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Susan Goodman

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Competing Visions of Freud in the Memoirs of Ellen Glasgow and Edith Wharton

by SUSAN GOODMAN

ELLEN GLASGOW (1873–1941) admired Freud and claimed that although she was never a disciple and disliked the “current patter of Freudian theory,”¹ she was “among the first, in the South, to perceive the invigorating effect of this fresh approach to experience” (269). As a self-styled “priestess of the Life of Reason,”² Edith Wharton (1862–1937) was less open-minded. Writing to Bernard Berenson in 1922 about a mutual friend, she begged him to ask his wife “not to befuddle her with Freudianism & all its jargon. She’d take to it like a duck to—sewerage.” Wharton advised that “what she wants is to develop the *conscious*, & not grub after the sub-conscious. She wants to be taught first to see, to attend, to reflect.”³

Since it undermined the idea of free will, Freud’s theory of the unconscious was particularly distasteful to Wharton. At any time that unexplored, untapped domain could threaten to wrest control from the conscious mind and engulf the “I.” Subduing similar fears, Glasgow believed that a work’s “fidelity to life” was tied to its “value as psychology” (214), and offering herself as a case study in both psychology and literary history, she tracks the elusive figure of her memoir’s title, *The Woman Within* (1954). Her attempt to record impressions as they occur and without revision underscores Freud’s influence on the book’s structure and content. Wharton resisted Freud’s construct of the “self” and—as the title of her autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934), suggests—chose to emphasize social realism over psychological truth.

Wharton’s memoir is limited almost entirely to what Georges Gusdorf defines as “the public sector of existence,” while in *The Woman Within* “the private face of existence assumes more importance.”⁴ “I am speaking the truth, as I know it,” Glasgow writes, “because the truth alone, without vanity or evasion, can justify an intimate memoir . . .” (8). Shari Benstock suggests that female autobiographers are less successful than

1. Ellen Glasgow, *The Woman Within* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1954), p. 227. When appropriate all subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically by the abbreviation *WW*.

2. Edith Wharton, letter to Margaret Terry Chanler, June 9, 1925, in *The Letters of Edith Wharton*, ed. R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1988), p. 483. All subsequent references to this text will be noted solely by date.

3. Edith Wharton, letter to Bernard Berenson, Feb. 21, 1922, pp. 450–51.

4. Georges Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 36, 37.

their male counterparts at keeping the ego intact.⁵ Assuming that this is the case, Wharton, who warns her readers that they must not expect a memorialist who spares no one or who sets “down in detail every defect and absurdity in others, and every resentment in the writer,” is a notable exception.⁶ Not wanting to acknowledge a gulf between “self” and “consciousness,” she uses language—to employ the Lacanian model—as a defense against unconscious material surfacing. Glasgow, on the other hand, stretches, tests, and disrupts language as a way of unveiling “the woman within.” In her purpose and her uses of language, she resembles an author whom she (but not Wharton) admired, Virginia Woolf: “I was writing for my own release of mind and heart,” Glasgow explained to her literary executors, “and I have tried to make a completely honest portrayal of an interior world, and of that one world alone” (*WW* v).

The stories themselves are not unlike. Wharton lived under the shadow of her mother’s icy disapproval and Glasgow in the half-light of her mother’s mental illness, yet each one’s early childhood days were filled by the comforting presence of a surrogate mother, Glasgow’s Mammy Lizzie and Wharton’s Nurse Dooley. Both novelists felt that they were—as Glasgow phrases it—“born with an appreciation of the best, and an equal aversion from the second best” (*WW* 42). After their first efforts were ridiculed, they wrote in secret, and perhaps this partial silencing led them to develop an enduring empathy for inarticulate creatures, especially dogs. They shared an antagonism toward romantic love, misgivings about marriage, a belief that “the primary influence of woman” would remain “indirect” (*WW* 187), a distaste for sentimentality, and a dislike of the senseless cruelty that Wharton termed “sterile pain.” Each suffered from and revolted against convention, eventually finding “it easier to break with tradition than to endure it” (*WW* 280). Feeling lonely, different, and besieged, they bore physical and psychic ailments as they struggled to fashion authorial identities compatible with their social roles.

The Woman Within and *A Backward Glance* open with their authors waking to consciousness. In Glasgow’s memoir, *ta onta*—a state that James Olney describes as a “seamless fabric woven of perception, consciousness, memories, and the surrounding universe”—dominates *bios*, the historical course of life.⁷ The reverse is true in *A Backward Glance*. *Bios* rules, although emerging memories threaten to disform the text.

Glasgow begins by showing how language gives birth to “self”:

5. Shari Benstock, “Authorizing the Autobiographical,” in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill and London: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 12. See also Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1986), pp. 26–27. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

6. Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1934), p. viii. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

7. James Olney, “The Ontology of Autobiography,” *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), p. 244. Olney defines *ta onta* as the “phenomenological, eternal present” (241).

Beyond the top windowpanes, in the midst of a red glow, I see a face without a body staring in at me, a vacant face, round, pallid, grotesque, malevolent. Terror—or was it merely sensation?—stabbed me into consciousness. Terror of the sinking sun? Or terror of the formless, the unknown, the mystery, terror of life, of the world, of nothing or everything? Convulsions seized me, a spasm of dumb agony. One minute, I was not; the next minute, I was. I felt. I was separate. I could be hurt. I had discovered myself. And I had discovered, too, the universe apart from myself. (4)

Before this experience, Glasgow describes herself as drifting in a state of preconsciousness, “[m]oving forward and backward, as contented and as mindless as an amoeba, submerged in that vast fog of existence” (3). Her terror arises from the brief, split second between being and nonbeing, from the feeling that she was a face without features, a soul without a body, an intelligence without a voice. The qualified questions, the short disjointed sentences, the emphasis on sensation, and the intruding “I’s,” mix memoir and fantasy. Glasgow realizes that the language which allows her to articulate her “earliest sensation” and which she attaches to it, “long afterward” (3), also transforms that sensation’s essence.

The face that marks Glasgow “as a victim” before she learns to put “fear into words” (112) mirrors both her own and an “other.” The same is true for Wharton when her moment of waking separates her forever from her adored father. Speaking of herself in the third person, she writes:

It was always an event in the little girl’s life to take a walk with her father, and more particularly so today, because she had on her new winter bonnet, which was so beautiful (and so becoming) that for the first time she woke to the importance of dress, and of herself as a subject for adornment—so that I may date from that hour the birth of the conscious and feminine *me* in the little girl’s vague soul. (2)

The memory appears more straightforward than Glasgow’s stylized form of Freudian free association, but it is Wharton’s tone rather than her narrative technique that most distinguishes the two. Wharton’s anecdote reads as if the twin birthing of “femininity” and “consciousness” were indeed known to the little girl, yet it is the adult “I” who critically examines and marks the date. When the Glasgow passage shifts from present to past tense, the same occurs: the older “self” envisions the younger, and from the process a third character emerges. In Wharton’s account, the intrusion of the “I” controls the child, whose vague soul recalls Glasgow’s image of the formless face. By placing the little girl in perspective, the analytical “I” lessens her threat of “vagueness” or chaos while asserting its “self” as a coherent, stable “identity.” Glasgow is not as successful, and her lifelong feeling of victimization is in part linked to the discovery of her “self” in relation to a horrifying “other.”⁸

Wharton’s mirror was more benign. In her father’s eyes, she saw a positive reflection of her own femaleness, and it led to a second and sexual awakening. On the walk already described, the author met her cousin,

8. See Mary Mason, “Autobiographies of Women Writers,” *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), p. 210. She suggests that “the self-discovery of female self is linked to the identification of some other.”

Daniel, "and suddenly he put out a chubby hand, lifted the little girl's veil, and boldly planted a kiss on her cheek. It was the first time — and the little girl found it very pleasant" (3). Susan Stanford Friedman argues that a female autobiographer must come to terms with her individual identity within a larger cultural context that has already defined "woman" as a category.⁹ As a result, a woman's sense of "self" exists in tension with a sense of her own uniqueness (44). Wharton illustrates this point when she simultaneously recognizes her own separateness (consciousness) and her connection to a group identity (femininity);¹⁰ likewise, Glasgow recounts her own life in relation to the lives of her mother and sisters. The authors' gender identification does not, however, preclude their having and affirming qualities that make them different from other members of their sex. If we accept Friedman's contention that the assertion of a unique identity is a predominant pattern in lives written by men, then Glasgow and Wharton seem to bridge male and female forms of autobiography.

Wharton further and more subtly fits the pattern of female autobiographers when she defines herself in opposition to her mother, Lucretia Jones, a prosaically unsympathetic character. In Wharton's version of the Freudian drama, her father would have been a far different man, less "lonely," less "haunted by something always unexpressed and unattained" (39), if he had married someone less like his wife and more like his daughter. Although Wharton clearly aligns herself with him, she refuses to grant Lucretia the power of having circumscribed her own development. Describing her mother's prohibitions on her reading, for example, she writes: "By denying me the opportunity of wasting my time over ephemeral rubbish my mother threw me back on the great classics, and thereby helped to give my mind a temper which my too-easy studies could not have produced" (65–66). Wharton implies that as a great consumer of "ephemeral rubbish" her mother was not so lucky. By criticizing the societal definitions of womanhood that her mother represented, the "memorialist" establishes her own. The identities of mother and daughter are nevertheless interdependent; the daughter constitutes her mother's image and concurrently fashions her own.

Neither Glasgow nor Wharton can repair the rent that separates them from "the universe apart," but each uses her memoir to create in a Lacanian sense a "self" in language. To quote Glasgow's mammy, both were "born without a skin" (5) into a world that they perceived as cold and indifferent. As a result, Glasgow felt that "[a] sensitive mind would always

9. See Susan Stanford Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves, Theory and Practice," in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill and London: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1988). Friedman explains that the cultural mirror projects "an image of WOMAN, a category that is supposed to define the living woman's identity" (38) and notes that Gurdorf dismisses the "key elements" of "identification, interdependence, and community" from autobiographical selves (38). All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

10. See Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 27. Rowbotham contends that cultural representations of "woman" shape every individual woman's "consciousness."

remain an exile on earth" (271), and Wharton believed that "the creative mind thrives best on a reduced diet."¹¹ Words were their armor, but for Wharton they were also weapons. She used them in particular to control her mother who, as she wrote in the first, more candid draft of her autobiography, "Life and I," helped most to "falsify & misdirect my whole life."¹² When the young author told her, "'Mamma, you must go and entertain that little girl for me. *I've got to make up*'" (*A Backward Glance* 35), she was neatly reversing their roles. Tellingly, the room in which she "made up" stories was her mother's bedroom ("Life" 12), and she kept parents and nurses enthralled as she strode the floor reciting with Washington Irving's *The Alhambra* upside down in her outstretched arms.¹³ Early on Wharton coupled the manipulation of language with the manipulation of people and events. "Making up" served three purposes: as Freud argues in "Creative Writers and Daydreaming" (1908), it corrected an unsatisfying reality; it gave her an identity distinct from the other members of her family; and it gave her an instrument for keeping them—like *The Alhambra*—at arm's length. By giving her the means "to see, to attend, to reflect," storytelling allowed the novelist to keep all the vagueness associated with that distant little girl at bay.

The format of her autobiography does the same. Readers learn about her genealogy, the old New York of her childhood, her travels, and friendships, but they learn little of her feelings. In fact, Wharton makes a point of denying any equation between "psychology" and "autobiography" when she writes of her younger "self," "I might have suffered from an inferiority complex had such ailments been known" (88–89).

Since Glasgow's autobiography attempts to record the growth of a mind, she feels that she cannot avoid—to quote Wharton—"grubbing after the unconscious":

Until my first book was finished no one, except my mother, who suspected but did not speak of it, was aware that, below the animated surface, I was already immersed in some dark stream of identity, stronger and deeper and more relentless than the external movement of living. (41)

Glasgow sees no need to dissociate her internal life, her underground "stream-of-consciousness," from her writing. Rather it is inseparably "twisted" with her external life (*WW* 38). Wharton describes a similar interior creative space as her "secret garden," a place where plants grow and unfold "from the seed to the shrub-top," but cautions her reader, "I have no intention of magnifying my vegetation into trees!" (198). The statement functions as a playfully modest disclaimer and a prohibition. Unlike Glasgow, she does not invite her readers into her "secret-story world,"

11. Edith Wharton, "A Little Girl's New York," *Harper's Magazine*, 176 (March 1938), 357.

12. Edith Wharton, "Life and I," The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, p. 35. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically.

13. For a detailed analysis of Wharton's "making up," see Judith Fryer, *Felicitous Spaces: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather* (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1986), pp. 148–69.

perhaps because she now associates her “making up” with a loss of control:

What I mean to try for is the observation of that strange moment when the vaguely adumbrated characters whose adventures one is preparing to record are suddenly *there*, themselves, in the flesh, in possession of one, and in command of one's voice and hand. It is there that the central mystery lies, and perhaps it is at the precise moment impossible to fix in words as that other mystery of what happens in the brain as when one falls over the edge of consciousness into sleep. (198)

In becoming “a recording instrument” (203), Wharton duplicates Alice's experience in *Wonderland*: she enters a realm of seeming, where “the appearance of reality” (205) has a darker side, the disappearance of tangible substance. For this reason, possibly, “making up” is less empowering in the adult's than in the child's world. She lives Glasgow's two “twisted” lives, but she sees them as “totally unrelated worlds . . . side by side, equally absorbing, but wholly isolated from each other” (205). Wharton is afraid that if she does not wall off her “secret garden,” its tendrils will choke the entire landscape.

For Glasgow, the interior life if anything is the more vivid, the more vital, and her hyperconscious experiments with form are meant to unloose and approximate it. The memoir's interrupted chronology, its repetitions that unveil and advance plot, create the sense that she has indeed not molded “both causes and effects into a fixed psychological pattern” but has left “the inward and the outward streams of experience free to flow in their own channels, and free, too, to construct their own special designs” (227). “Analysis,” she contends, “if it comes at all, must come later” (227). The unfolding story of her brother Frank's suicide exemplifies this method. Glasgow has previously hinted at the cause of his death but does not disclose it until the end of an anecdote about his departure for school: “In a last effort to spare us as far as it was possible, he went, alone, from the house, and, alone, into a future where we could not follow him . . .” (67). The sentence applies equally well to either his temporary or permanent exile, but, as Glasgow reminds us, the latter “was years afterwards” (67). Instead of continuing her narrative in a chronological fashion, she then retraces similar ground by recounting his return home for the school holidays. Pages earlier Glasgow has asserted that he was “the only one of my mother's children who never failed her” (17). Introducing the revelation of his suicide, she restates it: “I repeat that he was the only one of Mother's children who never failed her in word, or in act, or in sympathetic understanding” (66). Retrospectively it becomes his epitaph.

The Woman Within and *A Backward Glance* are in form and approach representative of each author's fiction. Glasgow's willingness to experiment with prose style grows from her search for one “so pure and flexible that it could bend without breaking” (123). Unlike Wharton she recognized the profound effect that Freud was to have on the nature of nar-

native, noting in her memoir that “it is true that the novel, as a living force, if not as a work of art, owes an incalculable debt to what we call, mistakenly, the new psychology, to Freud, in his earlier interpretations, and more truly, I think, to Jung” (269). *The Sheltered Life* (1932) is such a work. In it she aimed to “[a]lways, and as far as it is possible, endeavor to touch life on every side; but keep the central vision of the mind, the inmost light, untouched and untouchable” while preserving, “within a wild sanctuary, an inaccessible valley of reveries.”¹⁴ The novel’s section titled “The Deep Past” moves back and forth through time as it is perceived in the unfolding consciousness of the elderly General Archbald. Although Archbald muses that “[w]ithin time, and within time alone, there was life—the gleam, the quiver, the heart-beat, the immeasurable joy and anguish of being . . .” (109), the section’s synchronic structure belies his conclusion.

Uncomfortable with literary techniques that broke down the barriers between life and fiction, Wharton did not (as her autobiography demonstrates) subscribe as fully as Glasgow to the belief that the emotional and the intellectual life “formed a single strand, and could not be divided” (*WW* 56).¹⁵ Nevertheless, these two lives often became tangled in her fiction; for example, *The Reef*, with or without its author’s conscious intent, “takes up the same [autobiographical] material in complete freedom and under the protection of a hidden identity” (Gusdorf 46). The story of Anna Leath’s and Sophy Viner’s love of the same man, George Darrow, closely parallels its author’s history with Morton Fullerton, a journalist who conducted his affair with Wharton while engaged to his cousin, Katherine Fullerton. Because Wharton projects her own internally warring aspects of the “self” as separated individuals—Anna represents the repressed lady; Sophy, the unconventional, exiled woman; and George, the privileged aesthete—*The Reef* unintentionally supports the premise of Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1912–1913).

Glasgow, more willingly than Wharton, may have admitted the arbitrary distinctions between substance and illusion, but she too felt that her “best books” had “all been written when emotion was over” (214). She considered Wharton’s work indistinguishable from Henry James’s and did not recognize that her own vision was closer to Wharton’s than it was to Mary Austin’s, Willa Cather’s, or any other of her contemporaries. Reading either a Wharton or a Glasgow novel, one encounters the decline of a culture and the passing of tradition, an ironic analysis of morals and manners, a scathing study of the destructive double standard for male and female behavior, and what Glasgow described as the “spectacle of an in-

14. Ellen Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life* (London: Virago Press, 1981), p. xxviii.

15. See Margaret B. McDowell, “*Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*,” *Edith Wharton*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), pp. 53–56 esp. McDowell notes that Wharton would have disliked the stream-of-consciousness technique because its association with the Naturalist movement and its underlying determinism reduce free will. Also see Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p. 395. She speculates that a novel such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* threatened Wharton since its style led “back to the [autobiographical] practices that distorted her own first work” (395).

nocent soul suffering an undeserved tragedy" (*WW* 64). Admirers of Tolstoy, both agreed that literature should have "human significance" and concern itself with the general rather than the particular, the universal rather than the provincial (*WW* 128).¹⁶

Wharton's aesthetics unexpectedly align her with Freud as well as Glasgow. Believing in the supremacy of the rational, she persistently sought the dividing line between illusion and truth. Wharton's protagonists, such as Ralph Marvell in *The Custom of the Country* (1913), strain to remove the veil of illusion that separates them from reality. Judith van Herik designates "renunciation of illusion" as "Freud's consistent critical principle," and the same could be said of the novelist.¹⁷ Wharton parts company from Freud, however, over his belief, expressed in *Totem and Taboo* (1912–1913), that in the manner of the primitive the poet is ultimately bound by the autobiographical. Valuing artistic distance and believing it possible, she never wanted to be heard "shrieking" her tale.¹⁸ At the same time, she defined literature as a "contemplation of life that goes below its surface."¹⁹ This definition could have presented a problem for an author who wanted to maintain a controlled distance from her subject, but Wharton's choice of literary realism allowed her to preserve at least the fiction of authorial impersonality.

This stance breaks down in her later novels of artistic development, *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929) and *The Gods Arrive* (1932). Echoing Goethe and Augustine, she locates the source of all creativity in "The Mothers"; and in this way, her aesthetic vision—like Freud's—manages to blend two opposed traditions, the romantic and the neoclassic.²⁰ Furthermore, her own work is based on the thesis of *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930): as Lily Bart, Undine Spragg, Ethan Frome, and Newland Archer can testify, not only will individual desires always be in conflict with societal restrictions, but the continuation of society absolutely requires repression.

Glasgow agreed with Freud and Wharton's essentially pessimistic view that civilization helps people to adjust their relations and protects them against their own natures: "After both world wars are over," she predicts, "we shall still be fighting an eternal conflict between human beings and human nature" (*WW* 285). Explaining *The Sheltered Life* to Allen Tate, she criticized the society that she, like Wharton, thought necessary: "I am not writing of Southern nature, but of human nature. By the *Sheltered Life*, I meant the whole civilization man has built to protect himself from

16. Edith Wharton, "Permanent Values in Fiction," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 10 (April 7, 1934), 603.

17. Judith van Herik, *Freud on Femininity and Faith* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: Univ. of California Press, 1982), p. 18.

18. Edith Wharton, letter to Edward Burlingame, July 10, 1898, 36. Also see R. W. B. Lewis, *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975; Fromm International Publishing Co., 1985), p. 86.

19. Edith Wharton, "The Criticism of Fiction," *Times Literary Supplement*, May 14, 1924, p. 230.

20. See Jack J. Spector, *The Aesthetics of Freud* (New York: Praeger Publisher, 1973), p. 142.

reality. . . . I was not concerned with the code of Virginia, but with the conventions of the world we call civilized. . . . I was dealing with the fate of the civilized mind in a world where even the civilizations we make are uncivilized.”²¹ Wharton could make the same claim for *The Age of Innocence* (1920).

In both Glasgow’s and Wharton’s fiction, the individual does not escape, redefine, or recreate the existing world; rather he or she struggles within the confines of “civilization.” The two women shared the same quarrel, which Glasgow described as being “less with the world than with the scheme of things in general”; she was, she tells us, “in arms against the universe” (279). Although Freud redefined that universe in terms that Glasgow accepted and Wharton resisted, their visions are compatible. Glasgow could be speaking for both herself and Wharton when she explains, “I have done the work I wished to do for the sake of that work alone. And I have come, at last, from the fleeting rebellion of youth into the steadfast — or is it merely the seasonable — accord without surrender of the unreconciled heart” (296). Freud would add only one qualifier: art, as he articulated in “Creative Writers and Daydreaming” (1908), provided them with a means for coping with the real world.

21. Ellen Glasgow, *Letters of Ellen Glasgow*, ed. Blair Rouse (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1958), p. 124.