The Novel & Psychology: Edith Wharton's 'The Age of Innocence'
Transcript

Date: Tuesday, 24 February 2015 - 6:00PM
Location: Museum of London
In my last lecture – the third of four on the novel and its extraordinary bagginess – I explored the degree to which the genre of the novel allows for explorations of idealistic or utopian ideas, ideas about how we might better organise ourselves as social beings. Idealist and Utopian novels imagine other ways of living as social beings and in imagining them make it possible, perhaps, for radical change. The lecture was based on the nineteenth-century French woman writer George Sand and her novel, *François le Champi* (*The Country Wail*, 1848). Before that we considered the capacity of the novel to allow for explorations of political history. This was based on the writings of another French novelist, Henri Beyle, who wrote under the pseudonym of Stendhal. The focus was on his novel, *Le rouge et le noir* (*The Red and the Black*, 1830). And in the first of the four lectures on the novel I discussed Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas* (1759). Johnson’s working title had been ‘The Choice of Life’ and I analysed it in terms of its capacity to explore what I called the ‘morality of happiness’. Is it incumbent on us to try to find a life that makes us happy? Tonight, in my final lecture on the novel, I’d like to consider the genre as a vehicle for the exploration of human psychology.

As a very loose definition of ‘psychology’ I’d like to propose this: ‘the means of exploring ideas, feelings and behaviours.’ Most novels are about people in a social setting and this is certainly true of Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* (1920) and in exploring how individuals function in a group, psychology will almost necessarily form part of the writing. It has been argued, however, that Wharton’s novels are better described primarily as social satires. It is her short stories, it has been claimed, that provide the great psychological insights. This is Carolingley in a double review of a Wharton biography (by Shari Benstock) and a book about Wharton and WWI (by Alan Price): ‘Her fiction is Janus-faced: her social satires fill the “large canvas of the novels,” whereas her explorations of the inner life, of psychology and parapsychology, fill the “smaller canvases of short stories”’ (p. 243). Throughout her career, Wharton shifted between these two forms of writing, chronicling the social scene while simultaneously penetrating its members’ inner lives.’ [No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton by Shari Benstock; *The End of the Age of Innocence: Edith Wharton and the First World War* by Alan Price Review by: Carol Singley, *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (Mar., 1999), pp. 153-157]

In one of my introductory lectures in my first year as Gresham Professor I sounded words of caution about books and courses that claim to be able to teach novel-writing, particularly those – the majority – that treat certain aspects of the novel as discrete elements, typically: character, plot, setting, point of view, and theme. To distinguish ‘the social scene’ and ‘members’ inner lives’, as Singley does in the review I just quoted from, is, in my view, equally mistaken. At the risk of mixing my metaphors – I have proposed the novel as a capacious sack – I’d now like to suggest that it is also a Gordian Knot, the proverbial intricate knot which is impossible to untie because one end is hidden. Great novels do not allow the constituent elements which I just proposed, to be detached one from another. This evening I’d like to argue that in a novel like *The Age of Innocence* (and I’ll refer to a couple of others) Wharton provides both acute social satire and very modern insights into the human psychology of the members of that society – and the two are inextricably part and parcel of each other. This is because the categories of ‘place’ and ‘person’ are fused. But before I begin that argument – which is a complex one – and illustrate it, I think it’s useful to give a brief account of Wharton’s life and a number of descriptions of the novel for those of you who may not yet have had a chance to read it.

Edith Wharton was born Edith Newbold Jones in New York on January 24, 1862. [Image 2] She died in Saint-Brice-sous-Féret, near Paris, in 1937. She was seventy-five. [gloss my absurd obsession with length of a life]. Her family was essentially ‘quasi-new-aristocratic’, distinguished and thus well-connected, long-established, wealthy and New York. She was educated by private tutors and governesses at home and in Europe, where the family moved for six years after the American Civil War (1861-65). She was a voracious reader. She made her debut in society in 1879, aged seventeen [age again], and married Edward Wharton [Image 3], a wealthy Boston banker, in 1885. He was 12 years older than she was, from a grand Boston family. He was a sportsman and from a similarly confident social class. They both enjoyed travel. But a few years into the marriage Edward started to suffer from serious depression. By 1902 it had developed into a chronic mental disorder and was deemed incurable. That same year Wharton fell in love with the promiscuous Morton Fullerton [Image 4] who was a correspondent for the London *Times*. In Morton she found an intellectual companion who shared her interest in writing. Their affair only lasted three years.

Although she had had a book of her own poems privately printed when she was 16 – her mother’s attempt to get writing out of her system - it was not until years later that she began to take writing seriously, that’s to say to write in the disciplined way that almost all novelists eventually adopt. She was influenced above all by her fellow American writer and friend, Henry James [Image 5] (who had introduced her to Fullerton), their work shows shared concern for artistic form and the exploration of ethical dilemmas. She contributed a few poems and stories to *Harper’s*, *Scribner’s*, and other magazines in the 1890s. Her next books were collections of short stories, *The Greater Inclination* (1899) and *Crucial Instances*(1901).
In 1902 Wharton published her first novel, *The Valley of Decision* and, three years later, *The House of Mirth*. The latter bears some resemblance to *The Age of Innocence* being a detailed analysis of the hierarchical and repressive society in which she herself grew up. It won her wide critical acclaim and an audience keen to read more of her. Her career as a novelist really took off. In the next two decades she wrote novels including *The Reef* (1912), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), *Summer* (1917), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), which won a Pulitzer Prize.

So why, in 1919 (when Wharton started *The Age of Innocence*) was she intent on looking back fifty or so years to her childhood in New York? Wharton spoke of the venture as a retreat ‘to childish memories of a long-vanished America’, and a desire for ‘momentary escape’. But this looking back is barely indicative of a nostalgic desire, nor of an intention to write an historical novel, although like Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* the novel does give us a keen sense of what it might have been like to live in the upper echelons of Old New York in the 1870s. Edith Wharton’s working title had been *Old New York* and she was living in Paris at the time (and where she had been permanently resident from 1909), organising institutions to feed, clothe, and shelter the refugees who were pouring into the capital. This was 1919 and the Allied forces were remaking the map of Europe. What she was observing at first hand was individuals’ relationships with place. And what *The Age of Innocence* explores is just this. She is looking back to ‘Old New York’ not with naïve nostalgia but because it provides the richest and most familiar context in which to consider the interactions of the self and place which, as I said earlier, she writes about as an inseparable pair. So what is the novel about?

*The Age of Innocence* presents a picture of upper-class New York society in the 1870s by means of an intractable three-way relationship between Newland Archer, the protagonist [image 6], May Welland [image 7], a beautiful fellow member of the grand society of New York and Ellen Olenska [image 8], May’s cousin. [Images from *The Age of Innocence* is a 1993 American film adaptation of Edith Wharton’s 1920 novel of the same name. The film was released by Columbia Pictures, and stars Daniel Day-Lewis, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Winona Ryder]. Ellen is a former member of their social circle who has returned to New York after a disastrous marriage to a Polish nobleman, Count Olenska. Newland falls deeply in love with Ellen but neither he nor Ellen is capable of breaking out of the conventions and taboos of their society and its times. Newland feels compelled to renounce Ellen and marry May. So it is at once a love story and a brilliant examination of the snobbery and hypocrisy of a wealthy elite.

I think it’s worth providing some additional accounts of the novel from contemporary reviews as these give us some insight into how the novel was read when it was first published. As I said in one of my lectures on reading last year, reading is an act of engagement which is largely ephemeral and which is unique. We know this from our re-reading of novels; they seem to have changed in the interim. [gloss further?] So how did Wharton’s contemporaries engage with her novel?

Here is one which, in my view, is a mis-reading, in terms of its conclusion at least:

A young man, Newland Archer, belonging to the inner stock, the real thing, finds himself in conflict with the traditions that have made him – in conflict, that is to say, with a very large part of himself. His traditions, working with the smoothness of long practice, draw him remorselessly into the discreet, distinguished, airless world of his kind, into a sound profession and an unsuitable marriage; while the strain of rebellion pulls on the other side towards freedom, pulls violently, but at last has to own itself beaten. It is easier for a stranger to get into the guarded enclosure, after all, than for a native to get out of it. For Archer freedom means Ellen Olenska, a member of the family party like himself, but one who has vividly (and also disastrously) succeeded in detaching herself, and who has returned to it for support and consolation after her wandering.

And the critic goes on to write – and this is where I think a mis-reading takes place:

‘Ellen is exquisite, and she and Archer are both of them much too intelligent to underrate the virtue and the dignity of the forces opposed to them; the old order, in its way, is perfectly just and reasonable, its standards are honourable; two intelligent beings can only in the end respect them.’ [Reviews, Norton ed., p.396]

What I want to argue, as I mentioned earlier, is that for Wharton, individuals and their context are not separable. It is not, in my view, that Archer and Ellen are ‘too intelligent’ to free themselves from the ‘old order’; it is that the ‘old order’ is part of them and they are part of the old order. There is, in effect, no choice. This is the acute insight into the psychologies of the characters, psychologies shaped by their social context. This is what makes the novel tragic as there is that overwhelming sense of waste, of love wasted.

Other readers certainly found her re-creation of people in a place convincing. One wrote, ‘New York society and customs in the seventies are described with an accuracy that is almost uncanny; to read these pages is to live again.’ [Reviews, Norton ed., p.384]

Another reviewer wrote: ‘It is said that this generation devours everything but remembers nothing’ and proposed *The Age of Innocence* as a classic which would be remembered: ‘As a picture of the ‘upper classes’ in our metropolis as it stolidly solidified itself in the decade or so after the Civil War, the novel is curiously captivating; no one but Mrs. Wharton could have rendered the description so delicately exact. There is irony behind it all, but not the bitterness of scorn or contempt. It is an etching, not a caricature.’ [Ibid., p.390] This is a comment about Wharton’s *tone* and I agree. It is the sympathy which Wharton allows us to develop with her
characters which makes the novel more than a social satire: it is not just about a society, it is about particular individuals who are bound up in that society, one which the previously quoted reviewer brilliantly describes as ‘stolidly solidified’ – that captures the sense of entrapment. Archer has no choice but to give up his love of Ellen and marry May. All three are inseparably bound up with place.

It is this idea of the Gordian Knot of great literature that I’d now like to develop. Let’s begin with character. In The Age of Innocence Wharton brilliantly re-invents fictional character. She moves a long way from the notion of character in the American Realist tradition. For Wharton, characters are not separable one from another. Identity is rather a function of multiple relationships and not simply with other ‘characters’. She expresses this idea in her fascinating work, The Writing of Fiction (1925): ‘the bounds of personality were not reproducible by a sharp black line, but that of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things.’ [EW, The Writing of Fiction (1925), p.7] Rather than being an independent, contained entity, character, for Wharton, spills out into ‘adjacent people and things’. This is expressed very well by Pamela Knights in her essay ‘Forms of Disembodiment’. She writes: ‘Readers soon discover that any observation about an individual character – about his or her consciousness, emotions, body, history or language – also entangles us in the collective experience of the group, expressed in the welter of trifles, the matrix of social knowledge, within and out of which Wharton’s subjects are composed’ [Pamela Knights, ‘Forms of Disembodiment: The Social Subject in The Age of Innocence’, The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton, p.21]

‘Character and scenic detail’, Wharton contends in The Writing of Fiction are ‘in fact one’.

I’d like to argue that this notion of character as entanglement in the people and things that surround the character is also achieved as a function of two other ‘constituent elements’ of novels: narrative technique and figurative language. Once again, in Wharton’s novel, character and narrative technique are fused. The point of view is largely Newland Archer’s but the story isn’t told by Newland, in the first person, (‘I’); rather it is a third-person narrative but from his point of view. As William E.Cain writes, ‘we see characters and situations from his perspective and perceive Newland’s and others’ thoughts and feelings as he experiences them. At the outset, Newland is proud of his commitment to convention and takes pleasure in his place in 1870s New York society. However, as the novel proceeds, he grows disenchanted, embittered by the personal cost, the loss of freedom, that a conventional marriage exacts.’ [William E. Cain, ‘Edith Wharton and the Second Story’] And he goes on to say, ‘To an extent, Newland’s self-division suggests Wharton’s own. She became a successful writer, a literary professional, and a woman of letters, but, as her biographers R.W.B. Lewis and Hermione Lee have established, for decades she was trapped in a bad marriage that left her sexually and emotionally unfulfilled. She blamed the coercive force of New York social convention for imprisoning her in a misguided union even as she valued the decorum, restraint, and dignity that New York at its best had represented for her. Sharing her main character’s disappointment, Wharton offers a compelling exploration of his troubled, evasive consciousness. [William E. Cain, ‘Edith Wharton and the Second Story’]

He goes on to write:

An intense awareness of the point of view; the detailed articulation of the processes of consciousness; visions of desire and aspiration falling victim to temptation from the outside and to subtle self-deception and self-delusion from within: these are elements identified with the fiction of Henry James, and also with that of Edith Wharton. To say that Wharton has a Jamesian aspect is not to identify her entirely with James, as though there were no real distinction to be made between them... In her work, Wharton is not simply doing what James does very well; she is doing what she herself has set out to do. This is above all true of The Age of Innocence (1920), Wharton's most subtle and intricate novel. [William E.Cain, ‘Edith Wharton and the Second Story’, New England Review, vol 29 no2 2008]

But I want to add that this is also effective as a function of figurative language, in particular the ways in which architecture and interior design are configured. ‘Description’, another constituent ingredient of the novel, and especially the exterior and interior of buildings, is inseparable from both character and narrative technique. The Gordian Knot of fiction remains firmly tied. Some further biographical details may substantiate my emphasis on Wharton’s concern with the built environment. Firstly, this seems to have been something she was aware of from within: these are elements identified with the fiction of Henry James, and also with that of Edith Wharton. To say that Wharton has a Jamesian aspect is not to identify her entirely with James, as though there were no real distinction to be made between them... In her work, Wharton is not simply doing what James does very well; she is doing what she herself has set out to do. This is above all true of The Age of Innocence (1920), Wharton's most subtle and intricate novel. [William E.Cain, ‘Edith Wharton and the Second Story’, New England Review, vol 29 no2 2008]

This vignette tells of people and places – people of a certain class, living in a certain kind of community and their ‘social’ space – the drawing room – where visitors would be received. The drawing room was, then, a window into the life of those of the house and it was important, in this case, that it be ‘tidy’. And tidiness would symbolise order, cleanliness, even sexual propriety perhaps, the smooth running of the household which would be one of a hierarchy of people from the lady and gentleman of the house down to the humblest member of the household’s staff.

Wharton’s interest as an adult in interior design and architecture preceded her rise to fame as a novelist. Her first published book was The Decoration of Houses [image 9] which was co-written with Ogden Codman, Jr., noted American architect and interior decorator in the Beaux-Arts styles. In their book they argued for ‘house-decoration as a branch of architecture’, and criticised the ‘indifference of the wealthy to architectural fitness.’
They argued that there was no logic in treating the interior and exterior of houses in distinct ways but rather as a single aesthetic project and one which should be guided by the principles of simplicity, rather than ornament. They denounced Victorian-style interior decoration, particularly rooms that were decorated with heavy window curtains, and large, overstuffed, upholstered furniture. They argued that such rooms emphasized fabric and upholstery at the expense of the proper planning of space and thought-out architectural design. The consequence was that rooms designed along these lines were uncomfortable to be in and therefore little used. They were a statement for visitors, rather than a space to be lived in and enjoyed. Wharton and Codman advocated the creation of houses with rooms decorated with strong wall and ceiling treatments, emphasising airy volume, complemented by appropriate furniture, rooms based on simple, classical design principles such as symmetry and proportion and a sense of balance. The Decoration of Houses is considered a seminal work and its success led to the emergence of professional decorators working alongside architects.

In 1902 Wharton was able to put her ideas into practice. She bought a 113 acre property in Lenox, Massachusetts. With the help of architects and engineers she built the Mount [image 10], a Georgian mansion with a cascade of beautiful gardens. It was the ideal environment for her as a designer, gardener, hostess and, of course, writer.

As an aside I’d like you to see The Mount and George Sand’s manor house at Nohant [image 11] alongside. Wharton admired Sand the novelist – she also admired the architecture of her country house.

The building work on The Mount proceeded quickly. Within a year Wharton reported: ‘Lenox has had its usual tonic effect on me, & I feel like a new edition, revised & corrected ... in the very best type. It is great fun out at the place, now too – as everything is pushing up new shoots – not only cabbages & strawberries, but electric lights & plumbing. I really think we shall be installed – after a fashion – by Sept. 1st.’ As moving-in day came nearer she thanked her publisher, Scribner’s, for a timely royalty payment – she was struggling financially: ‘Many thanks for the cheque for $2,191.81, which even to the 81 cents, is welcome to an author in the last throes of house-building.’ In a letter to a friend some weeks later, she exclaimed: ‘Finalmente! We have been in the new house for ten days, and have enjoyed every minute of it.’ Most telling, however, is a letter she wrote to Morton Fullerton which described just how much of herself she had invested in the Mount project: ‘I am amazed at the success of my efforts. Decidedly, I’m a better landscape gardener than novelist image 12], and this place, every line of which is my own work, far surpasses The House of Mirth.’ Henry James recognised this, writing, ‘No one fully knows our Edith who hasn’t seen her in the act of creating a habitation for herself’. So just as character and setting are fused in her novels, so her friends saw her personality as intimately bound up with the Mount.

_The House of Mirth_, whatever Wharton’s protestations, is a wonderful novel and one in which setting and character are fused. At the beginning we are introduced to Lawrence Selden, the bachelor lawyer who lives in his comfortable apartment complete with ‘shabby leather chairs’, faded oriental carpets and a pleasant balcony. This is his safe haven to which he retreats and from whose balcony he witnesses the lives of others. In sharp contrast, at the end of the novel, we see Lily Bart, the unmarried heroine of the novel, in her boarding house lodging, ‘where there was no other token of her personality about the room, unless it showed itself in the scrupulous neatness.’ Selden has money, Lily has none. Selden is a man and Lily a woman. Selden has made a home for himself, one with the trappings of a gentleman’s club. The only aspect of her personality that Lily can project onto her surroundings is her tidiness, a sign of her adherence to certain principles which Wharton was taught about by her mother at the age of eleven.

Wharton’s use of architecture and interior design is more developed in _The Age of Innocence_ as Cynthia G.Falk has demonstrated and to whom I am indebted in the following discussion. [‘The Intolerable ugliness of New York’; Architecture and Society in Edith Warton’s _The Age of Innocence_, American Studies, Summer 2001, 19-43]. But I’d like to further her treatment of architecture in the novel and to underline the inextricable relationship between character, social ritual and setting. These are brilliantly conflated in the novel. The rebellious Ellen’s grandmother, Mrs Manson Mingott, ‘put the crowning touch to her audacities by building a large house of cream-colored stone ... in an inaccessible wilderness near the Central Park.’ Her audacity would have been obvious to contemporary readers. New York, as far as the wealthy were concerned was built of brownstone buildings, not ‘brash’ cream-coloured stone. Early on in the novel we read, ‘brown sandstone seemed as much the only wear as a frock coat in the afternoon.’ (_The Age of Innocence_, chp 1) and a little later that ‘its hue coated New York like a cold chocolate sauce’. (_The Age of Innocence_, chp 9)

There were ‘in’ areas of the city, and ‘out’ areas, like the ‘wilderness near the Central Park’. All this is part of what Wharton called ‘the hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs.’ [ _The Age of Innocence_, chp 6].

In _The Age of Innocence_ we are told that fashionable New York society in the 1870s could be represented as a pyramid with three tiers. At the top were a small number of families that could claim an aristocratic origin in the real sense of the word.’ In the middle was a group of families descended from ‘respectable English or Dutch merchants’, and at the bottom, ‘wealthy but inconspicuous people who had often been raised above their level by marriage with one of the ruling clans.’ (46-9). Rather than explicitly categorising the characters of the novel in terms of class, characters are associated with architecture and interior design. The most aristocratic family of the novel, the van der Luydens own a ‘large solemn house’ (50). From Archer’s point of view its ‘high-ceileded white-walled’ (51) drawing room was ‘so complete an image of its owners.’ (54) The van der Luydens, it turns
out, are rarely in New York and more often at one of their country estates. The novel’s protagonist, Newland Archer, belongs to the middle stratum and his family are insufficiently wealthy to own proper estates. Summers are spent out of town but in the autumn they return to New York and to a clearly circumscribed area of the city around lower Fifth Avenue between Washington Square and Fortieth Street. ‘Every year’ we read, ‘on the fifteenth of October Fifth Avenue opened its shutters, unrolled its carpets and hung up its triple layer of window-curtains’ (chp 26). We know that these heavy, thick curtains were not to Wharton’s liking and symbolised introspection and suffocation.

Living outside the ‘in’ areas, as Ellen and her grandmother Mingott choose to do, is considered not the thing. Ellen remarks to Archer, ‘I’ve never been in a city where there seems to be such a feeling against living in des quartiers excentriques’ (chp 9). She herself has shunned convention having rented a house from her ‘vagabond’ Aunt Medora ‘far down West Twenty-third street’. And in the summer instead of vacationing in Newport, Rhode Island, which was the done thing, she chose to stay in Portsmouth, Rhode Island. Catherine Mingott remarks to Archer, ‘When I built this house you’d have thought I was moving to California! Nobody ever HAD built above fortieth street – no, says I, nor above the Buttery either, before Christopher Columbus discovered America. No, no; not one of them wants to be different; they’re as scared of it as the small-pox.’ (chp 17).

But there is an element of this architectural hieroglyphic that goes beyond matters of taste. A contrast is clearly established between architecture that is American and inward-looking, and architecture that draws on European traditions. When Archer, deeply in love with Ellen, visits her rented house we hear his reactions: ‘The atmosphere of the room was so different from any he had ever breathed that self-consciousness vanished in the sense of adventure. He had been in drawings hung with red damask, with pictures ‘of the Italian school’; what struck him was the way in which Medora Manson’s shabby hired house... had, by a turn of the hand, and the skilful use of a few properties, been turned into something intimate, “foreign,” subtly suggestive of old romantic scenes and sentiments.’ [chp 9] His mother and sister, on the other hand, ‘collected American revolutionary glazed ware.’ [chp 5] Thus an opposition opens up between characters wedded to national architectural styles and American artefacts, and those drawn to things European. And women in these two groups are further opposed: those committed to all things American do not want freedom [43], protect themselves from anything unusual or unpleasant [77] and only ever express the views of their husbands, brothers or fathers. They never speak for themselves. [81] When they entered marriage, these were characterised as ‘dull associations of material and social interests held together by ignorance.’ [44] Those who want to adopt European styles, on the other hand, are shown to be independent and keen to travel. Catherine Mingott and her granddaughter Ellen Olenska are the prime examples.

Wharton was writing The Age of Innocence at the very end of the First World War. She had been resident in France throughout the war and had seen much of the destruction war had brought. She wrote a number of articles for Scribner’s Magazine which described those horrors and, by implication, advocated greater American involvement in Europe. As Cynthia G. Falk has convincingly argued, ‘The Age of Innocence continued in the spirit of Wharton’s war-time work. In the years immediately following the surrender of the central powers [Germany and Austria-Hungary], the role of the increasingly powerful United States would play in rehabilitating war-torn Europe remained unclear. US President Woodrow Wilson opposed subjecting Germany to financial reparations that would help other European nations, particularly France and England [GB], recover from the destruction they had suffered during the war. Leaders in the US were equally resistant to the creation of a League of Nations, which might require their nation once again to use military force to aid European allies.’ Wharton’s concern was to ‘encourage Americans to look beyond insular patriotic tendencies that might lead to isolationism. She urged her readers to look to France with both compassion and an eye toward their own national betterment.’

Writing The Age of Innocence was not the nostalgic looking back she herself claimed. Rather it was an opportunity to reassess the culture in which she had largely grown up and to question the artistic and social conventions which had shaped her but which she was able critically to re-assess as a woman and an artist.

To conclude, my contention is that the novel – and Wharton’s novels generally - should be read less as acutely observed ‘social’ satires but rather as highly charged psychological novels. This is because of Wharton’s innovations as a novelist and her re-invention of the idea of fictional character as inseparable from the people and objects that surround it. And the objects that come to be most highly charged and significant are those of the built environment. This is brilliantly expressed when we hear – from Archer’s point of view – of his mother’s astute insights into New York social hierarchies: ‘She was able... to trace each new crack in its surface, and all the strange weeds pushing up between the ordered rows of social vegetables. [Norton ed. p.155] ‘The crack in the surface’, suggests a crack in a built façade, and the weeds pushing up between the ordered rows of social vegetables’ are, of course, the people.

But I’d like to finish by proposing a distinction between the built environment that characters inhabit and the idea of archaeological remains. One of the most brilliant descriptions in The Age of Innocence is this:

‘The immense accretion of flesh that had descended on her in middle life like a flood of lava on a doomed city had changed her... into something as vast and august as a natural phenomenon. She had accepted this submergence as philosophically as all her other trials, and now, in extreme old age, was rewarded by presenting to her mirror an almost unwrinkled expanse of firm pink and white flesh, in the centre of which the traces of a
small face survived as if waiting excavation... Around and below, wave after wave of black silk surged away over the edges of a capacious armchair, with two tiny hands poised like gulls on the surface of the billows.’ (p.388)

This is full of irony, of course Mrs Miggott is over-weight, but accepts her figure ‘philosophically’. And the figurative language of archaeology is suggestive of outliving one’s peers. And there is a wonderful sense of freedom in the appeal to sea imagery – the black silk ‘surging’, ‘wave after wave’, and the gulls ‘poised’, ready, presumably to take flight – as Wharton herself had known to do when she moved permanently to Europe in 1912.

Thank you.

© Professor Belinda Jack, 2015