approaches *The Age of Innocence* from the perspective of Platonic philosophy, with Ellen Olenska, for example, cast in the role of Socrates. While this reading is itself valid, it misses the profound influence of Pater on Wharton's work.

Wharton is most often concerned with examining the situation of the individual within a conventional social context, pitting individuality against custom or habit. Lewis speaks of "those figures of hers who struggle pathetically and unsuccessfully against their stifling surroundings," and sees behind this interest the influence of Herbert Spencer (Lewis, 57). Singley, on the other hand, notes the influence of Pascal, who "believed in convention to order life and keep it from becoming pure chaos" (Singley, 65). Throughout Wharton's fiction, and especially in *The Age of Innocence*, custom (convention, habit) is an ambiguous notion: it stifles the individual, and yet it prevents social chaos.

"Habit" is a key word for Edith Wharton. "Habits," she writes in *The Glimpses of the Moon*, "-they outspan the Pyramids" (160). In her autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, she writes:

The other producer of old age [in addition to sorrow] is habit: the deathly process of doing the same thing in the same way at the same hour day after day, first from

carelessness, then from inclination, at last from cowardice or inertia. Luckily the inconsequent life is not the only alternative; for caprice is as ruinous as routine. Habit is necessary; it is the habit of having habits, of turning a trail into a rut, that must be incessantly fought against if one is to remain alive.

In spite of illness, in spite even of the arch-enemy sorrow, one *can* remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration if one is unafraid of change, insatiable in intellectual curiosity, interested in big things, and happy in small ways (Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, vii).

Wharton here seems to be echoing, in much less elevated tones, the famous “Conclusion” of *The Renaissance*, where Pater launches into an eloquent defense of a life of experience: To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations seem alike. While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist’s hands, or the face of one’s friend. Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the very brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their ways, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening (197).

Pater’s formulation is echoed even more clearly in Newland Archer’s final assessment of his wife after her early death: “[she was] so lacking in imagination, so incapable of growth, that the world of her youth had fallen into pieces and rebuilt itself without her ever being conscious

of the change. This hard bright blindness had kept her immediate horizon apparently unaltered” (1292). Here, Wharton seems also to be alluding specifically to Pater by reversing his “hard, gemlike flame” when she speaks of May’s “hard bright blindness,” and by contrasting Pater’s “lifted horizon” with May’s horizon, which remains “apparently unaltered.”

We know that Pater’s conclusion to *The Renaissance* made an early impression on Wharton because of its mention in a poem which she composed in around 1881, during her brief engagement to Harry Stevens. She writes:

No, no-what is life? A succession
Of fleeting pulsations (as Pater
Has told us in *Renaissance Studies*),
Which must cease for us sooner or later(quoted in Lewis, 43)

The reference is to Pater’s remark that “a counted number of pulses only is given us of a variegated, dramatic life” (197).

For Pater, each individual moment of life must stand out, perfect in itself, against the deadening influence of habit. “Every moment,” he writes, “some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or intellectual excitement is irresistably real and attractive to us,-for that moment only” (196-197).

In her early poem, “The Mortal Lease,” Wharton writes: “If in that moment were all we are,/We live enough.” The influence of Pater’s elevation of the moment is unmistakable.

In the poem “Artemis to Actaeon,” Wharton again explores the emotional denseness of “the moment.” The poem was written in 1906 and collected in 1909 under the title *Artemis to Actaeon and Other Verse*. In 1909, Wharton was in the midst of a passionate love affair with

Morton Fullerton; in “Artemis to Actaeon” she saw, says her biographer R.W.B. Lewis, “a precise statement of the impulse that was gripping her, to crowd a lifetime into a single moment of passion” (Lewis: 218). She writes:

For immortality is not to range
Unlimited through vast Olympian days,
Or sit in dull dominion over time;
But this-to drink life’s utmost at a draught,
Nor feel the wine grow stale upon the lip,
To scale the summit of some soaring moment,
Nor know the dulness of some long descent

The poem suggests that the significance of human life is precisely in its “momentariness,” the richness, warmth and beauty of each moment. Wharton writes that the Olympian gods “pale, for lack of warmth they wane,/Freeze to the marble of their images.”

Wharton may have been influenced here by Pater’s characterization of the sculpture of the Greeks, who were prompted “constantly to seek the type in the individual, to abstract and express only what is structural and permanent, to purge from the individual all that belongs only to him, all the accidents, the feelings and actions of the special moment, all that (because in its own nature endures but for a moment) is apt to look like a frozen thing if one arrests it” (Pater, 54).

The exaltation of the moment in the early poems is countered in Wharton’s fiction by works such as *Ethan Frome* which offer a more realistic assessment of, as it were, the dull ascent from a steep moment of passion. Much of her fiction explores precisely the deflation of the

ecstatic moment and the relentlessness of ordinary time. On several occasions, Wharton uses clocks as symbols of the vicissitudes of time, passionate moment versus ordinary time. In the early story "Bunner Sisters," a broken clock (frozen on a single moment) leads one of the sisters to a disastrous liaison with the man who repairs the clock; once time is set in motion again, the passionate moment dissolves into its tragic consequences. In "The Old Maid," written shortly after *The Age of Innocence*, the recurring symbol is an ormolu clock representing a shepherd attempting to steal a kiss from a shepherdess. In a single object, ordinary time is set against an image of the frozen moment. The clock was a wedding gift to Delia from Mrs. Manson Mingott, conveyed from Europe by Clem Spender, the artist whom Delia loved but rejected in favor of the conventional Jim Ralston. The figures on the clock freeze a moment of unfulfilled passion, the consequences of which inform the entire action of the story. As an allusion to Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," conveyed to Delia by an artist, the ormolu clock suggests that the frozen moment of ecstasy is more at home in static art (such as painting or sculpture) than in life (or, for that matter, in realistic fiction) where moments always have their consequences in ordinary time. One might add here that in *The House of Mirth* (originally titled "A Moment's Ornament"), Lily Bart enjoys her greatest moment of success when she is representing a work of art. In art, the individual moment of passion can endure, but "life goes on" to its often tragic consequences.

If "the moment" cannot be successfully frozen and held, except by art, it is possible for the mind to experience "moments of vision" in which the underlying flux of existence is apprehended in all its prismatic beauty and variety. As Pater says in his "Conclusion": "What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy" (197). The mind must be continuously open to each new

moment, to the constantly shifting nature of experience. Virginia Woolf, advancing “an explicitly Paterian project” in her review essay, “Moments of Vision,” writes that the aim of fiction should be “to catch and enclose certain moments which break off from the mass, in which things come together in a combination of inexplicable significance, to arrest these thoughts which are almost menacing with meaning” (quoted in Meisel, 49). Pater himself, in privileging these special “moment of vision,” writes in Humean terms of “the denial of habitual impressions” (quoted in Meisel, 49).

The recurring tension in Wharton’s fiction between the “moment of vision” and fossilized habit (“habitual impressions,” “facile orthodoxy”) can be traced with particular clarity in “The Old Maid,” in many respects a companion piece to *The Age of Innocence*. Of the Ralston family, into which the protagonist has married, Wharton writes:

by being so numerous and so similar they had come to have a weight in the community. People said: “the Ralstons” when they wished to invoke a precedent. This attribution of authority gradually convinced the third generation of its collective importance and the fourth, to which Delia Ralston’s husband belonged, had the ease and simplicity of a ruling class (374-375).

The accumulation of similar instances has given the impression of an unchanging law. Wharton continues: “the carefully built-up Ralston character was now so congenial that Delia Ralston sometimes asked herself whether, were she to turn her own little boy loose in a wilderness, he would not create a small New York there, and be on all its boards of directors” (375). The weight of custom gives the impression of constituting a universal law which would apply even “in a wilderness.”

In the world of the Ralstons of *Old New York*, everything follows a predictable sequence of events. When Delia Ralston's cousin, Charlotte Lovell, becomes engaged to a Ralston, Delia reflects that "nothing could be safer, sounder or more-well, usual" (376). She is able to foresee exactly the course Charlotte's married life is expected to take, from the "embarrassed pleasure" of the honeymoon to "the growth of habit, the insidious lulling of the matter-of-course, the dreamless double slumbers in the big white bed," to the inevitable babies. "Yes," she reflects: Charlotte's fate would be just like hers. Joe Ralston was so like his second cousin Jim (Delia's James), that Delia could see no reason why life in the squat brick house in Waverly Place should not exactly resemble life in the tall brownstone house in Gramercy Park (377).

All of these expectations, however, are overturned when Charlotte breaks off her engagement to Joe Ralston and confides to Delia that she has had an illegitimate child by Delia's former admirer, Clem Spender. At this news, "Delia Ralston stood speechless, looking away from her cousin in a growing horror. She had lost all sense of reality, all feeling of safety and self-reliance. Her impulse was to close her ears to the other's appeal" (388). She looks away, she wants to close her ears; her impulse, in other words, is to shut her senses to these incongruous new impressions which have upset her habitual construction of her world and of her self.

The event proves that even the "congenital" Ralston character is merely a creation of custom. As Wharton suggests, the self constructed in reference to the custom of the Ralstons is always susceptible to dissolution when seen against the underlying flux of life:

She [Delia] lived under them [the Ralstons] as unthinkingly as one lives under the laws of one's country. Yet the tremor of the muted keyboard, that secret questioning which sometimes beat in her like wings, would now and then so divide her from them that for a

fleeting moment she could survey them in their relation to other things. The moment was always fleeting; she dropped back from it quickly, breathless and a little pale, to her children, her housekeeping, her new dresses and her kindly Jim (375).

This apprehension of life's underlying flux is neatly encapsulated in Charlotte's observation to Delia that "life doesn't stop" (386).

Delia Ralston's "fleeting moment" of insight can be compared to Newland Archer's moment of confusion at his wedding as he waits for his bride to process down the aisle: Archer opened his eyes The music, the scent of lilies on the altar, the vision of the cloud of tulle and orange-blossoms floating nearer and nearer, the sight of Mrs. Archer's face suddenly convulsed with happy sobs, the low benedictory murmur of the Rector's voice, the ordered evolutions of the eight pink bridesmaids and the eight black ushers: all these sights, sounds and sensations, so familiar in themselves, so unutterably strange and meaningless in his new relation to them, were confusedly mingled in his brain (1162).

This is just one of numerous instances of the dissolution of self which Archer experiences in the course of the novel, particularly in his relationship with Ellen Olenska. As Pamela Knights puts it: "In Archer's world, identity is formed within social consciousness, and when Archer is confronted with a challenge to his categories he begins to come apart, losing his sense of himself, his language, position, bodily space" (Knights 36). It could be said that these moments of dissolution give Archer insight into the underlying flux which in his world is usually ordered by custom or habit. Coming unglued from his socially-constructed view of reality, Archer sees conventional social situations, such as an evening dinner party, as embodying an incomprehensible flux: "and so the evening swept on, running and running like a senseless river

that did not know how to stop” (1286).

Archer is never able to embrace and celebrate flux with the freedom suggested by Pater in his “Conclusion.” Pater says, “not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end” (197). Archer, however, is continually drawn back by the force of custom embedded in his society, in which real experience (experience of life’s underlying flux, “experience itself”) is replaced by fossilized convention (“the fruit of experience”). As Mary Suzanne Schriber has written: “*The Age of Innocence* is a complaint against an insidious tendency to substitute tradition for the direct apprehension of life” (Schriber: 197). This tension is never really resolved in the novel. “After all, there was good in the old ways,” Archer reflects, at the end of the novel; “There was good in the new order too” (1291; 1292). Only history and not the individual, Wharton suggests, is capable of resolving the tension between the force of custom and the possibility of change. Archer can have only intimations of a different life while clinging to the habits of the life into which he was born.

Pater’s influence on *The Age of Innocence* is perhaps most explicitly seen in Wharton’s characterization of the two women in Newland Archer’s life, May Welland and Ellen Olenska. It has become a commonplace of scholarship on the novel that May represents innocence against Ellen’s experience. In *The Renaissance*, such a contrast is found, for example, in Pater’s comparison of Dante’s Beatrice with Michelangelo’s Vittoria: “Beatrice is a child, with the wistful, ambiguous vision of a child, with a character still unaccentuated by the influence of outward circumstances, almost expressionless. Vittoria, on the other hand, is a woman already weary, in advanced age, of grave intellectual qualities” (71). The notion of a “character still unaccentuated by the influence of outward circumstances” recurs in Pater’s discussions of Greek

sculpture, and through those discussions informs Wharton's characterization of May Welland.

May Welland is consistently characterized as pure, cool, serene, vacant, hard-more statue than living woman: "her face [had] the look of representing a type rather than a person; as if she might have been chosen to pose for a Civic Virtue or a Greek goddess" (1164). Previous scholars have related this characterization generally to popular depictions of "ideal womanhood" contemporary with the novel's setting. Neoclassicism in art was flourishing both in America and in Europe, promoting a classical ideal of athletic female beauty modeled after the sculpture of the Greeks (Fryer, 55-61; Banta, 448-449). The skyline of Edith Wharton's New York of the 1890s, for example, was presided over by both a "Civic Virtue" (the Statue of Liberty) and a "Greek goddess" (Augustus Saint-Gaudens' "Diana" atop the tower of the old Madison Square Garden) which reflected this Greek ideal. Saint-Gaudens later designed the figure of Liberty on the famous 1907 gold dollar. Much of this characterization, however, specifically echoes Pater's discussion of classical Greek sculpture.

In his essay on Winckelmann (the final essay in *The Renaissance*), Pater writes that Greek sculpture

has no backgrounds, no sky or atmosphere, to suggest and interpret a train of feeling; a little of suggested motion, and much of pure light on its gleaming surfaces, with pure form-only these. And it gains more than it loses by these limitations to its own distinguishing motives; it unveils man in the repose of his unchanging characteristics. That white light, purged from the angry, bloodlike stains of action and passion, reveals, not what is accidental in man, but the tranquil godship in him, as opposed to the restless accidents of life (177).

He goes on to discuss the Panathenaic frieze of the Parthenon, remarking on its depiction of “colorless, unclassified purity of life” (181). And discussing a marble athlete in Berlin, he remarks that it is “characterless, so far as character involves subjection to the accidental influences of life” (182). The most significant element in Pater’s discussion is this insistence that Greek sculpture is free from the influences of “the restless accidents of life.” Greek art is static and serene; Pater uses Winckelmann’s word, *Heiterkeit*, “serenity” (184). Greek art, in emphasizing “tranquil godship,” fails to register change or to record the lineaments of human experience.

May Welland fully embodies Pater’s conception of the Greek ideal as represented by the marble athlete in Berlin: “[her] face wore the vacant serenity of a young marble athlete” (1127). And like Pater’s marble athlete, May is nearly characterless: “the lines of her character, though so few, were on the same fine mould as her face” (1170). She is further distinguished by her “incapacity to recognise change” (1292); in Pater’s terms, she is untouched by “the restless accidents of life” and “the angry, bloodlike stains of action and passion.” As her husband observes: “the blood that ran so close to her fair skin might have been a preserving fluid rather than a ravaging element; yet her look of indestructible youthfulness made her seem neither hard nor dull, but only primitive and pure” (1164).

Pater, however, recognizes the inadequacy of the Greek ideal which May embodies. He concedes that:

if he [man] was to be saved from the *ennui* which ever attaches itself to realisation, even the realisation of the perfect life, it was necessary that a conflict should come, that some sharper note should grieve the existing harmony, and the spirit chafed by it beat out at

last only a larger and profounder music. In Greek tragedy this conflict has begun: man finds himself face to face with rival claims (185).

For Newland Archer, these “rival claims” are represented by Ellen Olenska. Observing her at the party thrown for her by the van der Luydens, Archer reflects that the “plump elderly faces” of the older women at the party seem “curiously immature” compared with the face of the Countess: “it frightened him to think what must have gone to the making of her eyes” (1065). “The red cheeks had paled,” Archer observes; “she was thin, worn, a little older-looking than her age, which must have been nearly thirty. But there was about her the mysterious authority of beauty” (1065).

Archer’s impressions of Countess Olenska, the mysterious woman made more beautiful by her world-weary experience, calls to mind Pater’s famous meditation on da Vinci’s “Mona Lisa:”

The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all “the ends of the earth are come,” and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. *Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how they would be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul and all of its maladies has passed!* All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there She is older than the rocks among which she sits (103; my emphasis).

Mona Lisa’s accumulation of experience contrasts with the serenity of Greek art, just as Ellen’s world-weary beauty (a little “disappointing” to the ladies of New York society) is contrasted, for Archer, with May’s classical innocence.

Having been exposed to Ellen's beauty, Archer begins to feel all the more acutely the limitations of the life offered by a world in which May Welland represents the ideal. Already, after his first visit to Ellen's apartment, he feels the *ennui* of New York society:

“‘Sameness-sameness!’” (1082). It is clear that May, “the tutelary divinity of all his old traditions and reverences” (1170), is the chief symbol for him of this sameness: “and there was May, and habit, and honour, and all the old decencies he and his people had always believed in” (1259).

Seen through the lens of Pater's aesthetic criticism in *The Renaissance*, it becomes clear that both May and Ellen are transformed by Archer, and by the society of which he is a product, into works of art representing two opposing aesthetic ideals. Marina Warner speaks of “the projection of immaterial concepts on to the female form, in both rhetoric and iconography” (Warner: 239). Both May and Ellen are represented “artistically,” becoming, in a sense, icons (see Ammons, 207-224). Although Ellen is treated more sympathetically, perhaps, as possessing a beauty moulded by experience, she is nonetheless rendered as an artistic object. On her first appearance in New York society, as a “brilliantly pretty little girl of nine or ten,” people remarked that she “‘ought to be painted’” (38). In the end, Ellen's beauty, the beauty of experience, is entirely intellectualized by Archer: “When he thought of Ellen Olenska it was abstractly, serenely, as one might think of some imaginary beloved in a book or a picture: she had become the composite picture of all that he had missed” (1291). The title of the novel itself, *The Age of Innocence*, is drawn from the title of a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds of an innocent, rosy-cheeked little girl. As Archer's final assessment of Ellen shows, experience, too, is figured as art.

As the novel closes, Archer, the failed empiricist, becomes a pure idealist; he refuses to

go up with his son to Ellen's apartment, preferring instead to sit on a bench outside the building, looking up at the window: "It's more real to me here than if I went up,' he suddenly heard himself say" (1302). His idealizing gaze, trained by the conventionalities of his society, provides him with more of a reality than experience itself.

In the end, habit prevails: "Archer found himself held fast by habit, by memories, by a sudden startled shrinking from new things." But there are still occasional "moments of vision": "There are moments when a man's imagination, so easily subdued to what it lives in, suddenly rises above its daily level, and surveys the long windings of destiny. Archer hung there and wondered" (1294). If Wharton fails to resolve the tension between habit and the living moment, she may, perhaps, be seen here to be following the example of Botticelli as described, again, by Pater:

I have said that the peculiar character of Botticelli is the result of a blending in him of a sympathy for humanity in its uncertain condition, its investiture at rarer moments in a character of loveliness and energy, with his consciousness of the shadow upon it of the great things from which it shrinks, and that this conveys into his work somewhat more than painting usually attains of the true complexion of humanity (49).

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page 17

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