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Edith Wharton and Louis Bromfield: Passionate Pilgrims in Postwar Paris

Daniel Bratton

1930年代初頭共にフランスに住んでいた頃に、アメリカの作家イーディス・ウォートンとルイ・ブロンフィールドは親しい友人となった。文化と農業が微妙な均衡を保って作る調和が生み出す悠久不変の雰囲気を見出し、この二人はフランスを熱愛した。二人はこの土地を深く愛したが、旧世界で先ず落ち着いた先はパリであった。パリはこの二人の小説では中心的な役割を担い、また作家としての成長に果たした点でも重要である。しかしこの二つの点で両者の相違は深刻である。イーディス・ウォートンとルイ・ブロンフィールドは二人とも第一次世界大戦後のパリの生活に次第に幻滅を感じるようになった。共に加速的に進行する社会的政治的混乱と見たものから、二人の異邦人はこの都市の郊外に——ブロンフィールドはサンリにあるプレスピテール・ドゥ・サンティエヌヌにおいて、またウォートンはサンブリス・ス・フォレとイエグルに復元した歴史的な建物において——それぞれが愛情を込めて手ずから造った庭に平安と静謐を求めた。二人の交わした書簡には「残された最後の道徳的な生活」とウォートンが見なした庭園での試みを細かく述べて、「嘆かわしくも忌むべき光景」とブロンフィールドが呼んだ当時の世界のさまを目にして二人が互いにいたわり合う姿が読み取れる。

The American writers Edith Wharton and Louis Bromfield became close friends in the early 1930s, when they both lived in France, a country they had passionately embraced for its sense of permanence and continuity, the result of a carefully modulated harmony between culture and agriculture. In spite of a mutual devotion to the land, both pilgrims to the Old World had initially resided in Paris, a city that played a central part in both their fiction and personal development, but about which each writer maintained a profound ambivalence. Bromfield and Wharton had become increasingly disenchanted with Parisian life during the post-war years. Retreating from what they jointly perceived as spiraling social and political chaos, the two expatriates sought peace and quiet in the gardens they lovingly created outside the capital city – Bromfield at the ancient Presbytère de St. Etienne in Senlis, Wharton at two historic properties that she restored in St. Brice-sous-Forêt and Hyères. In their correspondence they consoled each other for what Bromfield called the "pitiful disgusting spectacle" of the present world by detailing their pursuits in what Wharton saw as the "last moral life-preserver left" – the garden.

The nomenclature of the passionate pilgrim can be traced to Shakespeare, but closer to the time under consideration in this paper, its genealogy includes the title of an early short story by Henry James. Although James's "The Passionate Pilgrim" (1875) is set in England rather than France, Clement Searle's pilgrimage to the Old World, where he "can wander all day like a proscribed and exiled prince,"¹ anticipates the transatlantic peregrinations of characters in the fiction of Edith Wharton and Louis Bromfield who belong to the twilight of the International Theme. More to our purpose, the "passionate pilgrim" appellation effectively captures the spirit in which both Edith Wharton and Louis Bromfield themselves embraced the Old World, especially France.

Wharton and Bromfield, who became close friends in the early 1930s, shared a devotion to the permanence and continuity of France, anchored, as Bromfield

¹ Henry James, "A Passionate Pilgrim" in *A Passionate Pilgrim and Other Tales* (1875; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), 46. Earlier, James's first-person narrator observes of Searle, "His observation I soon perceived to be extremely acute. His almost passionate relish for the old, the artificial, and social, wellnigh extinct from its long inanity, began now to tremble and thrill with a tardy vitality" (39).

observed, in the "very earth itself."² Ironically, Wharton's pilgrimage involved a mode of travel, as evidenced by her title *A Motor-Flight through France*, that would come to threaten this very permanence and continuity. And though Bromfield's ardent wish was to be at home with the "horticulturalists, farmers, peasants, market gardeners and the workingmen [in Senlis] whose communal gardens adjoined [his] own," his pilgrimage included a quest for social distinction signified by the "Rolls-Royces and automobiles labeled Corps Diplomatique" (*Pleasant Valley* 8) that stood before his door when he hosted grand Sunday lunches for what his daughter Ellen has described as a "world of nothing but successful people."³ The paradoxes and ambivalencies in Wharton's and Bromfield's natures were reflected in their attitudes toward Paris. At the heart of their highly complex, sometimes fluid, and always passionate response to France was their experience of, and relation to, its capital city.

Here we might consider the genealogy of another literary quotation, "Good Americans, when they die, go to Paris," credited to Thomas Gold Appleton but perpetuated by Oliver Wendell Holmes. Oscar Wilde embellished upon this saying in *A Woman of No Importance* when, building upon Holmes' axiom, he assigned to Lady Hunstanton the query: "Indeed? And when bad Americans die, where do they go?" To which Lord Illingworth retorts, "Oh, they go to America."⁴ Certainly Lord Illingworth's rejoinder encapsulates the view of John Jacob Astor, who announced in 1890 that America was "no longer a fit place for a gentleman to live."⁵

Wharton's disaffiliation from the New World— unlike Bromfield's, for his early life was centered in the pastoral rolling hills of Richland County in Ohio— was rooted in what she described as her infancy. At the age of three, she had embarked on a six-year sojourn in the old world when her father's income had been reduced at the close of the Civil War. The Jones family lived in Rome and Paris, and toured Spain. In *A Backward Glance*, her autobiography, Wharton remarked upon the Old

² Louis Bromfield, *Pleasant Valley* (New York: Harper, 1943), 7.

³ Ellen Bromfield Geld, *The Heriage: A Daughter's Memories of Louis Bromfield* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 58.

⁴ Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* 436. Another of Wilde's jibes involves Lady Caroline Pontefract's remark to a young American girl that "they say you have no ruins, and no curiosities." To this Mrs. Allonby, a witty member of British high society, retorts, "What nonsense! They have their mothers and their manners" (449).

Such views are certainly supported by the conclusions James reached after his return to America eleven years later. In *The American Scene* he subverted the pilgrim paradigm by assuming the role of spectator from the Old World in the New. The critical impressions of early twentieth century America recorded by his "repentant absentee," also designated "the restless analyst," help to explain Wharton's removal to Paris around the same time.

⁵ Simon Jenkins, "England's best houses: Simon Jenkins at Hever Castle." *The Times* 12 May 2001, "Weekending" 9. Although Astor, like James's passionate pilgrim, chose England for his expatriation, his view effectively relates to Edith Wharton's indictment of the American leisure class when she chose France as her home in exile. Readers of Wharton in this audience need hardly be reminded of the belief expressed in both her fiction and non-fiction that from the beginning the American leisure class had been wasted, had failed to justify its existence. To Wharton, leisure had a positive value in that the surplus of wealth was ideally transmuted into beauty when it flowered into great architecture, painting, and literature. "Only in the atmosphere thus engendered floats that impalpable dust of ideas which is real culture. A colony of ants or bees will never create a Parthenon," she observed in her article "The Great American Novel" (652).

World "background of beauty and old-established order."⁶ She further observed, "I did not know how deeply I felt the nobility and harmony of the great European cities till our steamer was docked at New York," at which time "the shameless squalor of the purlieus of the New York docks in the 'seventies dismayed my childish eyes, stored with the glories of Rome and the architectural majesty of Paris" (44).

Although, in the early years of their marriage, Edith and Teddy Wharton became inveterate world travelers, Wharton's expatriation was initiated in 1905, when she was in her mid-forties. At that time her brother Harry lent the couple his Parisian flat (ABG 306), where Henry James was their guest in France for the first time.⁷ In the winter of 1906-7, on the heels of the success of Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth*, the Whartons, while maintaining The Mount as their summer home in the Berkshires in Massachusetts, decided to exchange their town house on New York City's Park Avenue for their own flat in Paris (257). They rented George Vanderbilt's apartment at 58, rue de Varenne, moving across the street to 53, rue de Varenne two winters later. Wharton, who divorced in 1913, remained there until the end of World War I. Significantly, she observed in *A Backward Glance* that when she and her husband left New York, "A house and garden of my own, anywhere on the coast between Marseilles and Fréjus, would have made me happy; since that could not be, my preference was for a flat in Paris, where I could see people who shared my tastes, and whence it was was easy to go south for sunshine when the weather grew too damp for my husband" (257). From the beginning her predilection was for a house and garden outside the city. To this one might also add the opening of her unpublished article "Gardening in France," which alludes to her decision in late 1918 to purchase the Pavillon Colombe in St. Brice-sous-Forêt, on the outskirts of Paris: "It used to be said that good Americans went to Paris when they died; but the saying should be qualified by adding that garden-loving Americans go to the suburbs of Paris."⁸

Nevertheless, in *A Backward Glance* she would reflect at length upon "the busy happy Parisian years" (293). Paul and Minnie Bourget's warm welcome made her

⁶ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1934), 44. All subsequent references to Wharton's autobiography will designate it ABG.

⁷ James had stayed with the Whartons at The Mount in 1904 and again in 1905. Of his experience Leon Edel writes,

As might be expected of a woman who had collaborated on a book *The Decoration of Houses*, Edith Wharton had built her new home at Lenox, Massachusetts, in the Berkshires, with a sense of style and comfort. The Mount was spacious; it was dignified. It overlooked the wooded shores of Laurel Lake. In the French style, its drawing-room, dining-room and library opened on a terrace beyond which was a stretch of formal garden. Henry James sank into the house as into a bed of luxury. The Mount was "an exquisite and marvellous place," he wrote to Howard Sturgis, "a delicate French Château mirrored in a Massachusetts pond and a monument to "the almost too impeccable taste of its so accomplished mistress" (*Henry James: A Life* [New York: Harper and Row, 1985], 597).

⁸ Qtd. in *Yrs. Ever Affly: The Correspondence of Edith Wharton and Louis Bromfield*, ed. Daniel Bratton (East Lansing, Michigan State UP, 2000), 135. All subsequent references to this text will be designated *Affly*.

feel immediately at home,⁹ as did the renewal of friendships Edith had enjoyed with "three or four French girlfriends [she] had known in [her] youth at Cannes." These connections gave her entrance to "worlds as widely different as the University, the literary and Academic *milieux*, and the old and aloof society of the Faubourg Saint-Germain," and Wharton observed that "As a stranger and newcomer, not only outside of all groups and coteries, but hardly aware of their existence, I enjoyed a freedom not possible in those days to the native-born . . ." (*ABG* 258). Her passionate pilgrimage culminated with her entrée into the world of the salon, once again facilitated by her friendship with Paul Bourget. It was the "continuity of social relations" within the French salon that most impressed Wharton.¹⁰ She felt especially privileged to have been part of the inner circle of the greatest of pre-war salons, that of the Comtesse "Rosa" de Fitz-James. Nearly two decades later, she reflected in *A Backward Glance* that the thirteen years she had spent in Paris prior to her move to the Pavillon Colombe had been "[r]ich years, crowded and happy years; for though I should have preferred London, I should have been hard to please had I not discovered many compensations in my life in Paris" (258).

Interestingly, Louis Bromfield, like Wharton, professed to prefer London to Paris. His earliest letter to Wharton [undated, c. Oct.-Nov. 1931] includes the following: "I am going to London for a week. London I love above all cities and I am looking forward to seeing Harold Nicholson, Rebecca West and a lot of others who always act as powerful stimulants. I am not in the least French and draw no fire whatever from French writers or the French literary milieu" (*Affly* 2). Then, several years later, Bromfield's preference for national capitals shifted to Washington, D.C., at which time he wrote Wharton, "I miss you and the [Louis] Gillets and the garden but otherwise I feel no pull towards France at the moment."¹¹

However, Bromfield's loyalties shifted according to political and social circumstances, and certainly the sentiments expressed in these two letters belie pronouncements he made elsewhere regarding both Paris and France. It was in fact his devotion to France that caused him to change the spelling of his first name from Lewis to Louis while he was still in high school in Mansfield, Ohio, and it was this same devotion that caused him to drop out of Columbia University to join a private observation balloon unit, and then enlist in *Section Sanitaire Américain* No. 577 of the Army Ambulance Service during World War I. He would later write in *Pleasant Valley*:

France was one of the places I had always known. From the time I was old enough to read, France had a reality for me, the one place in all the world I felt a fierce compulsion to see. Its history fascinated me, its pictures, its landscapes, its books, its theaters. It was, during all my childhood and early youth, the very apotheosis of all that was romantic and beautiful. (3)

⁹ Wharton had met the French novelist and dramatist when he and his wife, Minnie, visited the Whartons at Newport in 1893.

¹⁰ The "continuity of social relations" in the Parisian salon was in marked contrast to the London salon, "where another ideal prevailed, and perpetual novelty was sought for, the stream of new faces rushing past me often made me feel as if I were in a railroad station rather than a drawing-room" (*A Backward Glance* 263).

¹¹ Letter of 18 January qtd. in *Affly* 56. Louis Gillet's large family, who lived in Ermenonville not far from Senlis, held a special place in the affections of both Wharton and Bromfield.

When his unit of the ambulance service returned to the United States, Bromfield chose to be discharged in France as a gesture of his love for its land and people.

He already possessed a passionate appreciation of the carefully modulated harmony between culture and agriculture that existed in France, and though Bromfield would not meet Wharton for another decade, it was arguably this awareness, even more than their mutual passion for literature and travel, that caused these two Americans, their ages separated by thirty-four years, to develop such a deep and abiding friendship. In *A Motor-Flight through France*, Wharton wrote, "In northern France, where agriculture has mated with poetry instead of banishing it, one understands the higher beauty of land developed, humanised, brought into relation to life and history . . ." (5). In *Pleasant Valley* Bromfield contended that what he missed most in America was the "permanence, the continuity of France...a living thing, anchored to the soil, to the very earth itself" (7).

Within these two passages can be found the kernels of the seeds of Wharton's and Bromfield's disenchantment with Paris of the 1920s and 1930s. Both chose to live outside what Lily Shane, the heroine of Bromfield's first novel, acknowledged as "the very heart of the world" (*The Green Bay Tree* 321). During the time immediately following the war, when Wharton was lovingly supervising the restoration of two historic properties, the Pavillon Colombe and Château Sainte-Claire near Hyères—and creating acres of gardens in the process—Bromfield returned to the United States. The great success of his first two novels, *The Green Bay Tree* (1924) and *Possession* (1925), followed by the completion of *Early Autumn* (1926), allowed him to escape to Paris with his family in the mid-1920s. However, finding himself in the midst of the American invasion that emanated from the Latin Quarter, Bromfield quickly wearied of the city and began to look for a rural property. Although he continued to attend "luncheons at the smart Champs-Élysées restaurants[,] . . . aristocratic soirées in Faubourg St.-Germain drawing rooms, [and] tea and cocktails at the Ritz" (Llona 101-2), Bromfield signed a long-term lease for the ancient stone Presbytère de St. Etienne in Senlis, thirty-five miles north of the city. He would remain there until his return to Ohio in 1939, creating a spectacular garden that cradled both sides of the little river Nonette, the waters of which were draped by rare hybrid roses that cascaded from a bridge joining its banks.

While, then, both Wharton and Bromfield were in and out of Paris during this period—Wharton visiting old friends, taking in performances, and staying at the Hôtel de Crillon in her seasonal moves between the Pavillon Colombe and Sainte-Claire, Bromfield regularly attending the theatre, films and the openings of art exhibitions—their writings and correspondence plainly reveal that their hearts were now outside the city. A fair indication of Wharton's growing disenchantment with Paris is her remark in *A Backward Glance* on the fading of Jean Cocteau's youthful "light": "Life in general, and Parisian life in particular, is the cause of so many such effacements—or defacements" (285). Elsewhere she expressed her aversion to the hordes of Americans whom Bromfield would encounter upon his return in 1925. During the 1930s Wharton's alienation from the Paris of High Modernism would deepen with grave prognostications upon the effects the rapidly altering European political landscape would have upon Parisian society. With a corresponding awareness of the city's futile fireworks at dusk, Bromfield wrote Wharton from Senlis on 18 April 1934: "As for summer plans we shall probably be here except for a visit or two to London. We are avoiding Paris entirely which is not difficult to do as it is truly dull and rather sullen" (*Affly* 65).

Like Wharton, he increasingly came to feel himself an exile from the world at large. Though both maintained active social lives, they retreated more and more into

their gardens. In his very first letter to Wharton, Bromfield, writing that he had found "another literary gardener in the person of Gertrude Stein whose approach, needless to say, is far more intellectual and less passionate than our own," added "I suppose gardening is the best insurance against the complications and depressions of this age" (*Affly* 3). His need to withdraw from the tormented outer world deepened as his friendship with Wharton progressed against the backdrop of a disintegrating Europe. On 28 May 1932 he wrote her,

I am so thankful to be at home once more that I have no desire to leave the garden, save to pay you and one or two other people visits now and then. . . . Do ring up and come over to lunch as soon as you return. We are both wanting to see you. At the moment I'm feeling very acid and fed up with all of humanity save a tiny handful. I do think the world is making a pitiful disgusting spectacle of itself and I trust other planets are unaware of it. It all affects me in a curious neurasthenic fashion filling me with a horror of going outside my own garden. (*Affly* 22-3)

Wharton heartily concurred, writing Bromfield "It is rather blasphemous to leave a garden between June & Oct, & I find myself curtailing my summer travels more & more" (letter of 30 July 1932, qtd. in *Affly* 29). A year later, when Wharton was between country houses and staying in Paris, she wrote Bromfield, "I have been sitting at the Crillon, & looking at the flowers, & eating the fruit . . . & I simply can't stand it!" The postscript to this letter reads "Yes, the garden is the last moral life-preserver left. I pity those who haven't it" (letter of 12 June 1933, qtd. in *Affly* 46-9).

Wharton's final letter to Bromfield, dated 3 March 1937, some six months before her death, once again contrasted the sanctuary of the garden with the chaotic state of the world. Commenting upon the excessive rainfall north of Paris, as well as the destructive frost in the California garden of her niece, the American landscape designer Beatrix Farrand, Wharton went on to regale in the winter weather she had experienced at Sainte-Claire: "The loveliest since 1920 or thereabouts. All sunshine, warmth & blue-&-gold post-card effects." But she would quickly qualify this euphoria with a mention of "our only (& rather serious) grievance, the persistent lack of rain," to which she added, "The weather & the world resemble each other too closely at present—though there is no blue-&-gold political climate left anywhere, I'm afraid" (qtd. in *Affly* 90-1).

Shortly after her death, Bromfield would begin a tribute to Edith Wharton, though he would never publish it. It makes no mention of her life in Paris. Instead, it dwells on her love of the land:

For those who did not know her it doubtless seems unbelievable that the Edith Wharton who wrote of manners and the society of a country coming of age should love the earth, yet it is true: I think I never knew anyone who loved it more, not in the personal sense for the coarse profit which might be drained from it, but for the incalculable beauty which might be wrung from it by feeling and care and worship. (*Affly* 109)

In a year's time he purchased three run-down farms in Ohio and began his famous agricultural work at Malabar Farm. After fifteen years of expatriation in France, he had determined in the late 1930s that the New World was, after all, the true home of the Jeffersonian natural aristocrat. Writing of the period between the wars, Bromfield observed that "no intelligent American, no foreign correspondent, living abroad during those years . . . wholly escaped the European sickness, a malady compounded by anxiety and dread . . . tinctured by the knowledge that some

horrifying experience lay inevitably ahead for all the human race." Toward the end of his time in France he found himself "spending more and more of my sleeping hours in the country where I was born and always what I dreamed of was Ohio and my own county" (*Pleasant Valley* 4-5). In his autobiographical novel *The Farm* (1933), a work much commended by Wharton in their correspondence, Bromfield revealed that his departure from America in the 1920s had resulted from what he at that time perceived to be the destruction of a great agricultural democracy. His return to America in 1939 was a rescission of his earlier pessimism.

When, after returning to Ohio, he recorded his memories of life in France, once again they were not of Paris, but of his love of the ancient presbytère at Senlis; the magnificent ruins of the nearby Abbaye de Chaalis, where Louis Gillet was curator; and the magical moonlit forest of Ermenonville: "I would be saying farewell to France which I had loved and known even before I had ever seen it. And if one day I returned it would never be the same. It would live, because an idea, a civilization never wholly dies but goes on living in some altered form as a contribution to all that follows, but it would be changed, dimmed and dissipated by the violence of war and decadence. I would never again find the France I was leaving" (*Pleasant Valley* 7).

Wharton and Bromfield remained passionate pilgrims until their deaths. Both remained ever thankful for the civilizing influence that Paris had played in their lives, but in the end they both preferred the peace and quiet of the garden to the confusion and noise of the city. The garden provided a sanctuary from the affairs of men, affording a perfection they could not realize in the outer world. Hence Bromfield's reflection in a letter to Wharton, following a portentous analysis of developments in Paris during the spring of 1936, "In any case Nature continues to take no notice of the imbecilities of mankind and despite even the bad weather the garden is lovely and the roses have never been finer" (c. May 1936 qtd. in *Affly* 84).

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