



## Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

58 | Spring 2012

Special Issue: The Short Stories of Edith Wharton

---

# The Epistolary Motif and Literary Creation in Edith Wharton's Short Stories: Narrative, Aesthetic and Moral Issues

Audrey Giboux

---



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1240>

ISSN: 1969-6108

### Publisher

Presses universitaires d'Angers

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2012

Number of pages: 77-91

ISBN: 0294-0442

ISSN: 0294-04442

### Electronic reference

Audrey Giboux, « The Epistolary Motif and Literary Creation in Edith Wharton's Short Stories: Narrative, Aesthetic and Moral Issues », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 58 | Spring 2012, Online since 01 June 2014, connection on 20 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1240>

---

This text was automatically generated on 20 April 2019.

© All rights reserved

---

# *The Epistolary Motif and Literary Creation in Edith Wharton's Short Stories: Narrative, Aesthetic and Moral Issues*

Audrey Giboux

---

- 1 Edith Wharton, who was a great letter writer herself, was certainly familiar with the tradition of the European epistolary novel (Benstock 37). More than thirty of her stories mention or quote letters as a narrative device designed to introduce a slight disruption within a single point of view. In her famous essay of 1925, *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton emphasizes the need to reduce the narration to a single focalizer: "The effect of compactness and instantaneity sought in the short story is attained mainly by the observance of two 'unities'—the old traditional one of time, and that other, more modern and complex, which requires that any rapidly enacted episode shall be seen through only one pair of eyes" (43). The use of the letter motif is a good example of this quest for narrative efficiency. Wharton resorts to this device in three stories—whose characters are all writers—and which connect the epistolary motif with a reflection on literature, a clear attempt on Wharton's part to examine letter writing both as a narrative process and a literary topic. This article will attempt to analyze the way Wharton uses this realistic narrative tool to raise a series of questions about the moral and literary implications of epistolary writing.

## **Letter Writing as the Polyphonic Intrusion of a Female Voice in an Otherwise Male Perspective<sup>1</sup>**

- 2 The letter motif is central in "The Muse's Tragedy," the opening story of the collection *The Greater Inclination*, published in 1899. The main character, Danyers, is a young critic who has written an essay on Vincent Rendle, a deceased poet. The canonized poet

happens to have dedicated his verse to a married woman called Mary Anerton, who goes by the bucolic name of “Silvia” in his works. Danyers and Anerton first develop a friendship, based on their common admiration for the poet and on an intellectual collaboration in the writing of the definitive critical study of Rendle’s aesthetic—or at least until Danyers grows jealous of the past love between the poet and his muse. The first two sections of the story are told through Danyers’s perspective. After a narrative ellipsis, the third and last part consists in the whole letter<sup>2</sup>—without comment or response—written by Anerton to Danyers, her suitor. Anerton explains that she has decided to leave Danyers and tells him why he should not marry a “disappointed woman” (58-9). The missive plays an epiphanic and subversive role that sheds new light on the whole story: Anerton reveals she was never loved by Rendle “as a woman” (62) and that their relationship was a mere pretext for his poetic creation; with Danyers, she was only trying to find out if another man could sincerely love her for herself and not only as an Egeria.

- 3 The structure of the story is significant: the relationship between Anerton and Danyers is presented as a repetition of the one she had with Rendle, insofar as the critic can be seen as an avatar of the poet he admires, and because the critical collaboration between Danyers and Anerton reduplicates the intellectual interaction between the poet and his muse. M. Denise Witzig has provided a feminist interpretation of the sexual dimension of the denied love between the muse and both poet and critic, where the works stemming from their literary communion appear as their metaphorical progeny (264). The tragic element consists in the irony that every reader of Rendle’s poetry believes in the deep love he is supposed to have felt for “Silvia.” This story is thus a subtle variation on the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea: Rendle saw his muse as a purely literary object and Danyers’s initial fascination with the heroine seems to be founded on a certain literary sentimentalism. But Anerton, by contributing actively to Rendle’s poetic creation and to Danyers’s critical study, and more particularly by writing this letter, becomes a writer and a creator herself. As she explains the true nature of her relationship with Rendle and her desire to put Danyers’s feelings to the test, she becomes a feminine Pygmalion, re-creating the figure of the poet who made her an Egeria, and shaping the young critic, almost maternally, according to her own desires. Her letter is a reinterpretation of the story previously read, and leads the reader to question the status of “Silvia” as a representation of the “Woman,” the so-called eternal feminine myth which perpetuates a long series of stylized and idealized feminine archetypes in western poetry: the muse, it seems, attempts to seize and reappropriate the myth. Through this reflexive character, Wharton lays emphasis on the limits of a literary canon formed through a mainly masculine fantasy.
- 4 But the letter motif is not only a way to give the female character a voice otherwise denied in a narrative focalized on the masculine perspective. In her missive, Anerton mentions the correspondence Rendle dedicated to her, published in the volume of his *Life and Letters*:

You have noticed the breaks in the letters here and there, just as they seem to be on the point of growing a little-warmer? The critics [...] praised the editor for his commendable delicacy and good taste (so rare in these days!) in omitting from the correspondence all personal allusions, all those *détails intimes* which should be kept sacred from the public gaze. They referred [...] to the asterisks in the letters to Mrs. A. Those letters I myself prepared for publication; [...] I copied them out for the editor, and every now and then I put in a line of asterisks to make it appear that

something had been left out. [...] The asterisks were a sham—*there was nothing to leave out.* (60)

- 5 The boundary between the private and the public, very tenuous in the case of published letters of famous authors, is subverted here by the ambiguous—poetic rather than private—relationship which united the writer and his muse. The asterisks ironically stand for an absent text and not as a substitute for a private love message. By clarifying the misunderstanding, Anerton paradoxically gains the status of an author: she has falsified the text, giving it another meaning, appropriating it in order to maintain the illusion that she had been loved, converting the text of Rendle's letters into her own literary work.
- 6 Anerton also mentions two types of letters sent by Rendle that reveal the personality of their author: the ones he wrote when he was on a trip with another woman; and the one he addressed to her when she lost her husband, described as a "beautiful letter" in which "he was kind, considerate, decently commiserating" (61). Anerton's portrait of the poet's indifference to the feelings he praises in his works shows him to be a character who plays the part of an attentive friend: the aesthetic quality of his writing overrides the necessity of sincere communication. The treatment of the letter motif in this story thus introduces a moral issue, since the respect due to a literary text should protect it from manipulation, and transparency in epistolary expression is supposedly required. In this perspective, the decision of the female character to leave her mark on the poet's correspondence and to reveal the truth in her own letter seems to indicate a desire to free herself from her status as literary object compelled to submit to the reader's (possibly false) interpretation and to conquer the position of an active writer.

## A Conflict between Private and Public

- 7 "Copy" is a dialogue published in 1901 in the collection called *Crucial Instances*. The discussion involves Mrs. Ambrose Dale, a famous novelist and a widow, and her old friend the no less famous poet, Paul Ventnor—so famous, in fact, that he is referred to as "public property" (277).<sup>3</sup> Dale, who refuses to sign the autographs her admirers beg her for in their letters (274), defines the identity of writers by contrast with "real people," telling Ventnor: "I died years ago. What you see before you is a figment of the reporter's brain—a monster manufactured out of newspaper paragraphs, with ink in its veins. A keen sense of copyright is my nearest approach to an emotion. [...] [T]he last shred of my identity is gone" (278). The character, like Anerton in "The Muse's Tragedy," metafictionally exhibits the difficulty of being trapped in the role of a mere literary fantasy in the eyes of the public. The whole dialogue is indeed a reflection upon the gap between privacy and publicity in the case of a literary correspondence. The reader learns from the conversation between the two artists that they were lovers long ago, before Dale dismissed Ventnor who then married another woman. The conversation takes a sentimental turn when they discover that they have both kept the letters they sent each other. Ventnor first presents these missives as a substitute for the work Dale never dedicated to him and as a precious souvenir of their past love, by confessing that he always has them with him and often rereads them. But Dale introduces a dichotomy between two different ways of considering their correspondence when she claims she kept his letters because Ventnor was already a famous author by then, whose writings were valuable. The debate is then oriented towards moral and social issues: are these letters from the past "compromising" or "immune" (280)?

- 8 The literary nature of the correspondence between two authors becomes the main topic of the dialogue, in the course of which a case of conscious insertion of a literary text within a private letter is mentioned. Dale recalls that Ventnor quoted verses of *Epipsychidion*, a love poem Shelley devoted to Emilia Viviani, but Ventnor disapproves of using literature in private communication (“Mercy! Did I *quote* things? I don’t wonder you were cruel,” 281). The content of letters is also described as a source of inspiration for literary creation. Reading a letter she sent Ventnor, Dale says: “it’s the most curious thing—I had a letter of this kind to do the other day, in the novel I’m at work on now—[...] And [...] I find the best phrase in it, the phrase I somehow regarded as the fruit of [...] all my subsequent discoveries—is simply plagiarized, word for word, from this!” (280-1). Although she judges the rest of the letter “poorly done,” this statement shows that the fictional letter included in the novel is simply the unconscious reminiscence of an old private letter. Ventnor also recognizes in one of these letters the first hint of a famous sonnet he wrote later (281). The traditional *cliché* according to which art is a sublimated transubstantiation of life is here shown to depend on an unconscious process.<sup>4</sup>
- 9 The rest of the dialogue is characterized by an opposition between symbols of life and death. Ventnor describes the rediscovery of the old letters as the unrolling of a “mummy,” but hopes there is a “live grain of wheat” in it (281). The allusion to a verse of the gospel of John when Christ announces his death (“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit,” 12: 24) shows that their correspondence, an emblem of a dead love, may in fact contain the germ of their creations. Renouncement as metaphoric death may be necessary to a new life and to literary activity seen as a form of salvation. The grain metaphor also recalls Wharton’s well-known fascination with the myth of Persephone (Donovan 1989). Goddess of both the underworld and the harvest, she symbolizes fertility and the possibility of overcoming death. The syncretism between the biblical parable and the ancient myth is also corroborated by the title of Dale’s novel, *Pomegranate Seed*, which refers to the grains of pomegranate Persephone ate in hell after her abduction by Hades—and the reason why she was not allowed to return to the world of the living without her spouse’s permission. By way of these references, the dialogue questions the possibility of gaining a new literary life for past love. One reading of the “grain of wheat” might be as an expression of faith that the letters contain “other material” ready for a literary transubstantiation (282).<sup>5</sup>
- 10 The authors have a dilemma to solve: which of them should keep the other’s letters in the end? To whom do the letters belong, to the one who wrote them, to the addressee, or perhaps to the readers, inasmuch as artists whose works are already classics can enjoy no privacy (282)? These questions engage legal but also moral and sentimental issues. The casuistry is dramatized and Dale calls “bargain” what Ventnor ironically describes as a model of “arbitration treaty” ruled by “conventions” (283). Although he previously refused to give back Dale’s letters because they are “the only thing [he] ha[s] left” (282), he claims that “technically [...] the letter belongs to its writer,” particularly in this case since “there’s nothing in which a man puts more of himself than in his love-letters.” Dale, as a “dialectician,” considers on the contrary that she has a right to both the letters she wrote and received. Her suffering and loneliness are the price she has paid for the right to keep Ventnor’s letters, because, as she puts it, love letters belong to the woman who inspired them: “you couldn’t have written them if I hadn’t been willing to read them. Surely there is more of myself in them than of you. [...] [A] woman’s love letters [...]

belong to her more than to anybody else" (283). Dale asserts her prerogatives as muse. She also demands her own letters back, because only her identity has not changed since the time of their love affair, whereas Ventnor "voluntary ceased to be the man who wrote [her] those letters." The debate comes to an end with Dale's two aphorisms: if a woman's love-letters "are like her child," a man's love-letters "are all he risks" (283). Two definitions of literary ownership emerge from the dialogue: an objective conception, which irreversibly attributes the ownership of a text, whatever it is, to the person who wrote it; and a subjective conception, which requires moral continuity of the identity of the letter writer and implies obtaining the permission of the addressee (who has a sort of emotional right to it) before publication. The key word in the second definition—based on a moral argument<sup>6</sup>—is what Dale calls "authenticity."

- 11 The climax of the scene is reached when the disappointed Dale suddenly renounces her right to the letters Ventnor wrote her. This decision is followed by a series of *coups de théâtre*: the possibility that each might return the letters so that they can be used as a source for the other's memoirs is rapidly abandoned; then both renounce the possibility of having the whole correspondence in their possession. The issue of the letters, as a pretext for their quarrel, is surprisingly transformed. First a textual testimony of a dead past, providing only literary suggestions, it becomes a series of vivid remembrances. "How fresh they seem, and how they take me back to the time when we lived instead of writing about life!" says Dale. This remark removes the love letters from the realm of literature, as if a private correspondence could free itself from the necessity of style and from aesthetic effects. The last turn in the dialogue is initiated when Ventnor suggests destroying the letters, whose literary value would exceed their sentimental value in the eyes of the public, with the following argument: "there's nothing like the exhilaration of spending one's capital!" The financial metaphor is soon replaced by a bucolic one however. Dale, explaining that the "deserted garden [they] sometimes used to walk in" has been "turned into a public park, where excursionists sit on cast-iron benches admiring the statue of an Abolitionist," introduces a comparison between them, both able to earn money through the sale of their keepsakes, and the man who sold the garden and who "has made a fortune that he doesn't know how to spend." The two old friends finally decide to "sacrifice [their] fortune and keep the excursionists out." Two statements then take the metaphor of the secret garden a step further: their memories are compared by Ventnor to "more than a garden" ("it's a park") and by Dale to a whole "world—as long as [they] keep it to [them]selves." The intrusion of strangers is thus held responsible for the corruption of their memories: "even the pyramids look small when one sees a Cook's tourist on top of them!" (285). The characters then decide to burn their letters, considered as "the key to [their] garden": this *auto-da-fé* takes on a sacrificial function, freeing them of the temptation to capitalize on private life for the sake of art.

## Letters as Power Issues and Role-Playing

- 12 Like those in "The Muse's Tragedy" and "Copy," the characters in "Full Circle," published in 1910 in the collection *Tales of Men and Ghosts*, are both authors. The plot is centered round the opposition between a successful writer, Geoffrey Betton, whose first novel has aroused a great deal of interest, and an acquaintance of his, Duncan Vyse, the talented author of an unpublished novel entitled *The Lifted Lamp*. Thanks to a flashback, the reader learns that a few years earlier, Vyse asked his friend to help him get published, but in

spite of three notes to remind him of the request, Betton has forgotten his promise to contact the editor who might have helped Vyse. The letters motif, then, is part of a power game: Betton sees the letters sent by Vyse as desperate pleas; and the letter that the powerful Betton does *not* send the editor serves as proof of his ascendancy over Vyse.

- 13 At the beginning of the story, where Betton is the principal focalizer, he is anticipating the “deluge” (764) of letters from admirers after the publication of his second novel, *Abundance*. Reading these letters has indeed become a ritual since the success of his first book: “He remembered [...] the thrill with which [...] he had opened the first missive in a strange feminine hand.” But the feeling soon turned into disgust:

For more than a year after the publication of *Diadems and Faggots* [...] the inane indiscriminate letters of condemnation, of criticism, of interrogation, had poured in on him by every post. [...] And the wonder of it was [...] that when their thick broth of praise was strained through the author’s anxious vanity there remained to him so small a sediment of definite specific understanding! No—it was always the same thing, [...] the same incorrigible tendency to estimate his effort according to each writer’s personal preferences, instead of regarding it as a work of art, a thing to be measured by fixed standards! (759)

- 14 The passage seems to deny that readers—conditioned as they are by narcissistic preoccupations—are able to judge works of art on the basis of aesthetic criteria. Letters, in other words, do not constitute a medium of real communication. The letters are referred to through the metaphor of breaking waves:

his success began to submerge him: he gasped under the thickening shower of letters. His admirers were really unappeasable. [...] [T]hey wanted his opinion on everything [...]. Perhaps the chief benefit of this demand was his incidentally learning from it how few opinions he really had: the only one that remained with him was a rooted horror of all forms of correspondence. He had been unspeakably thankful when the letters began to fall off. (759-60)

- 15 Betton, who initially feels real pride in readers’ admiration, then begins to understand the “vanity of it all,” as if the ironically recurring metaphor of the “deluge” of letters were a kind of biblical punishment for his self-satisfaction. The satirical use of free indirect speech allows the reader to penetrate the character’s self-analysis and to measure how the “epistolary burden” is considered a public intrusion into the space of intellectual privacy: “Half a million of people would be reading him within a week, and every one of them would write to him, and their friends and relations would write too” (759-760). The letters are thus a symptom of the readers’ exorbitant power over the author’s vanity.
- 16 Fearing that the publication of *Abundance* will put an end to “the blessed shelter of oblivion” and “the cursed letters would begin again” (760), Betton decides to employ a secretary to answer them; Vyse, having renounced literature, proposes his services. A master and servant dialectic, which founds the psychological tension in the story, is set up when Betton creates a rivalry with Vyse by cruelly asking him if he has “any idea of the deluge of stuff that people write to a successful novelist”. By asking Vyse to sign “Betton,” the successful author turns his secretary into an *alter ego*. This is underlined by the parallel in their physical descriptions: “As Betton spoke, he saw a tinge of red on Vyse’s thin cheek, and his own reflected it in a richer glow of shame.” And it is stressed further by a remark made by Betton—one that introduces a fiction within the fiction —“You’ll have to answer them as if they were written to *you*.” The first section of the story then renews the topical antagonism between the *bourgeois* artist, who, catching his

own reflection in a mirror, admits that “his high-coloured well-fed person presented the image of commercial rather than of intellectual achievement” (764), and the impoverished but talented *bohemian* artist, who has “grown shabbier” (762) since the failure of his literary ambitions. But Vyse gains power as Betton’s collaborator and substitute: obtruding in Betton’s correspondence; writing in his name, pastiching the “tone” in which Betton would have written the letters; and being creative again, although he has given up writing on his own account.

- 17 The second part covers the period when the “deluge” of letters indeed pours in, giving Vyse much to do and the *blasé* Betton the joys of “indolence” and of “wild and lawless freedom.” Feigning to fear it will “be worse than *Diadems*,” he advises Vyse against using a sentimental tone. Vyse’s cleverness arouses in Betton a feeling of exultation, “between fear and rapture”: “For five or six blissful days Betton did not even have his mail brought to him [...]” (765-6). The ironic dimension of the narrative increases when Betton begins to feel “a shame-faced desire to see his letters.” Betton, eager to have access to his readers’ flatteries and even to their “stereotyped homage,” decides to read the letters before submitting them to his secretary: “It was really a pleasure to read them, now that he was relieved of the burden of replying: his new relation to his correspondents had the glow of a love-affair unchilled by the contingency of marriage” (766).
- 18 The harmony is broken when Betton notices that the number of letters has decreased and finds “unexpectedly disagreeable to have Vyse read any letters which did not express unqualified praise of his books.” Beginning “to fancy there was a latent rancour, a kind of baffled sneer, under Vyse’s manner,” he decides to “edit the letters before his secretary saw them” (767). The mirror relationship between the prosperous and the unsuccessful writer is reinforced by Betton’s obsession with what Vyse thinks of him. Playing the part of a detached man, feigning to distance himself from his readers’ opinions, the hypocritical Betton, “reduced to wondering whether [Vyse’s] imperturbable composure were the mask of complete indifference or of a watchful jealousy,” wants to unmask his rival. The moral analysis of the character’s psychology turns another corner with this narrative comment: “The latter view being more agreeable to his employer’s self-esteem, the next step was to conclude that Vyse had not forgotten the episode of *The Lifted Lamp*, and would naturally take a vindictive joy in any unfavourable judgments passed on his rival’s work.” Betton’s doubts are thus communicated to the reader who begins with him an investigation of the true feelings of the secretary about the “unfavourable criticisms [which] preponderat[e] in Betton’s correspondence.” This becomes a pretext for Betton to dismiss Vyse without giving him the real reason for this decision—the shame caused by the “unfavourable comments” met by the novel, and without having recourse to the “more embarrassing” argument that the “correspondence about the book had died out.” Betton then develops a literary fascination with his secretary, speculating on his motivations and saying to himself, “with the sudden professional instinct for ‘type’: ‘He might be an agent of something—a chap who carries deadly secrets’” (768). The reader soon learns Vyse’s only secret is his poverty, which forces him to defend his position before his employer when Betton declares that the job is not worthy of his talent.
- 19 In the third part of the story, Betton considers the decrease in the number of letters a humiliation, as is revealed by the use of free indirect speech: “What a triumph for Vyse!” He disguises his despair at seeing Vyse witness his failure behind a mask of kindly solicitude, fearing that dismissing Vyse might cause him to commit suicide: “This consideration came after the other, but Betton, in rearranging them, put it first, because



he thought it looked better there, and also because he immediately perceived its value in justifying a plan of action that was beginning to take shape in his mind" (770). This enigmatic passage renews the inquiry into Betton's intentions, as he pretends to himself to be acting in Vyse's interest.

- 20 After an ellipsis, the reader learns that the number of letters has increased, whereas Betton acts as if this revival of interest for his book annoyed him. The letters mostly see the critics' misrepresentation of *Abundance* as an injustice. But Vyse notices from the beginning that the letters from women are unusually short: this is the first clue that something is wrong. Vyse, after a careful analysis of the writing, style and content of the letters, reveals to Betton that all the letters were written in the same hand, and that a letter he wrote in his own name to a female admirer of the novel came back to him marked "Dead Letter Office," whereas a letter he wrote to the same woman in Betton's name did not come back. The narrative underlines the physical symptoms of Betton's trouble when Vyse explains that he thinks all the letters are "a hoax" (771-2). His exaggerated laughter when Vyse unconvincingly suggests that perhaps the valet, Strett, is the author of the letters, and his "gentle irony" when he doubts Vyse's "ingenious conjecture" (772) are the final clues leading the reader to conclude that the author of the fake letters could only be someone living in Betton's flat—that is to say Betton himself. The letters written to himself in the name of imaginary readers are in fact addressed to Vyse and meant to preserve his image in the mind of the secretary he feels so superior to. By replying to these imaginary readers, Vyse then writes to none other than Betton himself, thus closing the first "circle" in the story.
- 21 The dramatic intensity of the duel between the authors culminates in the fourth part of the story. Betton, aware that Vyse knows he is the author of the letters, says to Vyse: "If you suspect [*Strett*] you'll be thinking next that I write the letters myself", after which the letters stop coming. The narcissistic reason why Betton is nevertheless forced to keep Vyse in his service is expressed in direct speech ("If I ship him now he'll think it's because I'm ashamed to have him see that I'm not getting any more letters") and reveals the power the secretary has won over his employer. The master-servant relationship is thus inverted,<sup>7</sup> when Vyse kindly predicts that *Abundance*, which Betton calls a "confessed and glaring failure" (773), will be shown to be a success by another wave of admiration: "this is just a temporary lull in the letters. They'll begin again—as they did before. The people who read carefully read slowly—you haven't heard yet what *they* think." With this promise, Vyse asserts his power of manipulation over Betton's state of mind, who immediately feels "a rush of puerile joy at the suggestion" (774).
- 22 The third rush of letters, unlike the ones Betton wrote, is characterized by the sociological variety of the "careful readers." These "really remarkable letters" have great literary "quality":
- One of the writers was a professor in a Western college; the other was a girl in Florida. In their language, their point of view, their reasons for appreciating *Abundance*, they differed almost diametrically; but this only made the unanimity of their approval the more striking. The rush of correspondence evoked by Betton's earlier novel had produced nothing so personal, so exceptional as these communications. (774-5)
- 23 The psychological plot reaches its highest degree of complexity as Betton grows increasingly obsessed with Vyse's opinion of his failures and success and develops the rivalry with him, focusing not only on literary issues, but on sentimental issues as well:

He had gulped the praise of *Diadems and Faggots* as indiscriminatingly as it was offered; now he knew for the first time the subtler pleasures of the palate. He tried to feign indifference, even to himself; and to Vyse he made no sign. But gradually he felt a desire to know what his secretary thought of the letters, and, above all, what he was saying in reply to them. And he resented acutely the possibility of Vyse's starting one of his clandestine correspondences with the girl in Florida. (775)

24 Betton announces his decision to answer the most laudatory letters himself and begins a correspondence with a woman he becomes infatuated with—just as Vyse was previously fascinated with one of the fictional female correspondents Betton invented and named Hester Macklin.

25 The novelist delights in these correspondences as he finds in them the “proof of his restored authority” and evidence that Vyse was right when he predicted *Abundance* would find its own public:

The professor's letters satisfied his craving for intellectual recognition, and the satisfaction he felt in them proved how completely he had lost faith in himself. He blushed to think that his opinion of his work had been swayed by the shallow judgments of a public whose taste he despised. [...] All this the professor's letters delicately and indirectly conveyed to Betton, with the result that the author of *Abundance* began to recognize in it the ripest flower of his genius. But if the professor understood his book, the girl in Florida understood *him*; and Betton was fully alive to the superior qualities of discernment which this process implied. For his lovely correspondent his novel was but the starting point, the pretext of her discourse: he himself was her real object. [...] Betton's agreeable person had permitted him some insight into the incorrigible subjectiveness of female judgments, and he was pleasantly aware, from the lady's tone, that she guessed him to be neither old nor ridiculous. (776)

26 This passage, which underlines the vanity and male chauvinism of the character, also confirms that Vyse is the author of the letters. But the secretary not only flatters his employer's taste for praise, he also courts him: the two authors are trapped in a kind of mediated love relationship. The initial device of Vyse's writing in Betton's name is made more complex by this sub-plot in which Vyse seems to know Betton's temper and weaknesses so well that he is able to make Betton fall in love with a fictional woman he has created—but also, in a way, fall in love with his writing. The second “circle” which gives its title to the story is completed when Vyse writes letters to Betton in the name of readers who do not exist and Betton addresses his letters to none other than Vyse himself, believing he is writing to a woman.

27 In a comic repetition of the same inverted scene, Betton tells Vyse that a letter he wrote to the girl in Florida has come back marked “Dead Letter Office” and that he knows Vyse is the author of “her” letters just as he himself had been the author of the fictional Hester Macklin's letters. This scene, in which letters are discovered to be the medium of two consecutive manipulations, makes the story a parody of a detective novel, as Betton exposes Vyse's as well as his own duplicity. This subversion of a literary genre in the frame of a psychological plot is made more complex by the irony contained in the dialogue, in particular when Betton reveals to Vyse how clear-sighted Vyse has been in the diagnosis of his failings: “you saw I couldn't live without flattery” (779). As Charlee M. Sterling suggests, “though Wharton almost reflexively employs simple irony where and when useful, it is her employment of double irony that marks her as an ironist *par excellence*” (21). Betton's irony concerning Vyse's trickery indeed coexists with the irony of which he is the conscious object.

- 28 At the end of the story, then, letter writing paradoxically demonstrates the power of fiction. Betton renounces his usurped superiority when he denounces Vyse's duplicity, while simultaneously praising his stylistic talents and sense of psychology:

those letters were wonderful [...]! [...] [W]hen you'd foolishly put me on my guard by pointing out to me that they were a clumsy forgery, and had then suddenly guessed that I was the forger, you drew the natural inference that I had to have popular approval, or at least had to make you think I had it. [...] And so you applied your [...] immeasurably superior [...] abilities to carrying on the humbug, and deceiving me as I'd tried to deceive you. And you did it so successfully that I don't see why the devil you haven't made your fortune writing novels! [...] The way you differentiated your people—characterised them—avoided my stupid mistake of making the women's letters too short and logical, of letting my different correspondents use the same expressions: the amount of ingenuity and art you wasted on it! (779-80)

- 29 The conclusion is ironic in tone. When Betton makes amends and apologizes for not having helped his friend, Vyse denies that he has written the false letters either for sympathy or because of a desire for revenge. He simply needs money. Betton acknowledges Vyse's superiority in the interpretation of people's attitudes, whereas he failed to understand he was deceived by Vyse. Since the letters written by the latter are said to have the quality of literary writing, it seems that the story pays homage to the plasticity and eloquence of epistolary writing.
- 30 Wharton's three short stories confronting characters who are authors with the joys and pains of epistolary writing demonstrate her interest in a literary topic particularly favourable to the *mise en abyme* of the dangers and difficulties of authorship. These meta-literary fictions allow her to investigate, ironically, the narrative possibilities offered by the letter motif. The moral ambiguities of the private correspondence of public figures—occupying a space between the private and the public, between sincere self-expression and the desire to manipulate, between simple communication and complex art—are all presented here. More generally, insofar as the letter motif enables Wharton to reflect in these stories on writing and the power of writing, it also provides a critical image of literature.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Benstock, Shari. *No Gifts from Chance. A Biography of Edith Wharton*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994.
- Donovan, Josephine. *After the Fall. The Demeter-Persephone Myth in Wharton, Cather, and Glasgow*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1989.
- Haytock, Jennifer. *Edith Wharton and the Conversation of Literary Modernism*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008.
- Singley, Carol J. *Edith Wharton. Matters of Mind and Spirit*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.
- Sterling, Charlee M. *Irony in the Short Stories of Edith Wharton*. Lewiston, Queenstin, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005.

White, Barbara Ann. *Edith Wharton. A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twaine Publishers, 1991.

Wharton, Edith. *Collected Stories 1891-1910*. Ed. Maureen Howard. New York: The Library of America, 2001.

---. *Collected Stories 1911-1937*. Ed. Maureen Howard. New York: The Library of America, 2001.

---. *The Collected Short Stories*. 2 Volumes. Ed. R. W. B. Lewis. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968.

---. *The Writing of Fiction*. New York, London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925.

Witzig, M. Denise. "The Muse's Tragedy' and the Muse's Text: Language and Desire in Wharton." In *Edith Wharton. New Critical Essays*. Ed. Alfred Bendixen and Annette Zilvermit. New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1992: 261-270.

## NOTES

1. See White (62-63) on the question of gender and narrative.
2. "April Showers" similarly quotes from a letter which is sent to the wrong addressee, is misinterpreted by her, and is then used as a symbol for misunderstanding and as a narrative device to unmask the character's tendency to be fooled by her own presumptions (*The Collected Short Stories* vol. I 189-96).
3. Dale may seem to be an avatar of Wharton herself and the title of Dale's novel, *Pomegranate Seed*, strikingly anticipates that of a story Wharton published in 1936 in the collection *The World Over*.
4. This is the plot of "Writing a War Story" in which Wharton uses a *mise en abyme* to deal with the question of the "subject" and satirize "inspiration" and the artificial opposition between form and content in literary works.
5. The character draws this biblical metaphor by approximately quoting the parable of the sower (282) told by Christ in three of the gospels (for instance Matthew, 13: 3-9).
6. See Singley (6).
7. Jennifer Haytock develops a radical interpretation of this relationship: "Betton and Vyse become so engrossed in the other's reaction to their joint situation that they become a closed loop of correspondence. Each man lives off the other as a succubus, Betton feeding his ego and Vyse his body" (93).

---

## ABSTRACTS

Cet article analyse l'interaction entre le motif épistolaire et l'enjeu de la création littéraire dans les trois nouvelles de Wharton qui insèrent l'outil narratif et/ou l'objet littéraire réaliste qu'est la lettre dans des intrigues centrées sur des personnages d'écrivains ("The Muse's Tragedy," "Copy" et "Full Circle"). Il met au jour la réflexion métalittéraire critique menée par l'auteur sur les différents versants de l'écriture, épistolaire et fictive, ainsi que le traitement ironique et moraliste que la nouvelliste applique à l'ambiguïté fondamentale du texte épistolaire, vecteur

d'une expression censément privée ici livrée publiquement, partagé entre la revendication d'une vérité et la recherche d'effets esthétiques, qui confine à un véritable jeu de rôles stylistique.

## AUTHORS

### AUDREY GIBOUX

Audrey Giboux is the author of a PhD in Comparative Literature on Hugo von Hofmannsthal and the reception of French classical literature. Her work focuses mainly on the relationship between classical literature and modernity, and more especially on the notions of modern classicism and modern ethics.