

The Perception of Time in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920) in the Context of Her War-Related Nonfiction

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Abstract

Edith Wharton published her *The Age of Innocence* just after the Great War, but the focus on the past and on social change in the text has usually not been connected to concerns in the novel's immediate war context for a long time. However, as part of the general critical interest in the literature of war, the issue of the war context for *The Age of Innocence* was examined by Julie Olin-Ammentorp's *Edith Wharton's Writings from the Great War* in 2004. Hermione Lee's subsequent biography of Wharton in 2008 also claimed that *The Age* was not only motivated by escapism but by Wharton's experience of war as well. This paper looks into how the perception of time is represented in Wharton's nonfiction war text *Fighting France* (1915) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920) by comparing their representations of the contrast between the past and the present. Both *Fighting France* and *The Age of Innocence* contain spatial descriptions that employ Wharton's rhetoric of what the article proposes to call *the presence of the past*, in which past moments reappear in the present, problematizing what is seen as real and unreal by the characters. The rhetoric of the presence of the past links the war text to the novel in that both share a basic interest in problematic processes of cultural continuity.

Keywords: Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, war literature, representation of time, rhetoric

Introduction

Edith Wharton is usually considered to be a nostalgic chronicler of historical change in her novels of manners. Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* investigates how the mores and ways of the traditional New York City cultural and social elite of the 1870s are slowly replaced by those of a new elite class of pragmatic industrialists by the turn of the century.

The novel maps out the costs of the struggle for social power from the perspective of upper class NYC genteel society, *the innocents*, who lose out to the new moneyed class of modern industrialists, *the experienced* by implication. We all know that Newland Archer, the seemingly progressive protagonist of the novel, regresses into accepting traditional ways of *innocent* behavior eventually. Wharton projects a famously ambiguous representation of social change in the novel. It is never clear if one should feel sorry and sad for the losses the change for experience cost or be happy for the change because it was for good; or both at the same time.

Published in 1920, *The Age of Innocence* belongs to the heterogeneous group of Wharton's wartime texts. Wharton published extensively during the war, but only part of her output was strictly *literary*, as her engagement in war relief work from 1914 on reduced her literary output considerably. She published a collection of short stories titled *Xingu* in 1915, but it contained texts from before the war mostly, as Wharton only added "Coming Home" as a new one to it. In 1918 she published a war story *The Marne*, and in 1920 *The Age of Innocence* about the 1870s of her childhood. Instead of fiction, she published war journalism and collected these articles under the title *Fighting France* (1915), then she edited *The Book of the Homeless* (1916) for charity purposes. Her essays on French culture, which originated in the speeches she delivered for American soldiers about France after the US joined the war, appeared as *French Ways and their Meaning* (1918). Wharton's last travel book *In Morocco* (1920) reported about her 1917 trip to the then French protectorate and was published right after the war along with *The Age of Innocence*.

Although Wharton published her *The Age of Innocence* just after the Great War, the focus on the past and on social change in the text has usually not been connected to concerns in the novel's immediate war context for a long time. As a case in point, in the Norton critical edition from 2003 the editor Candace Waid focuses on the novel's criticism of the innocent American child-woman and the leisure and business cultures of the 1870s as its major cultural contexts (Waid, 2003b, p. 275; 2003c, p. 311). In her "Introduction," however, Waid states that the novel "draws a great deal of its emotional force from the sense of loss associated with the Great War" (Waid, 2003a, p. xiii), but without providing further explanation. Carol Singley also sidesteps the issue of the war context when she considers Archer's adventure in the context of American individualism to conclude that, surprisingly, it is Ellen's actions that fit that masculine framework (Singley, 2020, p. 23). It was Alan Price's groundbreaking *The End of the Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the Great War* (1996) that initiated a rising interest in Wharton's activities during the war as part of the emerging critical attention to war literature.

Price's mostly biographical book provides a detailed account of Wharton's wartime activities, most importantly her work for her various charities. And it gave rise to an outpouring of war-related readings of Wharton's work.

The issue of the war context for *The Age of Innocence* has been examined as part of the general critical interest in the literature of war by Julie Olin-Ammentorp's *Edith Wharton's Writings from the Great War* (2004). It not only recognized the importance of the war context but also integrated into it the detailed study of both *literary* and *nonfiction* texts, explicating *The Age of Innocence* as well. Olin-Ammentorp made two claims about *The Age* and its context. She maintained that the novel is historical fiction about Wharton's youth in the US in the 1870s and Wharton's turn to the past serves to escape the anxieties of the immediate war context, in a complex tone that reflects an ambivalence about the past (Olin-Ammentorp, 2004, p. 161). She also argued that the "Age is subtly but profoundly shaped by the war years" (p. 167), mainly in links to ideas of "experience" that American innocence is supposed to give way to in the novel. Olin-Ammentorp noted that Archer's insecurities and sense of "protean reality" resemble Wharton's feelings during the war (p. 174). Along similar lines, Hermione Lee's 2008 exquisite Wharton biography also argued that although Wharton herself states she "had to get away from the present altogether" (Lee, 2008, p. 561; Wharton, 1990, p. 1056) though "escapism is not the whole narrative behind *The Age of Innocence*. [...] it replays, in historical guise, her current feelings about America and Europe" (Lee, 2008, p. 562) and the "title refers to a lost pre-war world" (p. 561). Similarly, Lee's introduction to the centenary thematic issue on *The Age* in *The Edith Wharton Review* revisits her earlier view of *The Age* "as a French novel" (Lee, 2020, p. 91), as Lee states that *The Age of Innocence* is "interwoven with idealized images of France before the war," as one finds it in Wharton's *French Ways* published just before the novel (2020, p. 91).

This paper investigates Ammentorp's reference to the sense of "protean reality" in *The Age* through the representations of time in the novel. Taking Lee's cue also, it links the sense of this protean reality to Wharton's related nonfiction, in the context of which the novel was published. More specifically, the study looks into how the perception of time is represented in Wharton's *Fighting France* (1915) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920) by comparing their representations of the contrast between the past and the present.

In her nonfiction before and during the Great War, Wharton contemplates on the continuity of artistic styles in watching architecture (Kovács, 2021). In her *A Motor-Flight Through France* from 1908, Wharton contends that in special moments of aesthetic experience, the viewer of architecture can experience a continuity with the past *in* the present.

As Wharton writes: “reverence is the most precious emotion that such a building inspires: reverence for the accumulated experiences of the past, readiness to puzzle out their meaning, unwillingness to disturb rashly” (Wharton, 1991, p. 11). In *Fighting France*, bombarded monuments produce the opposite effect, as they invoke the experience of the loss of historical continuity in the viewer (Kovács, 2017, p. 548) as war destruction seems to freeze the experience of everyday time. In her tourist book on Morocco, Wharton’s project is to report on the presence of the past in the protectorate before tourists and modernization flood in. Her entries illustrate the presence of a magic Oriental past in special scenes, including harems (Kovács, 2014, pp. 66–67). Similarly, observations of space that are linked to a special experience of time occur in *The Age of Innocence* as well. The question arises how the representation of space relates to that of historical change and time in the novel. The paper claims that Wharton’s rhetoric of the presence of the past has a key role in producing an ambiguous representation of time and social change in *The Age of Innocence* generally.

A set of general questions related to the literature of war will not be touched upon here. The Great War is usually seen as a watershed in cultural representations because of the experience of disappointment, pointlessness, and feelings of loss triggered by the material and cultural destruction of the war effort. Histories of war literature often identify two oppositional reactions to the war experience: disillusionment and nostalgia. The powerful sense of disillusionment is to have elicited experimental Modernist works in the post war period, while conservative authors are said to have preferred to look back at the time before the war and maintain their traditional ways of expression as well. Wharton’s reception has been struggling to reformulate the terms of this discussion ever since the rising interest in her war texts, trying to accommodate a view of Wharton who is less of a conservative than a binary typology could tell. Investigations into Wharton and gender form part of this effort.¹

This paper expands on Olin-Ammentorp’s and Hermione Lee’s accounts of *The Age* as a novel deeply immersed in the war context. It surveys the themes of historical change, loss, and the presence of the past in Wharton’s *Fighting France* (1915) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), eventually focusing on Archer’s final renunciation scene in Paris, in order to compare perceptions of time represented in them.

¹ For further discussions of the relations among the Great War, literature, and modernism see Fussell, 1975; Campbell, 1999; Heathorn, 2005; and Hutchinson, 2015.

The perception of time in *Fighting France* (1915)

Wharton's *Fighting France: From Dunkerque to Belfort* describes the French war zone from the perspective of a woman in the early stage of the war. Five chapters document Wharton's experience of war in the book: the essays portray a powerful sense of destruction and a more and more palpable sense of resilience to the actual war experience. The text is scattered with comments on the "sense of unreality" amidst the reality war that refer to fleeting moments when the new and terrible reality of war seems to pause momentarily and Wharton has the illusion of revisiting times from before the war. Let us have a closer look at this experience and its representation in the chapters.

Fighting France contains five articles about Wharton's travels behind the front lines in 1914–15 and one extra essay on the tone of France. Four of the articles had been published in *Scribner's Magazine* and one in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Wharton made five trips to the war zone with French military approval in the company of her lifelong friend Walter Berry, riding her own Mercedes, driven by her own chauffeur. The primary aim of her trips was to assess the state of military hospitals and carry supplies, but she realized that what she saw gave her the chance to report the US audience on the state of France and ask for monetary help. Mary Suzanne Schriber has placed the book among Wharton's other travel texts, stating that it marked the end of the romance of travel (Schriber, 1999, p. 143) and initiated "travel writing in the grotesque" because it showed the nightmarish destruction the war brought to familiar French travel sites (1999, p. 143). The latest edition, by Alice Kelly, reinstated the photos of the original journal publications into the text and includes a concise introduction to its position in Wharton's whole oeuvre (Kelly, 2018).

In *Fighting France* the descriptive passages convey the shock of destruction the early phase of the war brought and these scenes focus especially on the damage to architecture. Villages, towns, streets, houses, churches are shown in various states of ruin, often personified as sick or dead. Laimont looks "as if a cyclone had beheaded it" (Wharton, 1915, p. 82), Ypres resembles a "disemboweled corpse" (1915, p. 152), the new part of Nieuport looks as if it had "died of colic" (p. 167). A façade of a house in Ypres has been sliced off, exposing the intimate inside space for scrutiny (p. 153). For Wharton, these ruins indicate the possibility that a whole way of life has been destroyed.

The most iconic architectural symbol of cultural value and destruction in the text is that of the medieval cathedral. In her Introduction, Wharton describes the colourful stones of the cathedral of Chartres as the image of beauty and continuity that she identifies with a tranquillizing effect on the soul.

As the shadows gradually thinned and gathered themselves into pier and vault and ribbing, there burst out of them great sheets and showers of colour. [...] Some [windows] were cataracts of sapphires, others roses dropped from a saint's tunic, others great carven platter strewn with heavenly regalia. [...] All that a great cathedral can be, all the meanings it can express, all the tranquillizing power it can breathe upon the soul, all the richness of detail it can fuse into a large utterance of strength and beauty, the cathedral of Chartres gave us in that perfect hour. (1915, pp. 4–5)

By way of contrast to Chartres as the image of perfection, later in the book Wharton is especially moved by the image of the cathedral of Rheims burning:

The interweaving of colour over the whole blunted bruised surface recalls the metallic tints, the peacock-and-pigeon iridescences, the incredible mingling of red, blue, umber and yellow of the rocks along the Gulf of Aegina. And the wonder of the impression is increased by the sense of its evanescence; the knowledge that this is the beauty of disease and death, that every one of the transfigured statues must crumble under the autumn rains, that every one of the pink or golden stones is already eaten away to the core, that the Cathedral of Rheims is glowing and dying before us like a sunset. (1915, p. 186)

The cathedral built of stone had represented the heritage of past generations across centuries, thought to be reliably resistant to time. The burning cathedral represents not only the image of a burning monument but a passing of a trace of the past as well. The impression made on the observer contains both the feeling of beauty and sorrow for the passing of that beauty.²

In *Fighting France*, the images of ruined houses and churches are associated with death and the arrest of the normal flow of time. Life is suspended in Paris (Wharton, 1915, p. 24) at the beginning of the war already, and there is a general paralysis of activities at wartime (1915, p. 157). The bombarded towns recede into paralysis as well (p. 184). The descriptions imply a basic opposition between old ways, a secure way of life with knowable rules and continuities and images of present destruction, death, and the stopping of normal time.

Another example for the destruction of temporal continuity comes from her first trip to Argonne, where Wharton sees ruined and empty villages that for her indicate the uprooting of communities. In the village of Auve, instead of a promising autumn harvest,

² The general French reaction to the burning of the Notre Dame in Paris in April 2019 is best understood from the perspective Wharton identified here.

rubble and cinders fill the yards (1915, pp. 57–58). They saw ruined houses with scattered bits of the past that indicated the loss of a meaningful link between the past and the present:

The photographs on the walls, the twigs of withered box above the crucifixes, the old wedding-dresses in brass-clamped trunks, the bundles of letters laboriously written and as painfully deciphered, all the thousand and one bits of the past that give meaning and continuity to the present—of all that accumulated warmth nothing was left but a brick-heap and some twisted stove-pipes! (1915, p. 58).

The house as the locus of the family and its objects is ruined and the former meaningful organization of space and objects becomes a meaningless heap of useless fragments as the result of war destruction.

In addition to impressions of loss, *Fighting France* also chronicles stories of special moments when a clear sense of time divided into past and present planes becomes distorted. You can find accounts of impressions in which a *sense of unreality* is referred to. These are scenes where the sense of past security seems to return, only to disappear again. For instance, gardens continue to bloom against all odds (Wharton, 1915, p. 107). There is a misleading silence and peace in the Vosges despite the closeness of the enemy lines that seems to belong to the time before the war:

As we sat there in the grass, swept by a great mountain breeze full of the scent of thyme and myrtle, while the flutter of birds, the hum of insects, the still and busy life of the hills went on all about us in the sunshine, the pressure of the encircling line of death grew more intolerably real. It is not in the mud and jokes and every-day activities of the trenches that one most feels the damnable insanity of war; it is where it lurks like a mythical monster in scenes to which the mind has always turned to rest. (1915, p. 200)

William Blazek called this the “ambiguity of a hidden reality and a more accessible unreality” characterizing Wharton’s account of the Western front (Blazek, 2008, pp. 12–13).

Similarly, at Châlons, at a checkpoint when a young officer helps the travelers find lodgings, Wharton is suddenly experiencing the past:

I stood there in the pitch-black night, suddenly unable to believe that I was I, or Châlons Châlons, or that a young man who in Paris drops in to dine with me and talk over new books and plays, had been whispering a password in my ear to carry me unchallenged to a house a few streets away! The *sense of unreality* produced by that one word was so overwhelming that for a blissful moment the whole fabric of what I had been experiencing, the whole huge and oppressive and unescapable fact of the war, slipped away

like a torn cobweb, and I seemed to see behind it the reassuring face of things as they used to be. The next morning dispelled that vision (1915, 88–89, emphasis mine)

In this image, an ideal France of good conversation before the war³ is set against the present of the war and its threats of death and lack of connection. The past reappears for a short time of reassurance only, to disappear soon. The sense of unreality is connected to the awareness of the impossibility of the experience of the past, yet at the same time the acknowledgement of the experience.

The fluctuation between the sense of the past and the present happens at deceitfully peaceful moments. These all prove to be illusion eventually, of the presence of the past in the present, and these *mistakes* of identifying a point in time create the “protean” sense of reality Julie Ammentorp referred to. Also, these moments are always highlighted as valuable and reflected upon with a sense of loss.⁴

The sense of unreality in *The Age of Innocence*

The Age of Innocence presents a powerful meditation on how one cultural elite is replaced by a new set from the perspective of the old elite reluctant to follow the change. The story of pretentious social mores and crushing personal effacements from the 1870s focuses on Newland Archer’s thwarted romance with Ellen Olenska. In this analysis, the focus is on Archer’s visions of the “reality” of his life as a young and as an older man. I would like to show that his understanding of what seems real and unreal for him as a young man shifts and so does his position on the question of how to act out his love for Ellen.

³ The ideal France of the pre-war period also appears in Wharton’s *French Ways and Their Meanings* (1918) as an entity that had lessons to teach about the past: “France has a lesson to teach and a warning to give. It was our English forbears who taught us to flout tradition and break away from their own great inheritance; France may teach us that, side by side with the qualities of enterprise and innovation that English blood has put in us, we should cultivate the sense of continuity, that “sense of the past” which enriches the present and binds us up with the world’s great stabilising traditions of art and poetry and knowledge” (Wharton, 1918, p. 97). For further discussions of the French connection, see Virginia Ricard’s articles, e.g. (2019, 2020).

⁴ Wharton’s *In Morocco* reconstructs the presence of a medieval sense of time in the French protectorate of Morocco during the Great War. *In Morocco* is the first tourist book about the country in English. In the introduction, Wharton specifies her aim to describe perceivable sense of the past before tourists flock in when the country is opened up for travel. Her account is interwoven with descriptions of Eastern scenes and dreamlike occurrences of a Medieval past in special scenes, the representations of which are remarkably similar to the occurrence of the pre-war past in *Fighting France*. (For details see Kovács, 2014.) Wharton and Walter Berry toured Morocco in the fall of 1917. They received a military motor and guidance, as they had been invited by the resident general of the country, General Hubert Lyautey. Wharton celebrates the achievements of French colonial administration in the country and opposes its actual modern presence to the simultaneous presence of a medieval Moroccan past in buildings, in art, and also in the life of the harems she peeps into and reports about. For limitations of size, a discussion of *In Morocco* cannot be included in the comparison in this paper, but it is important to indicate the relevance of the text to the subject.

At Newport in the 1870s, Ellen in the near past seems like an unattainable dream which then again appears attainable with a sudden turn of Archer's mood. As an older man in Paris, his vision manifests a similar duality between the senses of the real and unreal, and Ellen in the past is again seen as a dream. However, when his mood changes, Archer eventually sees that it is the present with Ellen that is unreal.

In *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer sees himself as a person internally divided between public expectation and private imagination. His external public self marks him as a member of the old New York elite four hundred who can fit into Mrs. Astor's ballroom. Archer presents the group as an ancient tribe performing prehistoric customs and rites (Wharton, 2003, pp. 109–110) whose lives move in prearranged ritual steps from christening through marriage to funeral that Archer accepts until he meets Ellen (Bentley, 2003, p. 453). The group has a commonly shared manner of behavior not to talk of anything unpleasant, to communicate in code (like flower language), consume the same objects and share interests. As opposed to his public self, Archer also professes to possess an internal deep self that is able to reflect on his communal side. He is reading Romantic poetry and romances in the safety of his library, he orders the latest books on scientific thought and also devours volumes about history. Thus he is aware of and sensitive to European cultural influences, and shows himself to be more open minded and cosmopolitan than the place in which his parochial NYC "tribal" community would put him.

An opposition between the senses of the real and the unreal is also implied in the contrast between Archer's external public and internal private selves. As he presents his set, he thinks of them as not *real* people with real lives. His view of his own Grace church marriage is tinged by the comment that the ceremony of his marriage was a repetition of many others of the kind (Wharton, 2003, p. 110), with familiar faces, clothes, and countenances which seemed "like a nursery parody of life" (2003, p. 111), or even downright childish (p. 111). So whilst he performed the rite of getting married, he thought that "real people were living elsewhere and real things happening to them" (p. 111). His thoughts wander away twice, both times anticipating the appearance of the Countess Olenska.

In contrast, Archer's real life is at the library (Wharton, 2003, p. 206; Orlando, 2008, p. 174). From this vantage point, he sees his wife as a traditional person, an innocent victim of tribal customs who can never fathom the existence of different customs and manners or of his inner self (2003, p. 6, p. 52, pp. 93–94). Also, he sees his love interest, Ellen, as a worldly sensuous Europeanized woman in line with his internal side (pp. 44–46, p. 126).

Archer's idea to escape with Mme Olenska away from NYC society is based on this presupposition on Archer's part of the opposition of unreal public life versus real internal life, as old Mrs Manson Mingott's father Bob Spicer managed to disappear from society with the love of his life. Yet when he proposes the idea to get away with Ellen to a country where social relations do not matter, she asks him "Where is that country?" (p. 174) of escape, and he is baffled to realize that Ellen does not share his idea of *real* life beyond the world of unreal normal life and neither does she share his presupposition about the possibility to secure an inner self isolated from external social circumstances.

Archer's oppositional thinking about his own life leads him to basic misrepresentations about the two women of his life as well. Ellen is not so much the voluptuous Parisienne he sees in her but rather a socially experienced woman who is better used to social formalities and is even more reflective than Archer himself. For instance, she knows there is no country without social relations for divorcees in the 1870s to escape to and is unhappy about NYC focus on proper things and feelings, about not being allowed to complain. Similarly, Archer's simple virginal wife May has a scheming and manipulative side that remains invisible to Archer. May agrees to the early announcement of her engagement with Newland to line up for Ellen's social status first. When she senses the dangerous influence on her fiancée from Ellen, she agrees to hasten the marriage, too. Eventually, she announces her pregnancy just a bit too early but in time to prevent Ellen from consummating her affair with Archer.

Throughout the story, Archer's special individualism is crumbling down to the point where he acts out nothing else than what is expected of him socially. With this, his idea of his deep self is being questioned as an illusion. Yet at the end of the story, after 26 years, he still behaves as if the idea of the internal life, which he knows was an illusion, was still intact.

Visions of the past and the present in Newport and Paris

Echoing the passage about Grace Church, many scenes of the novel employ the language of in/outside and maintain an ambivalence about what seems real or unreal for Archer in them. In particular, Archer's near-meetings of Ellen at Newport and Paris appear as lengthy descriptions of Archer's lack of action and self-assertion. There is an *unreal* (Wharton, 2003, p. 133) visionary quality described in these two passages that need to be considered: eventually, the question is how the vocabulary and rhetoric of these scenes about the *unreal* in the novel can be related to the *sense of unreality* and the past that was specified in *Fighting France*.

In the Newport scene, Archer's impression about which part of his life is unreal/real shifts. Visiting old Mrs. Mingott Archer learns that Ellen Olenska is in the house and is sent to fetch her. The mention of Ellen's name induces a dreamlike stance in Archer like seeing ancient cave "images" fresh with color (Wharton, 2003, p. 131) as he goes in search of the woman in the garden to find her in the pagoda at the end of the pier overlooking the bay. He is to speak to Ellen after a one and a half year gap, and their whole relationship feels like history. When he actually glimpses Ellen who stands facing the sea, he is unwilling to go to her, because he feels "he had waked from sleep," from the dreamlike state he felt hearing the name (2003, p. 132). Suddenly, he seems to realize that: "[t]hat vision of the past was a *dream*, and the *reality* was what awaited him in the house on the bank overhead" (p. 132, emphases mine). He waits for Ellen to turn and come to him, whilst he supposes she is not aware of his presence, so without really expecting her to act. In this passage the summer-house and Ellen are associated with the past and dreams and the unreal, whilst the Welland house is associated with "reality" (p. 132).

However, the passage continues and takes a surprising turn. As Archer and May arrive at the actual Welland house right after the scene on the shore, Archer's mood changes. The usual effect of the Welland house on him is mesmerizing because of the well-oiled regularity and propriety of the household arrangements and habits in it. The spaces and the expensive furniture exhale this spirit of prestige and immediate presence for Archer as well. Yet now he feels it is the house that is unreal:

The whole chain of tyrannical trifles binding one hour to the next, and each member of the household to all the others, made any less systematized and affluent existence seem *unreal* and precarious. But now it was the Welland house, and the life he was expected to lead in it, that had become *unreal* and irrelevant, and the brief scene on the shore, when he had stood irresolute, halfway down the bank, was as close to him as the blood in his veins. (Wharton, 2003, p. 133, emphases mine)

Archer's mood turns as he is back in the safety of the house, and he spends the night pining for Ellen Olenska on the shore from the unreality of his own bedroom (p. 133). It would seem that when Archer is somewhere he wants to be somewhere else or what he actually is not: when he is outside he wants the inside, when he is inside he wants the outside, when he is hesitant he wants secure routine, when he is safe he wants the alluring challenge. The unreal usually is close at hand, whilst the real is far away. His lack of action and resolution is related to his *mood changes* about what is real and unreal for him.

Archer's mood about what he feels to be "real" and "unreal" turns in a similar manner in Paris. This happens twenty-six years after Newport, when May is already dead. As a prelude to the actual scene, the widowed Archer has just reconsidered his life as a married man from his old vantage point in the library. His thoughts have been prompted by a visit to the new galleries of the Metropolitan Museum: what used to be the old Cesnola rooms (Wharton, 2003, p. 206), where he had met Ellen. From this vantage point, Archer's whole relation to Ellen seems like an analogy to the story of the Cesnola collection. The Cesnola Collection of classical antiquities from Cyprus was acquired by the Met in 1872 (The Cesnola, 2021), and as Lee remarks "its collection of tomb objects from Cyprus, in what is now the medieval sculpture hall of the Met, was in fact a great draw when the museum opened" (Lee, 2008, p. 578). As Macaulay-Lewis explains further, "within decades of the Met's purchase of the Cesnola Collection, subsequent curators, trustees, and directors saw it as a disappointment" (2021, p. 322; Roffmann, 2010, p. 27) because it was not comprised of classical Greek objects and the collection was "relegated to the second floor where they remain today, far from the Greek and Roman galleries, which occupy prime real estate on the ground floor" (2021, p. 322).

In *The Age*, the Cesnola rooms have been repurposed, as have Archer's life and library (Wharton, 2003, p. 208) but he still seems complacent. His library used to be the space of his books and imaginative life, but now he thinks of it as a space where the most "real" things of his life happened (2003, p. 206) in relation to his family: May told him of her pregnancy here, this was the place for the first steps of his son, subsequent major family discussions took place in it. Although he feels he had missed "the flower of life" (p. 208), he seems not to mind this fact any more: "but he thought of it [the flower of life] now as a thing so unattainable and improbable that to have repined would have been like despairing because one had not drawn the first prize in a lottery" (p. 208). The stakes were against him having the flower of life, and Ellen "had become the composite vision of what he had missed." (p. 208). The image of Ellen in the Met in the Cesnola rooms together with his attachment to her have all become part of a vision, a vision of the happier past he had missed and the memory of which had been relegated to some rarely visited recess of his mind.

When Archer attempts to visit Ellen with his son, the debilitating vacillation between what is real or unreal returns one last time. He spends his two days in Paris thinking about Ellen and processing "the packed regrets and stifled memories of an inarticulate lifetime" (Wharton, 2003, p. 214). A visit to the Louvre makes him think of his old passion for Ellen and he fears its toned down version he would experience decades later (2003, p. 215).

Also, the contrast between his lack of life and Ellen's social life in the rich Parisian atmosphere strikes him. The golden light of the afternoon symbolizes to him a life of conversation and "immemorial manners" (p. 215) Ellen had and he missed. It is after all these associations that he declines to climb the steps to Ellen's apartment and meet her. Instead, he watches her balcony (like Strether watched Chad's balcony in *The Ambassadors*) while the sun sets because it is more real to him to stay: "It is more *real* to me here than if I went up' he suddenly heard himself say; and the fear lest that last shadow of *reality* should lose its edge kept him rooted to his seat as the minutes succeeded each other" (p. 217, emphasizes mine). The real now is associated with the past image of Ellen he secures in his memory, and reality refers to his sense of that memory rather than his immediate situation in the present. It is the vision of the past with Ellen the sense of the real is assigned to.

The last two scenes employ references to Archer's sense of the real and the unreal in a similar way. At Newport, Ellen is seen as a dream from the past, then as an illusion, then again as more real than everyday life. The oscillation between these positions allows for these positions almost simultaneously. In Paris twenty-six years later, a dream vision of Ellen that had been evoked in the Met and was balanced by Archer's new sense of the real in his library reappears and stands in the way of the actual Ellen and her life in the present. Preventing any more oscillation about the sense of the unreal, Archer accepts his sense of the past as more real than the actual flow of life around him. He has eventually chosen the past in the face of the actual, knowing it is an illusion.

Conclusion

Both *Fighting France* and *The Age of Innocence* contain spatial descriptions that employ Wharton's rhetoric of what I would like to call the presence of the past. These scenes take place at the golden hour of the afternoon or at twilight and the experience described in them passes as the light passes. The descriptive strategy makes use of basic oppositions like the "real" and the "unreal," the "past" and the "present," sometimes even "dream" and "awake." Once the opposition is set up, one part of it is highlighted and described as the actual one being experienced in the present. Then there is a reversal of the terms and the other part of the opposition is highlighted as being present. This technique was used in *Fighting France* to refer to a sense of the past in the present as the "sense of unreality" that visited Wharton for short lapses whilst she travelled behind the front lines in 1915. In *The Age*, there is constant reference to what feels "real" or "unreal" for Archer as he tries to come to terms with his feelings and obligations in the 1870s: Ellen Olenska seems both real and unreal for him in quick succession as his mood oscillates between identifications.

Twenty-six years later he re-experiences the real–unreal opposition when he is to choose between Ellen Olenska in the present and his vision of Ellen in the past. In the final scene, Archer chooses the vision of Ellen in the past instead the one in the present, putting an end to his turning of moods.

As far as the actual rhetorical patterns of the presence of the past are concerned, *The Age of Innocence* can indeed be compared to the representation of the reappearing sense of the past in *Fighting France*. In the war articles the pre-war past seems present for sweet if dazzled moments that pass quickly and one cannot choose to stick to the past. In the novel, the first contrast between May as old New York life and Ellen as Europeanized life is replaced by the second contrast between Ellen in the past as Europeanized and Ellen in the present as also Europeanized and self-sufficient. For sweet if dazzled moments the past seems more real than the present for Archer, so he chooses to accept the past as real. The elderly Archer finds himself in a situation similar to that of Wharton watching the war from behind the front lines. They both know that it is illusory to stick to the past as real, but are also both unwilling to accept the present as real, and feel stuck in between.

The rhetoric of the presence of the past appears in other nonfiction pieces Wharton wrote during and after the Great War and it would be challenging to integrate them into a broader discussion. *In Morocco* relies on the interplay of the reality or unreality of the presence of a Medieval past in the country, while *French Ways* presents an ideal view of France before the war in which the past prevails through continuity present in material tradition and manners. The main concern in these four texts is the interplay of cultural and historical continuity and change. The manners of old New York were replaced, so are the ways of France before the war, and so will be the medieval features of Morocco. The big challenge in every case is transmission, the practices of continuity. And as the fate of the Cesnola Collection in the Met indicates, the process of ensuring continuity lies not only in collecting objects from different cultural eras (of Cyprus or of New York or even of Paris)—as the status and the value of the objects will be determined by the culture that chooses to purchase and display them.

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