



Irene Billeter Sauter

New York City: “Gilt Cage” or “Promised Land”?

Representations of Urban Space in
Edith Wharton and Anzia Yezierska



Peter Lang

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New York and Environs, 1859

Lithograph by John Bachmann

Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York

Preface

There is an island surrounded by rivers, and about it the tide scurries fast and deep. It is a beautiful island, long, narrow, magnificently populated, and with such a wealth of life and interest as no island in the whole world before has ever possessed.¹

Perhaps it was my very own experience as a modern immigrant working on the lofty floors of a banking institution just off Fifth Avenue in midtown Manhattan that got me started on my theme. I cannot exactly recall how I finally settled on this particular topic, but I do remember that walking to work every morning through city streets provided me with images, impressions, thoughts, ideas and questions that could not be quenched or suppressed once I entered the gleaming lobby and rode the elevator up to the 40th floor to address a by no means stimulating banking job.

On sunny days, the view up there was fabulous. Pretending that I had to run an errand, I would often circle the entire floor in order to steal a peek at the city's views in all directions. Admiring Manhattan island from high above was awe-inspiring every single time; looking down and into the distance from my banking tower let me be a part of the city while being an isolated and privileged spectator nevertheless.

Aside from me, the only other person who was probably as taken by the city and its views was Sonja, the old German-Jewish receptionist who – fleeing the Holocaust with her sister – had first come to New York City as a young child. Every morning, Sonja would come in with a big smile on her carefully made-up face, take off her coat and scarf and hang them up neatly in the wardrobe by the receptionist's desk. Then, flattening her carefully ironed blouse and skirt with her hands and with a look on her face that asked for confirmation from anyone in earshot, she would utter without fail: "Isn't it invigorating?!"

1 Theodore Dreiser, "The Rivers of the Nameless Dead," *The Color of a Great City* (1923; reprint, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 284.

This is what New York City has always been to me, too, and it continues to be a place that remains endlessly fascinating, endlessly inspiring because of its physical architecture and its social culture, but also due to its abundant and diverse literary representations. As an immigrant – a “resident alien” (a term that couldn’t be stranger in its oxymoronic combination) – I have walked the city many times, stunned by its magnitude but also impressed by the simple expressions of small and ordinary things. I have walked along the shores of the Hudson River, have crossed magnificent Central Park and have enjoyed, too, the slightly salty smells of the East River. I have navigated the little old streets and shops on the Lower East Side, visiting a tenement building similar to Anzia Yeziarska’s home as I have admired Fifth Avenue mansions and Edith Wharton’s home “The Mount” in the Berkshires. I have entered the city by foot, bicycle, car, bus, boat and airplane, through tunnels and across every single bridge, I have been in its underbelly and have observed it from high above. I have experienced New York City at any time of day or night, in heat waves, snow storms, black-outs and terrorist attacks. And I, too, have finally left the city after having called it my home for many years.

Having myself been a foreigner in New York City, though certainly a privileged one, an immigrant and a “resident alien” just like Yeziarska had been many years earlier, perhaps has made me more aware of an outsider’s perspective from the urban margin. Gradually, by becoming less of an “alien” and more of a “resident” through social interaction, work, city skills and knowledge, I moved from an immigrant’s city margin to participation in the social center. Consequently, I might also have gained a better understanding of Wharton’s traditional world of class constraints and conventions because, surprisingly, some things in New York society just haven’t changed to this day.

Having been able to experience New York City in various stages of belonging has definitely caused my interest in this particular urban space and its captivating and animated representation in literature. Wherever I have gone since, alluring New York City has always stayed with me, shaping my views and experiences, remaining indelibly ingrained in my very being.

Acknowledgments

Time has been my most potent foe throughout the many years it took to write this book. Place has been a dear companion to me and New York City, in particular, *conditio sine qua non* for writing this book in the first place. Ultimately, however, it is people who have given meaning and significance to both place and time.

My gratitude thus goes to the people who gave life to this project: I am deeply grateful to my dissertation supervisor at the University of Lausanne, Professor Dr. Emeritus Peter Halter, who with unfailing patience, great insight, academic knowledge and careful reasoning always pointed me into the right direction.

I am also very much indebted to Professor Dr. Liam Kennedy, Director of the Clinton Institute for American Studies at University College Dublin, who – by reading my manuscripts not only critically but also very analytically – offered many valuable signposts by which to map the subject matter; and I am very grateful, too, to Dr. Boris Vejdovsky, Senior Lecturer at the University of Lausanne, for guiding me along paths I had not previously considered in my research.

My thanks go to Dr. Regula Giovani and Dr. André Rogger, my peers for segments of our respective academic journeys and friends I have cherished for the better part of my life. I owe them many inspiring and critical discussions about life and literature. They always gave me new fuel for thought and encouraged me to continue.

I thank Katrin Forrer of Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, Switzerland, for her very attentive and efficient corrections of my manuscript; I thank Robbi Siegel, Rights and Reproduction Specialist at The Museum of the City of New York, for providing me with professional assistance in obtaining permission to use some of the wonderful New York City photographs in the museum's collection. My thanks also go to the permission staff of the New York Public Library as well as to the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, for allowing me to re-

search and include images of their respective collections. Finally, my gratitude belongs to the helpful librarians of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

David and Freeda Muller and their extended family showed me a New York City that I could never have discovered by myself, let alone understood without their help. They introduced me to Shabbat and challah, to brisses, bar mitzvahs and shivas, to colorful and often onomatopoeic Yiddish expressions, and to kosher food and Jewish Orthodox life. Most important of all, however, David and Freeda offered me and my family their unconditional friendship and love. And for that there are simply not enough words of gratitude.

Finally, I would like to thank my family: I thank my mother for never stopping me from doing what I wanted to do; my late father for always believing in me and for making me see that a problem is but a task waiting to be tackled and solved; my brothers for being my brothers as well as my earliest and most outspoken critics; and my parents-in-law for being the best and most supportive in-laws anyone could possibly wish for.

Lastly, I thank my wonderful husband Bernhard and my children Nava, Noë, Anju and Ilan for their patience with and understanding of my demanding project. To them, I dedicate this book. Without them, neither time nor place would ever have the meaning it has for me.

List of Abbreviations

Edith Wharton:

<i>The House of Mirth:</i>	HOM
<i>The Custom of the Country:</i>	COC
<i>The Age of Innocence:</i>	AOI
<i>The Mother's Recompense:</i>	MR
<i>The Buccaneers:</i>	BUC
<i>The Decoration of Houses:</i>	DEC
<i>(With Ogden Codman, Jr.)</i>	

Anzia Yezierska:

<i>Salome of the Tenements</i>	SOT
<i>Bread Givers</i>	BG
<i>Arrogant Beggars</i>	AB
<i>All I Could Never Be</i>	AICNB
<i>Red Ribbon on a White Horse</i>	RR

In the Appendix:

Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, Eds.:

<i>Gotham:</i>	
<i>A History of New York City to 1898</i>	GOTHAM



Aerial View, Lower Manhattan, 1921

Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York