“Sermons in Stone”: Théophile Gautier’s *Emaux et Camées* and Edith Wharton’s “The Eyes”

Joseph Urbas
Edith Wharton’s ghost story “The Eyes” (1910) contains a rather curious reference to Théophile Gautier (1811-1872). Andrew Culwin, the dilettante who narrates his personal experience of visitation by a pair of sinister eyes, slips in the reference when describing the fruitless efforts of his former protégé Gilbert Noyes, a faithful follower of the French writer’s esthetic doctrine: “he kept on repeating Gautier’s axiom, and battering and filing at his limp prose till he’d spread it out over Lord knows how many hundred pages.”¹ The axiom is identified by Maureen Howard, in the Library of America edition of Wharton’s short stories, as a famous line from the preface to Gautier’s novel Mademoiselle de Maupin (1836): “Nothing is truly beautiful unless it is useless” (928n). Is this the most likely source? Perhaps not. If Gautier’s doctrine of l’art pour l’art is what Wharton had in mind, then the irony seems overly subtle, especially when applied to a secondary figure in the tale. For the gloss to make sense, Noyes would have to embody the axiom unawares, as a cruel split between self and art: the young man is as “beautiful” (820) as his prose is “useless” to publishers, who are relentless in their refusals of everything he submits.²

Although the standard gloss cannot be ruled out,² the resulting interpretation seems overwrought and inconsistent with the specific imagery of Culwin’s description, which points to another source in Gautier’s œuvre. A more likely inspiration—already suggested glancingly by Frederick Wegner³—is Gautier’s Emaux et Camées, which makes a far better fit with the brevity and the moral and esthetic self-awareness of “The Eyes.”³

In his famous volume of poetry, Gautier champions the art of the small masterpiece and compares the perfection of form attainable in the short lyric to the exquisite
craftsmanship of the jeweller or sculptor. The closing poem, “L’Art,” which provides a self-referential summary of the esthetic principles behind the collection as a whole, may help us to understand the deeper aims of Wharton’s reference to Gautier. As it happens, Gautier wrote more than one axiom. Here is another, which *Emaux et Camées* seeks to exemplify and which may be paraphrased as, “the harder the material, the more beautiful the form.” Thus Gautier, in the boldly axiomatic opening stanza of “L’Art”:

Oui, l’œuvre sort plus belle
D’une forme au travail
Rebelle,
Vers, marbre, onyx, émail. (Gautier 148.1)
Yes, fair-wrought verse shuns pliant
Form; beauty craves the touch
Defiant:
Marble, onyx, and such. (Shapiro 263)

The closing stanza, which puts the finishing touch on the volume and its metaphor of the poet as sculptor or jeweller, may well be what Wharton is ironically echoing in the description of Noyes’s “battering and filing”:

Sculpte, lime, cisèle;
Que ton rêve flottant
Se scelle
Dans le bloc résistant! (Gautier 150.14)
Sculpt, chisel, file, and let
Your flotsam dream, wind-blown,
Be set,
In the resisting stone! (Shapiro 267)

Noyes’s failure as an artist may be understood in precisely the terms laid down by Gautier in this final exhortation. Noyes’s material—his “limp prose”—is inherently unsuitable for crafting; and the predictable result is a sprawling mass (“spread . . . out over Lord knows how many hundred pages”), rather than the tight construction and hard finish of the small masterpiece—for example, the perfectly executed sculpture of a woman’s hand that Gautier holds up as a model in “Etude de Mains”:

Pur fragment d’un chef d’œuvre humain. (Gautier 32.1)

**Sculpte, Lime, Cisèle**

There are a number of indications that Wharton may have had *Emaux et Camées* specifically in mind when she composed “The Eyes.” To begin with, I would cite a compelling piece of external evidence. Wharton quoted Gautier’s exhortation *sculpte, lime, cisèle* in an article that appeared in *Scribner’s* magazine in February 1910, just a few months prior to the publication of “The Eyes” in the same journal (*Uncollected Critical Writings* 191). In tribute to one of her close friends, the poet George Cabot Lodge, Wharton took issue with a simplistic application of Gautier’s doctrine. Cabot Lodge’s long verse drama “Herakles”—whose composition Wharton describes in curiously Gautierian language (“the image he had so patiently sought to shape emerged at length from the marble”)—seemed to her an exception to the rule:

The theory that the artist should sacrifice much to produce little—the “sculpte, lime, cisèle” of Gautier—seems sometimes to be confused with the notion that abundant production is proof of mediocrity. Mediocrity, alas, is often fertile; but so, almost always, is genius. Taken by itself, abundance, in the sense of capacity for sustained expression, is a hopeful sign; and it is well that a young poet should
measure himself with a long task. Cabot Lodge, in “Herakles,” certainly proved the value of the effort. (Uncollected Critical Writings 191)

7 In an admirably rich and suggestive note on the quotation, Frederick Wegener observes that Henry James had quoted “L’art” in full in an essay devoted to Gautier in French Poets and Novelists (1878). James described “L’art” as “the singularly perfect little poem which closes the collection of chiselled and polished verses called ‘Emaux et Camées’” (359). If James had nothing but the highest praise for this collection of “goldsmith’s work,” in which “every poem is a masterpiece” (362), he considered “L’Art” as “Gautier at his best” and—interestingly, for any discussion of “axioms”—“the only very distinct statement of intellectual belief that we remember in his pages” (359).

8 It is difficult to imagine that Wharton could have been unaware of James’s essay, which underscores what he saw as the moral dimension of Gautier’s poetry, over and against the doctrine of l’art pour l’art:

[T]he artificer of “Emaux et Camées” was presumably of opinion that it is idle at all times to point a moral. But if there are sermons in stones, there are profitable reflections to be made even on Théophile Gautier; notably this one—that a man’s supreme use in the world is to master his intellectual instrument and play it in perfection. (356)

9 James was convinced that “L’art,” in particular, had a moral dimension: “These admirable verses seem to us to be almost tinged with intellectual passion. It is a case of an esthetic, an almost technical, conviction, glowing with a kind of moral fervour” (361). Wegener suggests that where Gautier was concerned Wharton “did not perhaps share James’s conflation of the moral with the esthetic, or his unqualified enthusiasm.” Wegener sees Andrew Culwin as the Gautierian esthete turned “malevolent” (Wharton, Uncollected Critical Writings 196n9).

10 James was right about Gautier, however. Although Emaux displays a studied indifference to the political upheavals of the day in its “Préface,” it does have a properly moral dimension, one that derives ultimately from the cult of craft labor. I shall argue that Wharton did indeed find a “use” for Gautier’s art in her subtle crafting of “The Eyes.” Emaux provided a rich background for her own “profitable reflections” on the relation between art and the moral life. “The Eyes,” we might say, is Wharton’s “sermon in stone.” But before continuing this line of inquiry, we need to consider briefly the internal evidence for Emaux as a source for the story.

**Emaux and “Spots of Enamel”**

11 Both Emaux et Camées and “The Eyes” build on the metaphor of hardness through imagery of hard materials—stone, ceramic, glass, and of course enamel. Ezra Pound found this quality in Emaux so compelling that he later turned it into a critical principle, in his essay “The Hard and Soft in French Poetry” (1918): “Anyone who dislikes these textural terms may lay the blame on Théophile Gautier, who certainly suggests them in Emaux et Camées; it is his hardness that I first had in mind. He exhorts us to cut in hard substance, the shell and the Parian” (Pound 285). The “textural” quality of hardness was thus, in Pound’s view, the distinguishing feature of Gautier’s esthetics.

12 The most striking echo of Emaux in “The Eyes” may be found in the following passage, where the unnamed narrator describes Andrew Culwin’s head:
Pressed into the hollow of the chair-back, it stood out an instant like an intaglio of yellowish red-veined stone, with spots of enamel for the eyes. (825)

This is by no means an isolated image in the story. Culwin initially describes the phantom eyes that haunt him as “sea-pebbles” or “small glassy disks with an agate-like rim” (816); later he compares them, in their quality of slowly acquired baseness and obduracy, to coral (824). Culwin describes Noyes on their first meeting in Rome in terms of stone-imagery, as “slender and smooth and hyacinthine,” as if he had “stepped from a ruined altar” (820). Phil Frenham, who replaces Noyes as Culwin’s new protégé and who provokes the older man into telling the story of the eyes, is described by the unnamed narrator in flattering, Gautierian terms—“like the pure paste under a fine glaze” (812).

Then too there is the shared esthetic of the minor scale and the detail, rather than the large canvas and the complete figure. In both works, form and content are one. The title of Gautier’s collection of “exquisite little pieces,” to borrow another phrase from James (362), is of course programmatic in this regard. As for “The Eyes,” it has been widely praised as one of the finest specimens of Wharton’s short fiction, and I would argue that it is her adoption of an approach similar to Gautier’s that made the story into a masterpiece in the minor key. Its imagery, qualities, and themes are perfectly commensurate with an esthetic commitment to the minor scale.

The “Tightening” Effect

“The Eyes” may be described as a small, hard literary object that describes a comfortable world haunted, morally as well as psychologically, by objects with similar qualities. The emphasis throughout is on the detail or the partial object, on the fragment rather than the whole—on the eyes and head, in particular. And this emphasis may be reformulated as an ethical problem. What happens when the whole human being and form are deliberately sacrificed for the pleasure procured by the part? A quick answer might be: the fetishized thing then returns with a vengeance, to haunt everyone—characters, narrator, and reader alike. Another esthetic and moral question raised by “The Eyes” is, to put it crudely: how do small, obdurate things get that way? Through the painstaking of the craftsmen or poet? Or through the crippling idleness of the man of leisure, whose pursuit of pleasure and flight from pain seem to shrivel and harden his very being, leaving him with nothing but “dryness” (811) and a “gnomelike” figure (813)? With “gouty hands” (828) and eyes like “spots of enamel,” Culwin—a dabbler forever promising a “great book” or “definitive work” (814, 820)—stands as something akin to a dark, leisure-class parody of Gautier’s diligent craftsman.

Then too we might say that Wharton has built the shrinking and hardening effect into the very shape of the story. The actions that make up its moral structure—Culwin’s narration and the two events he describes as preceding the appearance of the eyes: his false promise of marriage to Alice Nowell (814-815), and the reassuring lie he tells Gilbert Noyes (822-823)—all take place within the comfortable confines of libraries. What makes Culwin’s ghost story possible in the first place is the still more intimate atmosphere produced by a “tightening” of the group of friends, which Wharton quickly reduces, at the outset of her story, from eight to three. As the unnamed narrator puts it: “we knew that [Culwin] expected the nucleus of his group to tighten around him after midnight” (812). And the story of the phantom eyes is itself truncated, since Culwin simply breaks it off in one inconclusive sentence: “And so, after all, I never found out what they wanted
It should be noted that the abrupt end to the story of the ghostly eyes, which closes part two, is followed by the image of Culwin’s own eyes as “spots of enamel”—as if the fragmentary form of the tale and the apparition it describes found an answering reflection in the teller’s own features. And were it not for the interventions of the unnamed narrator, who is disturbed by this “sudden drop” and “disquieted by a sense of incompleteness” (825, 827) and who seeks, through his questions in parts 3 and 4, a proper literary end to what Frenham’s challenge had begun, Culwin’s ghost tale would remain a fragment.

It should be observed, however, that the narrator’s role is at once literary and social, in a pattern of mirroring that lends “The Eyes” much of its peculiar force. The embarrassment and unease that the narrator feels are not only esthetic responses; he struggles not only to help complete a disappointing fragment but also to ward off a comparable constriction and hardening of the social reflexes that the story itself has produced in its listeners, and particularly in Culwin’s young protégé, Frenham:

> Something in his silent gaze embarrassed me, and as if to divert attention from it I pressed on with another question. (825)
> “And the eyes?” I asked, after another pause which Frenham’s silence made oppressive. (828)

The relaxed intimacy of the tight-knit group has turned into a close atmosphere of stony silence and fixity. Frenham, who has “not moved” since the beginning of the tale, “continue[s] to maintain his silent immobility” (825). Unexpectedly, the ghost story’s original mover now sits “motionless” (827), “without moving” (828). “The Eyes” closes on this image of immobility and silence: “Frenham, his face still hidden, did not stir” (829). Furthermore, in the final chapters, movement itself seems only to underscore the general tendency to petrification. When Culwin stirs from his chair, it is only to walk “stiffly” and to lay “gouty hands” on Frenham’s shoulders (828). When Frenham finally does move, his change in position calls the narrator’s attention to an object that bodies forth this narrowing and hardening—a small mirror:

> Frenham shifted his attitude, and as he did so his elbow struck against a small mirror in a bronze frame standing on the table behind him. He turned and changed its angle slightly; then he resumed his former attitude, his dark head thrown back on his lifted palm, his eyes intent on Culwin’s face. (825)
> Culwin paused again, and Frenham still sat motionless, the dusky contour of his young head reflected in the mirror at his back. (827)

Frenham’s physical being is consistently reduced to parts or features: a head, a face, shoulders, a palm, but especially, of course, a pair of eyes. The story’s emphasis on the sculptural or painterly detail, perfectly suited to the dilettante’s eye, is thus further reinforced at the end, as if Culwin’s fetishizing gaze ended up shrinking the entire scene. Alice had been reduced, in his eye, to “thick and pretty” hair (815); Noyes, to a “radiant head,” with “blissful eyes” and “beautiful” eyelashes (821, 823). While telling his story, Culwin is suddenly struck by Frenham’s physical resemblance to Noyes—but, it should be noted, only as a head assuming a remarkable pose, “thrown back in the lamplight” (822). The intimate social setting of Culwin’s tale—the “nucleus” of friends together in his library—is finally compressed within a still narrower frame, captured as a series of partial reflections in the hard surface of a small mirror:

> [T]he light of the lamp on the table fell full on [Culwin’s] congested face, and I caught its reflection in the mirror behind Frenham’s head.
> Culwin saw the reflection also. He paused, his face level with the mirror, as if scarcely recognising the countenance in it as his own. But as he looked his
expression gradually changed, and for an appreciable space of time he and the
image in the glass confronted each other with a glare of slowly gathering hate.

(828-829)

20 Metaphorically, Culwin’s mind—first compared by the unnamed narrator to “a forum, or
some open meeting-place for the exchange of ideas,” then, less grandly, to “a kind of
academic grove from which all the leaves have fallen” (811)—has further collapsed into a
series of reflections tightly enclosed within a small bronze frame. This effect—in which
fragments of living, moving forms become petrified, or frozen in glass—is prefigured in a
rather conspicuous detail of the setting of Culwin’s false promise to Alice Nowell, the
Tiffany desk lamp in his aunt’s library: “it had a ground glass shade with vine leaves, and
glass drops around the edge” (815).

“Eyes” and “Hands”

On y voit les œuvres mauvaises . . . (Gautier 34.16)
One sees its scabrous deeds large writ . . . (Shapiro 25)

21 Wharton seems to be doing with eyes what Gautier had already done with hands—that is,
exploring the esthetic and moral implications of the anatomical detail. Could it be that
the ethical quality of certain actions leaves discernible, readable traces on the hand or in
the eye? Culwin, though a moral skeptic, admits that his “wider experience” points him
to such “damnable implications” when the phantom eyes reappear:

“I saw now what I hadn’t seen before: that they were eyes which had grown hideous
gradually, which had built up their baseness coral-wise, bit by bit, out of a series
of small turpitudes slowly accumulated through the industrious years.” (824)

22 We can only admire the audacity of the word “industrious,” when we extend the term, as
the story’s metaphor of mirroring invites us to do, to an idler like Culwin. Culwin now
deciphers the signs of evil in the phantom eyes, much as Gautier’s executioner “reads”
them in the hand of the condemned assassin:

Tous les vices avec leurs griffes
Ont, dans les plis de cette peau,
Tracé d’affreux hiéroglyphes,
Lus couramment par le bourreau. (Gautier 34.15)*
Vice clawed vile hieroglyphic designs
Of heinous wrongs—most foul, most fell—
In all its wrinkles, all its lines,
Signs that the executioner knew well! (Shapiro 23)

23 In “Etude de Mains,” a two-part poem already quoted above, Gautier considers how the
single body part might reflect the conduct of the whole person. The poem is built on an
exceptionally rich and subtle play of contrasts between two hands seen in a sculptor’s
studio. It is a deliberate, self-conscious study in contrasts. The first part of the diptych,
“Imperia,” describes the hand of a sixteenth-century Italian courtesan, in hard plaster;
the second, the mummified, severed hand of Pierre-François Lacenaire, a notorious thief,
murderer, and would-be poet executed in 1836. The one is a glorious creation, a
masterpiece of the sculptor’s art (pur fragment d’un chef-d’œuvre humain), an object of pure
contemplation and intense poetic and erotic fantasizing; the other, a real, amputated
hand, a repulsive, hairy, still blood-stained thing (du supplice encor mal lavée, Gautier
34.12) which the speaker dares to touch and which provokes, by stark contrast with the
first half of the study, a stern esthetic and moral judgment. The sculpted hand has been
placed on velvet, as a piece of jewelry might be, throwing into sharp relief its form, color, and texture; the severed hand, which is close by, lies on a cushion. This last detail is essential to the moral theme; for after the speaker’s lyrical echoings off the hard finish of the sculpted hand, the second part explores the rather unexpected correlation between softness and violence. Lacenaire’s hand combines qualities that seem incompatible. It is en même temps molle et féroce—at once “soft and savage” (Shapiro 25). Even more; in the second poem, esthetic and moral judgments merge. The limp, idle, pampered hand of the thief and murderer—unhardened by honest craft labor on hard material—cannot produce true art:

Criminelle aristocratie,
Par la varlope ou le marteau
Sa pulpe n’est pas endurcie,
Car son outil fut un couteau.
Saints calus du travail honnête,
On y cherche en vain votre sceau. (Gautier 35.19-20)

Crime’s aristocracy! No plane,
No hammer’s labor’s ever made
Its flesh tough time and time again!
Its only tool, the dagger-blade […]
Work’s honest calluses! For you
We look in vain, no sign we see. (Shapiro 25)

Small wonder, then, that Lacenaire should be described in the closing stanza as a “true murderer and false poet” (vrai meurtrier et faux poète, Gautier 35.20).

Andrew Culwin is no killer, of course, even though Wharton does slip in a possible point of comparison—and one well suited to a ghost story. I refer to the metaphor of moral vampirism. Here is Culwin’s final description of the phantom eyes:

“They reminded me of vampires with a taste for young flesh, they seemed so to gloat over the taste of a good conscience. Every night for a month they came to claim their morsel of mine: since I’d made Gilbert happy they simply wouldn’t loosen their fangs.” (824)

The irony of the unintentional self-portrait is hardly lost on us, since we have been prepared for it from the outset. Wharton chooses, very fittingly, Fred Murchard—the man who had put everyone in the proper “mood” for ghost stories—to inform us early on that Culwin has a “taste for young flesh”:

Young Phil Frenham was the last, and the most interesting, of these recruits, and a good example of Murchard’s somewhat morbid assertion that our old friend “liked ‘em juicy.” It was indeed a fact that Culwin, for all his dryness, specially tasted the lyrical qualities in youth. (811)

More to the point for our purposes, though, is Wharton’s possible adaptation of the Gautierian contrast of physical and moral qualities, in particular of the hard feature thrown into sharp relief by—perhaps even created by—the soft background. We have already seen the most striking example of this, in the description of Culwin’s head:

Pressed into the hollow of the chair-back, it stood out an instant like an intaglio of yellowish red-veined stone, with spots of enamel for the eyes. (825)

But this too is a detail that has been carefully prepared:

Culwin had dropped back into his arm-chair, his shock head embedded in the hollow of worn leather, his little eyes glimmering over a fresh cigar. (812)

Throughout “The Eyes” Wharton places great emphasis on Culwin’s life of ease. For him, even the act of telling the story is an effort, one that he is reluctant to make and that
requires his friends’ urgings to both start (Frenham) and to finish (the unnamed narrator). When pressed for his own “ghostly experience” (810), his first reflex is to seek refuge in the comfort of his surroundings: “Culwin cowered gnomelike among his cushions, dissembling himself in a protective cloud of smoke” (813). Like it or not, however, he must bestir himself to tell a story that is itself all about the acute discomfort caused by a pair of ghostly eyes. As he insists at the beginning of his tale, by way of preview:

“...and you know how I hate to be uncomfortable!” (813)

Wharton’s “Sermons in Stone”

But Wharton’s whole point is of course that the single-minded pursuit of comfort and ease can have grave moral repercussions. Culwin has “nursed,” “protected,” even “carefully guarded” his leisure, “instead of squandering it in vain activities” (811). With the aging dilettante of “The Eyes,” the political detachment that Gautier had proudly displayed in *Emaux* becomes ethical. Among “vain activities,” Culwin clearly includes moral action. He prefers the tranquility of the spectator *ab extra*, the “humorous detached observer of the immense muddled variety show of life” (810). He habitually declines “all collaboration with Providence” (815-816). “I’ve always shrank from usurping the functions of Providence, and when I have to exercise them I decidedly prefer that it shouldn’t be on an errand of destruction” (822). Idleness is harmlessness, in other words. Before his engagement to Alice Nowell, “the first good action [he] had ever consciously committed,” he was “merely a harmless young man,” rather than “an instrument of destruction” (815). And with Noyes, Culwin’s goal is to turn the young man into a beautiful version of himself—“an inoffensive idler” (821), “a charming parasitic thing” (826).

Moral action, if it must be indulged in, should be like the rest of the dilettante’s existence—all beauty, charms, and softness. Nothing stern or unpleasant. Why does Culwin refrain from telling Noyes the truth? Because it “would have been about as pleasant as slitting the throat of some gentle animal” (821). Doing good must feel good. Here is Culwin’s description of his feelings following his “first good action”—committed right before the first appearance of the eyes:

“A glow of self-righteousness tempered my fears, and I said to myself as I undressed that when I’d got used to being good it probably wouldn’t make me as nervous as it did at the start. And by the time I was in bed, and had blown out my candle, I felt that I really was getting used to it, and that, as far as I’d got, it was not unlike sinking down into one of my aunt’s very softest wool mattresses.” (816)

Moral conduct should never bring pain to oneself or others—on the contrary. Above all: do no harm. Avoid pain, come what may. The very idea that doing good to others might require hurting them is mere sophistry or “humbug.” Thus Culwin, on his “duty” to tell Noyes the truth about his lack of literary talent:

“It was well enough to tell myself that it was my duty to knock the poor boy’s hopes into splinters—but I’d like to know what act of gratuitous cruelty hasn’t been justified on that plea?”

“...and you know how I hate to be uncomfortable!” (813)
came over me suddenly how I should hurt others in hurting him: *myself, first*, since sending him home meant losing him; but more particularly poor Alice Nowell, to whom I had so longed to prove my good faith and my desire to serve her. It really seemed like failing her twice to fail Gilbert—“” (822-823; emphasis added)

33 *Myself, first.* Culwin redefines morality in hedonistic terms, as comfort and self-indulgence: the pursuit of pleasure, the avoidance of pain. Giving pain to others means, first and foremost, giving it to oneself. To avoid this with Noyes, Culwin opts for the easiest, most pleasurable way: “Hang it all, making people happy has its charms—” (823).

And in the end Culwin is convinced, even with hindsight, that he did the right thing: “But I must plead in extenuation that the boy was a fool, and that I’d done my best for him—I really had” (827).

34 The cruel paradox is that Culwin’s softness ends up being far worse than the resistance of Frenham’s “obdurate” family (820). The “enchanting,” “beautiful” friendship ends nightmarishly, in hard words, “violence” (826), and a cruel outburst of laughter on Culwin’s part—laughter which he finds, in retrospect, more objectionable on social and esthetic than on properly moral grounds: “I don’t defend my laugh—it was in wretched taste” (827). No wonder that the eyes that haunt Culwin are those of a man who has “done a lot of harm in his life” (817). The exclusive pursuit of happiness, comfort, and idleness leads to a form of shrinking and hardening—perhaps even to an ultimate reduction to nothingness. In his moral skepticism, Culwin wants neither “to promote the moral order of the world” (816) nor to be “an instrument of destruction” (815). But in what appears to be a completion of the process of shrinking, he ultimately reduces Noyes, from a pair of “charming” or “beautiful” eyes, to “nothing.” When Culwin is asked by the unnamed narrator what finally became of his young protégé, he replies: “Oh, nothing became of him—because he became nothing” (827). Wharton even slips in an image suggesting that Culwin might suffer a similar fate. Just after the description of his eyes as “spots of enamel,” we see Culwin “so sunk into his chair that he seemed like a heap of his own empty clothes” (825). It is as if he were fast becoming, like the phantom eyes he tries to combat, a mere apparition, devoid of corporeal substance, as in his first “battle” with the ghost:

   “I was seized by an impulse of rage that jerked me to my feet and pitched me straight at the unseen figure. But of course there wasn’t any figure there, and my fists struck at emptiness.” (817)

35 This prospect of annihilation should not be entirely unexpected. For Culwin, morality has never been a matter of real being or ontological expansion, as it was for Emerson: “In a virtuous action, I properly am; in a virtuous action I add to the world.”9 It is, rather, a solipsistic, specular, ultimately esthetic relation—a matter of justifying one’s self beautifully, but “in one’s own eyes.” *Myself, first.* Those two words also define the way Culwin envisions his good turn to Alice Nowell, which Noyes’s appearance suddenly makes possible: “I had always wanted to do her some service, to justify myself in my own eyes rather than hers; and here was a beautiful occasion” (820). Human and moral realities become mere images in a speculum—or more appropriately, for the esthete’s world, fleeting images in his little bronze-framed mirror. In Culwin’s narrow vision of strict cause and effect (815), there is no real place for morality, any more than for metaphysics. Of the eight members of his social circle, only two—Murchard and Frenham—have “the habit of sending [their] souls into the invisible” (810). Culwin inhabits the cultural world of Positivism triumphant, as Wharton is keen to point out at the outset. And here is perhaps her most brilliant stroke in the choice of genre. Wharton shows how
Culwin’s positivism and pleasure-seeking relegate duty to the realm of the supernatural, making “The Eyes,” almost indifferently, a ghost tale or a moral fable; either way, it is a tale of the unreal, a story that is incomprehensible to the narrow empiricist worldview which always finds the “connecting thread” missing (827). There is no observable tie between Culwin’s actions—necessarily “inoffensive,” “harmless,” and conducive to the happiness of others—and the subsequent fate of his friend and protégé Noyes. As Culwin concludes: “Put two and two together if you can. For my part I haven’t found the link” (828; see also, with Alice Nowell, 815). If we cannot observe the causal connection between two physical events, as the skeptic David Hume famously argued, how then for things far less palpable, like moral relations?

36 But Wharton’s simple story line has made it impossible for us readers to be quite so skeptical about the idea of necessary connections in our moral lives. After all, trouble begins not once but twice in Culwin’s otherwise care-free existence as a direct consequence of his moving from detached spectatorship to moral commitment—first with Alice Nowell, then, three years later, with Gilbert Noyes. No doubt about it, then: it is Culwin’s shirking his duty to others that causes the eyes to appear. We may of course be accused of committing the *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy. But readers of “The Eyes”—perhaps readers of any narrative, as Roland Barthes once suggested—have no choice but to embrace it. The success of the story depends on it. Here too, Wharton’s moral vision appears to be close to Emerson’s, in that it remains unaffected by the skepticism of a Hume or a Montaigne: “Seen or unseen, we believe the tie exists” (Emerson, “Montaigne, or The Skeptic”, 701).

37 Although the phantom eyes emerge in romance settings—now in “a damp Gothic villa,” now in Italy (814, 820)—as befits a supremely “Hawthornesque” short story (Wolff 156), they represent, above all, an ethical gaze. In their shared obduracy, Culwin’s own eyes, glimmering in the gathering darkness like Gautierian “spots of enamel,” are Edith Wharton’s “sermons in stone.”

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


NOTES

1. Wharton, “The Eyes,” Collected Stories, 1891-1910, 826. All references are to this edition and will be given hereafter between parentheses in the text. References to Théophile Gautier’s *Emaux et Camées* are, in the original, to the page and stanza and to the page in Norman Shapiro’s translation.

2. Howard’s gloss has since been adopted by French translator Jean-Pierre Naugrette, 106n1.


4. *Uncollected Critical Writings* 196-197n9. Wegener quotes the reference to Gautier in “The Eyes,” but misdates the publication of the short story as 1909, which would put it before rather than after the tribute to Cabot Lodge, with its quotation of sculpte, lime, cisèle.

5. Of course “Hyacinthine” might also be said to reinforce the floral metaphor, which emphasizes what the narrator and Culwin see as the latter’s nurturing relation to his protégés (811-812, 821). But the immediate context suggests the jewel (or, by association, the sculptured altar stone) rather than the flower. Then too we might say that in the competition between the soft organic and hard inorganic metaphors—which Wharton sets up in the unnamed narrator’s inconsistent descriptions of Frenham: now a “flower,” now, two sentences later, ceramic or stone (“the pure paste under a fine glaze”)—the latter win out. This process whereby life is frozen in hard “beautiful” materials is further developed in two objects which I shall consider below, one belonging to Culwin, the other to his aunt: a bronze-framed mirror and a Tiffany desk lamp.

6. R.W.B. Lewis has called the short story “one of the finest Edith Wharton ever wrote” (288), Cynthia Griffin Wolff “one of Wharton’s most brilliant” (159). See also White 64.

7. Though the description of Culwin’s apartment in Rome is rather vague, the room where he delivers his “verdict” on Gilbert Noyes’s literary talent has a library-like atmosphere (“The manuscript lay between us, on my table”), heightened by the explicit visual parallel Culwin draws, while narrating the incident, between the two settings and the two protégés: “Gilbert sat opposite me, with his head thrown back in the lamplight, just as Phil’s is now . . .” (822).

8. Unfortunately Shapiro’s rearrangement of the opening stanza ruins Gautier’s bold “attack” and its deliberate emphasis on purpose: Pour contraste is removed from its strategic position at the beginning of “Imperia”’s first line, and translated by the neutral formulation “in contrast.”

9. “Compensation,” Emerson 300. With this appeal to Emerson, my reading joins Carole Singley’s emphasis on Wharton’s attraction to philosophical idealism (31; on Emerson see also 19, 23, 147-148,150).
ABSTRACTS

Et si l'inspiration de “The Eyes” était plutôt venue d’une « Etude de Mains », celle proposée par Théophile Gautier dans Emaux et Camées ? L’hypothèse, pour étrange qu’elle paraîse à première vue, ne manque pas de vraisemblance. Wharton connaissait cette œuvre, qu’elle avait citée textuellement dans un article publié par Scribner’s quelques mois avant la parution de son nouveau conte fantastique. La référence explicite à Gautier dans « The Eyes » ne doit donc pas nous surprendre. Tout se passe comme si Wharton avait voulu adapter l’esthétique d’Emaux et Camées à la nouvelle en lui donnant, de surcroît, une dimension éthique déjà en filigrane dans l’œuvre de Gautier.

AUTHORS

JOSEPH URBAS

Joseph Urbas is Professor of nineteenth-century American literature at the Université Michel de Montaigne–Bordeaux, a member of the research group SPH (Sciences, Philosophie, Humanités, http://www.sph.u-bordeaux.fr), and Associate Editor of the works of Herman Melville for the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Editions Gallimard). His most recent publications focus on Transcendentalist philosophy. He is currently preparing a book of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s metaphysics.