THE END OF THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

Edith Wharton and the First World War

ALAN PRICE

St. Martin's Press
New York

Fig. 1 Edith Wharton in front of a railway car for wounded soldiers. (Courtesy of Jacques Fosse)

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Dedicated to the memory of my father,
Richard C. Price, 1916-1994

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PREFACE

A LIFE PUNCTUATED BY WAR

EDITH WHARTON'S LIFE WAS BRACKETED BY WARS. SHE WAS BORN DURING A bitterly cold January week in 1862, when the line of military camps stretched from northern Virginia through Kentucky to Cairo, Illinois. She died in 1937, the year that General Francisco Franco and his insurgents waged war against the Spanish Republican Army, supported by the International Brigade with its scattering of American writers. Her friend Teddy Roosevelt fashioned his public reputation during his military exploits in the Spanish-American War. Wharton's own literary career was interrupted, almost bisected, by the First World War.

She was one of a number of American writers, primarily women, who became involved in war charities during the opening months of the conflict in Belgium and France, well before the United States abandoned its official policy of neutrality. Wharton was among the 25,000 American women who volunteered for war-related work in Europe, Serbia, China, and Russia.[1] During the four years and three months of the war, she witnessed a transformation that saw economic and political power shift from a Europe bled white by the war (more than 10 million dead) to a United States that got through relatively unscathed (115,000 dead).[2]

The first chapter of this book describes how Wharton's plans for a new novel and a leisurely summer at a rented estate in England were interrupted by the opening of the war (variously called the Great War, the European War, and the First World War) during the first days of August 1914. For the next year Wharton threw her energies into organizing and raising money for several large civilian war charities, many of which bore her name.

Wharton's relief efforts began simply enough, with a sewing room. The need was obvious. Several thousand working women in Paris had been thrown out of their jobs by the military mobilization in early August of 1914. With the mobilization, hundreds of shops, cafes, and small businesses in Paris closed, leaving previously employed women without a

means of support. In her workroom Wharton offered employment to as many as ninety French women at a time. They received a nutritious lunch and a modest daily stipend. Wharton oversaw the work and secured orders from American friends. Some of the sewing women had worked for the famous couture houses on the rue de la Paix. Within a few weeks, Wharton's sewing room had established a reputation for producing fine lingerie as well as bandages for the hospitals and knitted socks and gloves for the men in the trenches.

By October and November Paris was flooded with refugees from Belgium and the invaded provinces of northern France. The French government could barely keep up with its own homeless, so the Belgians were forced to find shelter in railroad stations, in large sporting arenas, and on the streets. Again the need was obvious. With French, Belgian, and American friends, Wharton established the American Hostels for Refugees, a charity that provided housing, food, employment, medical services, education, and even Montessori classes for children of nursery-school age.

The second chapter follows Wharton to several locations on the French front, where she distributed medical supplies for the French Red Cross while collecting impressions for a series of evocative war essays that appeared first in *Scribner's Magazine* and were later collected in her book *Fighting France* (1915). By the summer she had begun another literary project, *The Book of the Homeless* (1916), an elaborately illustrated anthology with contributions from the leading writers, artists, and composers of the period. A detailed history of the creation and production of this gift book shows the breadth of Wharton's reputation as well as her extensive organizational skills.

Her charities continued to grow during 1915. The Belgian government, so impressed by Wharton's work with the adult refugees, asked if she could care for a small group of orphaned and abandoned children from Flanders. She said yes. With less than twenty-four hours' notice, she received sixty young girls. She had barely settled them when she received two hundred more. Soon the Children of Flanders Rescue Committee was caring for more than six hundred children and another two hundred aged and infirm Flemish refugees. Realizing that the children would return to Belgium after the war and would need to make a living, Wharton set up lace-making, gardening, and carpentry classes.

The work with the charities frequently left her exhausted. She began to take periodic rest trips in 1915 to get back to her writing. A cycle of

exhaustion and recovery was soon established. She would perform administrative and fund-raising tasks for the war charities in Paris until she reached a point where ill health and fatigue would force her doctor to send her away, usually to the south of France, for several weeks. The rest cures, however, rarely accomplished their goal. Often she had barely gotten her first wind when the deaths of close friends or the needs of the charities would shatter her peace and drive her back to Paris more tired than when she had left.

The third chapter looks at how official recognition for her war work—the French Legion of Honor awarded in March of 1916—was quickly overshadowed by private griefs—the deaths of her dear friends Henry James and Egerton Winthrop. She was slowly able to get back to her first love—writing fiction. During the summer and the autumn she wrote the novella *Summer*, which with its passion she called her "hot Ethan."

Also in 1916 she could see that all of her humanitarian efforts would waste away in the scourge of tuberculosis unless something were done immediately, and on a large scale, to limit its sweep. Wharton had already established a number of convalescent homes to care for the ill among her own refugees, but the disease was rampant among the soldiers coming out of the damp, rat-infested trenches. She joined several other prominent Americans in France as a vice president for the *Tuberculeux de la Guerre*, a large charity with official French government sanction. She set up demonstration sanatoriums using the American method of fresh-air cures for tubercular French soldiers and civilians.

The fourth chapter details the coming of America into the war and Wharton's subsequent struggle with a charity octopus—the American Red Cross. While her salvation might have come with its arrival in the summer of 1917, it did not. Wharton never publicly revealed her disagreements with the organization. However, her unpublished letters, an especially rich source for understanding the politics of American relief aid during the First World War, reveal her growing frustration. Moreover, they make clear that Wharton's disillusionment with the American Red Cross after 1917 was representative of what other American women in France felt. Scores of private relief agencies organized and administered by American women during the first three years of the war were unceremoniously swallowed up in a vast centralizing wave. Fourteen months after America entered the war and only three weeks before the Armistice, Wharton told her sister-in-law Mary Cadwalader Jones, "the feeling

against the Red Cross is not only as strong as it was but far stronger within the last two or three months . . . and apparently their purpose is to strangle all the independent war charities."[3]

The fifth chapter shows Wharton withdrawing increasingly from the management of the charities. She was still officially recognized: She had meetings with General John Pershing and Woodrow Wilson's representative, Colonel Edward M. House. But she moved to the Pavillon Colombe, a small estate in the village of St. Brice-sous-Forêt some twenty miles from Paris, and into a private imaginative space with her brief war novel *The Marne* (1918).

The conclusion of this book looks at the use Wharton made of the war in her later fiction. She regained her satirical edge to portray the frequently less than noble motives that prompted civilian volunteers to join war charities. The fiction she wrote during the war and that uses the war as a subject investigates themes of incest and social politics.

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Though Wharton's humanitarian war work was widely recognized—the Legion of Honor from the French and the Queen Elizabeth's medal from the Belgians—her writing from the war years has been largely dismissed by literary historians as an embarrassing passage during which she fell prey to propaganda. Blake Nevius, her first serious critic in the generation following her death, contends that Wharton's war fiction "adds nothing to her laurels; on the contrary, it proves that a novelist whose detachment was always precariously maintained could, when confronted with reports of German atrocities, lose her head as easily as the average newspaper reader."[4] Stanley Cooperman in his sweeping survey of American novels about the First World War contends, "Miss [sic] Wharton combined gentility with bloodthirst, the manners of the social novelist with the matter of the recruiting poster."[5] Even her most ardent admirers are left with uncomfortable questions: How did a sophisticated social satirist turn so quickly into a partisan war propagandist? What led Wharton, with her rich sense of irony, to turn her pen to sentimental fiction and propaganda essays?

This book first offers a historical context for Wharton's humanitarian and literary activities during the war. In addition, it probes her decision to adopt genres and literary voices she once condemned. We need to remember that the phenomenon of American authors turning from fiction to propaganda to sway a neutral American reading public and to aid war charities was not uncommon between 1914 and 1917. Dorothy

Canfield Fisher, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Gertrude Atherton, Alice B. Toklas, and Gertrude Stein participated in and wrote about relief activities in Belgium and France. Even that most detached of social observers, Henry James, wrote public letters to American newspapers and propaganda pamphlets urging support for the Norton-Harjes ambulance units in France and for the Belgian refugees in London.

For James and Wharton, the proposed imposition of German *kultur* (used by German intellectuals to justify the war) was an unconscionable violation of cultural boundaries. As expatriates and as writers of exquisite sensitivities, James and Wharton used their isolation from their native culture to heighten perception and contrast. For them the idea of Germany imposing a master culture on France or England or Italy was not just a political and military invasion, it was an assault on the cultural gradations that made their art possible.

Edith Wharton, it is true, wrote at the top of her voice during the early war years. She learned during the course of the war, however, to modulate her pitch and to hit and hold "the tremolo note" when its effects served her ends. The shift in rhetorical registers is instructive. When the war began, her dominant tone had been satire, with a strong secondary suit in irony. She and Henry James were swept uncritically into a total and totalizing condemnation of Germany, and in German *kultur* they foresaw "the crash of civilization." They quickly concluded that they could not remain silent in the face of wider American neutrality. Peter Buitenhuis in his study of the influence of British, American, and Canadian writers during the First World War concludes, "Expatriate American authors like Henry James and Edith Wharton were influential catalysts of American opinion."[6]

Both Wharton and James were aware of the shift in language generally and the dramatic dislocation in their own writing in particular. A few months into the war, James described the war's effect upon language. During a rare interview, where he insisted that his exact punctuation be taken down as well as his words, James asked the correspondent from the *New York Times* to consider the overwhelming fact that during a twenty-minute period, there had been as many as 5,000 casualties on the Western Front. James pondered the enormity of the statistic for a moment in a stunned silence. Then, anticipating by more than a dozen years Hemingway's statement in *A Farewell to Arms* about the decline of language, he continued: "One finds it in the midst of all this as hard to apply one's words as to endure one's thoughts. The war has

used up words: they have weakened, they have deteriorated like motor car tires; they have, like millions of other things, been more overstrained and knocked about and voided of the happy semblance during the last six months than in all the long ages before, and we are now confronted with a depreciation of all our terms, or, otherwise speaking, with a loss of expression through an increase in limpness, that may well make us wonder what ghosts will be left to walk."[7]

With her keen sense of noblesse oblige, Wharton makes an especially illustrative case of the tension American writers felt between the disinterested code of their craft, on the one hand, and their sympathy for allies and the refugees, on the other. Wharton's unpublished correspondence with her editors from the war years reveals a writer who had previously rejected the subjects and techniques of popular fiction now testing the boundaries of her literary identity.

Part of Wharton's reaction to the cataclysm of the war was social and aesthetic. "Propriety," "social grace," "good breeding"—these are terms not in favor today. Yet for an understanding of Wharton's actions during the war, such terms are important. She felt very strongly that private things should be kept private and public things made public. An example from her daily life may help.

During the mornings she wrote in her bedroom. Sometimes she would break off from her business writing to pen a quick note to one of her frequent houseguests. Those unpublished, and unmailed, notes were carried along the corridors of her rue de Varenne apartment by maids or her butler to the guest's bedroom. Yet even these little notes, frequently setting luncheon appointments or suggesting afternoon diversions, which were scribbled in relaxed moments during her writing mornings, would be inserted in envelopes and carefully addressed to, for example, Bernard Berenson, Esquire. The notes within often showed her great sense of fun. But the envelopes themselves observed an outer courtesy and an attention to good manners.[8]

Wharton had a keen sense of rhetorical and literary registers. Her observation that she had to sound the "tremolo note" in her frequent appeals for money for her charities reflects her self-conscious attention to voice and tone, especially during times of financial and social stress. The phrase itself comes from a letter to Elisina Tyler, her able lieutenant in the war charities. In the letter Wharton describes her struggle to overcome her long-standing reluctance to showcase pathetic individual cases of need to raise funds. "The Report [an annual report on the charities] is

exactly the contrary of what I approve in that line, but I always get money by the 'tremolo' note, so I try to dwell on it as much as possible."[9] The tremolo note, with its quavering pitch and its easy emotional appeal, initially stuck in Wharton's throat. Its obvious appeals to sentimentality and bathos struck her as inauthentic—it was making a private situation public. (In part, her objections to the literary modernism of James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence grew from what she saw as their inappropriate reversal of the private and the public.) Yet if stooping to a sentimental appeal would save the lives of the children and aged refugees for whom she had assumed responsibility, then Wharton could sustain a vibrato that would shake dollars from the pockets of a neutral American public.

It is easy to see how her appeals written during the war years have struck her readers as startlingly out of her literary character. Even during her best years, Wharton had a well-earned reputation for prickliness. Acquaintances, knowing her emphasis on propriety but missing her keen sense of fun and curiosity, were often overprotective. Those who knew her only by reputation were especially sensitive about offending Mrs. Wharton. F. Scott Fitzgerald, during a drunken pilgrimage after the war to her suburban home, could not bring himself to finish his story about the time he and Zelda mistakenly rented a room in a brothel on their first visit to Paris.[10] Even her friend the French novelist Paul Bourget stopped interrogating André Gide about homosexuality, for example, when Wharton entered the room.[11] Wharton, however, would have gladly listened to both conversations and participated. It was not the bawdy or sexual elements of life that offended her sensibility; it was the destruction of life and culture that she found blasphemous.

The war was an obvious assault on the order of life, on decorum. In a passage from one of her war essays collected in *Fighting France*, she describes the destruction of the Flemish city of Ypres. Aside from being gracefully written, the passage reveals the way the war had turned the public and the private worlds inside out:

> But Ypres has been bombarded to death, and the outer walls of its houses are still standing, so that it presents the distant semblance of a living city, while nearby it is seen to be a disembowelled corpse. Every window-pane is smashed, nearly every building unroofed, and some house-fronts are neatly sliced off, with the different stories exposed, as if for the stage-setting of a farce. In these exposed interiors the poor little household gods shiver and blink like owls

> surprised in a hollow tree. A hundred signs of intimate and humble tastes, of humdrum pursuits, of family association, clung to the unmasked walls. Whiskered photographs fade on the morning-glory wall-papers, plaster saints pine under glass bells, antimacassars droop from plush sofas, yellowing diplomas display their seals on office walls. It was all so still and familiar that it seemed as if the people for whom these things had a meaning might at any moment come back and take up their daily business. And then—crash! the guns began, slamming out volley after volley all along the English lines, and the poor frail web of things that had made up the lives of a vanished city-full hung dangling before us in that deathly blast.[12]

Wharton was essentially a social and philosophical conservative, in the root sense of "one who conserves or maintains." As Shari Benstock, Wharton's most recent biographer, notes: "New wealth posed a dangerous threat to American society, she claimed, because it came 'without inherited obligations, or any traditional sense of solidarity between the classes.'"[13] Wharton believed in a general sense of fitness in life. She was not an obvious snob about family lineage or aristocratic titles, but she was a snob about breeding and learning. She preferred an oligarchy of taste and erudition, a meritocracy of learning. She favored a society that would protect, if not favor, the connoisseur: Walter Berry, Robert Norton, Royall Tyler, Bernard Berenson, John Hugh Smith, Percy Lubbock. She celebrated the past. After her trip to Morocco in the fall of 1917, she playfully insisted that her host, Bernard Berenson, should supply her nightstand with books on the history of North Africa. But with her interest in the past, it should be noted that she was no technological Luddite. She loved what the automobile had done for travel, and she embraced the telephone.

Wharton has been an obvious and, it would seem, easy target for those who resented her strong personality. Percy Lubbock, who early enjoyed her hospitality and support, characterized her as "one of the few people I have ever known who used to do what severe ladies used to do so regularly in novels: she 'drew herself up'—"[14] Shifting to nautical imagery, he remembered Wharton as a "full-rigged ship under sail, with an eye for every detail and time for every claim."[15]

Some of the most lasting characterizations of Wharton by her contemporaries were based on hearsay that was largely untested by fact. Take, for example, Janet Flanner's poisonous profile in the *New Yorker*

Magazine, which presented Wharton as a conqueror: "Later, still pursuing her policy of Continental expansion, she purchased a charming Cistercian monastery near Hyères on the Mediterranean, where she summers. Finally, for permanent residence, she acquired an eighteenth-century villa, the Pavillon Colombe, at Saint-Brice-sous-Forêt, about eighty motor kilometers from Paris. It was here she collected her half-dozen adopted war orphans, left from the six hundred she housed during the war when she gave her property to the government and devoted herself to French and little Belgian refugees with a patriotism of which only an expatriated American who dislikes children is capable."[16] This acid portrait of Wharton as an aloof, acquisitive aristocrat was largely unchecked by the facts. Wharton spent her winters, not her summers, in Hyères. It was earlier, not later, that she bought the Pavillon Colombe in St. Brice, which is thirty kilometers, not eighty, from Paris. She never turned over her property, either in Paris or elsewhere, to the government during the war. In fact, she owned no property in France at that time. She never adopted a half dozen of the remaining war refugees. Nor, as the evidence shows in a number of cases, did she dislike children.

Wharton entered one type of world and witnessed the emergence of another after the First World War. Even though England and France won the war, the world Wharton valued was largely lost. It was obliterated by the mass world, a world without taste, a world without an aristocracy of intellect. Finally, the convergence of historical forces that transformed Wharton from an ironic social satirist into a partisan war reporter provides one of the few periods in her life when she was not in control of what happened. The war was not just a shock; it was a catastrophe that threatened one's ability to make a world. For a novelist who made fictional worlds and for a woman who created aesthetic spaces (her houses and their gardens), the loss of control was potentially devastating. The First World War ushered in the true end of the age of innocence.

INTRODUCTION
THE SECOND GREATEST FOURTH

THE MORNING OF THE FOURTH OF JULY, 1918, DAWNED OVERCAST IN PARIS, with a threat of rain that could spoil the elaborate schedule of ceremonies planned for the day.[1] Raymond Poincaré, the president of France, had sent a formal greeting to Woodrow Wilson proclaiming that America's Independence Day would for that year become a day of national celebration in France as well. Later in the morning, in what might have been taken as a metaphor for the Allies' military progress during the previous six months, the sky cleared.

The day's events got under way at nine o'clock with a brief ceremony at Lafayette's tomb in Picpus Cemetery, followed at nine-thirty by the dedication of the new avenue du Président Wilson, formerly the avenue du Trocadéro. The broad, tree-lined street stretched from Place de l'Alma (where the Bâteaux Mouches and other excursion boats dock in today's Paris), turned sharply left and slightly uphill as it paralleled the Seine for six hundred yards, before reaching its destination at the aristocratic Place d'Iéna, all in the elegant sixteenth *arrondissement*, or district.

The equestrian statue of George Washington at the Place d'Iéna had been decorated with so many flowers and potted ferns that the pedestal looked as if it grew out of a flower garden. Washington, sword raised, emerged out of a small mountain of color. The Paris edition of the *New York Herald* commented, "Hortensias predominated and were arranged in that attractive fashion associated with French good taste."[2] Reviewing platforms flanked the statue. The more elaborate one on the

right, covered with red velvet trimmed in gold fringe and cord and backed by a row of Allied flags, was reserved for the official group of Frenchmen, including Poincaré, Premier George Clémenceau, the presidents of the French Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, and the American ambassador, William G. Sharp.

After the closing speech by Monsieur Stéphen Pichon of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and just as the band was striking up the "Chant du Départ," two dust-covered automobiles pulled up in front of the reviewing stand. Out stepped British Prime Minister David Lloyd George and Italian Premier Vittorio Orlando. No one in the crowd knew they were even in France. Their dramatic appearance on the platform served as a further symbol of Allied solidarity, and the crowd applauded enthusiastically.

Following the official speeches, the parade of the Allies began. The American contingent of 3,000 soldiers represented an American force of more than 1 million troops in France. Their commander, General John "Black Jack" Pershing, had sent a message home on behalf of the troops, declaring their resolve was "quickened by sympathy for an invaded people of kindred ideals and the war challenge of an arrogant enemy."[3]

The procession moved off smartly down the newly inaugurated avenue to the Place de l'Alma, where several hundred spectators had been waiting since seven o'clock. Mounted police guarded the entrances to the avenues along the parade route. The crowd lining the route wore American flags and French tricolors in their coats and hats. Wounded French soldiers, some on crutches and others in rolling chairs with their attending nurses, from every hospital in Paris and from as far beyond as Le Raincy, waved small French tricolors and Stars and Stripes as the units passed in review. At the Place de l'Alma the parade turned left onto the avenue Montaigne, which led the half mile from the river up to the Rond-Point des Champs-Elysées. Upon reaching the Rond-Point the parade columns turned right onto the broad avenue Champs-Elysées and marched the final thousand yards to the Place de la Concorde, where there was to be a brief ceremony at the Strasbourg statue.

One of the estimated 50,000 thousand people waiting was Edith Wharton, the distinguished American novelist, who would follow the day's events from eight that morning until well after dark.[4] She had set out early for the large square because she had to decide whether to watch the parade with the crowd at ground level or to look on the wider spectacle from an elevated perch. She explained her choice to her sister-in-law:

> I saw the show from a balcony of the [Hôtel] Crillon, my pictorial instinct having made me decide that I'd rather have the impression of that matchless ensemble than the "human interest" of getting closer to "the boys."
>
> Since one *had* to choose, I don't regret my choice, for no doubt my eyes will never look on a sight at once so aesthetically and so symbolically splendid.[5]

Wharton saved her most vivid description of the parade for Mary Berenson, the wife of her dear friend, art historian Bernard Berenson. Mary was recuperating in England from problems relating to nerves and digestion, and Wharton's patriotic description full of rich imagery was partly meant to infuse the patient with some of her enthusiasm for the color and pageantry of life:

> The crowd was immense, incalculable; the buildings were richly beflagged, and everybody in the streets had a little stars-and-stripes in hand or button-hole. The motors were covered with them, and the old cab-horses caparisoned like Paolo Uccello's cavalry!—The Pl. de la C. was never half as beautiful, or as vast. The crowds made it immeasurable. All the big stone Cities (except poor decorated Strasbourg) had their laps full of American soldiers and French poilus, joyously intertwined; and flags and handkerchiefs and straw-hats and roses butterflied about above the dingy-coated crowds with an immense effect of popular festivity.
>
> And then they came! First, the tallest-ever Drum Major—then the biggest-ever Band, with the hugest wind-instruments all shining newly polished silver; and *then* the magnificent regiments, every man the same size, slim, tall, brick-red and fair haired, swinging along with a perfect rhythmic movement of their athletic bodies that simply amazed the French spectators. There never *was* such marching—it was really Pyrrhic!
>
> After the two beauty regiments, fresh out of their camps, came the infantry and marines from Château Thierry in their trench helmets, like Greek shepherds—and the crowd understood and cheered louder.
>
> But the climax of popular success was reserved for—the Red Cross nurses who closed the procession!! To see "La Femme" illimitably extended before his enterprising eyes was too much for

> the French male, and he roared like a young lion at such succulent prey! It was really funny, if one looked a little bit beneath the obvious sentimental surface.[6]

At noon Wharton's longtime friend and adviser Walter Berry presided over the American Chamber of Commerce's annual Fourth of July banquet held at the Hôtel du Palais d'Orsay. Berry's speech, as president of the chamber, was delivered in impeccable French. When he spoke of the American troops, however, he was momentarily upstaged by the impromptu remark of British Lord Derby: "After all, we've every reason to believe in your army, for you gave us the worst beating we ever had."[7]

The banquet was followed by a special performance of the Comédie Française with the American ambassador in attendance. At five that afternoon, the ambassador hosted a limited reception at the American embassy. (The previous Fourth, when he had opened the embassy to the entire American community in Paris to introduce General Pershing, more than 2,000 thousand people turned up.) The official day wound up at nine with a reception held by French Field Marshal Joseph Joffre. A gigantic entertainment of music and sport to honor America's wounded was held concurrently at the Gaumont Palace.

Some six hours later, New York City was the scene of a "monster parade," with bands and detachments assembling before nine in the morning and not finishing their march until late in the afternoon. "There were large groups representing Alsace-Lorraine, France, England and Italy: there were Poles, Greeks, Hungarians, Czechs and even citizens of German origin but of proven loyalty."[8]

Back in Paris, Wharton was writing up her impressions of the Fourth and reflecting on the fact that June had not been a productive month for her. Her usual hay fever had been compounded by a serious case of anemia that left her with barely enough energy to write. She had been spending a few days at a time recuperating at her friend Madame Béarn's château at Fleury, not far from Paris. There she had completed the first 9,000 thousand words of her short war novel, *The Marne*, reading it in the evenings to her cousin, LeRoy King, to check the accuracy of her military details. On the first day of July, however, she got stuck. After three days of sunshine and quiet in the French château, she experienced the "horribly Stygian sensation" of writer's block. It had happened before, three years earlier, when she had promised her publisher, Charles Scribner, an essay of her impressions of Paris during the opening days of the war. At

that time she had gone to a leased estate in the English countryside and found that she could not write a word. Now she felt the same "hateful sensation of rattling at the locked doors of memory, imagination, creative activity, the life of any kind beyond the mollusk, and perpetually getting the same answer: 'No one there.'"[9] Quoting a French jurist whose book of correspondence she had been reading, she told Berenson, "I search for myself and find no one."[10]

The same day, July 1, 1918, she returned to her apartment on the rue de Varenne on the left bank of the Seine in Paris. She still suffered from the exhaustion that had understandably plagued her from 1915 on. This time she did something about it: "I gave myself a good mental kick, pulled my 'author's pad' toward me, and attacked 'The Marne' again—with the result that I reeled off 2,000 words in no time!"[11]

Such swings between physical and nervous exhaustion and periods of literary productivity marked the four years of the war for Wharton. To capture the rhythms or cycles of this time, which was in many ways the darkest of her life—the death of Henry James, the First World War, the draining of France—and surely the most heroic, we need to begin at the beginning of 1914.

1

A Season of New Beginnings: 1914

EDITH WHARTON STARTED THE YEAR 1914 POISED FOR NEW BEGINNINGS. SHE had recently divorced Teddy Wharton after twenty-eight years of an increasingly painful marriage. Teddy's mood swings between manic highs and depressive lows became more pronounced after 1910. Wharton's attempts to distract her husband with travel became less and less successful after their move to Paris in 1907. She arranged for Teddy to be treated at a sanitarium in Switzerland, but he returned to her Paris doorstep little improved. The final break came after Wharton discovered that her husband had been speculating with money from her trust funds.

In addition, Wharton's secret love affair with Morton Fullerton, begun in 1907 and alternating between brief periods of sexual passion and long periods of unexplained silence from him, was also over. *The Custom of the Country*, the novel she had worked on for more than five years, had finally been published the previous October.

Her next major project would be the much-delayed novel *Literature*. In February, full of ambition, she warned Charles Scribner that the projected novel would run 170,000 words—too long for serial publication in *Scribner's Magazine*. The novel was "to be a full and leisurely chronicle of a young man's life from his childhood to his end," Wharton said: "I want it to be my best and most comprehensive piece of work, and it must move slowly."[1] Two weeks later, having a better sense of the novel's shape, she thought that it should be no longer than the 125,000-word *The Custom of the Country*. At the end of March she told Scribner, "I hope there will be no difficulty about giving you the new novel by January 1916 (how far off it seems!)"[2] But before undertaking new projects, she was ready for a trip.

During April of 1914, accompanied by her secretary, her new maid Elise, and her chauffeur of ten years, Charles Cook, she traveled with Percy Lubbock through Algeria and Tunisia. The trip originally had been planned with French novelist Paul Bourget and his wife, but because Bourget got bogged down trying to finish his latest novel and because Minnie Bourget's health was poor, Wharton substituted Lubbock and Gaillard Lapsley. Even then Lapsley became ill with the flu and was obliged to turn back at Bougie.[3]

The trip was not without incident. At Timgad Wharton awoke during the night to feel a man hovering over her. She screamed and struggled with the intruder, but he escaped before her servants and the hotel staff could apprehend him.[4]

North Africa soon was suggested a literary project to her. Writing Edward Burlingame, one of her editors at Scribners, from the Excelsior Hotel in Rome, Wharton outlined "another story, a good deal longer, & rather different from anything I've done. It is called 'Peter Elsom,' & will be a sort of pendant to 'Ethan Frome'—at least in length! It's a wild embroidery, made out of the adventure of a game Englishman who goes to Tunisia soon after the French occupation to work in some phosphate mines in the interior and disappears."[5] Robert Bridges, editor of *Scribner's Magazine*, replied that the firm looked forward to the new story and accepted it in advance.[6] There was a snag, however. In late June she told Charles Scribner that for the first time she was blocked on a story because she was unable to recapture "the local atmosphere, so I fear I must put it aside till I get back to Africa next winter."[7]

Percy Lubbock believed that the trip restored to Wharton the energies she needed to cope with the demands of the war years: "It was again another Edith who was presently to be seen, active and ardent to new ends; she had taken her draught of rest before the storm, just in time."[8]

Meanwhile, through the winter and spring Wharton had been engaged in lengthy negotiations for a possible move to England. She had consulted her close friend Henry James, now a resident; and the two had visited country houses and discussed locations that might be suitable. James clearly enjoyed his role as real estate adviser, and together they narrowed the choices to three. Negotiations for the purchase of Coopersdale, an estate eighteen miles from London, were still under way in March when Wharton left for the south of France, en route to North Africa. She told Bernard Berenson that her plan to join him at his estate,

I Tatti near Florence, in mid-May was pretty well set: "The only thing that might alter this as far as I can see—is the possible acquisition of Coopersdale, with which I am still coquetting."[9] Her bid was unsuccessful, and soon she also rejected the possibility of leasing the more remote Sutton Courtney in Oxfordshire. Giving up plans to purchase property, she arranged to rent Stocks, the country estate of English novelist Mrs. Humphry Ward, for several weeks during the summer. It had been Wharton's "life-long dream" to spend a summer in England, and she set about coaxing friends such as Berenson and James to come and stay with her, promising long motor trips "to Scotland, to Wales, to all the places I had longed to see for so many years." Looking back, she added, "How happy and safe the future seemed."[10]

The Wards had for some time supplemented their family income by leasing their London townhouse on Grosvenor Place for part of the winter and renting Stocks, thirty-two miles northwest of London, for part of each summer. James, recalling a trip that Wharton and he had made together to Stocks in July of 1909, assured her that she had made the right choice: "You have seen it & known it for the passing hour—I memorably with you!—but the further impression coming from a few week-ends &c there in the past have determined my good opinion of its likelihood to 'do' for you for three months very sufficiently & amply indeed. It was much modernized & bathroomed some few years back—not, doubtless, on the American scale; but very workably & conveniently. And it's civilized & big-treed & gardened & library'd & pictured & garaged in a very sympathetic way—& in the midst of a country of the most pleasing radiations."[11]

In ordinary times Stocks would have been exactly the sort of restful country setting Wharton would have enjoyed. As James noted, the Wards had had their 120-year-old manor house completely renovated in 1907. The costs of those improvements (the house was found to need significant structural work) and the gambling debts incurred by the Wards' son Arnold meant that Mrs. Ward had to depend on her pen and her success in renting her homes to keep the family afloat. Situated on more than a thousand acres, Stocks was near the still larger Rothschild estate in Tring Park. Mrs. Ward occasionally took advantage of the special trains the Rothschilds ran between London's Euston and Tring stations.[12] Wharton, on the other hand, insisted that she would need her motorcar, a 50-horsepower Mercedes purchased three years earlier, in such an isolated spot.

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Wharton's earliest intimation of the First World War came with innocent incongruity on a sunny June afternoon in 1914 at a garden party given by the painter Jacques-Émile Blanche. There, in the Paris suburb of Auteuil, amid festive tea tables and flowers in full bloom, a cloud momentarily passed over the gathering. The assassination of the heir to the Austrian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, by a Serbian nationalist on June 28, 1914, was not, however, seen at first as a threat to European peace. Talk of the assassination mingled with reviews of the latest plays or the most recent exhibitions:

> I joined a party at one of the tables, and as we sat there a cloud-shadow swept over us, abruptly darkening bright flowers and bright dresses. "Haven't you heard? The Archduke Ferdinand assassinated . . . at Serajevo . . . where *is* Serajevo? His wife was with him. What was her name? Both shot dead."
>
> A momentary shiver ran through the company. But to most of us the Archduke Ferdinand was no more than a name; only one or two elderly diplomatists shook their heads and murmured of Austrian reprisals. What if Germany should seize the opportunity—? There would be more particulars in the next morning's papers. The talk wandered away to the interests of the hour . . . the last play, the newest exhibition, the Louvre's most recent acquisitions.[13]

Wharton had been invited to Blanche's home because she was well connected with the conservative French artistic scene, and later she could quote the murmured responses of the elderly diplomats present precisely because they were part of that circle.

While the conversation among other American expatriates at that time may have touched on art and drama, it was sure to include some comment on the recently announced imposition of a French income tax of 2 percent.[14] Americans living in Paris also turned out at a gathering on July 6 to say good-bye to the extremely popular ambassador, Myron Herrick, who, following Woodrow Wilson's election, was being replaced by William Sharp.[15]

With her plans for a summer in England firm, Wharton dispatched Alfred White, her English butler of more than twenty-five years, and her housemaids across the Channel to prepare for her arrival. In the meantime

Wharton, restless again, collected Walter Berry and set off in early July for a trip through Spain.

Berry and Wharton had been friends for many years, with Berry frequently serving as a valued adviser on her literary projects.[16] From his earliest job as counsel to the Italian and French governments in Washington, D.C., he was connected with international law and diplomacy, and these connections stood him in good stead during the war.[17] Berry and Wharton's intimacy apparently never extended to physical love, and in her letters to friends she occasionally commented in annoyance about Berry's dalliances with much younger and less intellectually inclined women. During the war years, however, they kept in close contact—how close is indicated by a casual remark in 1916; Berry, she wrote, "usually calls me up in the morning, but he didn't today."[18]

Because the trip to Spain had been hastily planned, the usually thorough Wharton had forgotten to book passage on the small boat that made the nightly crossing to Majorca. The travelers arrived in sultry Barcelona to discover that there was no space on the ferry for the next three weeks, so they quickly headed for the cooler, fresher Spanish Pyrenees.[19] (The following year Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas would make the same journey, but they would be successful in crossing to Majorca—so successful, in fact, that they spent the next year, from May 1915 to June 1916, in a rented villa on the island.)[20]

Wharton wrote to Bernard Berenson from Burgos that the three-week trip "has been wonderful & beautiful, & Spain in July is the most delicious place imaginable." She complained, though, of Berry's forced-march regime. He insisted on starting in the car each morning at nine and sometimes not stopping until seven in the evening. When he and she viewed a motion picture travelogue in Bilbao loosely titled "What One Sees When Visiting a Town at a Gallop," she commented that upon leaving the theater, he had reminded her, apparently without irony, that they would have to begin the next morning at nine sharp.

At Altamira they visited the caves with their prehistoric drawings of "the big earth-shaking beasts, roaring & butting & galloping over the low-rock-roof." Standing up abruptly, the tall, thin Berry bumped his white linen hat against the ancient drawing, carrying off a souvenir of red marks.[21]

On July 26 the couple crossed into France and took a leisurely four days to reach Paris. For Americans in Europe there were few signs that this summer's events would be different from those of previous summers.

On the same day that Wharton and Berry crossed the border, for example, the European edition of the *New York Herald* reported Austria's ultimatum across the page from a story on the romantic effects produced by the Chinese lanterns hastily pressed into service at Mrs. Belmont's summer ball when the electric power plant at Newport, Rhode Island, failed.[22] At Poitiers on the evening of July 30, Wharton lay in her hotel bed listening to the crowds outside singing the *Marseillaise*. The next morning she and Berry said to each other, "What nonsense! It can't be war."[23] They stopped beside the road from Poitiers to Chartres for lunch under an apple tree in a field in the noonday quiet. The weather remained cloudy until four o'clock when they reached Chartres and found the cathedral suffused with sunlight. When they reached Paris at sunset, Wharton read the city imagistically—"like a princess guarded."[24]

The next day the capital was buzzing with rumors, but the only army of invaders that she saw was the usual flood of summer tourists. She planned to spend the night of July 31 at the Hôtel Crillon, as she had already closed her apartment at 53 rue de Varenne, and leave the next day for England. On the morning of August 1 she went to her dressmaker's, where the fitters were tired and looking forward to their month-long holiday. When the announcement of the mobilization came that afternoon, it was "like a monstrous landslide." Later, having dinner at a restaurant in the rue Royale, she watched tourists who by now looked like "puzzled inarticulate waifs caught in the cross-tides racing to a maelstrom."[25] This trope of the war described in pictures drawn from natural disasters indicates that Wharton had no other field of imagery to draw on to project the magnitude of the disaster.

The mood of those literary figures in France who had been getting more regular news of international events that last week of July was somber. The same day that Wharton and Berry were motoring from Poitiers to Paris, thinking only of what they had seen in Spain, André Gide was visiting his and Wharton's friend Jacques-Émile Blanche at the artist's summer home in the small Norman village of Offranville near Dieppe. When the fire alarm rang, everyone in the village, reflecting on Austria's ultimatum to Serbia published in the previous morning's papers, thought surely that it was a call to arms. "This morning the refusal of the delay requested by Russia increases the general nervousness," Gide wrote in his journal. "This is the only subject of conversation and J. E. Blanche has given way to the blackest misgivings." Gide's entry for the last day of July 1914 was prophetic: "We are getting ready to enter a long tunnel full of blood and darkness."[26]

When the mobilization notices went up on the afternoon of August 1, 1914, Wharton watched as Paris became a silent and disciplined city. She stayed only two nights at the Hôtel Crillon, just long enough for her housekeeper Catherine Gross and her personal maid Elise to take the muslin wraps off the furniture and to re-stock the kitchen at 53 rue de Varenne. By now her butler and housemaid had already been in England for three weeks, making necessary arrangements for her arrival. But civilian trains and boats between Paris and England were temporarily suspended, and bank accounts, even for Americans, after the mobilization were effectively frozen. With little money to pay further hotel bills at the Crillon, Wharton "moved back to my shrouded quarters in the rue de Varenne, and camped there until I could get a permit to go to England."[27]

She did not lack for company. Her favorite sister-in-law and one of her closest friends, Mary Cadwalader Jones, was also stuck in Paris. Mary Cadwalader Rawle of Philadelphia had married Wharton's brother Frederic in 1870, when Edith Jones was eight years old. The mature Edith Wharton became very attached to Minnie, as she called her sister-in-law, and to Minnie's daughter, Beatrix, born in 1872. When Frederic ran off with another woman and divorce was imminent, Wharton took her sister-in-law's side. As R.W.B. Lewis, Wharton's first biographer, notes, "In the course of time they became closer than blood sisters."[28] During the war Minnie became Wharton's able and efficient lieutenant in the United States, just as Elisina Tyler would become Wharton's right hand in France, overseeing the daily operations of the far-flung charities.

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For the moment no civilian was going anywhere. As Wharton noted, on August 2, "no trains stirred except to carry soldiers." The stranded American tourists in the luxury hotels of Paris had to contend with the "resounding emptiness of porterless halls, waiterless restaurants, motionless lifts." From the terrace of the Hôtel Crillon on the day after the general mobilization she felt "a first faint stir of returning life."[29]

Overnight Walter Berry had become a banker for stranded Americans, and he was able to help Wharton with some of her immediate expenses.[30] When Wharton referred in her letters to Berry playing banker to stranded American beauties, her satirical characterization was based on harsh economic truth. As early as July 30, nervous French bankers were refusing to change banknotes. Their frugal depositors, alarmed by the news, were already hoarding gold and silver, and making change was

impossible.[31] The English journalist Pearl Adam witnessed the sudden disappearance of French currency: "Public confidence in the bank-note had never been a feature of the French character, and at the first breath of international disturbance (in those days people thought only of the possibility of war between Serbia and Austro-Hungary) every vestige of gold coinage fled into the obscurity of the *bas de laine* [the savings stocking] and was very shortly afterwards followed by the cart-wheel of the five-franc piece."[32] Edward Fowles, manager of the Paris office of the international art dealers the Duveen Brothers, noticed that "both the *louis d'or* (a 20-franc gold coin worth about $4 at this time) and the silver *écu* (5 francs) had quickly disappeared from circulation."[33] Nothing was available in the French capital unless one had the exact amount of one's purchase. Restaurants and cafés were accepting IOUs written on customers' calling cards. Bankers became suspicious of their customers as depositors waited in long lines to draw out their savings. Journalist Pearl Adam made an emergency trip to London "to bring back the hard bright golden sovereigns without which we could do nothing."[34]

Thomas Cook, the travel agency, was charging a 25 percent commission to cash its own checks, and tourists who had managed to reach England found that they could change their French currency only at a loss of 25 percent.[35] It was not only French money that disappeared from circulation. Wharton cabled her friend Frederick Whitridge at his home in Hertfordshire, asking him to give some money to her servants at Stocks. He wired back that he had no money either. Her first cabled request to her bank in New York for funds was greeted with the reply "Impossible." After repeated attempts she did manage to get $500, but only by paying another $500 for the transmission fee.

Her most immediate thought was to take the money and deliver it personally to the English merchants who had extended credit to her servants for a month. Her experience with suspicious French tradespeople led her to believe that soon her servants would be unable to get food or basic supplies. When she arrived in England, however, she was astonished to find that the local tradespeople had given her staff unlimited credit and probably would have gone on doing so until the end of the summer. Everyone expected a short war, and friends advised her that if she got to England to stay there until the end of the conflict, expected in October.[36]

Other Americans who were stuck in Paris and London during the first week of August found that, money or no money, there was simply no space available on ships that were heading west. Charles Inman Barnard,

the Paris correspondent for the *New York Tribune* who had agreed weeks earlier to delay his retirement because "a quiet summer was expected," observed in his diary, "There are about three thousand who want to get home, but who are unable to obtain money on their letters of credit; if they have money, they are unable to find trains, or passenger space on the westward bound liners."[37]

Many Americans had a difficult time accepting the French bureaucracy and its security measures. Some demanded that officials accept their American identification papers without their having also to secure a *permis de séjour* issued by the local authorities. Estimates of Americans marooned in Europe ran as high as 40,000, with 7,500 in Paris and 1,500 of those without any financial means. The rector of the American Church in the avenue de l'Alma offered his sanctuary as a sleeping barracks to his homeless countrymen.

By the second week of the war the American embassy in Paris was able to advance small sums, averaging less than $17 apiece, to American tourists in need.[38] With powerful friends like Walter Berry, Wharton was fortunate enough to be spared days of what Pearl Adam described as "wild wrangles with passport-seeking crowds . . . , [and] in searching for provisions in all sorts of unlikely quarters of Paris, and in bathing our ankles, horribly swollen by too much exercise."[39]

Responding as quickly as it could, the United States government dispatched two armed cruisers to give financial relief to its citizens abroad. The *Tennessee*, carrying a cargo of gold, reached England on August 19. The next day the *North Carolina* arrived at Cherbourg with $200,000 in gold to aid needy Americans in France.

From a fully mobilized city, Edith Wharton cabled Scribner on August 4: "Detained in Paris . . . Extraordinary sights . . . Do you want impressions?" He did indeed want her impressions and immediately promised her space for 8,000 words in the October number of *Scribner's Magazine*. Unfortunately, his cabled reply, sent to her through her Paris bankers, never reached her.[40] When Barnard ran into her a week later, he noted that she "had made some valuable mental and written notes of what she has seen in Paris," but as of that date, Thursday, August 13, she was still planning to leave for England as soon as traveling was feasible. Barnard wrote in his diary: "Paris is no longer *la ville lumière*—it is a sad and gloomy city, where men and women go around with solemn, anxious faces, and every conversation seems to begin and end with the dreadful word 'War.'"[41]