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More than a War Correspondent: Edith Wharton's chronicles about French civilians in the Great War and the beginning of citizen journalism

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RESUMEN:

La producción literaria de Edith Wharton sobre la Primera Guerra Mundial, desatendida durante décadas, ha recibido la atención que merece en estos últimos años. Los trabajos de McLoughlin (2005) sobre *The Marne, A Son at the Front* y "Writing a War Story", junto al monográfico de Olin-Ammentorp, *Edith Wharton's Writings from the Great War* (2004), ofrecen nuevas fuentes documentales y un análisis profundo acerca de la manera en que la guerra afectó a la ficción de Wharton. Sin embargo, dichas fuentes deben someterse a una distinción: los relatos son muy diferentes de los ensayos y otros textos de no ficción que se publicaron contemporáneamente. Mientras que en las obras de ficción la Gran Guerra se transforma en un personaje en sí mismo, en sus textos de no ficción Wharton abandona su voz narrativa para asumir una voz protagonista. De hecho, algunos de estos textos pueden leerse como crónicas de guerra que adelantan las características más significativas de los corresponsales de guerra y el periodismo ciudadano que florecieron en el siglo XX.

Palabras clave: no ficción, artículos sobre la guerra, corresponsales de guerra, periodismo ciudadano, Primera Guerra Mundial

ABSTRACT:

Neglected during decades, Edith Wharton's literary production on the First World War has finally received due attention during these last years. McLoughlin's scholarly work (2005) on *The Marne, A Son at the Front* and "Writing a War Story", together with Olin-Ammentorp's *Edith Wharton's Writings from the Great War* (2004) have offered new documented sources and a deep analysis on how the Great War affected Wharton's fiction. However, within these sources a distinction should be made: Wharton's short stories differ greatly from her essays and other non-fiction pieces published contemporaneously. Whereas in her fiction the Great War becomes a character itself, in her non-fiction writing Wharton abandons her narrative voice to develop a protagonist voice. In fact, some of these pieces can be read as war chronicles that advance the most significant features of war correspondents and citizen journalists throughout the 20th century.

Key words: non-fiction, war articles, war correspondents, citizen journalism, First World War

Edith Wharton's active participation in the First World War cannot pass unnoticed, not only because of her insightful reflections on the conflict from different points of view (as a writer, an observer, and a Francophile militant) but also because of her initiatives to create better living conditions for French citizens,¹ and especially for women. Wharton promoted the foundation of work rooms as humanitarian aid for unemployed women. For her relief efforts during the Great War she was conferred the Cross of the Legion of Honour in France, and Belgium made her a Chevalier of the Order of Leopold.

Before the war, Wharton was already well known in Paris, where she had established herself among a circle of writers and had also made contacts with many people from various professions and nationalities. Inquisitive and alert, she was a resourceful person in times when quick thought and action were paramount. In his notes from August 14, 1914, Charles Inman Barnard remembers that "After lunch I met Mrs. Edith Wharton, who had made some valuable mental and written notes of what she has seen in Paris"; he writes down that she was "about to leave for England" (72). However, despite "James's call and her proclaimed preference for London over Paris" (in Balestra, 1994: 54), France absorbed all her energies.² Many of her friends were indeed in England, but her heart and soul remained in France. The titles of her production at that time—*Motor-flight through France* (1908), *Fighting France* (1915), *The Marne* (1918) and *French Ways and their Meaning* (1919a)—illustrate her undeniable interest in the French country and its people.

Alan Price remarks that Wharton embodies "the tension American writers felt between the disinterested code of their craft, on their one hand, and their sympathy for allies and the refugees, on the other" (xiv). Many wealthy Americans had developed sympathies for the French since the beginning of the twentieth century. Travels to Europe had become a fashion among the American upper classes in the 19th century, a fact Wharton herself included in novels such as *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth*. Apart from the obvious cases of writers who were expatriates at that time, others, such as Richard Norton, a friend of Wharton's and son of notable Harvard professor Charles Eliot Norton, contributed significantly to help the wounded during the Great War.³

Price quotes from Wharton's unpublished correspondence with her editors, where he

observes in her "a writer who had previously rejected the subjects and techniques of popular fiction now testing the boundaries of her literary identity". Nevertheless, the mechanisms for this sought after "literary identity" were not equally exercised in her fiction and non-fiction writings. Moreover, that tension did not manifest itself equally in those American writers and journalists, Henry James, Morton Fullerton and Ernest Hemingway among them, who got in contact, more or less intensely, with the war.

As distinctive of Wharton's literary production, books written or published during the War did not show a tendency towards a particular genre. In her particular travelogues around France, she used the "by ways" she had previously explored for *Italian Backgrounds* (1905: 85). In a very different vein, she published her novella *Summer* (1917), which is, "in many respects, [...] a war novel", as Cynthia Griffin Wolf (1977:267) pointed out; however, the sexual awakening of its heroine, Charity Royall, moves its conflict from the battlefield to the field of passions. The female character's introduction into mature life is certainly abrupt; the text evidences this by the use of crude dialogues where Charity is always the object of humiliation, as exemplified by her adoptive father: "You whore - you damn - bare-headed whore, you!" (103).⁴ Grafton links this degradation suffered by Wharton's main character to the impact of Sigmund Freud's theories at her time.

The rite of passage in *Summer* bears certain resemblance to that explored by writers such as Wyndham Lewis in contemporaneous fiction; in Lewis's short story "Cantelman Spring-Mate" (1917), the controversial British writer focused on the demeaning sexual experiences between a soldier and a village girl in France. Still, this tale of war, censored by the US post when published in the October issue of *The Little Review*,⁵ takes place *during* the Great War and in a country affected by the war, while Wharton's story flies away from time and place, thus restoring the power of the story to the female experience.

Undoubtedly, the role of the woman writer during the Great War is an underlying topic throughout the fiction of Edith Wharton in this period. During many years a neglected area in her literary production, in *Edith Wharton's Writings from the Great War* Julie Olin-Ammentorp (2004:5) set out to show her readers "how Wharton shaped the war for her readers, but how a great war—the Great War—shaped Wharton's

own particular creative imagination". In her reading of *Summer, The Marne, and French Ways and Their Meanings* Olin-Ammentorp concludes that Wharton is seeking to escape from this cruel scenario, where the war has imposed itself as an irremediable source of destruction. However, the further her imagination flies away in her novels and some of her short stories, the closer it gets to reality in her non-fiction production.

Even Wharton's novels whose setting is the war have not been entirely regarded as war writing. Annette Larson Benert (1996) considers that "Writing a War Story" (1919b) and "The Refugees" (1919c) are not war novels. For Benert, these are "satirical pieces having less to do with war than with writing (on the basis of no experience and no 'subject') and with refugees treated simply as the latest fad of an enervated and exploitative British aristocracy" (340).

Wharton's novella *The Marne* (1918) and her short story "Coming Home" (1916) are, in fact, the only pieces of fiction written during the First World War whose setting is France. And together with *A Son at the Front*, published five years later, it is Wharton's less valued writing. Because of the time in which *A Son at the Front* (1923) was published, this novel also faced criticism. The First World War was over but still too present. As Plante (1964: 18) points out,

the few lone voices crying that opportunity does not concern the artist were drowned by those who clamored that this was a most inopportune time for a war novel. The majority agreed that it was past even the eleventh hour for Edith Wharton to tell them, albeit in flawless English and Jamesian structural perfection, that the War had brought cruel suffering to a great many members of society.

Wharton's usual psychological insight is diminished in this portrait of a young soldier by the fact that her character's thoughts have a rather war correspondent touch, as when he describes men who "must have the same unnatural look as these wan ruins, these gutted houses and sterile fields" (24), a reflection that echoes her description of dumbness in relation with ruins in *Fighting France*: "that stare of dumb bewilderment—or that other look of concentrated horror, full of the reflection of flames and ruins" (34).

Only her war poem, 'You & You', published in *Scribner's Magazine* (January 1919d) and very much syndicated, is an exception to the use of war as a scenario. Wharton's long poem, written in November 1918, is a comprehensive tribute of those who fought at war. Perhaps her virtue lies in addressing people and displacing landscapes. A contributor to the magazine, Mary Shipman Andrews (in Sait, 1967: 174), wrote to Robert Bridges, editor at Charles Scribner's Sons, about Wharton's poem:

I am bowled over by Mrs. Wharton's 'You & You.' I couldn't bear to think I hadn't written it. Of course it's her genius in striking what that old wizard Emerson calls 'the universal note'—(didn't he?—) but the effect was that all the way through she was saying my inmost soul, & it wasn't fair—that I couldn't say it. I gulped & sobbed out loud all along. I love to make anybody cry the least bit so that was the deepest tribute I could pay. Nobody has said the thing like that. It ought to be immortal.

If Realism was a thing of the past, realist writing had then become the only way to live in the present moment. In a letter to Bernard Berenson (Lewis, 1975: 423), Wharton was compelled to state the difference between the situation before the war, when "you could write fiction without indicating the period, the present being assumed", and her actual time, when "everything will soon have to be timed with reference to it. In other words, the historical novel, with all its vices, will be the only possible form for fiction." It is not surprising, then, the fact that Wharton postponed the novel she was writing in 1915 in favour of her collection of essays about the Great War, *Fighting France, From Dunkerque to Belfort* (1915).

In one of his texts about the war, which dates back to 1881, Mark Twain (1992: 774) remarked ironically the relevance of war correspondents: "By the etiquette of war, it is permitted to none below the rank of newspaper correspondent to dictate to the general in the field". Certainly the development of journalism in the 20th century went hand in hand with the figure of the war correspondent. To the development of this profession it must be added that many writers were attracted to this form of writing. In the early years of the 20th century, there was no opposition between professional and amateur journalism,

and writers were among the very few to have access to the news before they were reported to citizens.

There are several theories about who was the first women correspondent. Catherine Ferguson (1864-1915), an Irish journalist whose nom de plume was Kit Coleman, is said to be the first war correspondent since she covered in 1898 the Spanish-American War from Cuba. Margaret Bourke-White, on the other hand, is credited with being the "first accredited American woman war correspondent" (Tolley-Stokes 2006: 76). Mary Roberts Rineharts, known as the American Agatha Christie, is considered the first woman war correspondent to report from the Belgian front during World War I. Rineharts contributed, like Wharton, to British newsmagazine *The Sphere*. Therefore, a range of attributions exists, from which we can easily conclude women had a very important role in reporting news about the war. Some of them developed this responsibility in situ, being there when facts occurred; others were sent for that matter. But all of them left their mark on history with an all-inclusive narration of how men, but also women, survived or died in those villages reduced to ruins. As Sait remarks

The skill of Wharton's writing far outstrips that of the official war correspondents in that it catches the grander movements and the universal scale of the action in an elevated prose style ideally suited for that purpose. And unlike her main English competitor, Mrs. Humphry Ward, Mrs. Wharton saw the significance and dignity of the common soldier." (1967: 173-74)

Wharton officially worked as a correspondent for *Scribner's Magazine* during the First World War. Price (1998) described in detail Wharton's writing process for her war articles, from obtaining the necessary permissions from the French government to tour the Western Front to her method when sending them to her editor. According to Price, Wharton took one week to write each article and then cabled her editor and mailed her contribution to be published in *Scribner's*. A reflection of this can be found in one ironic description of how to circulate during days when "instructions began to shower":

foreigners could not remain in France without satisfying the authorities as to their nationality and antecedents; and to do this

necessitated repeated ineffective visits to chanceries, consulates and police stations, each too densely thronged with flustered applicants to permit the entrance of one more. Between these vain pilgrimages, the traveller impatient to leave had to toil on foot to distant railway stations, from which he returned baffled by vague answers and disheartened by the declaration that tickets, when achievable, must also be *visés* by the police. There was a moment when it seemed that one's inmost thoughts had to have that unobtainable *visa* to obtain which, more fruitless hours must be lived on grimy stairways between perspiring layers of fellow-alien. (18-19)

Wharton's admiration for the "life-evoking faculty" (1914: 230) in an author, a virtue she possessed, had previously placed her among the so-called "realists". And, therefore, she seemed the perfect candidate to cover the terrible news since she was in France when the war broke out. As she narrates in "The look of Paris", which is the opening chapter of *Fighting France*, on July 30, 1914, *they* (no reference is provided for this pronoun in the text) had been having lunch "by the roadside under apple-trees on the edge of a field" (4), and then had continued their way, noticing various villages in celestial silence. That tranquillity had led them to contemplating the skies and the interior of Spain-like churches. And suddenly, "The next day the air was thundery with rumours. Nobody believed them, everybody repeated them. War? Of course there couldn't be war!" (6).

One of the crucial features of *Fighting France* is the freedom with which Wharton moved from the rigidity of the report to a more open genre, the reflexive chronicle. In fact, the testimonial genre had been widely explored in the American continent in previous centuries—from Christopher Columbus's log to the wide scope of ethnobiographical writing on the development and independence of former Spanish colonies. In the 20th century most characteristics of this genre were reversed. Not only did the geographical direction change but also new variants were introduced: however perilous, some women did take part in writing from the war proper; the writing itself also brought in a new flow, while it exchanged confession and witnessing for implication and assessment.

As the war paralysed the world, her literary

world came to a halt. Olin-Ammentorp quotes a letter to Charles Scribner, Wharton's publisher, from June 28, 1915, which clarifies the process of writing, planning and publishing her war volume *Fighting France*: "I have been given such unexpected opportunities for seeing things at the front, that you might perhaps care to collect the articles (I suppose there will be five) in a small volume to be published in the autumn".

Collections of articles were at the time a welcome practice in between two successful novels. But what Wharton was suggesting was not a literary strategy but a change in her plans because of the war—a change that implied leaving aside the novel she was writing, a novel she never published. Some years later, her friend Francis Scott Fitzgerald had in mind the idea of gathering some articles to be published between *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925). However, unlike Wharton, his original plan never materialised. It would not be fair to claim that these two opposite choices elucidate these two writers' real preferences for publication. Fitzgerald's essays dealt with his experience as a writer while Wharton's focused on her experience at war, a subject that was likely to attract a wider audience. However, it does show us an image of Edith Wharton that differs greatly from what we have read about her many times: that she was confined to an upper-class realism that practically limited her to the fiction produced in the 19th century when, on the contrary, Wharton lived in and for the present, in the midst of one of the most truculent periods of the twentieth century.

Citizen journalism was coined in the 21st century, when different forms of participatory journalism begun to be widespread. Also called "grassroots journalism" (Gillmor, 2004), it was defined as the "act of citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information" (Bowman and Willis, 2003: 9). For Sarah Bird Wright (1997: 58), Wharton "surrendered the authority inherent in her connoisseurship of art and architecture and entered an arena in which every citizen could be an expert on politics and mores and every writer a credible journalist." *Fighting France* demonstrates that Wharton's unconditional engagement with the French people was greater than with the British or the American from the beginning of the war. It shows her involvement both as a citizen and a journalist.

In the 20th century war became a powerful

scenario for writers, famously among them, Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck. In the 1970s, Maya Angelou (1974: 2) declared: "I thought if war did not include killing, I'd like to see one every year. Something like a festival". This is a sentence that brings to memory Wharton's powerful assertion in *Fighting France*: "War is the greatest of paradoxes: the most senseless and disheartening of human retrogressions, and yet the stimulant of qualities of soul which, in every race, can seemingly find no other means of renewal." (1915: 53).

In a recent article, Elizabeth D. Samet (2010) wondered whether Wharton was "hopelessly enamored with battle" to conclude that she was "attempting to reproduce the disorientation she was experiencing." Samet pinpoints a very significant element in her article, "the sensation produced by the collision of tranquil scenes with vivid imaginings of war's annihilating force." However, the images that Wharton employed as a prevailing synecdoche of the country that she was describing (i.e. houses in ruins or smashed hospitals in the middle of a peaceful field) have sometimes led to misunderstanding.

Having a car and circulating was not such an easy task as has been thought when reading Wharton's description:

Some cars requisitioned will hardly be returned, as is evidenced by the experience of Mrs. Julia Newell and her sister, Miss Josephine Pomeroy, two Americans just returned to Paris. Before the war broke out, Miss Pomeroy left Frankfort by automobile, but in passing through Metz her \$5,000 Delaunay-Belleville machine was confiscated by the Germans, and her footman and chauffeur, who were Frenchmen, were put into prison. All her luggage was lost. No attention was paid to her protests that she was an American citizen. (Barnard, 1914: 73-4)

The reasons that led Wharton to writing a type of essay or article different from what she had published before seem to gather around one notion, experience. Alfred Kazin (1941) saw through the concept of class and education to bring out this personal vision:

It is easy to say now that Edith Wharton's great subject should

have been the biography of her own class, for her education and training had given her alone in her literary generation the best access to it. But the very significance of that education was her inability to transcend and use it. Since she could do no other, she chose instead to write, in various forms and with unequal success, the one story she knew best, the story that constituted her basic experience—her own. (in Walker, 2003: 65)

And, in fact, Kazin's observations are very similar to those exposed by Wharton herself in her autobiography *A Backward Glance* (1934: 369-70), when she remembered her post-war years: "the world I had grown up in and been formed by had been destroyed in 1914, and I felt myself incapable of transmuting the raw material of the after-war world into a work of art". Brassard has compared May Sinclair's *Journal of Impressions in Belgium* and Edith Wharton's *Fighting France*, both published in 1915, and concludes that these travel narratives are "autobiographical documents disguised as propaganda" (2008: 3). Or we could rather rephrase as "war corresponding rephrased as autobiographical documents", since there is a clear journalistic touch under all her descriptions, curiously very similar to her young hero's observations in *The Marne* (1918).

War journalism has changed throughout the 20th century. Nowadays, subjectivity is no longer regarded as professional in the reports sent from the conflict area. However, with the emergence of citizen journalism, this feature, which was somehow lost after the profession of war correspondence achieved its golden age, is back again. In the middle, the job got adorned with stereotypes. Evelyn Waugh fixed many of them in his novel *Scoop*, where war correspondents were described as lazy, alcoholic journalists. The emergence of women correspondents represented a challenge to these widespread clichés.

French Ways and their Meaning (1919a) put an end to Wharton's war cycle somehow; with the exception of *A Son at the Front*, her period of observing and writing down was drawn to a close in this book, which is, according to its author's first lines, "essentially a desultory book, the result of intermittent observation, and often, no doubt, of rash assumption." Precisely because of the war, Wharton considered that it could "hardly be more than a series of disjointed notes; and the excuse for its

publication lies in the fact that the very conditions which made more consecutive work impossible also gave unprecedented opportunities for quick notation" (v).

A final remark must be made regarding women and journalism. The perspective of women as war correspondents or citizen journalists showed what being a woman at war was like. With the recent revelations of war correspondent in Egypt Lara Logan, new issues are becoming to be tackled when sending women to conflict areas. However, as Kim Barker, *ProRepublica* war correspondent, declared: "without female correspondents in war zones, the experiences of women there may be only a rumor" (in Hayden, 2011: n.pag.). Wharton set the pace for other women who witnessed wars from the front line and provided her readers with a rich and detailed account of the one of the most important conflicts of the 20th century. Curiously enough, Wharton's books were never banned, in spite of her challenging propositions about sexual and gender roles.⁶

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Título: Más que una corresponsal de guerra: Las crónicas de Edith Wharton sobre los civiles franceses durante la Gran Guerra y los albores del periodismo ciudadano.

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ENDNOTES

¹ With *The Book of the Homeless* (1916, *Le Livre des Sans-Foyer* in French) Wharton also gathered money for her charity work. It was a collection of writings and art (from poems and prose to illustrations and music) that included authors, painters and composers such as Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, W. B. Yeats, Alice Meynell, Igor Stravinsky and John Singer Sargent.

² In her biography of Edith Wharton, Hermione Lee affirms that "Wharton's tenancy, which also involved her renting the Wards' London house at 25 Grosvenor Place, was a strictly business arrangement" (467).

³ Norton was the founder of an ambulance corps, whose first car circulated in Boulogne-sur-mer in late October 1914. See Alan Albright (1998).

⁴ It seems reasonable to conclude that more often than not the deliberate suppression of texts did not affect elegant prose written by educated women however provocative the social subversion they proposed. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Compton Mackenzie's *Extraordinary Women* never suffered official censure. Some decades before, late Victorian American novelists had had to be careful enough to consider certain standards. As Hermione Lee (2007: 31) states in her study of Wharton: "fiction had to be fit for virgins" while she reminds us how Wharton's mother had forbidden her daughter to read "any of Scott's novels, except 'Waverly', till after she was married".

⁵ The issue had been banned by the US Post Office in 1917 on the complaint of John Sumner, vice head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. Only five years later publishers Boni & Liveright sued Sumner for \$25,000 in damages because of his ban on *The Satyricon of Petronius Arbiter*. A Press clip about this piece of news, "Vice Head Is Sued For Book Criticism", was published in *The New York Times*. 1 Oct. 1922.

⁶ Robin Peel (2005:203), quoting from Kenneth Clark's autobiography, *Another Part of the Wood*, exposes Clark's persuasion that Wharton was not