

# Edith Wharton

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Traveller in the Land of Letters

Janet Goodwyn

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MACMILLAN

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For my parents, with love

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Janet Goodwyn

## Introduction

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Edith Wharton's first novel, *The Valley of Decision*, was published in 1902, a month after her fortieth birthday. For the child who used to cover the brown wrapping paper from her mother's Paris dresses with closely written stories and pace about her bedroom, upside-down text in hand, declaiming her own fictions to the walls, this belated publication marked a definitive change of life. Wharton had been in print before 1902: a small volume of poetry, two collections of short stories, a treatise on interior design co-written with the architect, Ogden Codman, and a novella. All these preceded *The Valley of Decision*, but it was the novel which truly marked her entry into the world of the professional writer.

This 'romantic chronicle'<sup>1</sup> as Wharton called her first novel, was an experiment which she never repeated; never again did she venture so far into the past nor so deep into another country without an American cast of characters. However, the processes of composition of the book, the background reading and organisation of historical material, proved to be an invaluable exercise for the aspiring novelist, especially when looked at in conjunction with the writing of her two Italian travel books, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, published in 1904, and *Italian Backgrounds*, 1905. Her successful apprenticeship in the short story combined with her skills as observer and recorder in the guidebooks provided an inspirational beginning for an artist whose work would always be distinguished by its innovative use of specific landscapes and its topographical coherence.

Wharton thought of her fiction as possessing a particular geography and from the time of publication of *The Valley of Decision* onwards she was to regard the plying of the written word as much more than her profession; in fact, her art became her place of residence; as she says in her published autobiography, *A Backward Glance*:

I felt like some homeless waif who, after trying for years to take out naturalization papers, and being rejected by every country, has finally acquired a nationality. The Land of Letters was henceforth to be my country and I gloried in my new citizenship.<sup>2</sup>



The extended metaphor taken by Wharton to describe her confirmation as a writer is of central importance to the subject matter and form of the whole body of her fiction as well as to her own sense of belonging in 'The Land of Letters'. Throughout her writing life she was concerned with ideas of place: the American's place in the Western world, the woman's place in her own and in European society, the author's place in the larger life of a culture. She experimented with settings, with time, with genres, seeking to illuminate the lives of her characters and, in the travel books, enlighten her readers, with geographical and cultural differences. From *The Valley of Decision* to *The Buccaneers*, her last, unfinished novel, the various and many landscapes of Wharton's fiction whether actual or, as above, metaphorical, give structure and point to the text.

In this study of Edith Wharton's work I propose to shape my discussion by use of her specific landscapes. Not only did she set her novels in a variety of countries, she made the cultural imperatives of those lands reference points in her fictions. The landscapes are separate but they are also complementary. Wharton's sense of the unity of culture between America and Europe, the way in which one landscape can suggest another, illuminate another, enhance appreciation of another, is constantly a theme in both her fiction and travel writing.

Wharton herself was a perpetual tourist; no sooner did she return from one trip than she was planning the next. She owned one of the first automobiles and was convinced, as she declares at the opening of *A Motor-Flight Through France*, that 'The motor-car has restored the romance of travel'.<sup>3</sup> She used both her literary earnings and her inherited income to finance her tours, her peripatetic childhood having equipped her with a facility, and later a fluency, in all the major European languages. Travel both fed her imagination and restored her to a sense of self-possession; her experiences as a tourist fuelled her life as a writer.

I found a clue to the enlightening possibilities of a topographical approach to critical discussion of Wharton's work in her travel writings, the guides to foreign cultures which she offered to her American audience. The two Italian books – *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* and *Italian Backgrounds* – illuminate the novel, *The Valley of Decision*, just as the French books – *A Motor-Flight Through France* (1908), *Fighting France from Dunquerque to Belfort* (1915) and *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919) – extend and vivify the novels which

are set partly or wholly in France. In times of peace and of war Wharton made the landscape and society of France act as counterpoint to a largely American cast of characters.

The group of novels and travelogues which are distinguished by their concern with French civilisation, in its broadest sense, mark a time of transition in Wharton's work which actually mirrors the larger whole-cultural upheavals of the period. From the novella, *Madame de Treymes*, published in 1907, to *A Son at the Front*, finally published in 1923, the focus of Wharton's writing moves from a Europe of romance, viewed by the privileged aesthete-tourist and communicated to an audience with little or no firsthand experience of foreign travel, to a Europe made familiar to the United States by war and already, as Gertrude Stein would have it,<sup>4</sup> left behind by America's declaration of the new cultural boundaries of the twentieth century. The European subject treated as the prehistory of her own country in *The Valley of Decision* is transmuted in Wharton's writing by gradations. The gentle transatlanticism of the Americans in *Madame de Treymes* and her 1912 novel, *The Reef*, gives way to the acultural plundering of the European continent by such as Undine Spragg, the central character of *The Custom of the Country*, (1913).

Not only is a topographical grouping of Wharton's work critically enlightening in consideration of those books set in France and Italy but it is most revelatory in examination of the rôle of her native, American landscape. In the novel sequence which I take to be concerned with her own country, Wharton experiments with and comments upon modes of American narrative through both structure and theme. To read the novels *The House of Mirth* (1904), *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), *Ethan Frome* (1911), *Summer* (1917), *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922), *The Mother's Recompense* (1925), *Twilight Sleep* (1927), and *The Children* (1928) as a distinct American group provides a native context in which to place her work. The specific cultural portraiture which distinguishes her French and Italian writing takes on a different character in the books and articles which focus on the American scene. A changing New York is Wharton's primary subject; in her fiction she signals the end of a topographical certainty which had endured for three hundred years. As she says in *A Backward Glance*:

Not until the successive upheavals which culminated in the catastrophe of 1914 had 'cut all likeness from the name' of my

old New York, did I begin to see its pathetic picturesqueness. The first change came in the 'eighties, with the earliest detachment of big money-makers from the West, soon to be followed by the lords of Pittsburgh. But their infiltration did not greatly affect old manners and customs, since the dearest ambition of the newcomers was to assimilate existing traditions. Social life, with us as in the rest of the world, went on with hardly perceptible changes till the war abruptly tore down the old frame-work, and what had seemed unalterable rules of conduct became of a sudden observances as quaintly arbitrary as the domestic rites of the Pharaohs. Between the point of view of my Huguenot great-great-grandfather, who came from the French Palatinate to participate in the founding of New Rochelle, and my own father, who died in 1882, there were fewer differences than between my father and the post-war generation of Americans.<sup>5</sup>

She reacts, in her novels, to the removal of the inherited securities and values of her nineteenth-century upbringing; she makes a vital connection between the cultural situation of early American writers – who had to invent their own fictional landscapes – and the coming generation – who would be forced to deal with the dislocation of twentieth- from nineteenth-century America.

A crucial convergence of influence and circumstance make Edith Wharton the key articulator of turn-of-the-century America: not only did her upbringing amongst the first New York families provide her with the sharpest personal insight into the transactions between old and new cultural conditions, but, as a woman, she was at the heart of current artistic concern. The writers of the age, from Henry Adams to Sinclair Lewis, are not only concerned with the prerogatives of American commercial and political life, but with the conditions created by the absence of the male from the other part of the culture and the fact that the women of America are the creators and arbiters of the social scene (Wharton's writing proves to be an invaluable bridge between American fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, between Henry James and F. Scott Fitzgerald, shedding light on the past whilst also showing the way forward.) I have been able, in recognising the homology of the novels which have at their heart the changing, constantly disintegrating and restructuring American scene, to make a radical re-reading of the novels of the 1920s – novels substantially ignored

by critics in the past – and also a reassessment of their relationship to Wharton's other, better-known works.

Wharton's confidence in the cultural significance of topography, as expressed through the various landscapes of her fiction, does take a slightly different form in her autobiographical work. From 1912 onwards she was experimenting with several modes of self-presentation, both direct and indirect; the texts concerned with her residence in 'The Land of Letters' display differing degrees of autobiographical involvement and are in various stages of composition, some completed, some not. She began an autobiography, 'Life and I', probably around 1912, which remained incomplete, and published a formal autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, in 1934. This official autobiography – official because made public by Wharton as the authorised version of her life – has always been considered something of a disappointment because of its reticence and its reluctance to contend with the complexities of structure and expression attendant upon the retrospective view. A broader picture of her life and the influences which shaped her can be gained, however, if we read the various autobiographies and those experiences which she translated into the fictional life of a character called Richard Thaxter in the unfinished novel, 'Literature', in the manner of a palimpsest. The formal autobiography is the top layer of the portrait and the other writings lie underneath it in various forms which can then be read in their intertextual relation. *A Backward Glance* was the last full-length work published in Wharton's lifetime and as such it sets a seal on her previous writings. The seal can nevertheless be broken – and indeed Wharton must have intended that it should when she left her unfinished work to be read by a later generation – by reading backwards through the self-portraits. The autobiographical process is further illuminated, though not in so direct a self-referencing manner, in the novels, *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*. Here the fictional landscape is treated in terms of its specific effect on the writer, Vance Weston, of Euphoria, Illinois. Unlike Richard Thaxter, who shares the same kind of upbringing as Wharton, Vance is distanced from her own background, but from this point of difference she then proceeds to expose him to a number of the same influences which she felt crucial to her own development in order to explore, yet again, the making of the artist.

In many ways Wharton's building-up of creative confidence through a definition of landscape comes to fruition in her historical

novel writing, the mode to which she returned in 1920 with *The Age of Innocence*. She could bring all her topographical expertise to bear upon the New York of her childhood; the landscape of memory conjoining the well charted landscape of the novel to produce *The Age of Innocence*, *Old New York*, (1924) and *The Buccaneers*, (1938). Where travel and research had illuminated the background for her only other historical novel, *The Valley of Decision*, the topography of these stories is her own and is therefore directly recollectable. Here Wharton assumes the past in full consciousness of her power to recreate and, crucially, to explore, the conditions of her youth; she writes in a freely discursive mode, a mode which is distinct from the inevitably more self-protective and conservative approach of her final autobiographical reclamations of the past in *A Backward Glance*.

With the exception of *A Son at the Front* (1923), the last novel in which she was directly concerned with the first world war, all her work, from *The Age of Innocence* onwards, is taken up with the difficulties of placing the American, of marking out a specifically American topography. Faced with what George Frenside, a character from her novel, *Hudson River Bracketed*, calls the 'after-war welter, with its new recipe for immortality every morning',<sup>6</sup> Wharton turned to the nineteenth century which, in 1920, seemed to her almost as another country. The historical background of the post-war world was now as much American as European and it became possible for Wharton to write, amongst other things, a true historical novel set in her own land. As the two continents of Europe and North America entered the new century together, Wharton could express the vanished New York of the 1870s in *The Age of Innocence* in the language of social anthropology – now applicable to the American for the first time – as the last traces of the world she depicts have receded from view.

In the forty years during which Wharton was publishing her work the relationship between Europe and the United States went through a sea-change. Not only was the Atlantic diminished as a barrier for voyagers but the balance of power moved from one side of the ocean to the other. The entry of America into the war was also the entry of the American into all corners of Europe and Edith Wharton's fiction, in its breadth and its concerns, paints a picture of the reversal of the relationship of authority and influence. Her landscapes reflect the locus of power, whether east, west or mid-Atlantic, and her characters the personal and cultural effects

of a shifting centre. She began, in *The Valley of Decision*, with the period leading up to the invasion of Italy by Napoleon. A civilisation was about to give way to an invader and she details the social conditions which made such an upheaval possible, an exercise that was to occupy her for the rest of her creative life.



## 1

## The Valley of Decision

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Wharton's choice of subject for her first full-length fiction – the Italian eighteenth century – enabled her to establish, for herself, a writer's sense of the importance of place, both historical and geographical, and also a sense of her own relation to other artists, other cultures. Writing about a period of great social change at a distance from her own personal experience in *The Valley of Decision*, she was actually empowered to formulate a coherent idea of her own situation as an artist, and particularly as a woman artist, in turn-of-the-century America.

To begin in a genre, a period, a country, a style which were all foreign to her actually eased the personal and artistic uncertainties attendant upon the transition between short story and novel writing for Wharton. The programme of reading and research which she undertook before beginning the novel, a process of preparation unique in her work, is revealing of her wish to put up a barrier of scholarship between herself and her audience. It was too early to expose herself as a creator personally involved in the lives of her subjects; that would come in her next novel, *The House of Mirth*, (1905), which was set in contemporary America amidst her own people. In writing of Odo Valsecca, heir to the Duchy of Pianura, and his mistress, the intellectual Fulvia Vivaldi, whose stories unfold hundreds of miles and years away from her, she drew on the writings of others and the experience of her own travels to set her scene, describing a country the geography of which was unknown to the majority of her readers.

The choice of subject she made is also revealing of something which is both fundamental and enduring in Wharton's work: the desire to act as a cross-cultural mediator. In this instance, she was purveying the Italian eighteenth century, which she perceived as having been neglected by scholars who were interested only in the art and architecture of France in this period, to a North American audience largely unfamiliar with either the history or the actual landscape of that country. Wharton's career opened and closed

with an historical novel and the Italian past represented for her, at the outset, the wider cultural setting and background of her work. She needed to place herself as an American within the context of a shared history of Europe in order to realise her potential and power as an artist. The neglect of the Italian eighteenth century by scholars did not mean that there had been a lack of interest in the country by her compatriots: there was, in fact, a strong American precedent for Wharton to follow. Writing about Italy was a part of the process of grafting herself onto what she saw as a literary ancestral tree, 'the great genealogical tree of the arts' as she calls it in an unfinished essay 'Italy Again'.<sup>1</sup> No artistic tradition existed in her own family where writers were considered to be beyond the social pale: 'In the eyes of our provincial society authorship was still regarded as something between a black art and a form of manual labour'.<sup>2</sup>

Wharton was, however, fortunate in the scholarly friends and acquaintances to whom her social position allowed her access and in the breadth of her own background reading in the Italian subject, rare texts being made available to her by such as the Harvard professor, Charles Eliot Norton, whose own book, *Notes of Travel and Study in Italy*, had been published in 1859. Whether as tourists, historians or romancers, her compatriots had lingered over nineteenth-century Italy and had communicated their various impressions of the culture to an American audience. Her 'precursors',<sup>3</sup> to borrow Henry James's term for those who antedated his own venture into the Italian scene, provided Wharton with a starting-point from which to develop her own ideas on the presentation of her subject. American writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Marble Faun*, (1860), Henry Blake Fuller in *The Chevalier of Pensieri-Vani*, (1890), and William Dean Howells in *A Foregone Conclusion*, (1892), had combined, in distinct ways and with varying degrees of success, fiction with the guidebook. Wharton wrote in both genres, her first travel book, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, which arose from a commission from the *Century* magazine, was published in 1904, and her second, *Italian Backgrounds*, in 1905. But the two modes of presenting Italy, the factual and the fictional, are constantly and fruitfully in dialogue in her work; techniques and ideas interchange between the two and her writing is organised so as to put the cultural and historical differences which she sought to communicate to her primarily North American audience in the foreground of her picture.

It was not only from her American literary predecessors, however, that Wharton was able to gain inspiration for her Italian story: Madame de Staël's *Corinne, or Italy*, (1883), George Eliot's *Romola*, (1863), and Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley*, (1814), all these exercised Wharton's imagination and stimulated creative thinking on the particular problems of structuring an historical narrative. She was extensively and constructively influenced by all three authors. In *Corinne* and in *Romola* she found a precedent for the creation of a strong, intellectual woman of a type which could only be found in civilisations which – unlike the Anglo-Saxon – did not inhibit the woman's free social development, such as the Italy of de Staël or the France of Wharton's novels and guidebooks; and in Scott she found the example of a hero who occupies the middle ground, acting as a barometer for the currents of the age, reflecting them but never able himself to effect real change.

The central protagonist in *The Valley of Decision*, Odo Valsecca, in the line of succession of, and then incumbent of, the Dukedom of Pianura, a northern Italian state, is our guide through eighteenth-century Italy. As he is educated in the ways and means of his compatriots, so is his audience; he travels throughout the country, takes part in archaeological investigations, fraternises with poets and philosophers, poor farmers, powerful Dukes and Princes, strolling-players and priests. Through his eyes we see the complex problems of a post-feudal society still organised on feudal lines but we also see the terrible incapacity of Odo or any of his contemporaries to integrate the forces of change into the existing or any kind of new social order. Under the influence of his mistress, Fulvia Vivaldi, described by the radical poet, Alfieri, in the novel as 'one of your prodigies of female learning, such as our topsy-turvy land produces',<sup>4</sup> Odo seeks to implement certain ill-fated reforms, and in particular the restriction of the influence of the church upon the state. It is this latter ambition which directly causes the failure of the new constitution, as the church is able to inspire enough public feeling against the reforms to provoke a rebellion. Fulvia is shot dead by a protester and Odo, overcome by this loss and by the general reaction to his work, is ultimately forced, by the liberal faction which first inspired him, to surrender to the invading forces of Napoleon.

The story as outlined here is always, however, secondary to Wharton's wider ambitions in the novel as her intention was primarily to draw a picture of an age, a landscape humanised by

centuries of civilisation – from the achievements of the Ancient Romans to those of the eighteenth century – and now in the midst of a period of great social change. Wharton felt entirely comfortable with this combination of fiction and pedagogy and had found a precedent for such writing in Madame de Staël's work in the Italian subject. As Ellen Moers says in her book, *Literary Women*, 'The oddest thing about *Corinne* is that it is a guidebook to Italy just as much as it is a guidebook to the woman of genius. Madame de Staël called the novel *Corinne, or Italy* to signify its double usefulness'.<sup>5</sup> Wharton's novel, in common with de Staël's, has a dual didactic intent, as a guide for the tourist to the Italian landscape, and additionally, as a guide to the possibilities contained within it for the woman.

In many respects Wharton, and before her George Eliot, wrote as an academic tourist in the Italian subject. Both women, late and uncertain starters in their careers as novelists, worked hard amongst documents of the period – although Wharton strenuously denied having undertaken such preparations in her later autobiographical writing – and the novels are ultimately testaments to their reading rather than their writing skills. Gordon Haight, in his *George Eliot: A Biography*, describes Eliot's work in the Magliabecchian library: 'Here Marion copied into her notebook information about the Florence of Savonarola's day – costume, language, etymologies of names, descriptions of fairs and ceremonies, jesters, barbers, matchmakers, street-lighting, bonfires, games, the making and marketing of woollen cloth'.<sup>6</sup> Wharton's 'Writer's Notebook' for *The Valley of Decision* contains lists of phrases, cosmetics, clothing and details of secular and social practices in the Italy of the time most of which find their way directly into the text.

The characterisation of *Romola* herself within Eliot's novel, and of Fulvia Vivaldi in Wharton's story – their motherlessness, their positions as intellectual handmaidens to their respective fathers, their strength of mind in combination with an active compassion – these are all either imitative of or developments of de Staël's portrait of *Corinne*. The emphasis which is placed on *Corinne*'s skill as an improviser, a performing artist, is converted in Fulvia Vivaldi to her skill, under-used though it may be, in political oratory. More straightforwardly renewed, however, is the failure of romantic love to match up to the expectations of the exceptional woman; as *Corinne* loses the man she loves because of her commitment to the opportunities offered to her by the Italian scene, her desire to live a

personal life which is in concert, not conflict, with the wider demands and expectations of society, so Fulvia: 'had chosen to be regarded as a symbol rather than a woman, and there were moments when she felt as isolated from life as some marble allegory in its niche above the market-place'.<sup>7</sup> Even in Italy there is a high price to be paid for the difference between these 'prodigies of female learning' and other women of the time, but the nature of the choices they are forced to make shows how exact – much more so than in the case of the man – a reflection of cultural conditions are the lives of women. The topographical, here and throughout Wharton's work in all her various landscapes, is an enlightening measure of the female situation.

The doubts and misgivings which assailed Wharton, and before her George Eliot, in the composition of the historical novel, doubts evidenced by their extensive researches in the subject if nothing else, are equally the reason for their choice of subject matter and symptomatic of it. Elaine Showalter, in her book, *A Literature of Their Own*, singles out *Romola*, and Eliot's excessive preparations for its writing, as an illustration of general shamefastness or anxiety in women concerning their lack of education or simple ability to write: 'The danger of such strenuous self-cultivation lay in over-doing scholarship and becoming pedantic. George Eliot recognized this danger, as the figure of Casaubon [in *Middlemarch*] shows, but she could not help overcompensating in a book like *Romola*; in fact *Romola*'s dedication to the preservation of her father's library is a paradigm of the feminine novelist's veneration of male culture. Other women novelists, too, felt compelled to bury themselves in research as a defense against accusations of ignorance'.<sup>8</sup> The act of research then is a strategy of self-protection; better to make a display of pedantry than to expose one's efforts to charges of ignorance and ridicule. Wharton always denied that her researches for the *The Valley of Decision* were anything more than 'the gradual absorption into my pores of a myriad details – details of landscape, architecture, old furniture and eighteenth-century portraits, the gossip of contemporary diarists and travellers, all vivified by repeated spring wanderings',<sup>9</sup> but in other contexts she never ceased to bemoan her lack of formal education. She blamed her parents for denying her the discipline of systematic study: 'Being deprived of the irreplaceable grounding of Greek and Latin, I never learned to concentrate except on subjects naturally interesting to me, and developed a restless curiosity which prevented my

fixing my thoughts for long even on these'.<sup>10</sup> Despite such expressions of deprivation, however, Wharton is vehement in dissociating herself from techniques like those used by George Eliot in the historical novel, techniques which she viewed as too formal and academic; for instance, in the notes towards a piece – never completed – called 'Fiction and Criticism':

But the writer who deals with the past – who asks his reader to go with him to that land of mystery beyond the Chinese wall of the French revolution – has a more difficult feat to accomplish. For our conception of the men and women who lived three or four hundred years ago is made up not from personal experience, but from literature and art – from the books they wrote, the pictures they painted and the houses they lived in. From the books we obtain, with more or less effort of mental adjustment, a notion of what they thought and how they expressed their ideas; but much more immediate and vivid is the notion formed of them from their appearance and environment. And it is for this reason that the visualizing gift is of the first importance to the historical novelist. George Eliot did not possess it. Her letters from Italy show her curious insensibility to qualities of atmosphere, to values of form and colour. And for this reason her Florence, for all its carefully studied detail, remains a paste-board performance, like one of those reconstructions of medieval streets which are a popular feature of modern Exhibitions. Mr. Leslie Stephen, in his recent book on George Eliot, humorously complains that a certain article of dress called a *scarsella* gets on his nerves when he reads *Romola*. It is in fact a trick of the non-visualising novelist to attempt such archaeological details of dress and language to produce the effect which is not produced.<sup>11</sup>

The charges which Wharton makes against Eliot in this critique are, ironically, those which she consistently addressed in her own apologies for the writing of *The Valley of Decision*. She assumes a potentially hostile critic – 'I did not travel and look and read with the writing of the book in mind; but my years of intimacy with the Italian eighteenth century gradually and imperceptibly fashioned the tale and compelled me to write it'<sup>12</sup> – rebutting accusations of a too scholarly approach before they are made. There are, nevertheless, several points of similarity between *Romola* and *The Valley of*

*Decision*, the defensive strain of Wharton's writing perhaps showing her to be aware of this. This fact of likeness, however, is not necessarily indicative of weakness in either novel since, for instance, one of the devices selected by Wharton to highlight Eliot's failure, the use of 'archaeological details', is also a significant part of her strength and of Wharton's own, being intimately bound up with both authors' strategy for communicating the Italian subject.

The historical novel, as practised by Eliot and Wharton, is supported by the use of archaisms and figurative language. The process of constructing 'that land of mystery beyond the Chinese wall of the French revolution' relies extensively on the effective selection of the representative detail from the mass of researched or even – to use Wharton's preferred word – 'absorbed' information. The 'scarsella' which Stephen and Wharton find so irritating is perhaps used a little insistently in *Romola*, as is the 'white hood' which is designated as the signifying feature of the Florentine contadina, but the specification of the item of dress performs various functions; it denotes status, establishes a feature of the social order and also reveals something of character in the way in which it is worn. Similarly Wharton's mention of Odo's mistress's request that he should bring her 'one of the rare lap-dogs bred by the monks of Bologna'<sup>13</sup> passes an effective comment on the interdependent values of church and aristocracy. This employment of synecdochic detail, although in some cases speaking only of the writer's thoroughness of research, is generally successful in evoking the spirit of the age, and this success is repeated in the use of figurative language and in the method of characterisation, particularly in *The Valley of Decision*.

The individuals whose lives concern us centrally in these novels can be seen as emblematic representatives of their age in so far as they signify forms of compromise. Neither *Romola* nor Odo, despite intellectual and practical concern and great efforts on Odo's part, is a successful creator of history. Wharton makes repeated reference to Odo's fear of active engagement with his time; despite the fact that history is 'being written, chapter by chapter, before [his] very eyes', he is 'afraid to turn the next page'.<sup>14</sup> Odo and *Romola*, like the protagonists of Sir Walter Scott's novels designated by the critic Georg Lukács, in his book *The Historical Novel*, as 'middle-of-the-road heroes',<sup>15</sup> can be seen to reflect both sides of any question. *Romola* is pulled in one direction by her father's secular scholarship and in the other by the

devotional demands of Savonarola and her brother. Odo Valsecca is intellectually drawn to the philosophy of the Vivaldis and the reforming spirit of Carlo Gamba, but feels the attractions of the hedonistic lifestyle of the aristocracy as well. His loyalties and instincts are divided: 'the stealing sense of duality that so often paralyzed his action'.<sup>16</sup> and it is only Fulvia's single-minded commitment to reform that takes the new constitution as far as it goes. Odo and *Romola* both live in a time coincident with great social change – surely a prerequisite for the writing of a successful historical novel which must stand out against present realities – and they give way, just as the 'intelligent amateur', the dying breed of tourist whom Wharton commemorates in 'Italy Again', is forced to give way before the professionals, whether writers of guide-books, politicians, philosophers, artists or priests.

In her Italian travel books, to which I will return later in a fuller discussion, Wharton makes central issue of the tendency of the Italian landscape to divide, for the observer, naturally but distinctively into two parts, foreground and background. She takes this topographical phenomenon and uses it to great effect in the structure of her Italian novel. Whilst those in the foreground, Odo and Fulvia, sometimes fall victim to the weight – whether of confusion or conviction – which they have to bear, the supporting characters who make up the background, are entirely effective in rounding-out the otherwise inaccessible details of the mundane existences against which the central protagonists must stand in relief. Odo, heir or Duke, is the locus for the philosophical, political and religious anxieties which agitate a whole country or even a whole continent, and his receptiveness to the different sides of every question, in the best Scott tradition, keeps him from being subsumed into the background, which is peopled by well defined types or representatives of local colour. The courtiers, the strolling players, the peasant farmers and clerics animate the general setting whilst the outstanding types, Trescorre, the time-serving politician, de Crucis, the pragmatic priest, Gamba, the radical and 'victim of the conditions he denounced',<sup>17</sup> and the Duchess, the aristocratic hedonist, carry a burden of signification sharpened by their proximity to and influence upon Odo himself. The structures of existence, analysed by a disillusioned Odo towards the end of his reign, are expressed by the classes which represent them:

Certainly in the ideal state the rights and obligations of the

different classes would be more evenly adjusted. But the ideal state was a figment of the brain. The real one, as Crescenti had long ago pointed out, was the gradual and heterogeneous product of remote social conditions, wherein every seeming inconsistency had its roots in some bygone need, and the character of each class, with its special passions, ignorances and prejudices, was the sum total of influences so ingrown and inveterate that they had become a law of thought.<sup>18</sup>

Here is expounded not only the intent which has guided Wharton's choice and use of characters in the novel but also the whole-cultural motivation behind her work in the Italian historical subject. Each individual realises the sum of a particular social development, whether political, religious or philosophical; their interrelatedness is communicated by the broad sweep of Wharton's fictional panorama and they can be seen as products of the historical conditions which form the background to Odo's story. The emblematic nature of the characterisation also acts as a means by which to clarify – for Wharton as artist – the complexities of the inheritance of her own North American civilisation. It was one of her primary, almost didactic, aims in the novel to spell out to her New World audience how essential it was for them to recognise the fact of social continuity, even of history itself, as America was about to enter the first century to which its own definitive history allowed it to lay full claim as shaper and mover of world events.

The mixture of philosophies and social allegiances which bring pressure to bear upon Odo do not generally impinge, except in matters of simple plot, upon his other main purpose in the novel which is also inextricably bound up with the American discovery of its rôle on the world stage – in this case, that of tourist. The attention paid to travelling and sight-seeing and the attendant effect upon the boundaries of the individual's expectations is, as elsewhere in Wharton, intimately connected with the development of the aesthetic sensibility and also with her special pedagogic intentions towards her American audience. Just as Madame de Staël has Corinne and Lord Nelvil conduct the reader on a guided tour of the Italian sights so Odo comes to Naples as a tourist. His journey from Monte Alloro is highly circuitous: he takes in several northern principalities, sets sail for Naples from Genoa – having once reflected upon the spiritual and architectural properties of

that city – and after Naples moves on to Rome for further immersion in the past.

Odo's early, if untutored, exposure to devotional and classical painting prepares him for the Grand Tour of the principal Italian cities and their art treasures which is made expedient by his tacit banishment from Pianura, and the tour reaches its climax in his participation in an archaeological dig in Naples. This depiction of the literal excavation of the past is the most direct address in the text to a North American audience uneducated in the lessons of the past. Odo's archaeological adventures, in the company of 'a party of gentlemen in the saloon of Sir William Hamilton's famous villa of Posilipo',<sup>19</sup> provide direct and literal access to the foundations of civilisation, the 'famous' being offered as a tribute to the referential powers of the guidebook-trained reader. As rendered through the artefacts of the past by Odo, however, the lessons are redeemed from the limitations of the museum by the equalising emphasis of Wharton's prose upon both historic continuity and the organic: '... in his hands the rarest specimens of that buried art which, like some belated golden harvest, was now everywhere thrusting itself through the Neapolitan soil'.<sup>20</sup> In the use of the imagery of plant growth Wharton weighs the implications of the 'discovery' of the past, focusing on a development which is new and vital despite its concern with the ancient or neglected. The response of the individual – whether archaeologist or tourist – is what endows life.

The offering up of the Italian landscape as being perpetually in renewal through art and nature is made much of in both *The Valley of Decision* and in *Italian Backgrounds* where the linguistic emphasis falls upon the importance of the personal view:

The ancient Latin landscape, so time-furrowed and passion-scarred, lies virgin to the eye, fresh-bathed in floods of limpid air. The scene seems recreated by the imagination, it wears the pristine sparkle of those *Towers of fable immortal fashioned from mortal dreams* which lie beyond the geographer's boundaries, like the Oceanus of the early charts. . . .<sup>21</sup>

With 'virgin', 'fresh-bathed' and 'pristine' we are left in no doubt that Wharton is endeavouring to communicate to her audience the idea that there is a perspective which can be brought to bear on the Italian scene which need not be bound by a sense of the 'time-furrowed'; she translates Europe with the language of American

possibility. At the end of the notes for the fragmentary 'Italy Again' she quotes Goethe's reaction to the spectacle of Rome: "'Was einer ist' – it all comes back to that'; the European past can be communicated by the guidebook, wherein its most obvious treasures are displayed, but it is only the traveller prepared to venture upon an independent view, make an independent judgement, who can discern the importance of the Italian background. In the novel and in the guidebooks, particularly *Italian Backgrounds*, the prelapsarian expectations of life in the New World are refracted back upon the Old. Odo is the first of Wharton's fictional explorers of the dreams beyond a specific geography and, in her description of his awakening to 'the great inheritance of the past',<sup>22</sup> the only non-American.

In going outside her own geography at the beginning of her writing career Wharton was able to chart a number of significant personal landmarks. Within the eighteenth-century Italian framework she could create a strong woman, Fulvia Vivaldi, although, unlike the women in the novels which Wharton sets in the contemporary world who are at the centre of her artistic concern, Fulvia has to be, in the end, subordinated to the larger historical purpose of the narrative. She could also lay the groundwork for an exploration of what she felt to be a personal and national aesthetic crisis, that of imitation. She describes, in the novel, the 'Princes and Cardinals' who are interested only in those artists who can be trusted to reproduce exactly the artefacts which reflect the system under which the men of wealth and influence have come to operate the power of patronage, rather than those who would use the past as a foundation upon which to build artistic change. Wharton separates the act of homage which also leaves room for change and the act of pure imitation – 'a sterile restoration of the letter'<sup>23</sup> – in much the same way as she distinguishes between those historical novelists who are without the 'visualizing gift' and those who can make history live again through their boldness with the material of the past. She wished to place herself within a tradition but a tradition which she could use as part of a process rather than as an end in itself. Additionally she could establish the affinities which she sought to communicate between herself, as American artist – belonging to a society which could only tolerate 'literature' if practised by such as Washington Irvine 'because, in spite of the disturbing fact that he "wrote" he was a gentleman'<sup>24</sup> – and her European counterparts through the

referential nature of her writing in the Italian novel. This facet of her work can, however, be illuminated by a comparison with Sir Walter Scott since Wharton's American situation at the turn of the century actually bears close resemblance to the cultural conditions of Scott's beginnings in the historical novel.

In his Chapter Seventy-Second or 'Postscript which should have been a Preface' to *Waverley* Scott speaks of the changes which have occurred in Scotland, changes of an order so dramatic that it has become vital for him to commemorate the past before it becomes unattainable:

There is no European nation which, within the course of half a century, or little more, has undergone so complete a change as this kingdom of Scotland. . . . The gradual influx of wealth, and extension of commerce, have since united to render the present people of Scotland a class of beings as different from their grandfathers as the existing English are from those of Queen Elizabeth's time.<sup>25</sup>

The cadence of Scott's remarks is echoed, over one hundred years later, by Wharton when explaining the authorial motivation to record the past in her final autobiography, *A Backward Glance*:

The first change came in the [1880s] with the earliest detachment of big money-makers from the West, soon to be followed by the Lords of Pittsburgh. . . . what had seemed unalterable rules of conduct became of a sudden observances as quaintly arbitrary as the domestic rites of the Pharaohs. Between the point of view of my Huguenot great-great-grandfather, who came from the French Palatinate to participate in the founding of New Rochelle, and my own father, who died in 1882, there were fewer differences than between my father and the post-war generation of Americans.<sup>26</sup>

Like Scott, Wharton states the need, as she sees it, to memorialise the past before it recedes from her grasp. The primary movers of change in the view of both authors, despite a century's difference between the date of their writing, are the upwardly mobile manufacturing classes. A point in the distant past – whether Elizabethan England or the settlement of New Rochelle – is invoked as a simple point of contrast to the present day in order to



emphasise the recent rapidity of social and economic change, both writers having been creatively inspired by a powerful sense of dislocation.

Wharton's historical novels, *The Valley of Decision*, *The Age of Innocence*, (1920), and *The Buccaneers*, (1938), are all concerned, like Scott in *Waverley*, with the prior civilisation, not the instruments of change. The new money finds its way into the novels which Wharton sets in the contemporary world – *The House of Mirth* in 1905 and *The Custom of the Country* in 1913 for example – but the volumes which mark the beginning, middle and end of her writing career are all retrievals of the past. In many ways, especially when considering the closeness of the structural principles of the historical novel to those of autobiography, *The Age of Innocence* and *The Buccaneers* relate closely to the repeated attempts by Wharton to memorialise her own life, to impose an order on the past via the printed page. *The Valley of Decision*, however, simply by choice and location of subject, is revealing of the wider concerns in art and history with which she began her career as a novelist, as well as her need to locate the personal, the American, present in the European past. For Wharton, the history of Italy is also the history of the United States. The sense of relatedness which is built into the successful historical novel and which Georg Lukács describes as 'the prehistory of the present'<sup>27</sup> – in this case the foundations and background of an American present – is as much evident in eighteenth-century Italy as in 'the founding of New Rochelle'. The lessons to be learned from the exploration of similarities between the society portrayed in *The Valley of Decision* and the cultural conditions of turn-of-the-century America are important considerations in Wharton's treatment of the historical subject, but the eighteenth-century Italy of which she wrote is more than an historical model, it is also an aesthetic and moral model. Wharton's choice of subject reveals her powerful and enduring

reverence for the accumulated experiences of the past, readiness to puzzle out their meaning, unwillingness to disturb rashly results so powerfully willed, so laboriously arrived at – the desire, in short, to keep intact as many links as possible between yesterday and tomorrow, to lose, in the ardour of new experiment, the least that may be of the long rich heritage of human experience.<sup>28</sup>

– such being the inspiration for much of her writing, not least her non-fiction where her didactic motivation could be more straightforwardly enacted than in the novel.

Wharton's first travel or guidebook, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, published in 1904, developed out of a commission from the *Century* to write a series of articles on the subject to appear in the magazine in 1903. As R. W. B. Lewis points out in his biography, *Edith Wharton*, a precedent had been set in this line by the same magazine when they commissioned W. D. Howells to write on Tuscan cities in the 1880s. Wharton's qualifications for the task, for the magazine's purposes, were her two published texts: *The Valley of Decision* and her first book, *The Decoration of Houses*, a treatise on exterior and interior design and taste, co-written with the architect, Ogden Codman Jnr. and published in 1897. The novel showed the artist inspired by the Italian scene and the non-fiction displayed her professional and practical competence to good effect. The combination of qualities which appealed to the editor of the *Century* is worth noting very precisely, however, as it is actually the foundation upon which all Wharton's writing is built, both in fiction and non-fiction. The tension generated by her urge to defend the natural artist and the 'intelligent amateur' and her admiration for the results of 'systematized study' is a positive one, providing a constant source of energy for her work. This internal debate receives its first real airing in these early works where she makes a distinction between two different modes of apprehension, here in *Italian Backgrounds*:

But these are among the catalogued riches of the city. The guidebooks point to them, they lie in the beaten track of sight-seeing, and it is rather in the intervals between such systematized study of the past, in the parentheses of travel, that one obtains those more intimate glimpses which help to compose the image of each city, to preserve its personality in the traveller's mind.<sup>29</sup>

She chooses to express the individual, reflective response to travel in a metaphor of written composition – as the 'parentheses' of the guidebook experience – so as to illustrate the relationship between the two: the first, the informed, surrounds and supports the second, the felt.

In *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* Wharton combines the voice of

the scholar, the tourist and the pedagogue in a generally happy and always informative blend. She writes of abstract principles of design but illustrates her argument with many examples of villas all over the country and with biographical details of the garden architects responsible for them. The book is chiefly concerned, as its title suggests, with the relationship, the balance, between the interior and the exterior design of the Italian villa and also the manner in which the house complements and is complemented by the garden. She sees the development of garden art in Italy in parallel with the larger processes of social change, 'the rapid flowering of Italian civilization';<sup>30</sup> her appreciation of the villas and their gardens being the means by which to convey her admiration for the whole-cultural nature of the Italian aesthetic, that is, the desire to make 'a garden as well adapted to its surroundings as were the models which inspired it'. This aesthetic, a topographical aesthetic, is not only given as a description but as a warning to her audience – defined early in the text as North American – against easy borrowing, against acquisitive tourism: 'what can I bring away from here? . . . Not this or that amputated statue, or broken bas-relief, or fragmentary effect of any sort, but a sense of the informing spirit – an understanding of the gardener's purpose, and of the uses to which he meant his garden to be put'.<sup>31</sup> Understanding of intent is all, any thoughtless procurement of the souvenir is destructive – 'amputated', 'broken', 'fragmentary', – whereas a notion of the 'informing spirit' is always transferable to one's own landscape.

It is in *Italian Backgrounds*, a more general but also more personal series of travel sketches, however, that Wharton expounds most clearly her own inspiration and methodology as writer of guide-books in a manner which can, as already noted in discussion of *The Valley of Decision*, be taken to apply to the whole range of her artistic output:

As with the study of Italian pictures, so it is with Italy herself. The country is divided, not in *partes tres*, but in two: a foreground and a background. The foreground is the property of the guide-book and of its product, the mechanical sight-seer; the background, that of the dawdler, the dreamer and the serious student of Italy. This distinction does not imply any depreciation of the foreground. It must be known thoroughly before the

middle distance can be enjoyed; there is no short cut to an intimacy with Italy.<sup>32</sup>

The 'foreground', the province of the guidebook, is seen to contain the museum pieces to which there is a set, learned response. This is not to say, however, that in order to avoid classification as a mechanised 'sight-seer' one's approach as a tourist must be divorced from 'tradition', only 'detached'. The conventions she discusses are those of the outsider trained in the skill of studying the alien culture through the representative artefact, and, for the American audience she assumes, this museum-trained mode of apprehension is perhaps all that is possible at first. This initial response, however, is actually indispensable to a later, fuller understanding, the 'mechanical' must come before 'intimacy' can be achieved. From the guidebook initiation – which Wharton herself, as she explains in the unpublished autobiographical fragment 'Life and I', found so valuable as a nineteen-year-old untutored tourist in Italy: 'I cannot disown my debt to Ruskin. To Florence and Venice his little volumes gave a meaning, a sense of organic relation, which no other books attainable for me at that time could possibly have conveyed'<sup>33</sup> – it is then possible to move onto an independent view. It was such an independent view which had led her personally, against expert advice, to the discovery of the mis-dating and consequent neglect of some terra-cotta statues of the Passion in the monastery of San Vivaldo, 'the rare sensation of an artistic discovery made in the heart of the most carefully-explored artistic hunting-ground of Europe',<sup>34</sup> in the chapter 'A Tuscan Shrine' which forms the centre-piece of *Italian Backgrounds*.

To achieve such confidence in one's own instincts, one's own vision, a much larger overview of the subject is vital; it must take into account the whole life of the country and its people and express the coherence of the relationship between the art, architecture and the landscape: 'It is because Italian art so interpenetrated Italian life, because the humblest stone-mason followed in some sort the lines of the great architects, and the modeller of village Madonnas the composition of the great sculptors, that the monumental foreground and the unregarded distances behind it so continually interpret and expound each other'.<sup>35</sup> It is this interrelatedness which actually underpins Wharton's own

aesthetic. Her writing is various in its effects, its location and, often, its style, but it is unfailingly 'As well adapted to its surroundings as the models which inspired it' whether those models were to be found in another civilisation, like France or Italy, in a particular genre, like the historical novel or the autobiography, or in her own city, in 'the material nearest to hand, and most familiarly my own'<sup>36</sup> in *The House of Mirth*, the next novel she wrote and the text which shows Wharton exercising the most precise topographical control of her material.

## 2

# The Customs of the Country: France

As discussed in the Introduction to this study the novels and travel guides in which Wharton concerns herself with the civilisation of France mark a period of transition in her writing. These works chart a movement from the Europe which she sought to illuminate for her American audience in *The Valley of Decision* to a Europe made familiar to her compatriots through the experiences of both war and tourism; the European scene no longer needed to be explicated in the same way. From the Napoleonic War which ends *The Valley of Decision* to the publication of her novel, *A Son at the Front*, five years after the end of the first world war, the progress of Wharton's work reflects a larger cultural passage from the Europe which had been, in the words of Nathaniel Hawthorne, a locus for 'romance', towards a world where American 'actualities'<sup>1</sup> would now dominate. As Wharton expressed it in an essay 'The Great American Novel', published in the *Yale Review* in 1927. 'We [Americans] have, in fact, internationalized the earth, to the deep detriment of its picturesqueness'.<sup>2</sup>

Treating her French works as a homogeneous group also, however, provides an opportunity to nail a canard about the life and works of Edith Wharton: the traditional critical view that she was but a pale imitator of Henry James in her style and subject matter. Perhaps the main reason why she has not been taken seriously as an artist until recently is the mistaken attribution to her of Jamesian intentions and ambitions and nothing did more to propagate that view than the malicious undermining of her work by Percy Lubbock, that most slavish of Jamesians, in his biography of her, published in 1947, ten years after her death.<sup>3</sup>

Wharton and James were great friends and she did owe to him an enormous debt in terms of that friendship and also, undeniably, as an artist; here, I hope to indicate the extent of that debt and to illuminate both the positive and negative aspects of James's