“Writing a War Story”: The Female Author and the Challenge of Witnessing

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Edith Wharton’s “Writing a War Story” was first published in Woman’s Home Companion in September 1919. With incisive wit and pitiless irony it skewers its protagonist, “Miss Ivy Spang, of Cornwall-on-Hudson,” for her pretensions to literary talent and useful war service alike (247). A decidedly minor poet who is asked to contribute a short story to a well-meaning publication aimed at convalescent soldiers, Ivy struggles to balance the rival claims of literary fashion, subject matter and audience. In the desperation of her looming deadline, she plagiarizes the private diary of her French governess, who has worked in a war hospital, and turns a story “Mademoiselle” has heard and recorded from one of her patients into sentimental short fiction. At first Ivy seems to have scored a roaring success with the soldiers in her own ward, but she is soon mortified to discover that none of them has read her story—her “success” lies in its flattering accompanying photograph of the young authoress in nurse’s uniform. Ivy’s shame at being so objectified is undercut by her own earlier pride at her appearance in the photograph.

The story unsettles the common critical assumption that the First World War made Wharton temporarily abandon the irony that was her sharpest literary tool. Instead, despite its lightweight comic tone, the story reveals the complexity of Wharton’s attitude to the war and its impact on literary culture, as well as foregrounding larger issues of truth-telling, authority, gender and witnessing that have long challenged war writers, both combatant and civilian. Read in conjunction with Wharton’s non-fiction war writings, her short story “Coming Home,” and her novella The Marne, “Writing a War Story” demonstrates that Wharton was capable of thoughtful reflection and self-satire regarding her position as a female author and a witness to horrors she could not share.
The target of Wharton’s irony in the story is not just naïve Ivy, but the literary culture that fosters her pretensions and encourages her to prioritize form over content. “Writing a War Story” satirizes several venues of publication and review: one proto-modernist, one an opportunist war venture, and one a middlebrow, wide-circulation literary magazine. The story deals as much with the challenge of publishing as composing a war narrative, and it presents us from the start with a heroine who is vainly but not impractically concerned with the public reception of her writing. Ivy enthusiastically responds to the flattery of “the editor of ‘Zig-zag’, the new ‘Weekly Journal of Defiance’”—proudly unpopular avant-garde “little magazine” with echoes of Blast. The absurdity of his claim that her poems would “‘gain incommensurably in meaning’ when she abandoned the superannuated habit of beginning each line with a capital letter” makes it clear that Ivy’s first failure lies in choosing the wrong mentors for her art (247). The announcement that with the outbreak of war Ivy “forgot all about writing poetry” seals her reputation as a dilettante.

Yet more mainstream literary magazines also provide little guidance. On the beach, struggling with her recalcitrant “Inspiration,” Ivy picks up a discarded copy of another magazine, “the midsummer ‘All-Story’ number of ‘Fact and Fiction’” (249). Unlike “Zig-zag,” this publishes established authors—ones that Ivy judges harshly from their opening lines: “She may not have known much about story-writing, but she did know that that kind of a beginning was played out.” The “played-out” beginning—“In the month of October, 1914—” is ascribed to “one of the most famous names of the last generation of novelists,” and Ivy’s rejection of it is clearly tongue in cheek, for in its bluntness it echoes Wharton’s own, slyly last-generation opening, “Miss Ivy Spang, of Cornwall-on-Hudson—” (250). The representation of this magazine, with its parade of clichéd stories by outdated authors, may reveal some self-consciousness on the author’s part about the venues in which her own stories would subsequently appear. As Sarah Whitehead has discussed, Wharton’s publishing relationship with Scribner’s Magazine ended in 1919, ushering in an era of increased compromise with editorial staff over her stories, in accordance with the move to more middlebrow venues like Woman’s Home Companion (one of the six best-selling publications in the first half of the twentieth century). The commercial “framing” of stories in these magazines—in the form of illustrations, advertisements and other texts—inevitably affected their reception and meaning. The magazine’s publication of 57-year-old Wharton’s own photograph next to “Writing a War Story” was a particularly ironic framing of a story that turns on the sex appeal of an author’s image. However, Wharton could also turn the frame to her advantage: a predominately female readership would likely be more sympathetic in their interpretation of the story’s ending, which details Ivy’s humiliation at the hands of an exclusively male audience. To the extent that Wharton saw readers as part of the meaning-making process, the targeting of female readers here seems a deliberate effort to introduce an extra, situational level of irony to the otherwise misogynistic ending.

“Writing a War Story” is at heart a self-referential tale. Ivy’s youthful naïveté, her plagiarism and her humiliation are deployed in order to raise questions Wharton asked herself about authorial perspective and privilege during wartime: who should be writing war stories, and in what form? How do the inevitable limits on information and blockages of vision affect the judgments and interpretations of the writer? As Barbara A. White notes, there are “unmistakable clues” that help to “detect” Wharton in Ivy
Spang: Ivy’s story is called “His Letter Home,” evoking Wharton’s own 1915 story for *Scribner’s Magazine*, “Coming Home,” while the protagonist of Ivy’s story and of Wharton’s January 1919 story “The Refugees” share the last name Durand (White 87). These connections do not simply poke retrospective fun at Wharton’s own wartime literary output, but more pointedly target the publications that are soliciting pretty, marketable writers for war stories. It is the editor of “The Man-at-Arms” who asks Ivy directly for a story with a “Coming-Home scene to close with.” His requirements are plainly absurd: in addition to the paradoxical “tragedy with a happy ending,” he also wants “all the articles written by people who’ve done the thing themselves, or seen it done.” The facts that Ivy’s war service is the elegant and bloodless work of “pouring tea once a week” in a Paris hospital, and the nearest she has been to the front is “as far as Rheims, once,” are nevertheless no barrier to her producing “a good stirring trench story” (248).

The magazine which is to publish Ivy’s story is, in her words, “the opening number of ‘The Man-at-Arms,’ to which Queens and Archbishops and Field Marshals were to contribute poetry and photographs and patriotic sentiment in autograph!” (248). In scope and prestige, it echoes a similar project Wharton herself undertook at the outset of the war, the anthology *The Book of the Homeless*. As Peter Buitenhuis describes it, this was a collection of poetry and art by an array of artistic luminaries, for which, with customary energy, “Mrs. Wharton solicited the manuscripts, edited them, translated the French and Italian pieces, got Theodore Roosevelt to write an introduction and General Joffre a dedicatory letter, then herself wrote a preface and had it ready for the press by the end of 1915” (494). Clearly her editorial judgment and energies were more carefully directed than the unnamed editor of “The Man-At-Arms,” and her collection was undertaken to raise money for refugees, not “bring joy to the wounded and disabled in British hospitals” (248). Nevertheless, the comic rendering of Ivy’s enthusiasm for the venture suggests again that Wharton was capable of turning an ironic retrospective gaze on her own wartime activities—especially since the resulting fictional anthology is a failure, “made up in equal parts of tired compositions by people who knew how to write, and artless prattle by people who didn’t” (255).

In her chapter “Telling a Short Story” in the postwar *Writing of Fiction*, Wharton lays out several rules for the form. The most important principles are “selection and design,” and the goal of the story is not character development (as it is in a novel) but the representation of a “situation,” classically unified by time and by the single perspective of the central “reflector.” Furthermore, the end must be in sight from the beginning—a rule that Ivy breaks, in her obsession with beginnings and her faith that everything else will follow automatically. Without a clear idea of the ending, a story will end up with what Wharton dismisses as the “machine-made ‘magazine-story’” kind of ending, and without organic unity (excerpted in White, 135). In Ivy’s final opportunity for understanding and praise, from the fortuitous presence in the hospital of a renowned novelist-turned soldier, she encounters a distinctly Whartonian critic. Although he has in fact read her story, his laughter tells her everything she needs to know, and his blunt assessment—“You’ve got hold of an awfully good subject [...] but you’ve rather mauled it, haven’t you?”—makes it clear that the story’s failure is the mismatch of its content and form (259).

Ivy’s “subject” is derived from her governess’s diary, a genuine document of witnessing, the plain and factual tone is clearly a more powerful narrative mode than
Ivy’s sentimental storytelling: “‘Military Hospital No. 13. November, 1914. Long talk with the Chasseur Alpin Emile Durand, wounded through the knee and the left lung at the Hautes Chaumes. I have decided to write down his story...’” The diary, which is “written in a close, tremulous hand,” and “pour[s] on and on without a paragraph—a good deal like life,” shows honesty and accuracy in the act of bearing witness; Ivy’s judgment, that “Decidedly, poor Mademoiselle did not even know the rudiments of literature!” (253) proves once again the limits of her shallow formalism. Yet Ivy is also led astray by external pressures—the requirements for a happy ending, a dash of sentiment, a thrill, and a neat resolution. In the context of war, such compromises carry significant ethical consequences.

9 Edith Wharton’s war was a French war. Her love of the country and her identification with its values were deeply rooted, and she experienced the outbreak of war as a profound shock. She was not alone in her sense of the war as a cataclysmic rupture with the past, which would constitute a radical challenge to literature. Henry James, too, expressed in no uncertain terms his belief that the war would destabilize the civilized world and would prove impossible for the artist to represent: “such realities play the devil even with his very best imaginations and intentions” (qtd. in Price 1997, 27). Many combatant writers later expressed a similar sense of representative impossibility, although based more on the incommunicable horrors of their personal experience. For Wharton and James, the threat to France was connected to everything that they valued about their adopted nation, everything represented in Wharton’s postwar collection of articles French Ways and their Meaning which, by “extolling French intellectual and social values,” were intended as a postwar guide for Americans to the real importance of the country (Price 1996, 169). The war’s threat to “civilization” was a threat to culture, and especially to literature.

10 In “Writing a War Story,” Ivy Spang’s first difficulty is that she finds herself “suffering from a plethora of impressions” and unable to shape them into fictional form (249). Wharton’s first war writing was similarly impressionistic, and she battled her editors at Scribner’s Magazine in order to publish her non-fiction articles in preference to short stories—although they continued to insist on a story, and paid her half as much for her non-fiction impressions of the war as for her 1915 story “Coming Home” (Price 1996, 44-56). “The Look of Paris” appeared in the May 1915 issue, followed by a further five articles in subsequent months, which detailed her visits to the front with the Red Cross and were collected as Fighting France later in 1915. Describing the first few days of the war, she uses metaphors drawn from natural disaster to convey her sense of shock, and to reinscribe observable disruptions such as mobilization—compared to a “huge break in the normal flow of traffic, like the rupture of a dyke” (6)—as signs of the unseen, historic cataclysm: “Like a monstrous landslide [the war] had fallen across the path of an orderly laborious nation, disrupting its routine, annihilating its industries, rending families apart, and burying under a heap of senseless ruin the patiently and painfully wrought machinery of civilisation . . . ” (5).

11 Wharton did not, however, occupy the status of a neutral observer. She was actively soliciting wealthy Americans for donations for the various charities and relief efforts she had played a part in establishing, and thus her “impressions” also had to convey a sense of the moral virtue of the mobilized nation. She used paradox (and played on her readers’ prejudices about the French) in order to heighten the dignity of the people—“the dramatic sense of the [French] race had already told them that the event was too
great to be dramatised”—and the city: “The sudden flaming up of national life, the abeyance of every small and mean preoccupation, cleared the moral air as the streets had been cleared, and made the spectator feel as though he were reading a great poem on war rather than facing its realities” (8). Any hint of artistic decadence is cleansed from the city streets. This latter vision also makes a casual but important distinction between war poetry and war’s “realities,” suggesting that for Wharton, the two could not be made to coexist. This has the effect of shielding literature from the responsibility to bear witness, but it also raises the question of how “realities” were to be faced, and what value poets could have in wartime.7

A repeated trope of Fighting France is the interplay of attachment and rupture, in which the “ceaseless vigilant attachment of generations faithful to the soil” is evoked in order to represent its opposite, the war’s violent modernizing break with the past (3). Colm Tóibín, in his introduction, quotes the historian Graham Robb to convey the real immense historic change that mobilization—let alone the war—in fact represented for a predominantly rural nation: “Until 1st August 1914, no piece of news had ever reached the entire population on the same day” (viii). Although the essays show Wharton sometimes writing “at the top of her voice,” her subject is nothing less than instantaneous and universal change in the lives and movements of an entire population (Price xiii). In her wartime fiction, a similar structure of continuity and violent interruption is employed to convey the magnitude of loss. In the novella The Marne, the protagonist Troy Belknap’s visit back to his beloved tutor’s village conveys loss through the negation of what was there before: “The church, once so firm and four-square on the hill, was now a mere tracery against the clouds; the hospice roofless, the houses all gutted and bulging, with black smears of smoke on their inner walls” (284). Yet this negation at the same time offers a flash of imaginative restoration—the “firm and four-square” church appears for a moment to fill out its burned outline.

In “Coming Home,” Wharton reverses the strategy that she uses in Fighting France; rather than using the image of ruins to evoke the value of what has been destroyed, she attempts first to convey the value of “home” and to generate suspense from the possibility of its loss. A jaded American narrator tells the story of his comrade’s increasingly anxious homecoming to a village in the part of France that has been apparently devastated by the machinations of a particularly devilish German commander. The protagonist’s name, Jean de Réchamp, is identical with that of his village, thus embedding him in the landscape and making the personal and geographic losses and costs identical. Réchamp does not know what has happened to his village or his family, so for most of the story destruction is left to our imagination, piquing a lurid curiosity to uncover horrors that have been hinted at. This somewhat manipulative structure aims to provoke the fear of loss, the joy of reunion and the renewed pain of separation—exactly the effects Ivy Spang’s editor wanted for her homecoming story.

However, in order to ground its archetypal sentimentalism in reality, “Coming Home” draws directly on Wharton’s own observations of the Vosges region of France where the story is set. In the story, the narrator notes that, “[t]he sense of loneliness and remoteness that the absence of the civil population produces everywhere in eastern France is increased by the fact that all the names and distances on the mile-stones have been scratched out and the sign-posts as the cross-roads thrown down” (39). The detail precisely mirrors Wharton’s observation in Fighting France: “In this part of the country, which is one of many crossroads, we began to have unexpected difficulty in finding our
way, for the names and distances on the milestones have all been effaced, the signposts thrown down and the enameled *plaques* on the houses at the entrance to the villages removed." (38).

Fiction and non-fiction diverge, however, in the representation of the enemy. In *Fighting France* the Germans are a shadowy collective presence, whereas in the story, their inchoate “evil” is encapsulated in a single figure, the devilish Oberst Von Scharlach, who is known to be in the area inhabited by the family and fiancée of the story’s hero. Scharlach’s artistic refinement enhances his cruelty—he “made a painting of the ruins”—yet his acts of violence are not described, depending instead on the reader’s imagination, fueled by newspapers and anecdotal evidence: “Put together the worst of the typical horrors and you’ll have a fair idea of it.” (41) The story’s atmosphere of dread relies on its readers’ familiarity with the “typical horrors” contained in reports of German atrocities committed as they invaded Belgium and France. The more lurid of these stories—of nuns and priests killed at prayers, babies impaled on bayonets, widespread rape and murder—became the stuff of propaganda posters and cartoons, and passed into something like folklore. Such excesses tended to undermine the credibility of more sober reports, and civilian belief in these stories is usually taken as evidence of the power of propaganda. However, recent research in German military archives has suggested that more than 6,000 Belgian civilians were killed during the first two months of the war, purportedly in response to guerilla attacks.

The stories that reached French, British and American ears, however, contained no such military rationale (accurate or otherwise) and the victimization of Belgium was crucial to the representation of that country during the war and in mobilizing wealthy Americans to make charitable contributions. In *The Marne* Wharton makes no attempt to conceal the titillating appeal of these stories in New York society: “Here was Mr. So-and-So, just back from Belgium—such horrible stories—really unrepeatable! Don’t you want to come and hear them, my dear? Dine with us tomorrow” (274).

Stories of atrocity and victimization allow little room for resistance, only for noble suffering. It is intriguing, therefore, that Wharton chose, in “Coming Home,” to show the power of compromise—effectively, of collaboration—as an effective strategy in protecting against devastation. As Barbara White puts it, the story can be read as “an adventure with a female hero” in Yvonne Malo, Jean’s fiancée, who keeps the family safe through her own, implied, sexual sacrifice to Scharlach (85). The family she protects is depicted as provincial, moribund, and “helpless,” while Yvonne represents the New Woman—financially independent, sexually experienced, artistic, and at home in Paris. Her self-possession suggests the potential that the war could offer liberation as well as suffering for women. Although the story closes with the implication that Jean murders Scharlach, it is sufficiently ambiguous to undercut any sense that he is taking effective revenge for her violation. Yvonne has managed to rescue herself, and her survival is her own affair.

In *Fighting France* Wharton’s central challenge lies in getting near enough to “the war” to truly be in a position to observe and represent it. The titles of many contemporary published journals and later memoirs by women—including May Sinclair’s *Journal of Impressions in Belgium* (1915), Mildred Aldrich’s *On the Edge of the War Zone* (1917), Ellen LaMotte’s *The Backwash of War* (1916), and Mary Borden’s *The Forbidden Zone* (1929)—testify to a sense of exclusion from the war zone, or at least of confusion at being
unable to form a coherent picture from what has been witnessed. Many combatant memoirs, meanwhile, express the frustrated sense of being “in” the war yet unable to see it, or more powerfully, the horror of being unable to do any more than watch—enduring the “helpless sight” that haunts the speaker’s dreams in Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” (15). The pieces collected in *Fighting France* are similarly united by their emphasis on looking and the struggle for the best vantage point. Wharton emphasizes the variety of perspectives available to her on to the battlefield, and maintains a delicate, often uncomfortable balance between witnessing and spectatorship. This discomfort is highlighted in her wartime fiction, in which the effort to get close to the war and report back becomes as competitive as the pre-war race for the newest Paris fashions: “After all, Mrs. Belknap wasn’t the only person who had seen a battlefield! Lots and lots more were pouring home all the time with fresh tales of tragedy: the Marne had become—in a way—an old story” (*The Marne*, 273).

The struggle to see becomes a struggle to represent, and Wharton finds herself calling upon older literary and artistic models to grasp for expression, from nineteenth-century—“It was gay and terrible’ is the phrase forever recurring in *War and Peace,* and the gaiety of war was everywhere in Cassel”—to much older forms: “the cavalry galloping by in single file suggested a black frieze of warriors encircling the dun-coloured flanks of an Etruscan vase” (68, 80). Such moments of cultural connectivity might seem like a retreat from the effort to grasp and record what is really happening, but for Wharton, literary and artistic allusions are part of what makes the world comprehensible. Her descriptions of the front are most vivid when she is not writing “at the top of her voice,” but when she employs the more subtle eye of the artistically minded social satirist—for instance, reading the scene at a restaurant in Châlons as if it were a ballroom: “within the last two years the question of colour has greatly preoccupied the French military authorities, who have been seeking an invisible blue; and the range of their experiments is proved by the extraordinary variety of shades of blue, ranging from a sort of greyish robin’s-egg to the darkest navy, in which the army is clothed” (24).

*Fighting France* reveals Wharton—whose journeys to the front were sanctioned by the highest authorities and combined with carrying necessary supplies to the war zone—as indefatigable in the struggle to be an eyewitness. Her excitement when there is finally something to see is palpable: told that the fighting is visible from a nearby garden, she exclaims, “It did not take us long to reach that garden!” Opera glasses have given way to field glasses, which give a similarly tantalizing, and highly aestheticized, glimpse of the action: “a little corner of the battle of Vauquois was suddenly brought close to us—the rush of French infantry up the slopes, the feathery drift of French gun-smoke lower down, and, high up, on the wooded crest along the sky, the red lightnings and white puffs of the German artillery […] we stood there dumbfounded at the accident of having stumbled on this visible episode of the great subterranean struggle” (29). The more common invisibility of the war is evident in the repeated possibility of similar “stumbles”—visiting a village close to the German frontier in Lorraine, Wharton has to be “abruptly pulled back” and warned “Take care—those are the trenches!” (56) The undetectable presence of the enemy transforms the landscape itself, so that its bucolic appearance becomes deceptive: “The longer one looked, the more oppressive and menacing the invisibility of the foe became. ‘There they are—and there—and there.’ We strained our eyes obediently, but saw only calm hillsides, dozing farms. It was as if the
earth itself were the enemy, as if the hordes of evil were in the clods and grass-blades” (51).

In the absence of “visible episodes,” Wharton relies on absence itself to evoke the war, focusing on the emptiness of the landscape as contrasted to its busy and useful pre-war condition. It is the encounter with absence, with emptiness, at the start of her piece “The Argonne” which first stimulates the exclamation “This is war!” (22). What war is, and where it is, is a pressing question throughout Wharton’s journey. Even at the end of her tour, Wharton still presents herself as struggling to comprehend the war’s reality: “It was one of those strange and contradictory scenes of war that bring home to the bewildered looker-on the utter impossibility of picturing how the thing really happens” (97). The most powerful image of what the war might really mean is etched on the faces of those who have seen what “really happens,” yet Wharton’s powers of observation and imagination fail her at this crucial moment. Watching a line of éclopés in Châlons—the walking wounded and shell-shocked—she observes that “it is a grim sight to watch them limping by, and to meet the dazed stare of eyes that have seen what one dare not picture” (23). This is the line between spectator and witness—the spectator can choose not to see.

In her novella *The Marne*, published in *The Saturday Evening Post* on 26 October 1918, the young protagonist, Troy Belknap, is engaged in a constant struggle to get close to the war, and to the fantasy of maturity, wisdom and meaning that it embodies. Wharton again draws on her descriptions of the countryside in *Fighting France* to evoke Troy’s romantic attachment to the country, although from the beginning this landscape is represented as fleeting and fragile, glimpsed from the window of his mother’s “noiseless motor”:

The little boy’s happiness would have been complete if there had been more time to give to the beautiful things that flew past them; thatched villages with square-towered churches in hollows of the deep green country, or grey shining towns above rivers on which cathedrals seemed to be moored like ships; miles and miles of field and hedge and park falling away from high terraced houses, and little embroidered stone manors reflected in reed-grown moats under ancient trees. (262)

The paradoxical mobility of this landscape—flying past and falling away—as seen from the window of the “Pegasus motor” means that he cannot grasp its significance until he sees it from the inside, visiting the family of his young tutor, M. Gantier. The temporary reversal of perspective, as Troy peers out through “small window-panes looking on old box-gardens that he was always being whisked past in the motor,” briefly opens up the real meaning of France and its rootedness in the past (263). When the name of the little town appears in the daily wartime communiqués, its loss recalls it vividly to Troy’s memory: “He saw all these modest beaming people grouped about Mme Gantier’s coffee, and Papa Gantier’s best bottle of ‘Fine’; he smelt the lime-blossoms and box, he heard the bees in the lavender, he looked out on the rich fields and woods and the blue hills bathed in summer light. And he read: ‘Not a house is standing.’” (265) The “landslide” that Wharton predicted in 1914 sweeps away a vision that has barely taken shape for Troy, and this loss of something he never quite possessed sharpens his lasting sentimental attachment to France and his desire to fight and die for her.

The excesses of Troy’s attachment tend to overshadow the ironic bite of the story, which satirizes American attitudes to the war as wavering between curiosity, self-satisfaction and outright boredom. Nor does the narrator quite spare Troy, whose
passion for the war is driven primarily by an adolescent desire to be taken seriously, to live up to his warlike name. Sent back to school, his descriptions of what he has seen—“his haunting impressions of the Marne”—merely earn him the deflating nickname “Marny Belknap” (273). Troy finally makes it back to France at the end of the war because he begs for the trip as a birthday present, arguing that his parents have always indulged him in the past. But he is still too young to fight and has to serve his time in a volunteer ambulance unit, until in the midst of the confused retreat from the Marne, he is hoisted up into a truckload of American soldiers heading into battle. However, he doesn’t even get to fire a gun before he is shot in the back during a reconnaissance raid, and “rescued” by the spirit of his dead tutor who embodies the spirit of the Marne. Ending with Troy in hospital, confused about what—if anything—he has done, the end of the story reads like defeat snatched from the jaws of victory.

For most of the story Troy struggles, as does Wharton in *Fighting France*, to approach near enough to see action: “Here he was, once more involved in one of the great convulsions of destiny and still almost as helpless a spectator as when, four years before, he had strayed the burning desert of Paris, and cried out in his boy’s heart for a share in the drama” (292). Yet he does not understand that the “drama” is not a visible spectacle, but is dependent on the imagination of its audience to create a meaning that transcends its observable reality. Recovering in hospital, he has to be told after the fact, “Battle of the Marne? Sure you were in it—in it up to the hilt, you lucky kid!” (307). The story ends with Troy’s resolution to follow the spirit of his tutor, the spirit of the Marne, back to the battlefields of France. For “Marny” Belknap, that battlefield is mystic and eternal; the transmutation of champs de bataille into Champs-Elysées is a curious comfort to Troy, although most likely not for those reading about him in the final days of the war.

Tim O’Brien’s “How to Tell a True War Story,” is an influential analysis, part memoir and part polemic, of the methods and meanings of war writing. It is structured as a series of vignettes, told by the narrator but usually paraphrased from another storyteller, interspersed with a relentless digging away at the notion of truth-telling. In tone, vocabulary and historical setting, the story could not be further from Edith Wharton, but the story offers an illuminating counterpart to “Writing a War Story.” As Ivy eventually learns to do, O’Brien’s narrator privileges the content of the story over its form, yet at the same time recognizes that the story—its “subject” or its “truth”—cannot be conveyed from teller to listener without form. The responsibility of the storyteller is therefore to listen, like Ivy’s governess, and to communicate as far as possible without “mangling” the truth to fit the aesthetic values of the short story.

At the same time, as Wharton implies when she alludes to Tolstoy, the idea that a “true war story” can be lifted clear of literary influence may be an impossible requirement: war does sometimes fit the parameters of fiction and recall other stories. The narrator of “Coming Home,” describing the reunion of Jean with his old servant, protests to his audience, “I know you affect to scorn the cinema, and this was it, tremolo and all. Hang it! This war’s going to teach us not to be afraid of the obvious” (43). O’Brien too considers the question of true stories that nonetheless fit sentimental narratives, and reaffirms the importance of “grounding reality,” without which “it’s just a trite bit of puffery, pure Hollywood, untrue in the way all such stories are untrue” (83).

Wharton’s efforts to get close enough to the war to see and understand its reality, and bear witness to its effects, are clearly compromised by her inability to see and
represent the enemy as anything but a malevolent, inhuman force. Her perspective is based on “passionate Francophilia” and the privilege of a wealthy outsider, who is nevertheless allowed closer to the front than most journalists (Buitenhuis 496). What is “obvious” from such a position is not the whole truth. Yet her commitment to representing the war from her own direct observation is evident in her correspondence with her Scribner’s editors about “Coming Home,” in which she claims to have “revised and completed the story from direct personal impressions” (qtd. in Price 1989, 98). Despite the incomplete success of her war stories, her susceptibility to sentiment and her partisan thinking, Edith Wharton’s wartime writings attest to her belief that the war mobilized authors to the urgent challenge of bearing witness. Her tireless efforts to get close to the fighting, meanwhile, make it clear that she could accept no “impressions” other than her own.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Buitenhuis, for instance, calls The Marne “the most naïve and sentimental fiction she ever wrote,” and notes that most critics have deemed her 1923 war novel A Son at the Front “irrelevant” (497; 498).

2. The editors of the Library of America edition of Wharton’s later stories seem to invite this reassertion of irony; by placing “Writing a War Story” directly before The Marne, the reader cannot help but detect a similar “mangling” of an authentic story in this earlier piece.

3. Blast, Wyndham Lewis’s short-lived literary and art magazine, published two editions in 1914 and 1915, and was uncompromising in its editorial polemics, while “Zi-g-zag”’s commitment to vers-libre, and poetic form over content, seems to satirize the pre-war Imagist poets, several of whom were featured in Blast.

4. Whitehead argues that this breaking-up of a text with illustrations and advertisements, and excerpting parts of it for marketing purposes, means that “no other literary genre encourages a reader to approach a text in such a disrupted manner as that of the magazine.” Yet she does not wholly agree with critics who see Wharton’s writing for “middlebrow” magazines as a lowering of standards: instead, the play of ambiguity and closure becomes more delicate, generating “narratives that are simultaneously explicit and subtle” (49).

5. Whitehead cites Wharton’s preface to her collection Ghosts (1937), which laments the “withering” of her readers’ “creative faculty” (48).

6. Fussell gives the most influential account of this phenomenon, in The Great War and Modern Memory.

7. W. B. Yeats, approached by Wharton to contribute to her anthology The Book of the Homeless, took a different view in his short poem “Reasons for Keeping Silent,” later re-titled “On Being Asked for a War Poem,” and implicitly questions Wharton’s firm distinction between poetry and reality. The poem begins “I think it’s better that in times like these/A poet’s mouth be silent,” suggesting that if poetry cannot “set a statesman right” it has no use in wartime (The Book of the Homeless 45). This stance made him a rare dissenter in the flood of patriotic poetry that greeted the outbreak of war.

8. The most recent historical study of this period is by Horne and Kramer. Their subtitle A History of Denial makes clear their stance that the atrocities have too often been dismissed as propaganda.

9. In The Writing of Fiction Wharton defined the novella, or the “long short story” as a form suited to “any subject too spreading for conciseness yet too slight in texture to be stretched into a novel” (excerpted in White, 132). This rather vague and negative definition may account for some of the imbalances in The Marne.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article tente d’éclairer la complexité de la représentation littéraire de la guerre pour Wharton, à la lumière de « Writing a War Story » et des écrits sur la guerre rassemblés dans Fighting France. Comme beaucoup de combattants et d’infirmières auteurs de témoignages, Wharton pose la question de la légitimité et du point de vue dans tout discours fictionnel sur la guerre. Les textes de Wharton montrent aussi en quoi le caractère limité de la vision d’un auteur a une incidence sur ses jugements et ses interprétations. Ils posent le problème éthique d’une
esthétisation de la guerre. « Writing a War Story » pose ces questions sous une forme satirique, à travers le cas d’Ivy Spang, femme de lettres mineure, à qui on demande d’écrire une brève nouvelle pour une publication distribuée aux soldats à l’hôpital. Au début, Ivy semble être très appréciée des soldats, jusqu’au moment où elle découvre que le bon accueil réservé à sa nouvelle doit beaucoup à la photographie flatteuse de l’auteur en uniforme d’infirmière qui accompagne le texte. La cible de la satire est le monde littéraire qui alimente les prétentions d’Ivy et fait passer la forme avant le contenu. La nouvelle éclaire la tension entre les obligations de l’auteur en tant que témoin et son rôle d’artiste créateur, tension présente également dans les témoignages de Wharton.

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