The Letters of Edith Wharton, and: Edith Wharton: Traveller in the Land of Letters (review)

Malini Schueller

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entail grandiosity and self-punishment”; moreover, “her unconscious need to submit and (by submission) to keep alive hopes for eventual pleasure is profoundly masochistic.” Although many readers will consider Ash’s interpretation to be a travesty of James’s intentions, the overall effect of this and other essays in this collection should be to challenge comfortable responses to the The Portrait and to compel admirers to return to the text.

WILLIAM R. MACNAUGHTON
University of Waterloo


Edith Wharton is now recognized as an important American novelist of the twentieth century. Critical attention has been given not only to Wharton’s major works but also to minor works like Hudson River Bracketed and the unfinished novel The Buccaneers. Wharton has been seen as a writer portraying the entrapment and powerlessness of women and as a writer belonging to the tradition of great literature. Harold Bloom’s Introduction to a 1986 collection of critical essays on Wharton associates her with Hawthorne, Melville, Wallace Stevens, and Balzac.

It is, therefore, an appropriate time for the first collection of Wharton’s letters to be made available. The Lewises have done an excellent research job in editing this volume. They have included four hundred letters from the nearly four thousand extant ones. The collection is broken down into seven chronological sections, each with its own introduction. Each letter is profusely annotated with biographical, historical, and literary references, and the volume is well illustrated. R. W. B. Lewis attempts to make a case for the literary merit of the letters but few will want to read the letters for that reason. The biographical figure that emerges from the letters, however, is fascinating.

Critics interested in Wharton’s life will find a woman at once confident, firm, sensitive, and passionate. The most interesting letters are those to her editors and to her capricious lover W. Morton Fullerton. From the beginning Wharton was demanding of her editors. As early as 1899 we find her criticizing Scribner’s for doing an inadequate advertising job, and holding the editors responsible for the poor reviews of The Greater Inclination; shortly before her death she would reprimand Appleton publishers for their shoddy performance and demand release from her contract for The Buccaneers. The letters to her lover, Fullerton, an American journalist based in Paris, are full of passion and emotion and seem far removed
from the writings of the circumspect novelist. These letters, as R. W. B. Lewis puts it, have disquieting “expressions of subservience” and show a “felt need for sexual nagging.” On the other hand, some of these letters show Wharton to be the empowered person in the relationship. We see her fully aware of her lover’s limitations, advising him and observing him like a novelist, analyzing the process by which he has become a “highly intelligent automaton.” There are also letters to various novelists—Sinclair Lewis, Fitzgerald, André Gide—in which Wharton writes as a literary critic. Scholars will be interested in her analysis of Lewis’ style, her disapproval of his overuse of slang, and her view of James Joyce’s Ulysses as a “turgid welter of pornography.”

The Lewises have done an excellent job including letters that represent Wharton’s many interests, even though there are some trivial invitations and thank-you notes that could have been excluded. At $14.95 this is certainly an indispensable volume for all Wharton scholars. One cannot say the same about Janet Goodwyn’s Edith Wharton: Traveller in the Land of Letters. Although Goodwyn makes use of some offbeat texts such as Wharton’s Italian Villas and Their Gardens and French Ways and Their Meaning and often offers interesting interpretations of individual works, the book is uneven in quality and not well researched. Goodwyn’s initial thesis is that Wharton is 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.” But Goodwyn seems unable to expand this idea and her explanations of the concept of “place” are random and disconnected. She sees Wharton as using the cultural imperatives of foreign countries as reference points, as longing for the inherited securities of the nineteenth century, as “building up . . . creative confidence through a definition of landscape,” and as using landscapes as an “enlightening measure of the female situation.”

This kind of incoherence is present throughout most of the book, except in a few chapters where Goodwyn shows how Wharton combines landscape and action to comment on the importance of being related to a particular place. But if these chapters are coherent and interesting, the interpretations they offer are not new. Wharton’s attachment to place has been noted before, most recently in Judith Fryer’s Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather (1986). Goodwyn makes no reference to this work, or, for that matter, to any recent criticism. Her most current reference in Wharton scholarship is Cynthia Griffin Wolff’s A Feast of Words (1977). It is this inadequate research that leads the author to make arguable claims of newness, for example, dispelling “the traditional critical view that she was but a pale imitator of Henry James.” There is potential in the idea that Wharton’s nonfiction works illuminate the concerns of her fiction but this potential needs better exposition than it is given in Goodwyn’s book.

MALINI SCHUELLER
University of Florida

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