Reading and Readers in Edith Wharton’s Short Stories

Agnès Berbinau-Dezalay

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1242
ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher
Presses universitaires d'Angers

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 June 2012
Number of pages: 93-108
ISBN: 0294-0442
ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference
Agnès Berbinau-Dezalay, « Reading and Readers in Edith Wharton’s Short Stories », Journal of the Short Story in English [Online], 58 | Spring 2012, Online since 01 June 2014, connection on 05 May 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1242

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In her edition of The Journal of a Disappointed Man, by W.N.P. Barbellion, Wharton underlined the following passage on the role of a porter in a library:

[He] spends his days keeping strict vigil over his catacomb of books, passing along between the shelves and yet never paying heed to the almost audible susurrus of desire—the desire every book has to be taken down and read, to live, to come into being in somebody's mind [...] A Book is a Person and not a Thing. (qtd. in Ramsden x)

With the evocation of a catacomb, the public library is endowed here with a tomb-like dimension and presented as a shelter for books—so many souls left on the banks of the Styx, longing for a reader to come and resurrect them, thus challenging the boundaries of time and oblivion. The reader is a smuggler, but also an archaeologist who digs out forgotten treasures, and even a magician who can hear the voices of books and bring them back to life. Such were the calls that the young Edith Wharton heard in the volumes enclosed in her father's library: when she took them out of the oak bookshelves and started reading them, she transformed these inanimate objects into living companions. For Wharton reading was not a passive activity: it transmutes people and things.

Associating transgression with reading may sound paradoxical when referring to the work of a novelist whose environment was the highly codified upper-class New York and New England society at the turn of the twentieth century. A novelist, moreover, who advocated notions of order and selection as guiding principles in her essay The Writing of Fiction. Yet, reading and the figure of the reader are the means chosen by Wharton to express and underline deviation from the established norm, and to emphasize the discrepancy she perceived between what might be and what really was, between an ideal world and disappointing reality. A further paradox lies in the fact that her awareness of that essential divergence is to be found more specifically in the genre most constrained by formal norms: the short story. The stories that Wharton wrote all her life were so many narrative spaces within whose limits the writer felt free to express both her resistance to norms and her aspirations to an imaginary elsewhere. It was here too that
she developed a sentimental trend that she condemned so vigorously in her critical essays.

Yet reading doesn’t always take on positive connotations in Wharton’s work. Making literature one’s only reality may amount to being trapped like Don Quixote who, having read too many books of chivalry within the walls of his library, ended up perceiving the outside world through the distorting lens of literature. In the same way as Cervantes’s professed goal in writing the adventures of Don Quixote was to alert his readers to the risks of reading novels of chivalry, Edith Wharton’s aim when including readers of sentimental stories in her short stories was perhaps to better reassert the superiority of realism in literature. Yet both authors helped bring to the fore the very type of literature they intended to debunk. Analyzing the role of reading and readers in Wharton’s short stories is thus another way of addressing the subversive trends in Wharton’s work.

Transgression can be understood in various ways when connected to reading and readers: first, books and their environment provide the possibility of transgressing physical boundaries by projecting the reader into remote places and ancient times; within Wharton’s short stories as well as without, readers can be categorized as transgressors or conformists according to what they read and how they read, but also according to their gender; transgressing the limits imposed by reality through reading is shown to be potentially dangerous, since it often confronts the readers with their inability to overcome the barriers of reality and to exist in a world governed by other norms. The brief experience of escape through reading is therefore likely to lead to disenchantment and to the necessity for readers to adjust to their disappointing environments.

Reading: Transgressing Boundaries

In chapter XI of Edith Wharton’s long novel Hudson River Bracketed, Heloise Vance warns young Vance Weston when he discovers the rows of books in Miss Loburn’s library: “Don’t shake the books as if they were carpets, Vance; they’re not. At least they’re only magic carpets, some of them, to carry one to the other side of the moon” (113). Reading is clearly defined here as a way of transgressing spatial boundaries and being projected into another reality, ruled by other norms, “on the other side” of the known world. Books become passports to a new land; they are the screens on which the reader’s fancies may crystallise. When recalling her own childhood, Edith Wharton remembered her fascination for the printed pages of Washington Irving’s Alhambra before she could even read:

There was richness and mystery in the thick black type, a hint of bursting overflowing material in the serried lines and scant margin. [...] Well— the “Alhambra” once in hand, making up was ecstasy. At any moment the impulse might seize me; and then, if the book was in reach, I had only to walk the floor, turning the pages as I walked, to be swept off full sail on the sea of dreams. (Backward Glance 34)

Merely looking at undecipherable characters on a page immediately conveys marvellous visions, the materiality of the novel seeming even more likely to entail creativity (“making up”) than actual reading, because one’s fancy is not curbed by the story’s limits of time and space.

As a little girl, Edith Wharton had her most extraordinary travelling experiences reading books in her father’s library.
Whenever I try to recall my childhood it is in my father’s library that it comes to life. I am squatting again on the thick Turkey rug, pulling open one after another the glass doors of the low bookcases, and dragging out book after book in a secret ecstasy of communion. (Backward Glance 69)

Here, the library is presented as both enclosed—a confined room where the little girl is alone and where books themselves are locked in bookcases—and dynamic, allowing passionate exchanges between the child and the books she ardently devours. The library paradoxically provides a fenced-in frame for a form of communion which transgresses physical boundaries. In Wharton’s short stories, where the library is usually the heart of the house, the same ambivalence is to be found: it stands both for utmost confinement—as in “Afterwards” or “The Other Two”—and radical openness onto the world, such as that experienced by the fifteen-year-old Troy Belknap in “The Marne,” on his way to Europe.

Another of his cronies, the library steward, had unlocked the book-case doors for him, and buried for hours in the depths of a huge library armchair (there weren’t any to compare with it on land) he had ranged through the length and breadth of several literatures. (261)

Paradoxically, the young boy doesn’t experience the enchantment of travelling on deck, as he gazes at the immensity of the ocean. The lexical field of confinement, referring both to the boy and to the books he releases from their cages, enhances the geographical metaphor standing for the distances travelled by turning the pages of books. The library is both a u-topos and a u-chronos: it is a moving isolated island, which enables the reader to transcend physical boundaries. It provides a counterpoint to a reality that may seem dull or disappointing, especially in the eyes of a child who feels somewhat estranged from his environment.

So reading makes it possible to transgress the frame of a closed room. It also provides an opportunity to go beyond the boundary of death and to transcend the barrier between the self and others. “Meanwhile, though living authors were so remote, the dead were my most living companions” (Backward Glance 69). Readers have the power to resurrect forgotten books and books are seen as media allowing them to befriend dead writers who people their solitude. But books are also treasures around which the living happy few may gather; in Wharton’s case, all her friendships—with Walter Berry, Henry James, and Bernard Berenson among others—were linked to books. Another paradoxical characteristic of the ambivalent Whartonian library is therefore that it stands for both solitude and friendship, for isolation and communion through the exchange of reading experiences or simply a shared taste for beautiful bindings.

In the short stories, the mere presence of books in a room is sometimes enough to convey a sense of intimacy and friendship, while suggesting transgression: this is the case of Lizzie Hazeldean’s drawing-room in “New Year’s Day,” where the narrator marvels at the ability of that vaguely scandalous woman to create an atmosphere where men feel at ease, far from the fetters of social norms. By fusing two traditionally distinct spaces—the library and the drawing-room—thus transgressing the architectural codes prevailing in New York at the end of the nineteenth century, Lizzie Hazeldean asserts her status as a marginal woman and offers the appropriate setting for other kinds of transgressions—of a moral nature this time—which explains the attraction she exerts.

In her article “The Architecture of the Short Story: Edith Wharton’s Modernist Practice,” Michele S. Ware underlines the links between the organization of a house and the
structure of a short story. Indeed the paradoxical dimension of the Whartonian library as a place characterized both by confinement and connection finds a formal counterpart in the genre of the short story—the most suitable form to express the aspirations and transgressions connected with reading. Michele Ware observes that both the structure of a house and that of a narrative must obey the principles of symmetry and proportion: Wharton’s essay *The Writing of Fiction* echoes the architectural precepts presented in *The Decoration of Houses.* Just as in a house each room should have its own particular nature while being integrated into a harmonious whole, the majority of Wharton’s short stories are divided into sections which have their own specificity and yet participate in the overall coherence of the narrative. This gives the evolution of the plot its rhythm and helps to throw into relief significant contrasts or meaningful consequences.

“A Journey” thematically takes up the motif of the partition by staging a woman and her husband travelling in separate berths. The man dies during the journey, and the woman tries to hide his death until they reach their final destination, thus transgressing the law that would have obliged her to get off the train with the body before she arrived at her destination. The whole narrative is organized around the notion of fragmentation, the opposition between the outside and the inside, and the growing distance between the woman and the man who is partly hidden behind a curtain. “A Journey” illustrates the formal constraints that, according to Wharton, preside over the elaboration of a short story—proportion, coherence, symmetry, the first line finding an echo in the last one—and also suggests, through the behavior of the woman, that transgression can be found within the very limits imposed by these restraints.

So, in “A Journey” as in so many of Wharton’s stories, the author paradoxically chose that most codified form to express her doubts as to the validity of norms. The tight structure of the story enables Wharton to point to the opposition between the ideal and the real and to deviate from her own professed belief in realism. Indeed, the expression of the characters’ disillusionment, and their aspirations to a vaguely defined “elsewhere,” is mainly to be found in the short stories, and more specifically among readers, who are more likely to be aware of the gap between the dullness of their lives and the models they discover in books.

Yet, although reading seems to favor transgression, not all Wharton’s readers are tempted to emancipate themselves from conventions, and reading sometimes even lies on the side of the acceptance of norms.

**Readers: Conformists or Transgressors?**

In the short stories, reading appears as one of the defining features of a character—it is part of the social image he or she projects. But various factors—and above all gender—affect that image. There are male readers and female readers, and they are not perceived in the same way by their social environment. In Wharton’s narratives, reading is usually a subversive activity for women and a conformist one for men. Indeed, unsupervised reading was considered as a threat to a young girl’s morality in the upper-class society in which Wharton was raised and most of her short stories are set. New York society in the 1860s was characterized by the wariness of all forms of intellectualism. In that context, women who read were usually marginalized. This accounts for the fact that they are often chosen as the main protagonists of the short stories, which explore the fates of those who don’t conform to the norm, who embody some form of deviance from the established
order. In Wharton’s stories, two main categories of female readers—that sometimes merge—may be identified: bookworms, deprived of all power of attraction, and other readers who provoke curiosity and convey a sense of mystery, precisely because they are readers. In “Atrophy,” Nora Frenway is considered by all her acquaintances to be a conventional woman who respects the norms of her social circle: “Not that she was a woman to be awed by the conventions. She knew she wasn’t. She had always taken their measure, smiled at them—and conformed” (437). The intransitive use of the last verb, separated from the rest of the sentence by a dash, underlines Nora’s submission to the laws that rule her world. Respecting conventions is presented as a categorical imperative. Although the short story was published in 1927, at a time when old New York had been invaded by those whom Wharton considered as parvenus, the old model persisted. Nora is an adulterous woman, and to hide that ultimate transgression (what she calls her “real life” 436), she carries to extremes her respect for norms in everyday life. Reading is part of her strategy of dissimulation, and it is seen in the story as a means of making her undesirable: “No one had ever suspected Nora Frenway. Didn’t she know what her friends said of her? ‘Nora? No more temperament than a lamp-post. Always buried in her books . . . Never attractive to men, in spite of her looks” (439). In the eyes of the world—and of men more specifically—a woman who reads loses her power of seduction. Reading places Nora on the margin of her social circle, but not the same margin as that in which adultery places her: in the end, although reading is associated with boredom and is used by Nora as evidence of her respect for convention, it is also characteristic of woman whose non-standard behavior is likely to provoke scandal.

18 Wharton repeatedly denounced the impossibility, for a woman, of being recognized as an intellectual in American society, and intellectual female readers are often associated in her tales with something deadly. In “The Angel at the Grave,” Paulina has specialized in the works of her grandfather, Orestes Anson, and is presented as the Sybil in charge of interpreting the oracles left by the idol. The vocabulary of religion in the Ancient world (“altar,” “worship,” “temple,” “idolatry,” “Persephone,” “the House possessed her”) pervades the story and contributes to the image of Paulina as young virgin shut up in her role as a medium between the sacred and the profane. Everyone acknowledges her intelligence and literary skills, but everyone also denies her creative power. Like the Sybil who preserves her chastity, she refuses to follow the man who offers to take her away from her deadly environment.

19 However, when reading is disconnected from intellectualism, as it is with Mrs. Hazeldean in “New Year’s Day,” female readers are presented in terms of the power of seduction with which reading endows them. They are mostly perceived through masculine points of view, which seems to show that while denouncing the difficulties met by women in her time, Wharton does not radically question the social order responsible for that situation. She never promotes the image of an intellectual woman who succeeds in life without owing her success to the way men see her.

20 The way male readers are seen is altogether different. Reading does not set them apart from the group and is even sometimes simply conventional. In an increasingly materialistic society, some men do not read at all. In “Charm Incorporated,” Targatt spends more time in Wall Street than in his library: “In fact, he had never had time to read, or to think consecutively on any subject but money-making” (656). His lack of interest in reading is associated with his incapacity to see what is taking place under his own roof: a man who does not read is blind to the world around him. Yet reading may
also be a factor of isolation for men, the symptom of their refusal to accept others. Reading of non-subversive works, especially religious works, sometimes even threatens human fellowship. In “The Seed of Faith”—one of the rare tales set in Africa—young Willard Bent, who questions the usefulness of his mission in an indifferent, even hostile environment, wonders at the apparent serenity of the leader of the Mission. Willard attributes Blandhorn’s absence of doubt to the kind of books he reads: “he never read anything but the Scriptures, a volume of his own sermons [...] and—occasionally—a back number of the missionary journal that arrived at Eloued at long intervals, in thick mouldy batches” (394). Far from offering an opening to otherness, this narcissistic reading of his own sermons reinforces Blandhorn’s isolation: “no doubts disturbed him” (394). Here reading is perceived as a factor of ignorance, erecting yet another barrier between Blandhorn and his immediate surroundings and signalling the failure of his “mission.”

Even in cases less extreme than “The Seed of Faith,” male reading is seldom linked to transgression. In fact it is often a way of conforming to a social model according to which it was an essential part of the education of a young gentleman. Men who show a real taste for literature are not despised, but they place themselves outside their social environment in order to observe it at a distance and with condescendence, conscious of the superiority that culture confers. Male readers stand intentionally on the outskirts of society, without running the risk of being excluded from it. However, although their detachment allows them to see the flaws of their environment, it also blinds them. And distance sometimes turns into insensitivity or cowardice. Thursdale in “The Dilettante,” for example, or Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence, are learned men who prefer to live in a world of books rather than do what is expected of them as men. 7

Besides the gender divide, Wharton provides other positive and negative images of readers in her stories, distinguishing between the good and the bad reader, between what, in her essay “The Vice of Reading,” she calls the “innate” and the “mechanical” reader. She defines the innate reader as someone who is able to tell a good book from a bad one, to select the works he reads instead of accumulating them, 8 and to establish connections between the various books he has read. The innate reader delights in “intellectual vagrancy,” “the improvised chase after a fleeting allusion, suggested sometimes by the turn of a phrase or by the mere complexion of a word,” he uses the book “as the keynote of unpremeditated harmonies, as the gateway into some paysage choisi of the spirit” (Uncollected Critical Writings 102). When it comes to reading, Wharton praises vagrancy, detours, and wandering. The mechanical reader, who reads a book from the first to the last page, misses the adventure of reading, the opportunity to discover words, and through them, to meet the writer. Considering books as mere objects, the mechanical reader fossilizes them by placing them in separate corners of his mind, instead of establishing fruitful connections between them, and between himself and the author:

What is reading, in the last analysis, but an interchange of thought between writer and reader? If the book enters the reader’s mind just as it left the writer’s—without any of the additions and modifications inevitably produced by contact with a new body of thought—it has been read to no purpose. (Uncollected Critical Writings 99)

For Wharton, good reading implies a reader who doesn’t passively receive the writer’s words as if he were listening to a monologue but actually enriches the work with his own past reading experiences.
In the short stories, evocations of mechanical readers are numerous and usually ironic. Members of reading clubs, like the one founded by Mrs. Ballinger in “Xingu” (“regard literature as a cable-car that can be ‘boarded’ only by running” (Uncollected Critical Writings 100):

Mrs. Ballinger is one of the ladies who pursue Culture in bands, as though it were dangerous to meet alone. To this end she had founded the Lunch Club, an association composed of herself and several other indomitable huntresses of erudition. (1)

The use of the present tense makes Mrs. Ballinger both universal and timeless. She stands for all the women whose intellectual pretensions Wharton constantly stigmatizes in her work. The “indomitable huntresses of erudition” are so many representatives of readers who perceive culture as yet another social convention. Reading in clubs is thus devoid of the subversive dimension reading takes on when performed by women individually. For Mrs. Ballinger the contents of a book matters little. What counts is to “keep up” and to be able to talk about “the Book of the Day” (7)—in this case Osric Dane’s “The Wings of Death,” whose subject remains very blurred in the women’s minds. In a way, all books become synonymous for Mrs. Ballinger, since they all represent the constant challenge of maintaining one’s social position by being “up to date” (7). Her mind is no longer a library, but a hotel instead, “where facts came and went like transient lodgers, without leaving their address behind, and frequently without paying for their board” (7). Literature passes through it without leaving a trace. What counts is “the moment,” and time is no longer perceived as continuous but as constantly repeating itself. Books become mere objects of consumption for readers on the run. The content of what is read is progressively reduced from books to reviews and finally to the slogans to be found on magazine pages. Books are products and the techniques used to sell them are as efficient as those used for any other commodity.

Still, for all her stigmatization of the financial interests connected with literature and for all her scorn for the average reader, Wharton had to cater for the tastes and requirements of her readers. Her stories were bought by magazines whose priority was to sell as many issues as possible. Wharton also had to contend with censorship. Jessica Levine has shown that “The Old Maid” (the story of a spinster who, in spite of appearances, once had a passionate love story and has an illegitimate daughter) was refused by several magazines because the narrative was deemed too “vigorous.” Wharton addressed subjects that sounded subversive and shocking to her contemporaries (adultery, illegitimate children, free union) while preserving her position in the American world of letters, but had to water-down the last two stories in Old New York. And Gianfranca Balestra underlines that while she praised ambiguity and ambivalence in “tales of the fantastic,” Wharton adapted to her readers by adding explanations at the end of some of her ghost stories in order to make them more intelligible.

As well as stigmatizing the ignorance and arrogance of the mechanical reader, Wharton denounces books that reveal the secrets of celebrities and fuel voyeurism and an unhealthy taste for scandal. “The Touchstone” starts with an invitation from Margaret Aubyn’s biographer to send him letters written by the famous author. Glennard, who has kept many of the love letters Aubyn addressed to him, thinks he might publish them and then marry his lover, Alexa Trent, with the money he earns. The story is a reflection on guilt, on literature as a commercial enterprise, and on the connections between public persona and private self. Magazines are omnipresent in the story—the Spectator, the
Horoscope, the Radiator—and are associated with vulgarity since they exhibit a respectable woman’s private life. Magazine readers are ultimately held responsible for the publication of the letters. Their reading them is described as a vice, a form of unhealthy addiction. That, at least, is the way Mrs. Touchett evokes her own relation to the book:

“I’m positively sick of the book and I can’t put it down. Can’t you sail us beyond its reach, Mr. Flamel?

Flamel shook his head. “Not even with this breeze. Literature travels faster than steam nowadays. And the worst of it is that we can’t any of us give up reading; it’s as insidious as a vice and as tiresome as a virtue.

“I believe it is a vice, almost, to read such a book as the Letters,” said Mrs. Touchett. “It’s the woman’s soul, absolutely torn up by the roots—her whole self laid bare; and to a man who evidently didn’t care; who couldn’t have cared. I don’t mean to read another line: it’s too much like listening at a keyhole.” (192)

Reading is a vice, an inescapable disease rather than a pleasure, as is the exposure of a soul that was meant to remain hidden. In fact, reading Margaret Aubyn’s letters is obscene: “it’s much like listening at a keyhole,” says Mrs. Touchett. The use of the verb “listening” underlines the fact that it is Mrs. Aubyn’s voice that can be heard through these letters, a voice absorbed by, and put to the service of, masculine exploitation. If publication has been made possible—and profitable—it is ultimately because of readers’ fondness for this sort of reading.

So there is a negative kind of transgression connected with reading in Wharton’s short stories. More generally, the stories point to the risks run by those who have spent too much time in the library.

The Dangers of Transgression

Just as Don Quixote’s reading of novels of chivalry distorted his vision of reality, readers in the short stories come to perceive their environments in new ways. Most often, reading is closely intertwined with their longing to escape from some form of confinement, to reach an “elsewhere” defined as the opposite of reality. Reading is both the cause of longing (by supplying the image of what is outside the walls of the “prison”) and a remedy to the feeling of boredom born of confinement, since it offers at least temporary escape. Yet reading too much may lead readers to shut themselves up in another kind of prison and to lose touch with reality. Mme Bovary’s fate—itself closely linked to that of Don Quixote—shows to what extent reading may be assimilated to a disease. Confined within the walls of a convent as a girl, Mme Bovary read too many sentimental novels and they distorted her vision of reality. She constantly expected real life to fulfill her dreams—and was always disappointed. Wharton’s readers are contaminated by the same disease of anticipation, felt through the recurring use of the modal “would,” which implies uncertainty while carrying the promise of a better future. In “The Recovery,” Claudia Day is presented as “flushed with anticipation” (272):

The vision of herself walking under the “historic elms” toward the Memorial Library, standing rapt before the Stuart Washington, or drinking in, from some obscure corner of an academic drawing-room, the President’s reminiscences of the Concord group—this vividness of self-projection into the emotions awaiting her made her glad of any delay that prolonged so exquisite a moment. (273)

Claudia relishes not the prospect of a love affair but that of the adventure of knowledge that she is about to embark on. Her pleasure—the evocation is not devoid of sexual
connotations—derives from the fact that Claudia imagines a moment that is bound to be marvellous but which she cannot picture precisely. Reading, in other words, contributes to the distortion of vision, including vision of the self: self-fictionalization is to be found in many of Wharton’s short stories.

In many cases, literature progressively invades the readers’ reality from the outside. It is sometimes so present in the minds of the characters that it becomes an obstacle in their real lives. In “The Long Run,” Merrick misses his chance to experience happiness for fear that his life might resemble a bad sentimental novel. When Paulina Trant suggests moving in with him, he perceives her offer as “an act of romantic folly” (128). Convention is a barrier which, like literature, prevents him from fully living in the present moment.

Literature, in other words, sometimes kills life. Instead of providing an opening onto the world, it represents another kind of confinement. As in the case of Mme Bovary, the pleasure of anticipation turns into a form of deadly obsession and all books become synonymous since they merely fuel a desire that can never be satisfied. In the end, anticipation turns out to be no more than the projection of a disappointment to come. In Wharton’s stories reading often conjures up visions of an elsewhere that can never be actually reached. Two poles are thus juxtaposed: the hope of flight and the subsequent awareness that the dream can never come true. Those who have been led to read reality through the filter of literature end up, at some point, adjusting to their environment. They are confronted with the knowledge that “would” will never be real. And their resignation is purely passive: the failure of romance does not imply a victory over reality. “The Long Run” is a good illustration of the tragic results of giving up romantic aspirations. Halston Merrick and Paulina Trant, at first defined by the way they stand out from the group, become dull, faded parts of the social tapestry. Merrick, recalling the hopes nourished at the time of their idyll, sounds all the more pathetic as we know they have not come true: “Well, with her one had the sense that one would never have to come back; that the magic ship would always carry one farther. And what an air one breathed on it! And, oh, the wind, and the islands, and the sunsets!” (123). He is evoking an “unmapped” (a favourite word of Wharton’s), imaginary world, a u-topos, where social rules no longer apply. But the magic ship gets lost before it reaches the harbour: “This thing between us isn’t an ordinary thing. If it had been we shouldn’t, all these months, have drifted. We should have wanted to skip to the last page—and then throw down the book” (130). The metaphor of the sea is mixed here with that of reading—if one’s dreams are to be lived out, the book must, at some point, be closed. Yet Halston has renounced the open sea and he and Paulina have been compelled to re-establish themselves on land, in the social tapestry they had left behind.

Almost all of Wharton’s readers finally adapt to reality, they resign themselves to accepting their lives, dull and conventional as they are. “Resigned adaptations,” an expression used in “The Triumph of Night,” sounds almost redundant in Wharton’s universe. Examples of “reasonable” adjustments proliferate, sometimes in the form of a marriage, which often stands for renunciation. In “The Letters,” after discovering that her husband has not read a single one of the letters she sent him while they were apart, Lizzie contemplates leaving him. But the loss of illusions leads to resignation: “she understood now that she had gradually adjusted to the new image of her husband as he really was, as he would always be. He was not the hero of her dreams, but he was the man she loved, and who loved her” (897). So, the acceptance of fate lies on the side of maturity, while enchantment and illusions—like reading itself—are associated with youth.
and sentimentalism. The final message is blurred: is the author a moralist who prefers conservative outcomes, or does she glance ironically at the superficial satisfaction of those who end up respecting norms instead of transgressing them?

If reading in Wharton’s short stories at first seems to be connected to a positive kind of transgression synonymous with adventure, discovery and openness, not all the stories actually offer an opportunity for escape—some reinforce the confinement of the readers’ social environment instead—and not all the readers in the stories are positive transgressors. Reading ultimately leads the reader back to reality once he has realized that, as Sinclair Lewis put it, fantasy is actually “fallacy.” The overall effect of the omnipresence of books and readers in Wharton’s short fiction is to underline what Wharton saw as the unbridgeable gap between the ideal and the real. But Wharton also uses books and reading as a means to reveal her own temptation to deviate from the norm, whether social or literary, a disjunction that accounts for the disillusioned tone that prevails in all her work. The stories are, paradoxically, the frames within which Wharton most freely expresses her own longing for emancipation, and through her disillusioned characters, she represents her own disappointed dreams. She suggests the desirability of transgression while showing its dangers and ultimate impossibility. But the stories also provide a form that allows her to demonstrate her virtuosity as a writer, imposing her own rules onto a reality whose laws cannot be transgressed.

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NOTES

1. In her article “Children and Readers in Edith Wharton’s Fiction,” Elsa Nettels shows that Edith Wharton reproduces through the characters of young readers—most of whom are boys—the
magical and exclusive dimension linked to the activity of reading which she herself experienced as a child.

There was in me a secret retreat where I wished no one to intrude, or at least no one whom I had yet encountered. Words and cadences haunted it like song-birds in a magic wood, and I wanted to be able to steal away and listen when they called. (Backward Glance 70)

The exclusion linked to reading works both ways: by travelling imaginary distances, readers elaborate for themselves private fictional spaces nobody can trespass, peopled by imaginary companions belonging to other times and places, at odds with their dull or aggressive environment.

2. Edith Wharton was herself an adept of rare collections and devoted much time to the meticulous arrangement of her numerous libraries, at The Mount (Massachusetts) and in the two houses she owned in France.

3. “What is there in the atmosphere of such houses that makes them so enchanting to a fastidious and imaginative youth? Why is it that ‘those women’ (as the others call them) alone know how to put the awkward at ease, check the familiar, smile a little at the over-knowing, and yet encourage naturalness in all? The difference of atmosphere is felt on the very threshold. The flowers grow differently in their vases, the lamps and easy-chairs have found a cleverer way of coming together, the books on the table are the very ones that one is longing to get hold of. The most perilous coquetry may not be in a woman’s way of arranging her dress but in her way of arranging her drawing-room; and in this art Mrs. Hazeldene excelled” (305).

4. The Decoration of Houses was Edith Wharton’s first major success as a writer. It is an essay she wrote with Ogden Codman and in which she exposed the principles that should preside over the organization of a house: proportion (in the relation of each part with the whole) and symmetry.

5. “One of the most obvious formal characteristics of Wharton’s short stories is their compartmentalization, a kind of fragmentation without the implied discontinuity” (Ware 20).

6. The fear of the bad influence on women of the reading of fiction dates back to the origins of the United States at the end of the eighteenth century, when the fact that women might read European novels was considered a threat to the integrity and innocence of the young American nation that women were supposed to preserve: “In the newly-constituted USA, the alleged evils of reading fiction appeared especially pernicious, for the vitiated sentiments of European novels were perceived to pose an insidious threat to the purity of the nation and the future of republicanism. […] And if fiction was especially dangerous when transported to American soil, it was considered to be most dangerous of all in the closets of American women, for Jefferson’s American ‘Angels’ were regarded as the moral guardians of the new republic” (Wood 169-170).

7. Emily J. Orlando underlines the passivity of a number of male readers in Wharton’s fictions, suggesting that reading tends to feminize men, thus leading to another kind of transgression, that of genders.

8. In The Writing of Fiction, Wharton places the principle of selection at the core of the elaboration of a short story, thus linking the good reader and the good writer.

9. Magazine publishers were indeed submitted to the pressure of groups like “The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice” founded in 1872 and led by John S. Sumner, whose influence was reinforced during the First World War. In the 1920s, the norms of “decency” in literature were still close to Victorian norms. Recent “picture” or “yellow” magazines like McClure’s, Ladies’ Home Journal, The Saturday Evening Post or The Cosmopolitan shared the cautiousness of older reviews like Century, Scribner’s or Harper’s which felt responsible for the cultural standards they offered their learned readers.

10. Joan Del Fattore says as much: “she recognized the fact that adjustment to life sometimes entails a compromise with one’s private self which constitutes a betrayal” (953).
Dans les nouvelles d'Edith Wharton, la lecture semble indissociable d'une forme de transgression, ce qui est paradoxal de la part d'un écrivain revendiquant un certain conservatisme dans ses essais théoriques comme dans sa perception de l'ordre social. La lecture est d'abord un moyen de s'affranchir des carcans géographiques et temporels en projetant le lecteur de l'espace clos de la bibliothèque vers l'ailleurs. C'est au sein du cadre très codifié des nouvelles, images formelles de la bibliothèque, que Wharton exprime de façon privilégiée un écart par rapport à la norme, et prend acte, le plus souvent à travers ses personnages de lecteurs et de lectrices, du décalage qui sépare le réel d'un idéal souvent mal défini. Pourtant, la lecture peut parfois être mise au service d'un certain conformisme, puisqu'elle détermine le regard que l'environnement social porte sur un individu. La typologie générique que l'on peut établir à la lecture des nouvelles trouve un écho dans la distinction opérée par Wharton entre « lecteurs mécaniques » et « lecteurs nés » qui ont fait l'expérience d'une forme de décentrement par le biais des livres. Cependant, lecture et transgression ne sont pas sans danger : liée à un désir d'évasion, la littérature peut déformer la perception que le lecteur a du monde et le condamner à se heurter sans cesse au démenti du réel. Chez Wharton, la déformation temporaire de la vision se solde toujours par un ajustement qui équivaut à une résignation, la reconnaissance de la victoire d'un environnement décevant.

**AUTHORS**

**AGNÈS BERBINAU-DEZALAY**

Agnès Berbinau-Dezalay, a former student of the École Normale Supérieure and a holder of the Agrégation in English, has a doctorate in American Literature. She taught at the University of Paris for four years and is currently teaching students in classe préparatoire littéraire (khâgne) at Lycée Auguste Blanqui in Saint-Ouen. Her research focuses mainly on the work of Edith Wharton: in her thesis she analysed quixotism in Edith Wharton’s and Sinclair Lewis’s short stories, and in 2008 she published an article entitled “La Bibliothèque, (auto)portrait d’Edith Wharton” in Conserveries Mémorielles.