Edith Wharton's Argument with America (review)

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irrelevant. As we have come to expect of him, Brooks tackles numerous problems of interpretation in these texts, providing lucid step-by-step (and convincing) solutions to them in a number of fine critical readings (I find the chapter on *The Wild Palms* especially illuminating). The best chapter in the book is the last on "Faulkner on Time and History," a clarification of Faulkner's debt to Bergson (not so large as many think, Brooks argues) and of his general philosophy of time and change and tradition. It does justice to the complexity of Faulkner's view and provides a fitting climax to Brooks's complete study. Although they will be usefully supplemented by "newer" criticisms and by studies of special topics or from special angles, Brooks's two volumes provide a sane and solid critical foundation; his is the basic study to which all serious Faulkner students will be long indebted.

Harvard University Elizabeth McKinsey

Ammons, Elizabeth. *Edith Wharton's Argument with America.* Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1980. 210 pp. Cloth: $15.00.

As the title suggests, Ammons' discussion of Wharton's fiction is based on the premise that Wharton was an essentially polemical writer, that her novels constitute a feminist "argument": Wharton "agreed that the position of women in American society was the crucial issue of the new century; she did not believe that change was occurring. . . . Above all she had to find the public terms of her argument with America on the subject of woman. The expression of her individual pain finally could be only a beginning; she would, as she herself came to see, have to find ways to translate and transform her private fears and resentments into publicly arguable issues" (pp. 3-4). In sum, Ammons claims that it was Wharton's purpose as a novelist to expose and attack the patriarchal structure of American society. This is a dangerous tactic to take with Wharton because she herself so thoroughly renounced any writing of fiction which begins with some "theory." Even Henry James did not escape her censure in this regard:

> . . . Though I greatly admired some of the principles he had formulated, . . . I thought it was paying too dear . . . to subordinate to [them] the irregular and irrelevant movements of life. . . . His latest novels, for all their profound moral beauty, seemed to me more and more lacking in atmosphere, more and more severed from that thick nourishing human air in which we all live and move.

To be sure, Wharton was personally haunted by the dilemmas that beset so many women of intelligence and intellectual ambition; she wrote many ruthless satires of a society which was manifestly flawed, and more often than not, society's deficiencies were demonstrated by the plight of its women (who had less opportunity for a rejection of stifling social norms than its men). Nonetheless, it is a far step from this complex situation to the assertion that Wharton wrote primarily to "argue" the subject of women. In *A Backward Glance* Wharton warns: "There could be no greater critical ineptitude than to judge a novel according to *what it ought to have been about.*" It is a warning that Ammons ought to have heeded.

Too many times, for example, there is an elision or an imprecision which is introduced because it supports the author's thesis. Ammons sees the men in Wharton's first three long fictions about America as examples of man's inhumanity to woman. By Ammons'

own account, the men in question differ widely. Mr. Ramy in *Bunner Sisters* is a thief, a drug-addict, and a wife-beater. Denis Peyton in *Sanctuary* is a "scoundrel" (p. 21). Glennard in *The Touchstone* is a weak man who has had the misfortune to be loved by a woman more intelligent and talented than himself; after the woman's death he turns an easy dollar by publishing her letters to him. Not a nice way to behave, Ammons might say, but understandable: "Wharton has Margaret fall in love with a man her subordinate in intelligence and then blames the infatuated man for deciding he does not like the relationship enough to remain in it forever. Why should he?" (p. 17). Yet in Ammons' summing up of these novels, a strident conflation occurs: the events in these three fictions "remain incredible, lurid examples of male depravity" (p. 23). In her discussion of *The Reef*, Ammons quotes liberally from the early sections of the novel which deal with Darrow's naive double-standard for sexual behavior (Ammons' last direct quotation about Darrow is from p. 131 in this 367-page novel): in Ammons' judgment Darrow is

> a liar, a hypocrite, a coward, and a libertine. . . . [Wharton] comes close in *The Reef* . . . to attacking men per se rather than ideas they are taught to have about women and their relation to them. Perhaps Wharton, whose dislike for Darrow and Owen is obvious, takes out on them the contempt she may have felt for all lovers and husbands in the years immediately following her affair with Fullerton and just preceding her final break with Teddy (p. 94).

Yet Wharton's poignant argument in this novel is that Darrow changes; indeed, it is sadly ironic that he is *able* to change precisely because society has not mutilated his capacity to experience passion so thoroughly as it has mutilated Anna's. " 'When you've lived a little longer you'll see what complex blunderers we all are. . . . Life's just a perpetual piecing together of broken bits. . . . You say you'll never understand: but why shouldn't you. Is it anything to be proud of, to know so little of the strings that pull us? If you knew a little more, I could tell you how such things happen without offending you; and perhaps you'd listen without condemning me' " (Darrow makes these remarks to Anna on pp. 315-16—very close to the point when he exits from the novel. Yet if Anna Leath has failed to listen, so has Ammons: indeed, she seems to fall into a mirror-image posture of the critics who are willing to ornament a polemical argument about *The Custom of the Country* by assuming that Edith Wharton must have hated Undine Spragg.)

There are useful things in this book of criticism. Ammons provides us with a running account of the popular novels of the period during which Wharton wrote. Although it is fashionable to say that Wharton's later novels are weak because she became interested in being a best-seller, the fact is that Wharton always sought to be a popular novelist: she kept track of trends in fiction and often (though not always) tried her hand at a form that had a proven track-record. Even here, however, there is an obtrusive interest in feminist works which Wharton perhaps *ought* to have read but appears not to have: Gilman's *Women and Economics* or Putnam's *The Lady*.

One wishes that Edith Wharton had been less ambivalent about her own femininity—less reactionary in her later years. But it *is* the case that she expressed the opinion (bitterly, perhaps, but not ironically) that women should not have a college education; it *is* the case that she dismissed *Elmer Gantry* as a "pitiful production. . . . The trouble with them all is that they don't know what a gentleman is, and after all it was a useful standard to get one's perspective by." It is difficult to reconcile such views with Ammons' summation of *The Age of Innocence*: Wharton "obviously believed that any 'solution' would have to consist of revolutionary changes in men's, not women's, attitudes."

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