EDITH WHARTON AND THE INCONGRUITIES OF WAR

by

MARY AGNES CARNEY

(Under Direction of Douglas Anderson)

World War I is a vital turning point in the history of the twentieth century, and a study of the contemporary literature is essential to an understanding of the era’s impact. In her writings about World War I, Edith Wharton reveals a sustained interest in the incongruities that arise amid the war’s violence and its radical cultural and social changes. This era was a pivotal time in Wharton’s career from which she emerged as a transitional figure between the generations we have come to identify as Realists and Modernists. Her writings reflect a surprising, antithetical mix of these aesthetic worlds. She illuminates the war’s complex environment, including the rupture with prewar civilization, the questioning of the efficacy of language, and the rising sense of social estrangement.

During World War I, Edith Wharton lived in France, organized war charities, traveled the length of the frontline, and wrote almost daily about her experiences. Despite Wharton’s knowledgeable and prolific writing, her work has received little attention from scholars of war literature, most of whom have dismissed her a jingoist. Wharton’s writings and women’s war literature, however, are vital to a broader understanding not only of wartime but also of the literary genre it inspires. Wharton scholars have examined her war writing, but none have published an in-depth study exploring her dialog with wartime themes that would inspire many Modernists.

Central to Wharton’s contribution to war literature are those works set during World War I and written between 1915 and 1923, including Fighting France, “Coming Home,” “The Refugees,” “Writing a War Story,” The Marne, and A Son at the Front. These works illustrate the cultural transformations that war precipitates, including the erosion of what she terms the “humanest graces.” While Wharton maintains a conservative stance that affirms prewar cultural values, she also presents a pointed satire of the corrupt, privileged class that typifies Ezra Pound’s “botched civilization.” Wharton is among the first major writers to identify and explore the rising concern that war rhetoric had weakened language by undermining faith in the viability of abstract terms, such as “honor.” Wharton depicts an emerging distrust in the idealizing terminology of an earlier generation and the subsequent struggle to create a new means of expression, ultimately leading to the ascendancy of “concrete” language. In addition to these cultural and linguistic complexities, Wharton portrays the
savagery and grief of wartime and the rifts it creates within communities, leading to a widespread sense of alienation. She identifies these estrangements not only among soldiers but also among civilians. Wharton, however, suggests that amid the “welter” of the “strange war-world” new bonds are created and cultural life revitalizes. Her war writing anticipates the innovation that would take place in literature in the coming decades.

INDEX WORDS: American literature–twentieth century; modernism; World War I–American literature; Wharton, Edith; women-writers, American
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Dedication

For A. K. Carney and all my extended family.

To the memory of E. J. Carney, Jr.
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Introduction

It is one of the most detestable things about war that everything connected with it, except the death and ruin that result, is such a heightening of life, so visually stimulating and absorbing. ‘It was gay and terrible,’ is the phrase forever recurring in ‘War and Peace.’

Edith Wharton, Fighting France

Edith Wharton first became aware of impending war while attending a sunny garden party: “An exceptionally gay season was drawing to a close, the air was full of new literary and artistic emotions, and that dust of ideas with which the atmosphere of Paris is always laden sparkled like motes in the sun” (BG, 1032).1 When the announcement came that the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his consort had been shot dead on 28 June 1914, few suspected that this event would lead to war. Wharton records the party’s response to this news:

A momentary shiver ran through the company. But to most of us Archduke Ferdinand was no more than a name; only one or two elderly diplomatists shook their heads and murmured of Austrian reprisals. . . . The talk wandered away to the interests of the hour . . . the last play, the newest exhibition, the Louvre’s most recent acquisitions. (BG, 1032)

Only the concerned old diplomats understood that the assassination would reverberate along a web of treaties, threatening world peace.2 This elegant gathering recalls the beauty, intimate community, and stimulating conversation of la belle époque. In this scene, Wharton contextualizes the precipitating event of World War I and recreates the initial moment when political events began to
subsume “literary and artistic” pursuits. Wharton’s modern pastoral garden party hints at the subsequent lost innocence, as well as the implicit and radical metamorphosis from the ephemeral loveliness of this gathering to the violence and deprivations of war only weeks later. The conflict’s undermining of customs, social networks, and faith in prewar verities is often cited as ultimately becoming a profound influence on the postwar generation and the emerging Modernist movement.

Wharton’s reminiscence seems an apt characterization, particularly in its implicit irony. As Paul Fussell demonstrates, this startling transition from peace to war has acquired a particular meaning, in part, because “for the modern imagination that last summer has assumed the status of a permanent symbol for anything innocently but irrecoverably lost. Transferred meanings of ‘our summer of 1914’ retain the irony of the original, for the change from felicity to despair, pastoral to anti-pastoral, is melodramatically unexpected.” In the midst of a lovely summer, war suddenly began to consume lives, homes, towns, and art. This rapid metamorphosis created, according to Samuel Hynes, a “radical discontinuity of present from past[,] an essential element in what eventually took form as the Myth of the War.” Wharton explores this disjunction, which so many writers emphasize about the war years and the subsequent effects. She highlights the often paradoxical elements of this era and concludes that “it is one of the most detestable things about war that everything connected with it, except the death and ruin that result, is such a heightening of life, so visually stimulating and absorbing. ‘It was gay and terrible,’ is the phrase forever recurring in ‘War and Peace’” (FF, 146). She illustrates war’s “gay and terrible”
incongruities as she traces the changing cultural life of France, the effects of war on language, and the spreading sense of alienation.

In a literary panorama extending from the British countryside to the trenches of the French Alps, Wharton published a number of works on the war, including one collection of nonfiction essays (Fighting France in 1915), three short stories (“Coming Home” in 1915, “The Refugees” in 1919, and “Writing a War Story” in 1919), and two novels (The Marne in 1918 and A Son at the Front in 1923). Despite this extensive corpus, Wharton is rarely considered a war writer. These works have drawn minimal scholarly attention and are often considered little more than propaganda. Such an interpretation is understandable. According to Peter Buitenhuis, Wharton and her friend Henry James “were influential catalysts of American opinion.” Wharton devoted herself to war charities, supported the Allied cause, and sought to persuade her American audience of the importance of joining the Allied armies.

Wharton’s role in the war effort contributes to her diminished status after its end. Buitenhuis explains that because of propaganda by older authors, many younger writers lost confidence in the authority of the written word and turned against their elders. The reading public no longer had the trust in important authors that they had in the days before the Great War. . . . The old rhetoric based on a widely held set of common values and aspirations collapsed to be replaced by a laconic, ironic, and often understated language. The perception that Wharton’s war literature is “old rhetoric” long colored the critical response.
Some scholars argue that she was overwhelmed and confused by the war and unable to rise to her usual level of authorship. Blake Nevius, for instance, determines that this collection of work “adds nothing to her laurels.” Similarly, Stanley Cooperman finds that Wharton “combined gentility with blood thirst, the manners of the social novelist with the matter of the recruiting poster.” This contradiction of “blood thirst” and “manners,” however, hints at the complexity of her stance. Before limiting the interpretive possibilities to whether she was pro-French or anti-German, one should recall that neither her real nor fictive worlds are circumscribed by the dualistic Allied and enemy trenches. Rather than suspending her “imaginative function,” the war challenges her and prompts her to provide insights into the paradoxes of wartime life. The value of this work lies not in its evaluation of battles, soldiering, and traditional war issues but in its rendering of noncombatants’ lives and its revelations about the perplexing nature of war.

While Wharton’s alleged “blood thirst” has contributed to her exclusion from the major studies of the literature of the World War I, her gender reinforces her outsider’s status. Wharton composed war literature outside of the normative soldier’s perspective; she wrote as a noncombatant, a woman, and an American expatriate. Shari Benstock suggests that the lack of attention arises “not from an absence of interest in the broader range of her writing but from the larger problems of categorizing women’s contributions to war literature.” Many scholars and readers perceive war literature by men as more “authentic,” as is apparent in the near exclusion of women’s writings from the major critical works about World War I literature. Paul Fussell’s The Great War and Modern Memory, widely read both inside and outside the academy, shapes the largely
male canon of war literature in the United States. As Lynne Hanley notes, this volume was “extraordinarily influential in establishing what American intellectuals still generally agree to be the central preoccupations, the sources, the form, and the terrain of war literature.” While Fussell’s insightful study of “the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War” refers to almost no women authors, many wrote about this conflict. Some notable examples are Willa Cather’s *One of Ours* (1922), Rebecca West’s *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), and Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (1922). Reading an almost exclusively male canon limits our understanding of this war and its literary output.

In the last decade, however, a number of new books have been published that study women and militarism, a burgeoning field in feminist scholarship. These works have fueled an evolution in the definition of war literature. Claire Tylee, for example, distinguishes between traditional notions and a broader concept:

*Most studies of so-called ‘war-literature’, in poetry or prose, have been primarily concerned with descriptions of battlefront. They seem to be covertly devoted to the vicarious thrills of danger and the erotic myth of the fellowship of warriors. Women’s literary responses to war, however, tend to be much wider and more subtle in scope than battle-tales, since they are interested in the social context of belligerence and its connection with personal relations and the quality of ordinary life.*

Wharton’s writings often highlight the interrelated networks ranging from the battlefield to Parisian salons. Following such female correspondents as Margaret
 Fuller who from 1846 to 1849 sent dispatches from revolutionary Italy to the New York Tribune, Wharton involves herself in a wide array of war experiences. As Mary Suzanne Schriber points out, Wharton, like Fuller, “took remarkable risks, immersing herself in a world at war, skirting the front lines within sight of the Germans, parking her motor and proceeding by foot to reduce the danger of being shot.” Most of her time, however, was spent in Paris managing her war charities, keeping up with a remarkable amount of daily correspondence, and producing essays and fiction. While she does write about the war zone, her works primarily focus on what she termed the “strange war-world of the rear” (BG, 1057).

Another reason to redefine the parameters of war literature arises from the shifting distinctions between home front and battlefront, which became less sharply defined during this war. In a study entitled The Home Fronts: Britain, France, and Germany 1914-1919, John Williams asserts that the changes to the civilian scene were unprecedented in any previous conflict. War was no longer a matter almost exclusively for the fighting man, an isolated affair of clashing armies on some distant battlefield. The wearing of a uniform ceased to be virtually the sole criterion of service, privation or suffering. It was now, indeed, that the phrase ‘Home Front’ was first coined. Technological innovation, for example, caused increasing numbers of noncombatants to directly experience war’s violence. Wharton endured this incursion of brutality into civilian zones. As she explains, her neighborhood was “on Big Bertha’s deathly trajectory [and] her evil roar was also a well-known sound.” Wharton’s apartment on the rue de Varenne was “close to the Chamber
of Deputies, to the Ministries of War and of the Interior, and to other important
government offices, and bombs . . . rained” upon it until the end of the war (BG, 1048). She witnessed countless types of brutality while enduring life in Paris,
working with refugees, and traveling along the trenches. Her war writings
illustrate the effects of violence upon noncombatants and the war’s
reconfiguration of the boundaries between battle and home fronts.

The shocking violence and radical cultural adaptations of these years
influenced artistic values. Wharton’s war literature, written in France between
1914 and 1923, depicts a crucial place and time within the development of the
Modernist movement. She had been living in Paris since 1907 and continued to
reside there throughout the war; however, in the summer of 1919, she moved to
a small estate named Jean-Marie in the quiet village of St.-Brice-sous-Forêt, 10
miles north of the city. In 1922, she began spending June to mid-December at this
home, which she returned to its original name Pavillon Colombe, or Dove
summer home. This apt postwar title, however, was simply derived from the
stage name of two sisters who resided there in the mid-eighteenth century. The
rest of the year she lived at a chateau on the French Riviera. She moved because
Paris was no longer the city she had loved before the war. She sought a quieter
life than the metropolis now could provide.

Wharton relinquished her apartment on the rue de Varenne in the
Faubourg St.-Germain before most of the Modernist writers, such as Ezra Pound,
Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, moved to Paris after the war. While
Wharton lived in France during a vibrant era when the city was one of the
centers of American expatriate culture, she was not a member of the avant-garde
that has long been equated with the rise of Modernism; her expatriation, like
Gertrude Stein’s, predated that of Hemingway’s generation. She was 52 years old in 1914, and her stature as a successful novelist was established. Scribner’s published a ten-volume set of her collected works in 1914. Elizabeth Ammons observes that Wharton “published such beautifully crafted traditional novels that, in the eyes of young upstarts in the 1920s such as Hemingway and Fitzgerald, she became the very symbol of high-culture, old-fashioned, outdated novel-making—the precursor to topple, the master to displace.” Her novels, in effect, comprise part of the canon rejected by the younger generation.

Despite this remarkably entrenched attitude toward Wharton’s writings, they reveal a complex interaction with Modernism. Defining this movement has provided fertile ground, as Quentin Anderson contends:

Unlike such terms as ‘romanticism’ or ‘classicism,’ it does not refer to the qualities of works of art in a given period but simply suggests that they represent a break with the past. Since no such break can be complete, we must ask, when considering the various movements given this name, what it proposed to get rid of, what ideas about art and its place in society it employed, and what techniques were most often used by those associated with it.

Whether located in the Pound era or in the Stevens era, the Harlem Renaissance or the Lost Generation, the movement encompasses a variety of authors, themes, techniques, and politics. Wharton appreciated the works of such writers as Colette, Rilke, Gide, and Huxley, as well as the art of Cézanne and Gauguin. As Frederick Wegener points out, she “remained far more eclectic than one would guess from the asperity of her remarks on the writers and artists soon to be canonized as ‘modernist.’” In May of 1913, Wharton attended a milestone event
in the prewar evolution of Modernism, Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées. Wharton termed it “extraordinary.”

Recently, Wharton’s relationship with Modernists has become a matter of lively debate among her scholars. Wegener, for instance, concludes that she held an “antimodernist aesthetic.” He offers detailed evidence, drawn primarily from her nonfiction essays, of substantial critiques of Modernists, their innovations in form, and their choice of quotidian characters. Wegener points to Wharton’s satire of “stream-of-consciousness” and Modernist experimentation in “Writing a War Story.” While his crucial insights must inform any understanding of Wharton’s relationship with Modernism, much valuable scholarship has been published suggesting parallels between the work of these innovative writers and that of Wharton. Claire Preston, for instance, maintains that Wharton’s work fits within the “style and themes . . . of prevailing new intellectual fashions which included sociological and anthropological writing, and developing work from the slightly earlier scientific revolution of the mid-nineteenth century.” She suggests that Wharton’s exploration of expatriate life represents an “estranging modernist mode,” an issue which arises repeatedly in the war literature’s portrait of the alteration of social structures. One of the most persuasive arguments for Wharton’s Modernist leanings can be found in Dale Bauer’s examination of the postwar writings. Bauer recognizes that the conflict precipitates in Wharton’s texts, after 1917, a vocal engagement with contemporary issues, such as eugenics, Fascism, and other trends she identified as undermining the stability of civilization. Virtually all the studies that address Wharton’s connection with the emerging movement agree the war years are central in her developing relationship with Modernism and mark a turning point
in her canon. Yet no major study of the intersection of World War I, Modernism, and Wharton’s wartime literature exists.

Wharton’s complex insights into the war years are enriched by nearly five decades of observing and critiquing life in both America and Europe. Helen Killoran underscores the value of interpreting Wharton’s writing with an eye to her relationship not only with the past but also with the contemporary world and its artistic experimentations: “While Wharton believed in tradition and cultural continuity, her goal to bridge the world, the generations, and put together the thousand-and-one pieces of the past was similar to the goal of the allusive modernists, who wished to do the same, though often they also wished to wipe out the past and start over.” Wharton’s war literature reveals an interplay between ideas prevalent in her generation, including continuity and narrative coherence, and ideas forged in the furnace of war, including the break with the past and narrative fragmentation.

Wharton’s writings overlap with Modernist themes, in part, because the emerging movement was so profoundly influenced by World War I, its issues, and its literature. As Trudi Tate comments, this era offered an intense intellectual dialogue in which modernists and war writers reviewed one another’s books, and war writings were discussed in avant-garde journals such as the *Little Review* and the *Egoist*. Reading them together, the distinction between ‘modernism’ and ‘war writings’ starts to dissolve—and was by no means clear at the time—and modernism after 1914 begins to look like a peculiar but significant form of war writing.
While Wharton’s direct participation in this dialog was limited, her work contributed another voice in this fertile environment.

Determining the extent to which Wharton can be labeled Modernist, however, is not as informative as exploring her dynamic interplay with some of the themes upon which such judgments rest. In her own words, “All attempts at classification may seem to belong to school-examinations and textbooks, and to reduce the matter to the level of the famous examination-paper which, in reference to Wordsworth’s ‘O cuckoo, shall I call thee bird, or but a wandering voice?’ instructed the student to ‘state the alternative preferred, with reasons for your choice’” (WF, 52). Wharton’s amusing (and not quite correct) allusion reminds us that rigid categories can diminish our awareness of the intricate intellectual play through which culture and ideas pass from generation to generation.

While many Modernists reveal a fascination with the “radical discontinuity” between pre- and postwar life, Wharton explores not only the “radical” disruptions but also the intricate transitional passage that allows for surprising continuity within the traumatic social upheaval and mechanized warfare of World War I. Her writings reveal a focus on three key issues that overlap with wartime and Modernist literature; in brief, she explores the war’s effect on the stability of civilization, its impact on the credibility of language, and its fostering of a heightened sense of alienation. Regarding the war as a pivotal era in Western civilization, and French civilization in particular, she illuminates the repercussions to prewar values and explores the emerging cultural life.

Wharton’s war works illuminate the multivalent threat the war poses to France and its cultural life, which might lead to a weakening of Western
civilization. She had a fascination with French society that began long before the war and continued after its end. The idea of France plays an important role in *The House of Mirth* (1905), *Madame de Treymes* (1907), *The Reef* (1912), *The Custom of the Country* (1913), and *The Mother’s Recompense* (1925). Wharton’s personal and professional lives were inextricably connected to France, an adopted home that came to represent the apex of contemporary civilization.

Wharton admired European, and particularly French, civilization because here she found a home where her intellect and creativity were assets. Her writing was valued as it had not been among family and friends in America. She found two primary social groups with whom she had the kind of community that she had long desired. First, she developed close relationships with an international set of intellectuals, most of whom were by birth or expatriation Europeans. With Henry James, Walter Berry, and others, she formed an “inner group” of lifelong friends, many of whom found in Europe, according to Susan Goodman, “a sense of history and definition, a richness and complexity, that the United States lacked.”

The second society with which she began to associate was found in the Faubourg St.-Germain salon world of *la belle époque*, which Benstock describes as an “intellectual, artistic, and cultural milieu in which she moved with ease.” Wharton made Paris her permanent residence in 1912, after a half-dozen years of migrating between homes in America and Europe. As R. W. B. Lewis explains, France and “especially Paris, was in the midst of what the French, looking back nostalgically, came to call *la belle époque*: the period from the turn of the century to the outbreak of the Great War in 1914.” During these years, the French nation enjoyed “an air of unshakable stability, even of permanence,” and the arts
flourished. Wharton, therefore, gained insights into the society at its best, “a perfect combination of privacy and easy access to the social and intellectual life.”\(^{39}\) This society was to become her ideal community, wherein intellectual stimulation enriched and enlivened aristocratic traditions. To be invited to join must have been especially affirming for Wharton because the “salon world of the belle époque” was “dominantly male.” At home in America, her social set ignored her writing, but in France her artistic status and lively conversation made her, as Benstock points out, “an exception” and “an attraction in her own right.”\(^ {40}\) This community, however, was “an anachronism,” even before the war.\(^ {41}\) The modern world was eroding salon life and the power of the French aristocracy; the war ended both abruptly. Wharton’s depictions of the French seem to flow from her happy memories of this extraordinary time.

The society that Wharton admired, however, was part of the “botched civilization” that Pound decried in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly” as “an old bitch gone in the teeth.” One significant implication of the war is its erosion of belief in this culture’s ideals, which had found some of the highest expression in prewar accomplishments in science, social justice, and individual liberty. This crisis of faith, as Fussell explains, shapes the imaginative conundrum of the war:

Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected.
Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends. In the Great War eight million people were destroyed because two persons, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his Consort, had been shot. . . . [T]he Great War was more ironic than any before or since. It was a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist
It reversed the Idea of Progress. Such a significant challenge to the intellect resulted in a reshaping of the public imagination. Even before the war, however, Wharton had satirized the pompous strictures and rigid beliefs that typified the era. In *The House of Mirth* and *Madame de Treymes*, for instance, the upper classes of America and France serve as the targets of withering criticism. She rejected the inherited customs that crushed the individual spirit. Wharton demonstrates that this society should move more quickly to create a world that balances the needs of community with those of the individual. These works, then, show that while she was of that generation she condemned its failings and was skeptical about its self-satisfied belief in human progress.

In Wharton’s war literature, she both criticizes corrupt civilization and depicts the remarkable achievements of European culture. She expresses concern about the war’s repercussions, including the loss of centuries-old treasures. She encourages a fuller appreciation of the marvels of Western culture, which can best be accomplished through the ability to discern beauty. Civilization is passed along through each successive generation as they learn to perceive with intelligence and imagination what she calls the “gods.” By this she means all that has enduring aesthetic value. Carol Wershoven explains that “for Wharton, intelligence without discrimination is not intelligence at all. . . . ‘Seeing’ was not merely the practice of the aesthete, the rarified hobby of the international traveler, however. It was a discriminating power applied to people and things.”

In the last year of her life, Wharton observed in a letter to Bernard Berenson, “how thankful I am to remember that, whether as to people or as to places and
occasions, I’ve always known the gods the moment I met them.” Perceptual acuity, according to Wharton, stimulates intelligence and imagination. In much of her war writing, she strives to help Americans develop the ability to perceive the “gods” in French civilization, which will both encourage their support of the Allies and stimulate American culture to evolve. Bringing all of these perspectives to her war writings, she assesses the conflict’s effects on French civilization and to some extent on American as well. Her works mourn the loss of la belle époque, yet celebrate with an idealistic tone human adaptability.

Wharton addresses a second theme that would be influential after the war: the undermining of meliorist ideals that called into question the language which had shaped these tenets and urged young men into battle. The conflict had created a disjunction between political slogans and the realities of modern mechanized conflict. As Fussell explains, its outbreak caused an immediate questioning of the efficacy of words: “One of the cruxes of the war, of course, is the collision between events and the language available—or thought appropriate—to describe them. To put it more accurately, the collision was one between events and the public language used for over a century to celebrate the idea of progress.” The war undermined belief in the “idea of progress,” causing a permanent shift in language that was characterized by increasing irony. The mutability of language ensues when certain disproportions between events and the means to convey them become too pronounced; however, the resilience of language, as evidenced by the Modernist experiments, offers a complex affirmation of the power of ideals to migrate from dead words to living ones.
Even in the first weeks of the struggle before trench warfare began, intellectuals voiced their concern that words inadequately conveyed the wartime experience. This apprehension derives, in part, from shock at the war’s methods and from sheer emotional (and for some physical) exhaustion. The German bombardment of Louvain and Rheims during the war’s first month came to represent violence against civilians and the destruction of cultural monuments. Henry James writes to Wharton in a letter of 21 September 1914: ‘Rheims is the most unspeakable & immeasurable terror and infamy. . . . But no words fill the abyss of it’ (emphasis mine). 47 The gap between words and events remains a touchstone of this era, even more than a decade later. In fact, these concerns are famously expressed by Frederic Henry in Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*:

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice . . . There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. . . . Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates. 48

One possible source for this passage has been identified by Sheldon Grebstein. In Ernest Hemingway’s manuscript of *A Farewell to Arms*, Grebstein found a copy of an interview with Henry James published in the 21 March 1915 *New York Times* Book Review section. James explains that “The war had used up words; they have weakened, they have deteriorated like motor car tires, . . . and we are now confronted with a depreciation of all our terms.” 49 James and Hemingway,
from different generations, express a shared fear for the “depreciation” of language.

Neither writer is alone in his concerns about “weakened” language. Wharton, for instance, addresses this dilemma in her war writings. Her insights into the intricate landscape of wartime communication underscore both the necessary distrust of rhetoric and the persistent search for words to convey experiences and emotions. She addresses questions about the efficacy of language in a time when certain words had been weakened by the abuses of war rhetoric and silence sometimes seemed advisable in the face of unspeakable events. Her response to this linguistic dilemma was to suggest a bifurcated approach, distinguishing between rhetoric and genuine “expression,” a concept first articulated in Fighting France. She illustrates this search for “expression” among not only soldiers but also noncombatants whose lives are radically altered. Ultimately, Wharton highlights the resilience of language.

In a third issue that would influence postwar writing, Wharton portrays the emerging sense of alienation most often remarked in soldiers. Trench writers, such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves, often felt estranged from their families and from the values they held before the war. Wharton depicts these emotions in both soldiers and civilians. While servicemen felt the distance between battlefront and home, noncombatants were disturbed by the absence of loved ones and feelings of impotence in the face of war.

The ordeal of alienation, however, mingled with the satisfactions of new alliances. According to Jay Winter, the extreme duress of war created new communal experiences:
Almost everyone had someone close in the front lines: sons and fathers, uncles and brothers, lovers, friends, colleagues. . . . [The] military mobilization and military losses created a sense of community of those at risk of personal loss which, for a time, transcended—but did not eliminate—pre-war social divisions. The wartime community was one of shared hardships, first and foremost defined by the fate of the men at the front.50

Wharton portrays both the sense of community and the disturbance of social structures that grow from the unique conditions of wartime. These relational complexities underlie much of her war writing as she delineates the changing life of communities and reveals the emotional toll of these years.

Wharton’s war literature, including two novels, a book of essays, and three short stories, displays an incongruous array of genres. Though she composed other excellent works during these years, I am primarily interested in literary representations of France and America during wartime. The chapters ahead will explore Wharton’s war writings, starting with her earliest essays, collected as Fighting France. Portraying Paris and scenes from her travels along the trenches, Wharton illustrates the complex, emerging environment of wartime France that would permanently reshape social and aesthetic values. She begins to explore the war’s impact on language and communication. Identifying the complexities of social restructuring and mechanized warfare, she depicts a range of responses from alienation and grief to vitality and renewed commitment to the national community. The next chapter analyzes three war short stories, “Coming Home,” “The Refugees,” and “Writing a War Story,” which reveal the paradox of estrangement and community-building that women enact as new
gender roles emerge from the greater freedom and responsibilities they have in wartime. Wharton demonstrates how the stories of war become fragmented; furthermore, she illustrates the necessity for young writers to learn the craft inherited from generations of authors; she critiques the over-reliance on theory and technique that she discerns in the younger generation.

In the final two chapters, I examine her two war novels. The Marne offers a distinctly conservative view as it contrasts French and American societies. The narrative affirms prewar idealism and simultaneously presents a pointed satire of privileged Americans who demonstrate a peculiar mixture of empathy and callousness. Within this context, she examines the deadening effects of American anti-war rhetoric on language and the malleability of abstract terms, which can be used for shifting political objectives. The novel’s title, simply the name of the battle, points to the novel’s celebration of the vibrancy of concrete language. The Marne illustrates that, amid the problems and resilience of language, the peculiar community that soldiers create on the battlefront, where death and life mingle. Finally, her last war novel, A Son at the Front, extends her argument that the brutality of war creates rifts within communities leading to a widespread sense of disaffection and simultaneously to a social landscape wherein new alliances emerge. This novel is her most complex assessment of war’s cultural transformation. Instead of looking toward the cultural icons of France’s past as in Fighting France, she concentrates on memorials for those killed or maimed in battle. The cynicism that emerges during these years is balanced by the surprisingly relentless determination to fight until the end. This novel offers her most direct statement concerning the degradation of meaning in abstract terms and the abuses of language by those removed from the real work of war. She
satirizes not only the debauchery of the privileged class and its callous attitude toward suffering but also the rift between the soldiers and all others as expressed from the viewpoints of parents, soldiers, and friends, which depicts wartime alienation from the perspective of the older generation.

Because of the interrelated nature of events and imagination, interpretive studies of war literature provide a vital means of clarifying, reshaping, and stimulating our appreciation for World War I as a political and cultural turning point. Wharton’s war works reveal her as a figure with the perspective to assess the passing age and to examine its successor with sympathy. She creates a detailed portrait of wartime life in France as she explores the implications of war’s disruptions and disproportions for noncombatants, particularly the soldiers’ parents and friends, as well as society at large. Interpreting these works enriches our understanding of a little studied collection of Wharton’s works and will, furthermore, extend our understanding of Wharton’s dialogue with the younger generation, which is deeply influenced by war and its literary representations. Her war writings are particularly illuminating because they offer a window into the transition between the generation who lived most of their lives in the nineteenth century and those who came of age in the twentieth. Even as she depicts the incongruities of the war for her American audience, she examines the Zeitgeist of wartime France, an incubator for Modernist sensibilities.
Notes

1Quotations from Edith Wharton’s works are cited in the text with the abbreviations listed below.

CC  The Custom of the Country (New York: Scribner’s, 1913).
FF  Fighting France, from Dunkerque to Belfort (New York: Scribner’s, 1915).
HM  The House of Mirth (New York: Scribner’s, 1905).
HRB  Hudson River Bracketed (New York: Appleton, 1929).
MT  Madame de Treymes (Scribner’s, 1907).
M  The Marne (New York: Appleton, 1918).
WF  The Writing of Fiction (New York: Scribner’s, 1925; Rpt. New York:
2John Keegan explains that “the summer of 1914 enjoyed a peaceful productivity so dependent on international exchange and co-operation that a belief in the impossibility of general war seemed the most conventional of wisdoms.” John Keegan, The First World War (New York: Knopf, 1999), 10. He points to a Norman Angell’s best-seller that confidently declared that war would be averted or quickly ended because of the new relationships created by internal credit. Norman Angell, The Great Illusion; A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to Their Economic and Social Advantage (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1911).

3Numerous memoirs of this summer have contributed to our understanding of the extraordinary beauty and sense of innocence with which that summer has come to be associated. Sources include Modris Eksteins, Rites of Spring: the Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989); Franz Karl Stanzel and Martin Lööschnigg, eds. Intimate Enemies: English and German Literary Reactions to the Great War, 1914-1918 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1993); and, Barbara Tuchman, The Guns of August (New York: Ballantine, 1962).


6I have limited my project to those prose works that are set in wartime. The most notable exclusion is her novel Summer (1917), which is considered a commentary on the war; nonetheless, it falls outside the scope of my study as its setting is peacetime. For more on Summer, see Cynthia Griffin Wolff, A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University


8 Buitenhuis, xviii.


Tylee, 13-14.


The term Modernism is one that has been variously defined. The Modernist period has its origins in the late nineteenth century. In German in the 1890s, the word “Modernism” came into wide usage, then the literary period came to a close approximately as World War II was beginning. For the purposes of this dissertation, I would like to focus on the cluster of Modernism closely associated with and affected by the First World War, specifically such writers as Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and H. D., and other writers, many of whom were expatriates.


Elizabeth Ammons, Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 158.


Distinguishing this period from the earlier Victorian era provides some parameters; the boundaries of Victorian and Modernist eras are variously defined. Extending from Queen Victoria’s ascension to the throne in 1837 to her death in 1901, the Victorian epoch can be demarcated. However, World War I embodies the cataclysmic event that, even if it did not formally end the Victorian age, shaped the incipient modern era and represents an identifiable and abrupt transition between the two periods. The war as a liminal event between these eras underscores the importance of an understanding of war literature and its
dialog with themes that would shape postwar Modernism.


26Wegener, 119.

27Claire Preston, Edith Wharton’s Social Register (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000), xiii.

28Preston, 145.

29This is a central premise of Dale Bauer’s examination of Wharton’s postwar literature. Dale Bauer, Edith Wharton’s Brave New Politics (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).


31Tate, 2-3.

32This project, however, is concerned not with technical devices but with concepts. I am indebted to Katherine Joslin for this perspective on classification and its basis in Wharton’s The Writing of Fiction. Katherine Joslin, “‘Fleeing the Sewer’ Edith Wharton, George Sand, and Literary Innovation” in Wretched Exotic: Essays on Edith Wharton in Europe, ed. Katherine Joslin and Alan Price (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 336-37.

33Hynes, ix.

34Millicent Bell, for instance, argues that “The comparison of French with American traits is, indeed, one of the dominant motifs of her fiction.” Millicent Bell, Edith Wharton & Henry James: The Story of Their Friendship (London: Peter Owen, 1965), 252.


37 Wharton’s appreciation of France was influenced by William Crary Brownell, a “trusted friend and literary counsellor” (Bell, 222). Brownell’s volume entitled *French Traits* (1888) “may have assisted Mrs. Wharton in coming to view France as her spiritual home, the country, as they both felt, where nature was truly ‘cultivated’” (Bell, 223).


40 Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank*, 44.


42 Fussell, 7-8.


45 Higonnet recognizes Wharton’s interest in wartime rhetoric, suggesting that she “stress[es] language both to expose jingoistic hypocrisy and callousness and to raise the larger social issues cast up by linguistic change. How were people drawn into war? How did they use language to grasp the mechanisms of war?” (Margaret Randolph Higonnet, “Not So Quiet in No-Woman’s-Land,” in

46 Fussell, 169.


48 Ernest Hemingway, A Farewell to Arms (New York: Scribner’s, 1929), 196.


Chapter I

“An Unknown World”: The Collected Essays of Fighting France

There has not been a week like that from July 28 to August 4 since man inhabited the planet. From Tuesday to Tuesday something like nine millions of men started in arms to slay one another. Nearly all the greatest armies and navies in the world are ranging for battle. Imagination fails to unify such a situation—we state it, but we can form no picture of it.

Sir Henry Norman, October 1914

Edith Wharton chronicles the first year of World War I in a collection of essays entitled Fighting France, from Dunkerque to Belfort.¹ Her ostensible motive in writing these essays was to persuade American readers of Scribner’s Magazine to donate money for the war’s victims, yet these essays do much more than that.² They reveal the intricate details of life in France among both soldiers and noncombatants, the effects of war on architecture and landscapes, and the struggle for resilience in the midst of social disarray and military destruction. In her autobiography, Wharton describes Paris on the eve of war as “strange, ominous and unreal, like the yellow glare which precedes a storm. There were moments when I felt as if I had died, and waked up in an unknown world” (BG, 1033). As a whole, Fighting France traces the transformation of French life after the initial shock of Belgium’s occupation through France’s accommodation to wartime. In retrospect, war did not solely concern the failure of diplomacy and the ensuing military engagements; rather, its implications were so far-reaching as to create “an unknown world.” These essays reveal that even in the war’s early
months Wharton had begun to recognize the complexities and contradictions of this unfamiliar, and often disturbing, environment.

Wharton’s essays can be traced to her personal experiences and observations of life in Paris and along the trenches. Days after the German invasion of Belgium, Wharton began to devote herself to a remarkable array of humanitarian relief activities. By 3 August 1914, she had joined the executive committee of the American Ambulance, organized by the American Ambassador Myron T. Herrick and his wife. Shortly thereafter, Comtesse d’Haussonville, a branch President of the French Red Cross, asked Wharton to organize a work room for French women in her arrondissement. She turned her attentions to giving work to “women and children without means of livelihood” (BG, 1035). The war had shut down numerous businesses, leaving many women unemployed. A couple of weeks into the war, Wharton established an ouvroir (workroom) several blocks from her apartment on the Rue d’Université, creating employment for dozens of seamstresses. When Paris banks finally allowed small withdrawals, she convinced her American friends to contribute toward this workroom. The women sewed lingères and even “men’s shirts (in the low-neck Byronic style) for young American artists from Montparnasse!” (BG, 1036).

After this operation was underway, Wharton received her visa and went to England on a trip that she had planned prior to the war; however, she quickly became anxious to return to Paris and address problems her close friend Walter Berry had identified in her rue Vaneau workroom. Other charities she established and administered include the Children of Flanders Rescue Committee and American Hostels for Refugees, which provided food, clothing, and lodging to displaced people. Many of the Belgian refugees were sick from
hunger, trauma, and exhaustion, so Wharton organized a free clinic and dispensary. She helped create a means by which these women, children, and elderly people might support themselves, receive education and training, and enjoy a safe place to sleep. Her essays in *Fighting France* reflect a deep compassion for the French and Belgian citizens she encountered.

In these essays, Wharton draws on her experiences working for the French Red Cross. She traveled to the front lines, delivered food and medical supplies, and reported on conditions in hospitals. In order to garner good press in America, the French government granted her permission to travel extensively and gather impressions for her writing. According to Wharton’s wartime biographer Alan Price, Wharton and Berry traveled “to the Argonne and Verdun once in February and again two weeks later in early March, to the Vosges in May, to Belgium in June, and to Alsace in August.” Her discretion had gained her the trust of the French general staff; as a result, she was given permission to make a trip to the north and Belgium in June 1915. She and Berry traveled through Ypres and west to the coast of Belgium. In all, they drove along “the long wall of armies [guarding] the civilized world from the North Sea to the Vosges” (*FF*, 179). She took her work seriously and was disgusted by those who treated the war as a tourist attraction. Price explains that on one occasion she had some trouble getting permission to carry supplies to the hospitals because of the behavior of “two or three titled women who had been allowed to go to the front [and] had behaved so ‘riotously.'” In a letter to Mary Berenson on 24 February 1915, Wharton expresses her frustration: “I don’t know of anything ghastlier & more idiotic than ‘doing’ hospitals *en touriste*, like museums!”
Wharton’s fame and social standing were assets in fund raising and advocating for American support of the Allies. Her philanthropic efforts were highly successful, as she exclaims to Sara Norton on 27 October 1915: “I am very proud when I look back at the last year and find that I have collected altogether over $100,000 for my two refugee charities, workroom, and my Red Cross sanitary motors. But, oh, I’m tired.”

Price argues that the strenuousness of her many duties precipitated chronic health problems; still, she continued to be remarkably active throughout the war. In addition to a wide range of philanthropic work, she devoted her morning hours to writing, as was her habit.

In *Fighting France*, Wharton conveys her observations and experiences during the first 14 months of war. In the collection’s first essay, “The Look of Paris,” she portrays the mobilization and transformation of the city over the six months that follow the outbreak of war. The next four essays recount her travels along the entire front line from Dunkerque to Belfort. The final essay, “The Tone of France,” reveals how they acclimate and describes the inner life of the nation during the first year of war, the effect of events on the French language, and the odd estrangement and social realignment that war precipitates.

The eruption of hostilities separated families and emptied businesses of their staffs; people left their jobs and homes to fulfill their military duties. Six months into the war, Wharton writes that the mobilization of troops created a “landslide . . . burying under a heap of senseless ruin the patiently and painfully wrought machinery of civilization” (FF, 9). The perception that the outbreak of this war represented a crash of civilization points to lingering anxieties about the war’s transformation of French culture and the implications for America.
In this time of social and political upheaval, Wharton identifies what she terms ‘humanest graces’ as a source of France’s strength and resilience (FF, 6). This phrase echoes the title of a prewar work that her close friend Geoffrey Scott published in 1914 entitled The Architecture of Humanism: A Study in the History of Taste, which focuses on the classical design of the Italian Renaissance. In her Times Literary Supplement review, Wharton calls his work ‘brilliant and discriminating,’ and, in the last pages of A Backward Glance, she describes Scott as “flashtingly responsive to every appeal of life’s ironies and beauties (and for him, as with all subtler intelligences, the two were always interwoven)” (BG, 1061). Wharton’s observation suggests her own interest in the incongruities, or “ironies and beauties,” of life that inform her wartime writings. With a discerning eye, she sketches the French “humanest graces” that encompass the remarkable flourishing of art, architecture, literature and refined daily life; Wharton recognizes the irony that life seems heightened by the conflict, despite the death and destruction that war brings.

From the earliest pages of this collection, Wharton’s articles convey that this was a country on the verge of events which would unsettle the orderly civilization it had cultivated over centuries. The first essay, “The Look of Paris,” begins with a description of her return from Spain on the eve of war. She writes from the vantage point of February 1915, seven months into the conflict when it had already become a war of attrition in the trenches. She describes the landscape, emphasizing the collaboration of man and nature in the well-ordered world that generations of French had created. Driving through the countryside toward Paris on 30 July 1914, she observes the scenery:
All around was noonday quiet, and the sober disciplined landscape which the traveller’s memory is apt to evoke as distinctively French. Sometimes, even to accustomed eyes, these ruled-off fields and compact grey villages seem merely flat and tame; at other moments the sensitive imagination sees in every thrifty sod and even furrow the ceaseless vigilant attachment of generations faithful to the soil. That particular bit of landscape before us spoke in all its lines of that attachment. The air seemed full of the long murmur of human effort, the rhythm of oft-repeated tasks; the serenity of the scene smiled away the war rumours which had hung on us since morning. (FF, 3)

Wharton presents these rural areas as an ancient and orderly bucolic world that war would disorder, dramatizing the transformation between the prewar and war environments. The passage, however, reminds one that the need for “vigilant” attention reaches back far beyond the present generation. She suggests their inherited perceptiveness is attuned both to maintaining stability and managing inevitable change. For observers, a “sensitive imagination” allows one to appreciate this scene as more than plowed fields. With an eye for beauty and knowledge of France’s sometimes tumultuous history, one can value the centuries of human effort that are embodied in these simple fields. Concluding this scene, Wharton juxtaposes the reminder of war, which would interrupt this cultivation and, further north, turn similar landscapes into waste lands.

While the countryside represents the exemplary efforts of French farmers, Wharton illustrates the apex of French civilization through its cathedrals, which embody the religious and artistic society that has characterized France for
centuries. In her war writings, these architectural achievements take on heightened metaphorical status. Wharton describes a visit made just before the outbreak of war to the famous cathedral at Chartres. Begun in 1194, the structure stands as one of the finest examples of High Gothic architecture. The cathedral’s “hollow night” lightens as Wharton’s eyes adjust; she looks up to the windows where “burst out of them great sheets and showers of colour. Framed by such depths of darkness, and steeped in a blaze of midsummer sun, the familiar windows seemed singularly remote and yet overpoweringly vivid” (FF, 5). The description portrays her eyes adjusting to the cathedral’s interior, an acclimation that adds to the drama and pleasure of this scene. The brilliance contrasts with the framing “darkness,” and the “familiar windows” seem paradoxically “remote and yet overpoweringly vivid.” The spectacular variations of luminescence and profound “darkness,” as well as proximity and distance, hint at the complexity of the world, as captured in these stained glass scenes. Her imaginative response illustrates the gift of recognizing “humanest graces” with all their contradictory power.

This medieval church integrates the concrete with the mystical, which Wharton characterizes as emblematic of French cultural life. The cathedral description alludes to warfare, long a part of human history and mythology. She observes the light streaming through the windows that widened into dark-shored pools splashed with sunset, now glittered and menaced like the shields of fighting angels. Some were cataracts of sapphires, others roses dropped from a saint’s tunic, others great carven platters strewn with heavenly regalia, others the sails of galleons bound for the Purple Islands; and in the
western wall the scattered fires of the rose-window hung like a constellation in an African night. When one dropped one’s eyes from these ethereal harmonies, the dark masses of masonry below them, all veiled and muffled in a mist pricked by a few altar lights, seemed to symbolize life on earth, with its shadows, its heavy distances and its little islands of illusions. (FF, 5)

Surely, Wharton must be ironic in her claim for “ethereal harmonies”; after all, this account is hardly “harmonic.” The windows are a “blaze” of “fighting angels,” galleons bound for the “Purple Islands,” and “scattered fires.” Crafted by mortals, the windows reflect their concerns with war, adventure, and presumably the fight of good against evil. The interplay of light and dark, the contrast between the brilliant scenes in the heavens and the muted “life on earth,” suggests the incongruities of a warring world.

Wharton’s opinion of this cathedral may be more fully understood within the context of her friend Henry Adams’s masterpiece Mont St. Michel and Chartres (1904). He explains the power of this sacred space:

Like all great churches, that are not mere store-houses of theology, Chartres expressed, besides whatever else it meant, an emotion, the deepest man ever felt,—the struggle of his own littleness to grasp the infinite. You may, if you like, figure in it a mathematical formula of infinity, the broken arch, our finite idea of space; the spire, pointing, with its converging lines, to Unity beyond space; the sleepless, restless thrust of the vaults, telling the unsatisfied, incomplete, overstrained effort of man to rival the energy, intelligence and purpose of God.11
Wharton’s description of the cathedral suggests a similar alchemy of human and spiritual, or of nature’s light and manmade glass. This extraordinary visual experience reveals the power of such an alliance, and she concludes that: “All that a great cathedral can be, all the meanings it can express, all the tranquilizing power it can breathe upon the soul, all the richness of detail it can fuse into a large utterance of strength and beauty, the cathedral of Chartres gave us in that perfect hour” (FF, 5). This product of human hands has a “tranquilizing power” on its visitors, a valuable effect in an uncertain world. Humanity’s ambitious desire achieves one of its greatest expressions in Chartres Cathedral. This scene, then, celebrates this culture’s fostering of ambitions and talents. These characteristics, however, can be dangerous.

As Adams suggests, an “overstrained effort” recalls the human failures of architects and artists; however, within the context of essays about the inception of World War I, hubris assumes an ominous significance. After all, the ambitions of governments and leaders have contributed to impending war. Just as the cathedral is a failed attempt “to reveal the energy, intelligence, and purpose of God,” in Adams’s terms, so this cathedral suggests for Wharton both human potential and, within the context of these essays on wartime destruction, human frailty. While the cathedral offers some “comfort,” this false security itself is emblematic of the summer of 1914, as Wharton implies in her garden party. The cathedral itself provides one of the “little islands of illusions” that Wharton suggests “symbolize life on earth.” Denial will not change the course of events, only render them more ironic.

After the stop in Chartres, Wharton and Berry drive to Paris, arriving at sunset. To Wharton’s eye, the city appears as though it were panel taken from
the cathedral’s stained-glass windows and overlain with a Monet painting. The city glows with “the blue-pink lustre of an early Monet” and “the Champs Elysées slope[s] downward in a sun-powdered haze to the mist of fountains and the ethereal obelisk” (FF, 6). Both the cathedral and the city seem on fire, tempering brilliant colors into softer hues. Similarly, the Eiffel Tower, landmark of architectural and artistic achievement, stands guard: “The great city, so made for peace and art and all humanest graces, seemed to lie by her river-side like a princess guarded by the watchful giant of the Eiffel Tower” (FF, 6). Parisian beauty, art, and history enchant and animate the stone and iron. Wharton’s description conjures a heavenly metropolis, a place of spiritual and aesthetic import. This same “princess” city was rapidly preparing for war: “All the while, every one knew that . . . the whole fabric of the country’s seemingly undisturbed routine was threaded with noiseless invisible currents of preparation, the sense of them was in the calm air as the sense of changing weather is in the balminess of a perfect afternoon” (FF, 7). Interwoven with the “humanest graces” are military preparations. These beautiful descriptions of cathedrals and the French capital underscore the competing tendencies in humankind toward creation and destruction, art and war.

Many of Wharton’s observations derive from her concern for the refinements of France and all they represent. Both Wharton and Henry James, as Price writes, found “the idea of Germany imposing a master culture on France or England or Italy was not just a political and military invasion, it was an assault on the cultural gradations that made their art possible.”12 These attitudes derive, in part, from military events. As Barbara Tuchman explains, the burning and bombardment of Louvain just weeks after the war began is emblematic, in part,
because of the German “practice of the principle of collective responsibility.” This behavior, which had “been expressly outlawed by the Hague Convention, shocked the world of 1914 which had believed in human progress.” Germans posted proclamations in each town they entered warning against acts of “hostility.” Villages that resisted would be burned, and civilians who shot at Germans would be executed. The devastation raised fears about what the French and British perceived as the German threat to ideals of civilized behavior and respect for aesthetic and intellectual artifacts of western civilization, including language itself. The Belgian decision to resist invasion surprised the German government; nonetheless, the latter were prepared to force a swift capitulation. These events revealed the falseness of prewar beliefs that diplomatic treaties might prevent such violence.

Even as the burning continued, reports from eyewitnesses filled newspapers, and an outcry against the destruction arose around the world. The primary concern was for loss of life and the plight of children. Tuchman writes that knowledge of the attack that had begun on 25 August 1914, less than a month into the war, spread quickly as “[s]tunned and weeping refugees driven from the city told of street after street set on fire, of savage looting and continuing arrests and executions.” The bombardment created a secondary concern. Home of irreplaceable literature, art and architecture, Louvain was, according to Tuchman, a medieval city renowned for its University and incomparable Library, founded in 1426 when Berlin was a clump of wooded huts. Housed in the fourteenth century Clothworkers’ Hall, the Library included among its 230,000 volumes a unique collection of 750 medieval
manuscripts. . . . The façade of the Town Hall, called a ‘jewel of Gothic art,’ was a stone tapestry of carved knights and saints and ladies, lavish even of its kind. In the church of St. Pierre were altar panels by Dierik Bouts and other Flemish masters. The burning and sack of Louvain, accompanied by the invariable shooting of civilians, lasted six days.16

When the Germans were thwarted at the first Battle of the Marne, 9-15 September 1914, the bombardment of Rheims, another city with irreplaceable treasures, began. Each of these cities became a “symbol to the world” of the German savagery in killing defenseless civilians and destroying cultural treasures.

The perception that the war embodied a struggle for the ascendence of culture was pervasive also in Germany. On the one hand, destroying villages was intended to frighten inhabitants into quick submission to facilitate a swift crossing through Belgium to France. On the other, as Tuchman explains, obliterating the old culture would speed the work of replacing it with the superior, newer German Kultur: “Believing themselves superior in soul, in strength, in energy, industry, and virtue, Germans felt they deserved the dominion of Europe.”17 This potential displacement of French culture was not lost on Wharton. In England, France, and Germany, World War I was widely considered a battle for cultural survival.

Creating a portrait of France as a besieged civilized nation, Wharton denies their role in the buildup toward war and their desire to avenge the loss at Sedan and the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine after the Franco-Prussian war. Tuchman argues that ‘For more than forty years the thought of ‘Again’ was the
single fundamental factor of French policy.”\textsuperscript{18} Wharton, by contrast, asserts that Paris revealed no desire for military conflict; it had “no glitter of arms . . . reflected in the empty avenues” and “no military music sounded through them. Paris scorned all show of war, and fed the patriotism of her children on the mere sight of her beauty. It was enough” (FF, 25). While contending that France was not a war-mongering nation, she draws a comparison between the current situation and that of the earlier generation: “It seemed as though it had been unanimously, instinctively decided that the Paris of 1914 should in no respect resemble the Paris of 1870, and as though this resolution had passed at birth into the blood of millions born since that fatal date, and ignorant of its bitter lesson” (FF, 26). The loss of Alsace to Germany is the “bitter lesson” of this earlier war and the reason France sought to distance itself from any resemblance to that era.

While the nation does not revel in its militarism, Wharton claims that it demonstrates a quiet and strong conviction to be victorious. She asserts that “the tone of France after the declaration of war was the white hot glow of dedication: a great nation’s collective impulse (since there is no English equivalent for that winged word \textit{élan}) to resist destruction” (FF, 220). Wharton’s description of the strength derived from Paris’s unique “beauty” conveys one source of the French notion of \textit{élan vital} or, as Tuchman translates the phrase, “the all-conquering will” of the French spirit, which was deemed to endow France with the ability to resist the superior army and industry of the German nation.\textsuperscript{19}

French \textit{élan} is embodied, in one regard, as the integration of past and present military traditions. Wharton likens glorified armies of years past to modern troops. In the new “look” of this modern war, the soldiers drive motor vehicles, rather than sit astride horses, and wear uniforms of a dull blue cloth
instead of brilliant red. Her analysis of the way this war differs from portraits of bygone conflicts illustrates that the French are a “race of artists” who despite less dramatic apparel still appear stylish. Châlons, the village in which the French military was then headquartered, seems “extraordinarily exhilarating” (FF, 48).

At the town square military men with their vehicles assemble, creating a scene that Wharton compares with an imaginary ideal of such sights from wars past:

Rows of grey motor-lorries and omnibuses do not lend themselves to as happy groupings as a detachment of cavalry, and spitting and spurting motor-cycles and ‘torpedo’ racers are no substitute for the glitter of helmets and the curvetting of chargers; but once the eye has adapted itself to the ugly lines and the neutral tints of the new warfare, the scene in that crowded clattering square becomes positively brilliant. (FF, 49)

The juxtaposition of “grey motor-lorries” with “happy groupings” of cavalry creates a brief image of nineteenth-century warfare compared with that of the new century. Equating of new “grey” with old “glitter” demonstrates how sombre scenes paradoxically become transformed by what Wharton terms the sheer “concentrated energy” of men in arms.

Throughout these essays, military scenes convey this élan and yet temper it with acknowledgment of its cost. Wharton likens the busy roads, crowded soldiers and armaments, to a “river of war” (FF, 139). On a trip along the front lines from Doullens to Montreuil-sur-Mer, all are enveloped by a dust storm; still, the troops move along the road:

Standing up in the car and looking back, we watched the river of war wind toward us. Cavalry, artillery, lancers, infantry, sappers
and miners, trench-diggers, road-makers, stretcher-bearers, they swept on as smoothly as if in holiday order. Through the dust, the sun picked out the flash of lances and the gloss of chargers’ flanks, flushed rows and rows of determined faces, found the least touch of gold on faded uniforms, silvered the sad grey of mitrailleuses and munition waggons (sic). Close as the men were, they seemed allegorically splendid: as if, under the arch of the sunset, we had been watching the whole French army ride straight into glory.

(FF, 139-40)
The figures of lancers, chargers, and machine guns illustrate Wharton’s overlay of bygone onto modern military scenes. The soldiers are “close” yet “allegorically splendid” (FF, 140). These living men become representations of some abstract notion, Wharton’s glorified picture of French militarism. The interplay between idealized and grim images, allegory and contemporary history, creates an amalgam that illustrates the intersection of old traditions and the modern incarnation of warfare.

These descriptions of the military, however, are not merely about the appearance of soldiering. While Wharton’s tone is light and her outlook positive, these passages refer to a serious and dangerous situation. The uniforms worn during the earliest months of the First World War cost lives because their colors made the men visible targets. While the “neutral tints” saved lives, these fabrics were controversial because they brought to an end centuries of sartorial traditions. Wharton’s depiction suggests that the heroism and militaristic dash of previous wars persist amidst the dull colors dictated by the mechanized warfare in which camouflage was necessary. She later explains that “Within the
last two years the question of colour has greatly preoccupied the French military authorities, who have been seeking invisible blue; and the range of their experiments is proved by the extraordinary variety of shades of blue, ranging from a sort of greyish robin’s-egg to the darkest navy, in which the army is clothed” (FF, 51-52). Despite the reference to the military’s clothing blunder, she fully supports the necessity of the less aesthetically appealing fabric. She concludes that these men and their “look of quiet authority” make even the most plain appear “beautiful” (FF, 54). Though this work does not overtly condemn the military hierarchy for the deaths of brightly-clad soldiers, by the end of the war Wharton would become openly critical of the failures of the French military command, as illustrated in her final war novel, A Son at the Front.

Attuned to the war’s effects on French civilization, Wharton’s discussion of uniforms is one aspect of her exploration of the unsettling of social classes. Even as early as mobilization, she notes that these “people, only two days ago, had been leading a thousand different lives, in indifference or in antagonism to each other, as alien as enemies across a frontier: now workers and idlers, thieves, beggars, saints, poets, drabs and sharps, genuine people and showy shams, were all bumping up against each other in an instinctive community of emotion” (FF, 16-17). This intermingled crowd reveals the surprising disregard of traditional classes that becomes a hallmark of this conflict. In her descriptions of life in the trenches, Wharton notes the social changes. She describes the locale, but then asserts: “Interesting as the place was, the men who lived there interested me far more. They obviously belonged to different classes, and had received a different social education; but their mental and moral fraternity was complete” (FF, 118). Decades later Fussell would identify how the soldiers’ “mental and moral
fraternity” created a common idiom, which would shape the modern imagination. The war creates new bonds among people who otherwise might not come together.

The war recalculated social status according to individual sacrifices for the war. As Marc Ferro argues, a shift occurred in the French social tiers: The war gave rise to a new hierarchy of merit, which society accepted without a murmur of protest. At the head of this new elite of victims (second only to the dead) were the blinded veterans, followed by the gassed, the amputees, and those whose faces had been disfigured. The lads of the trenches came next, with survivors of the nightmares of Verdun, the Somme, and the Champagne ranking higher than veterans of the Dardanelles or of other fronts. The alteration in military prestige extends into and reshapes the civilian world. No longer was family pedigree or business occupation the primary measure of social standing.

These widespread social shifts had far-reaching and surprising effects. Ferro explains that this new means of determining status influenced clothing fashions:

The hierarchy of merit explains why, during the war, in the world of clothing and fashion, the nurse’s uniform (associated with solicitude for the common soldiers) gained pride of place over the worker’s garb (associated with themes of emancipation and revolt), and why colors were predominately somber and subdued, with grey and beige prevailing even in the realm of high fashion.
The muted uniforms and changing social hierarchy in the military spread through the civilian world as well. In Wharton’s discussion of the change in fabrics, she addresses wider social alterations that would affect the fashion world, which Coco Chanel would employ to change twentieth-century fashion. Wharton’s attention to the soldiers’ uniforms hints at the complex ramifications of the military’s image. She underscores the intricate relationship of military and civilians. The lives of noncombatants are remolded as the military becomes the formative social power during these years.

Wharton’s depiction of the culture of wartime emphasizes the overlap of military and civilian worlds that provides her with some of the most striking incongruities of wartime. She remarks that in a front line town the General Staff had established its office:

Upstairs, in the Empire bedroom which the General has turned into his study, it was amusingly incongruous to see the sturdy provincial furniture littered with war-maps, trench-plans, aeroplane photographs and all the documentation of modern war. Through the windows bees hummed, the garden rustled, and one felt, close by, behind the walls of other gardens, the untroubled continuance of a placid and orderly bourgeois life. (FF, 107)

Life continues alongside the war activities, and the modern juxtaposes with the antique. The emerging use of airplanes becomes a symbol of modern warfare. Alternatively, the reference to the “Empire bedroom” recollects an earlier era with its own culture and war. Just as that epoch was formative, so this time will be pivotal in French history.
Contextualizing this war within the longer view of French history, Wharton illustrates both the destruction and reassertion of life. The French continually find ways to revivify their country, revealing remarkable adaptability. At times, the disruption of their daily activities constitutes one of war’s devastations in Paris:

And that orderly arrest of life seemed sadder than any scene of disarray. It symbolized the senseless paralysis of a whole nation’s activities. . . . the hand of time had been stopped, the heart of life had ceased to beat, all the currents of hope and happiness and industry been choked—not that some great military end might be gained, or the length of the war curtailed, but that, wherever the shadow of Germany falls, all things should wither at the root. (FF, 157)

Silence and the absence of normal daily rhythms demonstrate the kinds of “death” that “arrest . . . life” behind the front lines. This particular form of “withering” represents the violence extending beyond the point of enemy contact on battlefields. Ironically, while the German army has not entered Paris, its presence is felt as surely as the more obvious effect of the bombs, which would later descend on Paris. Despite this silence and alteration of daily habits, Wharton maintains that the city prepared for war with “assurance,” “balance,” and “a kind of smiling fatalism,” partially resulting from “the beauty of the season and the silence of the city” (FF, 24). Even with the difficulties of daily life, the French citizenry exhibit perseverance and steadiness.
Wharton detects comic possibilities in the irrepressible thirst for pleasure amid suffering and deprivation. Six months into the war, the appetite for shopping has reasserted itself:

I say ‘shop’ instead of buy, to distinguish between the dull purchase of necessities and the voluptuousness of acquiring things one might do without. . . . [Woman], however valiant, however tired, however suffering and however self-denying, must eventually, in the long run, and at whatever cost to her pocket and her ideals, begin to shop again. She has renounced the theatre, she denies herself the tea-rooms, she goes apologetically and furtively (and economically) to concerts—but the swinging doors of the department stores suck her irresistibly into their quicksand of remnants and reductions.

Using metaphors of struggle, if not war, Wharton depicts the daily skirmishes and amusing losses that enrich life in Paris. The war raises new questions of what is appropriate behavior within this evolving cultural environment.

Throughout these essays, Wharton offers evidence that the French understand the paradoxes of life at war. She idealizes their cultural life and dedication to the war effort:

Enamoured of pleasure and beauty, dwelling freely and frankly in the present, they have yet kept their sense of larger meanings, have understood life to be made up of many things past and to come, of renunciation as well as satisfaction, of traditions as well as experiments, of dying as much as of living. Never have they
considered life as a thing to be cherished in itself, apart from its reactions and its relations. (FF, 230)

The war in these scenes evokes that mix of “irony and beauty” characterizing the “humanest graces” of life in France. The cultural landscape encompasses destructive forces and rejuvenating reassertions that shape the adjustments to World War I. One of the most vital aspects of these adaptations can be found in the effort to find ways to communicate one’s response to these events.

Wharton expresses her disillusionment with statesmen and diplomats who allowed international tensions to escalate into war. In “The Look of Paris,” she disparages the “bandying of diplomatic words” by the government cabinets whom she likens to “naughty children” (FF, 6). Implicit in this analogy is her accusation that the diplomats, who ultimately did not prevent war, were not taking the consequences of their negotiations seriously and were like children “dangling their feet over the edge” (FF, 6). While Wharton believed in fighting for France’s sovereignty, she criticized this diplomatic “bandying.” Her metaphor of diplomatists as children underscores the disproportion between the innocent trust that war would be averted by negotiators and the reality of the war’s cataclysmic beginnings. Because broken treaties and diplomatic discussions provoked the war, the words of these governments, in a sense, precipitated it. The written agreements, believed to be the answer to avoid war, caused it to spread rapidly around the globe.23 When Wharton likened the diplomats to children, the war had already destroyed human lives, all triggered by the death of a man and a woman, the Archduke Ferdinand and his consort. Civilized treaties and diplomacy failed. This was the civilized politics built by tradition, just as much as farmers gradually cultivated the “ruled off fields.”
Wharton is attuned to the failure of the diplomats’ language of negotiation, and she foregrounds wartime communication. In contrast to the dramatic scenes of aesthetic achievement, the actual announcement of war is understated: “a little strip of white paper against the wall of the Ministère de la Marine” signaled the start of the conflict, and the crowds offered “no cheers” (FF, 8). Jean Gallagher points to Wharton’s account that the war exists first as language. Wharton hears verbal ‘war-rumours’ and then sees nailed to a wall France’s written declaration of mobilization. The work of this first essay is to attempt to make a verbally-understood war visible, to convert it into image and thereby to convert its American readers to supporting the Allied war effort.  

Paradoxically, the conflict quickly became a time of silence. Wharton faces the fundamental war issue of translating experience and observations into reliable and comprehensible words, particularly the kind of writing that might persuade Americans to support the Allied armies. Wharton negotiates between persuasion and accuracy, and her writing reflects the peculiar interplay between silence and action, quiet and drama.

The silence of war emerges, in part, from military and political necessities and objectives. Especially at the war’s start, citizens endured the painful suspense of government’s information blackouts. Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate explain that anxieties rose as a result of rumors and self-evident destruction:

Censorship, propaganda, and the sheer scale and complexity of the event made it impossible to grasp what was happening at any particular moment. Even combatants were often unsure whether
they were winning or losing a particular engagement, and had no knowledge of the progress of the war overall, apart from what they read in the papers. Lack of knowledge was not gender-specific, nor even specific to civilians.\textsuperscript{25}

The French military headquarters published bulletins that “were masterpieces of the opaque. [French General] Joffre operated on the fixed principle that civilians should be told nothing.”\textsuperscript{26} While the information blackout eventually diminished as the public’s demands increased, officials still maintained some control of public knowledge about the war.

Wharton’s articles are shaped by the pressures of a watchful government. She elucidates in \textit{A Backward Glance} the conditions under which \textit{Fighting France} was released: “When the book was published it was not permissible to give too precise details about places or people, and I have sometimes thought of bringing out a new edition in which the gaps should be filled in with more personal touches” (BG, 1044). While the government finally relented and began to disclose more information, full details about military engagements were not forthcoming for reasons of security and morale. The government’s silence exacerbated the well-founded suspicion that official language shaded the truth and was not wholly reliable. As Fussell argues, truth was “the main casualty in war.”\textsuperscript{27}

Wharton’s idealizations of the French people’s reactions suggest a range of emotional responses from dumb acceptance to noisy excitement. Even in Paris, the varied aural landscape counterpoises scenes of silence with those of singing and talk. The mobilization notices drew “small and quiet” groups who gave “no cheers, no gesticulations” (FF, 8), but later “it was a night of singing and
acclamations, not boisterous, but gallant and determined” (FF, 11). One central preoccupation becomes the question of how to respond verbally in these circumstances.

In Wharton’s view, Paris possesses a silenced and “suspended life” in the early days of the war as the daily routines and services of Paris were disrupted. With men leaving their jobs to report to duty, business and banking came to a virtual halt. Wharton’s descriptions imbue the hush with a deathlike quality:

The days were dumb enough; but at night the hush became acute. In the quarter I inhabit, always deserted in summer, the shuttered streets were mute as catacombs, and the faintest pin-prick of noise seemed to tear a rent in a black pall of silence. I could hear the tired tap of a lame hoof half a mile away, and the tread of the policeman guarding the Embassy across the street beat against the pavement like a series of detonations. . . . I remember one morning being roused out of a deep sleep by a sudden explosion of noise in my room. I sat up with a start, and found I had been waked by a low-voiced exchange of ‘Bonjours’ in the street. (FF, 24)

With macabre humor, Wharton conflates a “good day” greeting with a bomb. She furthermore equates the war’s stillness or silence with the dark shroud of a coffin and Paris with ancient graveyard “catacombs.” The silence represents a kind of paralysis or wounding of the productive life of an entire nation, affecting both soldier and noncombatant. Ironically, by the end of the war, the noise of Paris would drive her to the suburbs.

Describing wartime France, Wharton returns again and again to the concept of the evocative alterations between quiet and sound to convey the
emotional tension she experiences and observes. In Paris after the soldiers have been mobilized, a peculiar silence descends and seems intensified because it contradicts usual expectations of daily noises: “War, the shrieking fury, had announced herself by a great wave of stillness. Never was desert hush more complete: the silence of a street is always so much deeper than the silence of wood or field” (FF, 24). Wharton highlights war's nature as both “shrieking fury” and disconcerting “stillness.” During her first night in Verdun near the front, she finds a “hush so intense that every reverberation from the dark hills beyond the walls brought out in the mind its separate vision of destruction; and then, just as the strained imagination could bear no more, the thunder ceased. A moment later, in a court below my windows, a pigeon began to coo; and all night long the two sounds strangely alternated” (FF, 73). In Cassel, she finds silence intermittent with deadening roar. At night, “silence and sleep came down again,” but later the “big siege-gun of Dixmude” filled the air “with a noise that may be compared—if the human imagination can stand the strain—to the simultaneous closing of all the iron shop-shutters in the world.” Amazingly, life goes on “in the strange parentheses between the roars” (FF, 161). Existence along the front lines is a place of “strange parentheses” in which the German and Allied trenches form a hidden labyrinth from the coast to the Alps.

The tension between silence and sound is suggestive of the psychological and professional adjustment to violence. Wharton found herself partially muted during initial months of this event when she experienced a rare case of writer’s block and could not produce fiction. In his study of Wharton’s relationship during the Great War with her publisher Charles Scribner's Sons, James Sait notes that she cabled them on 5 August 1914, just after the German invasion of
Belgium and the British declaration of war, but the upheaval disrupted cable communications, and by the time she heard from Scribner’s she felt too profoundly the contrast of the silence of the first weeks and the “horrors” of the German destruction to write effectively about the conflict:

You will find me indeed an unreliable contributor when I tell you that in spite of a fortnight’s struggle I have been unable to reconstitute my impressions of Paris at the outbreak of the war. I thought I could surely do it when I wrote to you but the overwhelming horrors of the last weeks have so blotted out my impressions of those first quiet days, that all my attempts to recover them have been unsuccessful. I am very sorry, for if I had received your cable, which has never yet turned up, I should have noted down my sensations day by day, & I think they might have been interesting.28

From her earliest observations to those made years after the war’s end, Wharton expresses the difficulties of conveying war experiences. The silence of Paris becomes Wharton’s silence.

That Wharton at first had difficulty writing about the war derives, in part, from the widespread sense that words were weak instruments to convey the import of war. As James has stated, “The war had used up words.”29 Fussell explains the environment in which this distrust arose:

[T]he Great War took place in what was, compared with ours, a static world, where the values appeared stable and where the meanings of abstractions seemed permanent and reliable. Everyone knew what Glory was, and what Honor meant. It was not until
eleven years after the war that Hemingway could declare in *A Farewell to Arms* that ‘abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.’ In the summer of 1914 no one would have understood what on earth he was talking about.  

The comments of James and Wharton indicate that they were aware of this dilemma early in the war. She anticipates Hemingway’s observations about the changing value of “words.” In her final essay of *Fighting France*, dated August 1915, she observes that the French seem to have circumvented this problem by separating language into two categories: the first category of French “expression” is “public speaking” or “rhetorical writing too often associated with the word” (FF, 231). Of this she comments, “Rhetoric is the dressing-up of conventional sentiment” (FF, 231).

Wharton offers, however, a second category of French “expression,” which reflects pragmatism and optimism. This construct allows for animated discussion and embodies eloquence [or] the fearless expression of real emotion. And this gift of fearless expression of emotion—fearless, that is, of ridicule, or of indifference in the hearer—has been an inestimable strength to France. It is a sign of the high average of French intelligence that feeling well-worded can stir and uplift it; that ‘words’ are not half shamefacedly regarded as something separate from, and extraneous to, emotion, or even as a mere vent for it, but as actually animating and forming it. Every additional faculty for exteriorizing
states of feeling, giving them a face and a language, is a moral as well as artistic asset. (FF, 231-232)

She adds later that “the word once uttered is passed on, and carries the same help to others” (FF, 232). The bifurcated approach allows that some words can offer little more than “conventional sentiment,” yet language still can express “real emotion.” She distinguishes between the “conventional” and the “real,” ultimately arguing that the French develop a means of “expression” that provides “a moral as well as artistic asset.” This latter perspective in particular separates her from those war writers who more obviously overlap with Modernist ideas. She denigrates empty rhetoric and finds in French “expression” an alternative that celebrates the adaptability of language.

While ironic in light of her own propagandistic tendencies, Wharton’s essays underscore not only her own intolerance of rhetoric, but also her awareness of the diminishment of meaning and value in patriotic words. In the mountain village of Cassel, she observes that “I heard in Dannemarie not a syllable of lyrical patriotism or post-card sentimentality, but only a kindly and impartial estimate of facts as they were and must be dealt with” (FF, 206). This statement significantly predates that of Hemingway who similarly privileges the facts, or “concrete names,” over patriotic expression. While her own writing sometimes offers sentimental descriptions of French patriotism, Wharton understood that the most vital expressions were found in an “impartial estimate of facts.” Specifically, the best language or “expression” during war is an honest communication of feelings and intellect untainted by empty rhetoric.

The French language provides a source of strength in wartime. In a ravaged town, Wharton finds “an ancient tram-car had been converted into a
café and labelled (sic): ‘Au Restaurant des Ruines’” (FF, 95). This gallows humor eases the starkness of the decimated town. Not only wit but also serious discussion helps the French to cope. In “The Tone of France,” Wharton discusses how French endurance derives from two primary sources: their unique intelligence and their language. She disputes claims that “in a spirit of patriotism, this fault-finding people have learned not to find fault” (FF, 229). Instead, they enjoy searching discussions about the war, including questions of “military policy” and their own personal grievances. These exercises of the keen French intellect are conducted not in the newspapers but in cafés (FF, 229). She admires the fact that the people do not remain silenced in the face of the war:

But in the café they are talking as freely as ever, discriminating as keenly and judging as passionately. The difference is that the very exercise of their intelligence on a problem larger and more difficult than any they have hitherto faced has freed them from the dominion of most of the prejudices, catch-words and conventions that directed opinion before the war. Then their intelligence ran in fixed channels; now it has overflowed its banks. (FF, 229)

Wharton does not focus on the limits of language; rather, she asserts its adaptability. Language becomes enriched by the “problem” of war as the effort to convey wartime experiences provokes an intellectual flowering.

Despite the resilience of communication, an underlying alienation resulted from the separation from families and loved ones, as well as the shock of dehumanized trench warfare. These essays depict the disfiguring effect of suffering and its paradoxically edifying influence on the interior self. In “The Look of Paris,” the wounded appear in the city streets, and soldiers are described
as embodying Wharton’s ideal of “the look of Paris.” She admires these young men:

They are grave, these young faces: one hears a great deal of the gaiety in the trenches, but the wounded are not gay. Neither are they sad, however. They are calm, meditative, strangely purified and matured. It is as though their great experience had purged them of pettiness, meanness and frivolity, burning them down to the bare bones of character, the fundamental substance of the soul, and shaping that substance into something so strong and finely tempered that for a long time to come Paris will not care to wear any look unworthy of the look on their faces. (FF, 41)

The war causes not only bodily but also psychological wounds that transmute these faces. Their sacrifices create a distance from their fellow citizens who now, in Wharton’s view, regard them as distinguished by their remarkable sacrifices. They lose some humanity and become like statues or memorials of war heroes made of a substance that has been “finely tempered.” The fact that civilians can only strive to avoid looking “unworthy” suggests the persistent struggle to bridge the abyss between soldier and noncombatant, as well as the fundamental connection that such an effort implies. This dichotomy appears again in her novels *The Marne* and *A Son at the Front*.

In the military zone, the troops move along the roads in the “heat, dust, crowds, [and] confusion,” and soldiers appear to be as “long Phidian lines of youths so ingeniously fair that one wondered how they could have looked on the Medusa face of war and lived” (FF, 149). Wharton’s idealized image of these “fair” youths is counterpoised with the threat they might turn to stone under the
eyes of Medusa. If these soldiers were to transform into stone, they would be not unlike sculptured “effigies,” an allusion to the specter of death that awaits the columns of marching soldiers. As effigies, these beautiful countenances are elevated to a memorial, recalling military statues of soldiers from bygone conflicts and anticipating a central metaphor of *A Son at the Front*.

The “ingeniously fair” form a striking contrast with those returning from battle. The latter intrude upon the idealized scenes: “If one could think away the ‘éclopés’ in the streets and the wounded in the hospitals, Châlons would be an invigorating spectacle” (FF, 50). The conditions of the front lines implicitly enter into a description of troops returned from the front:

> It is a vision of one of the central functions of a great war, in all its concentrated energy, without the saddening suggestions of what, on the distant periphery, that energy is daily and hourly resulting in. Yet even here such suggestions are never long out of sight; for one cannot pass through Châlons without meeting, on their way from the station, a long line of ‘éclopés’--the unwounded but battered, shattered, frost-bitten, deafened and half-paralyzed wreckage of the awful struggle. These poor wretches, in their thousands, are daily shipped back from the front to rest and be restored; and it is a grim sight to watch them limping by, and to meet the dazed stare of eyes that have seen what one dare not picture. (FF, 49-50)

These battle weary troops seem removed from all around them and can only muster a “dazed stare.” The psychological effects of war and a reference to the horrors of the battlefront enter into this description obliquely in the graphic
phrases. Wharton portrays war as the source of estranging experiences that generate “dazed” responses.

At a Red Cross hospital in Blercourt, Wharton found more severe cases, suffering from “trench-sickness.” Their condition is so acute that they cannot be moved to a hospital farther from the front. They are “stricken with fever, bronchitis, frost-bite, pleurisy” or other illnesses that arise from battlefield conditions. In the church where these soldiers are being nursed, Mass continues to be held:

A handful of women, probably the only ‘civil’ inhabitants left, and some of the soldiers we had seen about the village, had entered the church and stood together between the rows of cots; and the service began. It was a sunless afternoon, and the picture was all in monastic shades of black and white and ashen grey: the sick under their earth-coloured blankets, their livid faces against the pillows, the black dresses of the women (they seemed all to be in mourning) and the silver haze floating out from the little acolyte’s censer. The only light in the scene—the candle-gleams on the altar, and their reflection in the embroideries of the curé’s chasuble—were like a faint streak of sunset on the winter dusk. (FF, 69)

While Chartres blazes with color, this small church exists in neutral shades with only candlelight to brighten the space. This dismal service, however, brings together an odd assortment, creating an incongruous community. This scene details the remarkable convergence of small town French life with ravages of modern warfare.
Wharton suggests that shared suffering creates a parallel transformation among noncombatants. Despite distance from the soldiers’ world, the civilian mourners’ expressions appear altered by suffering. The faces of those who have lost beloved soldiers have also changed through these “lacerating memories” (FF, 38). For these noncombatants, the war has “hardened the poor human clay into some dense commemorative substance” (FF, 38). Some women’s faces have hardened into masks “like memorial medals--idealized images of what they were in the flesh. And the masks of some of the men --those queer tormented Gallic masks, crushed-in and squat and a little satyr-like--look like the bronzes of the Naples Museum, burnt and twisted from their baptism of fire” (FF, 39). These odd faces possess the nobility of ancient generations and have become transformed from “what they were in the [living] flesh” into a peculiarly vivid expressions that are at once static and compelling in their passionate animalism and purity.

The peculiar effects of war appear to alter not only people but also the landscapes they inhabit. Wharton juxtaposes scenes of the idyllic countryside with the perplexing, labyrinthian environment created by this war’s unique military entrenchments (FF, 5). In February of 1915, Paris at dusk has a “muffled” appearance: “The river is inky-smooth, with the same long weed-like reflections as in August. Only the reflections are fewer and paler: bright lights are muffled everywhere. The line of quays is scarcely discernible, and the heights of the Trocadéro are lost in the blur of night, which presently effaces even the firm tower-tops of Notre-Dame” (29). Paris seems dark, and “the faces of the houses are all blind” (FF, 29). The Rive Gauche’s darkness appears as a “Piranesi-like mystery” (FF, 29). Giovanni Battista Piranesi, an eighteenth-century Italian
graphic artist, produced neoclassical engravings that were often a mix of Roman ruins and bizarre, haunting arcades and dungeons with galleries that led nowhere. Paris becomes a grotesque and dangerous environment, and its darkness “seems full of cloaks and conspiracies” (FF, 30). With a marked alteration from the sombre but optimistic attitude of August 1914, the city’s early energy has dwindled into gritty determination. Paris ‘no doubt seems like a city on whom great issues weigh’ (FF, 31). Despite the pressures of war, the community has emerged from the upheaval to create new routines: “Almost all the early flush and shiver of romance is gone; or so at least it seems to those who have watched the gradual revival of life” (FF, 31). The precarious situation of France transforms the familiar city scape into an alien though sometimes lively environment of disarrayed customs and lives.

Outside of Paris, Wharton finds in the countryside near Verdun that “nothing can exceed the mournfulness of this depopulated land” (FF, 77). The land will not be cultivated here while troops move across it, and the orderly life Wharton found as she drove into Paris before the war has now been disarranged. North of Paris most people have retreated from their homes to gain distance from the front. The landscape has been torn up by the movement of troops and armaments: “On the road from Cassel to Poperinghe. Heat, dust, crowds, confusion, all the sordid shabby rear-view of war. The road running across the plain between white-powdered hedges was ploughed up by numberless motor-vans, supply-waggons (sic) and Red Cross ambulances” (FF, 149). The lovely region north of Paris becomes a “shabby” landscape, radically altered from the orderly prewar world.
Across this region, nature’s beauties are incongruous amid the war’s ravaged landscapes. On the trip to Nancy, through Commercy and Gerbéviller, and to the edge of the Vosges, Wharton and Berry were given a tour of the frontline trenches on May 16 and 17, 1914. Wharton opens this article with images of spring’s bounty erupting amidst the ravages of war. She finds pink peonies thriving “in the garden of a ruined house at Gerbéviller—a house so calcined and convulsed that, for epithets dire enough to fit it, one would have to borrow from a Hebrew prophet gloating over the fall of a city of idolaters” (FF, 93). Despite these apocalyptic scenes, nature comes to life near the “murdered houses” (FF, 93).

In these areas decimated by war, beauty surfaces, even in the war-making itself. The instruments of violence become bizarre flowers arching over the French countryside. Wharton describes a long-range bomb moving across the sky:

The outline of the ruined towns had vanished and peace seemed to have won back the world. But as we stood there a red flash started out of the mist far off to the northwest; then another and another flickered up at different points of the long curve. ‘Luminous bombs thrown up along the lines,’ our guide explained; and just then, at still another point a white light opened like a tropical flower, spread to full bloom and drew itself back into the night. ‘A flare,’ we were told; and another white flower bloomed out farther down. Below us, the roofs of Cassel slept their provincial sleep, the moonlight picking out every leaf in the gardens; while beyond,
those infernal flowers continued to open and shut along the curve of death. (FF, 148-49)

The innocence of the landscape and the festive fireworks of the warfare illuminates the calm, bucolic life with an uncanny spectacle. Her description underscores the perverse, geometric beauty in these exotic and beautiful bombs. Wharton’s description anticipates the awful beauty of the World War II V-2 rocket in Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity's Rainbow*. While Wharton’s ironic attitude is far more conservative, both authors recognize the disturbing paradoxes of war, the “gay and terrible” effect of mechanized violence.

The result of such bombings appears in Wharton’s description of the cathedral at Rheims. In the aftermath, Rheims Cathedral now stands “strange and beautiful” in “the dull provincial square” (FF, 185). She describes the extraordinary results of the German attack:

> When the German bombardment began, the west front of Rheims was covered with scaffolding: the shells set it on fire, and the whole church was wrapped in flames. Now the scaffolding is gone, and in the dull provincial square there stands a structure so strange and beautiful, that one must search the Inferno, or some talk of Eastern magic, for words to picture the luminous unearthly vision. (FF 185)

Contextualizing the bombing with the “dull” provincial France, Wharton suggests the incongruity between the peaceful setting and violent warfare. Just as the faces of French citizenry transform, so the facade of this cathedral is rendered “exotic” in its destruction.
Wharton depicts this apparently dying structure in a lengthy and evocative description. Highlighting the interplay of colors, she conjures the luminous and bizarre quality of the bombed structure:

The lower part of the front has been warmed to deep tints of umber and burnt siena. This rich burnishing passes, higher up, through yellowish-pink and carmine, to a sulphur whitening to ivory; and the recesses of the portals and the hollows behind the statues are lined with a black denser and more velvety than any effect of shadow to be obtained by sculptured relief. The interweaving of colour over the whole blunted bruised surface recalls the metallic tints, the peacock-and-pigeon iridescences, the incredible mingling of red, blue, umber and yellow of the rocks along the Gulf of Ægina. And the wonder of the impression is increased by the sense of its evanescence; the knowledge that this is the beauty of disease and death, that every one of the transfigured statues must crumble under the autumn rains, that every one of the pink or golden stones is already eaten away to the core, that the Cathedral of Rheims is glowing and dying before us like a sunset. (FF, 185-86)

Just as the ruins around the Aegean Sea are reminders of the now defunct yet still influential classical Greek world, so Wharton suggests this cathedral and France itself represent a hub of civilization. The description concludes with death, yet the “peacock-and-pigeon iridescences” connote a bird-like quality, which might infer the reanimation associated with a phoenix. The bombing’s aftermath, then, creates a conjunction between this fire-ravaged church and the
resilience of beauty and cultural life. Wharton later uses the metaphor of a phoenix more overtly in *The Marne* to characterize French endurance.

The painterly selection of pigments employed to describe the blackened windows and charred stone invites comparison with the luminescent windows of Chartres described in “The Look of Paris.” This cathedral’s exotic and fragile transformation reflects the complexities of war’s beauties and annihilations. Though the original fires might have subsided, “the Cathedral of Rheims is glowing and dying before us like a sunset” (FF, 186). Wharton reclaims this alien landscape of death as one of simultaneous beauty. This cathedral, an embodiment of the aesthetic achievements of these civilizations, serves as a metaphor for Belgium and France. In fact, this cathedral has since been rebuilt.32

The poignancy of Wharton’s description may derive in part from the view she stated in *A Motor-Flight Through France* (1908) that this cathedral “enters into the imagination, less startingly but perhaps more completely, more pervasively, than any other of the great Gothic monuments of France” (MFF, 176). Because the inn at Rheims is just across the street from the cathedral, Wharton imagines that even the “simple tourist” might enjoy an enriched “aesthetic consciousness” simply by seeing it many times a day from dawn to dusk. In effect, the tourist would derive greater understanding “of the underlying relation between art and life, between all the manifold and contradictory expressions of human energy” (MFF, 180). Wharton communicates a desire even in 1908 that Americans might learn the vital importance that art plays in life, particularly in energizing the interior self. Just as Henry Adams argues that cathedrals are evidence of people striving to imitate infinite energy, Wharton writes that Rheims cathedral offers “expressions of human energy.”
Rheims embodies the hope that even a “sentimental” (as opposed to “technical”) appreciation of the cathedral might give unschooled Americans a glimpse of what it means to enjoy great art; perhaps some Americans might develop their ability to “see the gods.”

Wharton depicts a variety of trenches along the front lines that suggests a landscape at once familiar and strange, using the recurrent motif of the unnerving juxtaposition of normalcy with violence and danger. The web of trenches interlaces the two encampments of the warring armies, and few geographical markers distinguish the Allied from the enemy lines. She visits a ruined hill-fortress overlooking the Moselle river, but discovers that only the wrecked bridge indicates this is the war zone. All the trenches are imperceptible. A soldier identifies the French trenches, but they “looked much more like the harmless traces of a prehistoric camp” (FF, 110). Not even the German positions are apparent. Looking across the hillsides, “it was as if the earth itself were the enemy, as if the hordes of evil were in the clods and grass-blades” (FF, 110). An officer then points out a farm, saying “They are there” (FF, 110). As Eric Leed explains, visibility for soldiers at the front was a widespread problem, and the “invisibility of the enemy put a premium upon auditory signals and seemed to make the war experience peculiarly subjective and intangible.” Wharton’s subjective response to the bucolic scenes changes after the officer indicates the enemy locations. Then, she explains that “the innocent vignette framed by my field-glasses suddenly glared back at me like a human mask of hate. The loudest cannonade had not made ‘them’ seem as real as that!” (FF 110-11). Only through her imagination are the hills transformed into “a human mask of hate.” These front lines bring Wharton into her closest contact with the German army, and yet
she has to make an effort to turn the “bucolic peace” of the hillsides into a “mask of hate.”

The German and French positions, virtually indistinguishable, are honeycombed together across the countryside. Wharton goes along the trenches “within a hundred yards or so of the German lines, hidden like ours, on the other side of the narrowing hollow; and as we stole down and down, the hush and secrecy of the scene, and the sense of that imminent lurking hatred only a few branch-lengths away, seemed to fill the silence with mysterious pulsations” (FF, 131). The vitality of the scene emanates, in part, from the “mysterious pulsations” that the imagination creates in response to the paradoxes of a vacation landscape that has become one of potential violence.

Despite the tense expectations, Wharton incorporates little of what those soldiers with a “dazed stare” had seen. Though her musings are interrupted by the “rap of a rifle-shot against a tree-trunk a few yards ahead,” this sound constitutes the only action (FF, 131). The silence and seeming normalcy amaze her:

I looked out and saw a strip of intensely green meadow just under me, and a wooded cliff rising abruptly on its other side. That was all. The wooded cliff swarmed with ‘them,’ and a few steps would have carried us across the interval; yet all about us was silence, and the peace of the forest. Again, for a minute, I had the sense of an all-pervading, invisible power of evil, a saturation of the whole landscape with some hidden vitriol of hate. Then the reaction of unbelief set in, and I felt myself in a harmless ordinary glen, like a million others on untroubled earth. (FF, 133)
The enemy is so close and yet invisible, prompting vacillations between “peace” and hostility. Wharton’s insistence that “evil” and ‘hatred” saturated the landscape contrasts with the bucolic scenes, thus vividly conveying the incongruity of warfare amidst such loveliness.

In the Alsace region, Wharton depicts the dark and winding trenches along the mountainside and the tense standoff of the French and German soldiers. The silence, darkness and danger of the “black labyrinth” create a world utterly removed from the nearby idyllic areas (FF, 215). The trenches give way to a “gutted house among fruit-trees, where soldiers were lounging and smoking” (FF, 215). The transition between the close darkness of the winding trenches and the open orchard is startling. The scene’s dramatic contrasts intensify when Wharton describes the seemingly relaxed soldiers as not talking but whispering “as they do about a death-bed” (FF, 215). Across the way in a “vineyard with dewy cobwebs hanging to the vines,” the Germans gather at their outpost.

Wharton’s travels provide her with an insight into the nature of trench warfare:

I could not understand where we were, or what it was all about, or why a shell from the enemy outpost did not suddenly annihilate us. And then, little by little, there came over me the sense of that mute reciprocal watching from trenches to trench: the interlocked stare of innumerable pairs of eyes, stretching on, mile after mile, along the whole sleepless line from Dunkerque to Belfort. (FF, 216)

Wharton discerns the subterranean nature of this conflict. While Leed argues that “the invisibility of the enemy, and the retirement of troops underground, destroyed any notion that war was a spectacle of contending humanity,” Wharton’s descriptions reveal a “spectacle.” 34 This scene offers a different
perspective than those of earlier essays in this collection, when the soldiers had been compared with calvary in bright uniforms. This new warfare incorporates a paradoxical intimacy of silent enemies not clashing openly on the battlefield but locked for great periods of time in an oddly intimate, “reciprocal” gaze.

The countryside that houses the cozy headquarters of the Alpine trenches appears deceptively relaxing. The beautiful vista contrasts starkly with the “big guns . . . crouched in . . . sylvan lairs” (FF, 197). Wharton is at one moment in the line of fire and at the next picnicking nearby in the “great mountain breeze full of the scent of thyme and myrtle” (FF, 200). In this scene, the armies are both enemies and neighbors. Such paradoxical intimacy creates a peculiar tension between her mindfulness of the guns nearby and the idyllic mountain scene. This suspense prompts Wharton to observe that “it is not in the mud and jokes and every-day activities of the trenches that one most feels the damnable insanity of war; it is where it lurks like a mythical monster in scenes to which the mind has always turned for rest” (FF, 200).

The scene intensifies as Wharton describes the German batteries launching bombs into the French trenches, yet the “puffs” of far-off guns and mental images of snipers in the trees are not any measure of warfare. Instead, one’s own cannonade produces an even more dramatic mental assault. Above her on the mountainside, the French battery begins its work: “It was the most terrible war-shriek I had heard. . . . There is a dreadful majesty in the sound of a distant cannonade; but these yelps and hisses roused only thoughts of horror” (FF, 209). Warfare in these idyllic mountainsides begets an insidious psychological effect that becomes a trigger for “insanity.” The mental difficulties emanate from the strange presence of overwhelming noise in the quiet mountainside.
Throughout *Fighting France*, Wharton identifies myriad forms of alienation that often characterize this war, even from its earliest days. Her beloved France, a country she had known since girlhood, becomes a place with disturbing scenes: burned cathedrals, farmhouses converted into military headquarters, and night skies lit up by exotic bombs. Paris and the French countryside alternate between appearing familiar and strange as she interweaves graphic descriptions of destruction and peacefulness. The troop movements, bombings, and trench-making damage the once orderly countryside. The wartime environment gives rise to contradictory experiences of estrangement and community. Combatants and noncombatants alike suffer so intensely that their faces are altered, disfigured or, alternatively, “tempered” by brutality and grief. Even in these first essays, Wharton perceives the widespread experience of alienation, a pervading theme in World War I literature. She offers a gritty yet optimistic view of the physical and psychological effects of this conflict.

The shock of the war and its promulgation of mechanized destruction caused some concern that war rhetoric undermined the integrity of language. Wharton demonstrates that language remains viable, even in the aftermath of the failed diplomatic negotiations and the perceived falseness of patriotic slogans. She suggests that the French employ a means of “expression” that allows honest and effective communication. They hold lively discussions in cafés and take a matter-of-fact attitude toward much of the suffering. These descriptions provide a sense of the complex verbal and aural scene, including the alternations of silence and sound. Ultimately, her bifurcated mapping of the French lingual response to war suggests both her awareness of the resistance to rhetoric and the need to find a means to unite and motivate the country to fight the war.
Wharton’s efforts to write about the war derive, in part, from her desire to protect French civilization. She was fascinated and dismayed by the destruction of the social habits and physical spaces comprising the cultural life of France. In sketching this rapidly changing environment, she suggests that even despite the violence French resilience emerges. Their civilization proves irrepressible because of the nation’s rich intellectual and aesthetic development, the “humanest graces” which have provided western civilization with art, literature, and other lasting contributions. The cathedral at Chartres and the city of Paris embody the country’s extraordinary gifts. The war’s threat to this culture constitutes the fundamental anxiety in these articles and the driving influence of Wharton’s war philanthropy. Her analysis of the changing culture includes such details as the new uniforms and their implications for social hierarchies. The most moving images, however, are the faces transfigured through anguish and grief. While personal appearance may suffer the ravages of war, a remarkable nobility and resilience emerge. Wharton’s appraisal of the war’s impact on French civilization underscores the dynamic interplay of devastation and rebirth in the emerging war environment, “an unknown world.”

Notes

1During this first year of the war, she wrote a nonfiction article about her war relief operations that was not collected in Fighting France: ‘My Work Among the Women Workers of Paris,” New York Times Magazine, 28 November 1915, 1-2. Wharton wrote several poems published in newspapers and magazines: “The Hymn of the Lusitania,” New York Herald, 7 May 1915, 1; ‘The

Many scholars consider this collection, as Judith Sensibar terms it, “outright propaganda.” Judith Sensibar, “Edith Wharton as Propagandist and Novelist,” in *A Forward Glance: New Essays on Edith Wharton*, ed. Clare Colquitt, Susan Goodman, and Candace Waid (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 167. In some scenes, her essays seem romanticizing and simplistic, such as when she observes that “the whole civilian part of the nation seems merged into one symbolic figure, carrying help and hope to the fighters or passionately bent above the wounded” (FF, 237). Such overt praise enhanced her relationship with the military officials and solidified her access to the front, which as a reporter was dependent upon the government’s trust that her essays would support the war effort and stay within the parameters they set. Paul Fussell explains that “the press was under rigid censorship throughout the war. Only correspondents willing to file wholesome, optimistic copy were permitted to visit France, and even these were seldom allowed near the line” (87).

Concerned about its citizens abroad, the United States sent over two armed cruisers that arrived at England and then France on August 19th and 20th, respectively. The *North Carolina* docked at Cherbourg carrying $200,000 in gold.

Wharton was in England from 27 August 1914 until 24 September 1914. Upon arriving in London, she spent a night with Henry James at Lamb House and then went on to Stocks, the home she had rented from English novelist Mrs. Humphrey Ward. However, the isolation of this country estate eighteen miles from London was unsuitable for a woman who wanted to keep abreast of war news and contribute whatever she could to the war effort. At Stocks, visitors were scarce, and she found it difficult to read. Mrs. Ward switched homes with Wharton so that she could be in London; shortly thereafter, Wharton returned to
Paris.

5Price, End of the Age of Innocence, 40.

6Price, End of the Age of Innocence, 43.

7Lewis and Lewis, 346.

8Quoted in Price, End of the Age of Innocence, 70.

9Wharton usually spent her afternoons administering charities and her mornings writing. Price, End of the Age of Innocence, 58. Both Price and Lewis offer details about her war charities.


12Price, End of the Age of Innocence, xiii.

13Tuchman, 227.

14Tuchman, 226-27.

15Tuchman, 319.

16Tuchman, 318.

17Tuchman, 31.

18Tuchman, 29.

19Tuchman, 31.

20According to Keegan, the original uniforms of French soldiers in this war were virtually the same as those worn in 1870. These uniforms and equipment
made them an easier target for Germans. The result, as Keegan explains, was that their packs were piled tall with the metal cooking pot at the apex: “gleam of sunlight from such pots would allow young Lieutenant Rommel to identify and kill French soldiers in high standing corn on the French frontier” (Keegan, 76).


22 Ferro, 306-07.

23 Tuchman suggests Norman Angell’s The Great Illusion, a cult classic translated into eleven languages, was evidence in the years preceding the war that “financial and economic interdependence of nations” precluded war because “the victor would suffer equally with the vanquished; therefore war had become unprofitable; therefore no nation would be so foolish as to start one” (Tuchman, 10). These international alliances, nonetheless, created relationships that simultaneously exacerbated military conflict.


25 Raitt and Tate, 1.

26 Tuchman, 188.

27 Fussell, 79.


29 Quoted in Grebstein, 206. See also Edel, 527.

30 Fussell, 21. Hemingway, A Farewell to Arms, 196.

32Carol Baker Sapora writes that “the entire west facade and roof of the cathedral is restored following the original fifteenth-century design. The impressive Gallery of Kings—fifty-six fifteen foot statues that line the third story—has been replaced with replicas made of a more durable stone. The restored Cathedral, looking much as Wharton saw it, is truly a monument to the ‘manifold and contradictory expression of human energy’—both past and present. [MFF, 180].” Carol Baker Sapora, “Motor Flights Through France: Wharton Acts as Guide,” *Edith Wharton Newsletter* 4, no. 2 (1987): 2.

33Leed, 19. See Jean Gallagher’s “Great War and the Female Gaze” for a discussion of the gaze in *Fighting France*.

34Leed, 19.
Chapter II

“Angles of vision”: Short Stories of War

It is clear that exactly the same thing never happens to two people, and that each witness of a given incident will report it differently.

Edith Wharton, “Telling a Short Story”

Between 1915 and 1919, Edith Wharton wrote three short stories set in wartime. She had difficulty producing fiction after the war began and did not begin to compose her first war story, “Coming Home,” until April 1915, despite the fact that her publisher, Charles Scribner’s Sons, offered her $1,000 for stories (in contrast to $500 for articles).¹ She completed this first tale in late May 1915, but not until a couple of years later did she pen her other two war short stories: “The Refugees” in 1917 and “Writing a War Story” in 1918. They were published in January and September of 1919, respectively.² In the interim, she had published her first war novel, The Marne. She addresses in these short stories more than in any of her other war writings the challenges that women face as a result of the changing cultural environment. These works lack the range and complexity of vision demonstrated by Fighting France; however, they contribute to Wharton’s ongoing dialog with wartime and Modernist issues. She constructs some of her most incisive arguments about this era’s effects on language and the choices women make that alter personal relationships and broader social structures.

These stories offer three distinct perspectives on wartime Europe and its rupture with the prewar world. She turns from Fighting France’s vivid
descriptions of landscapes and fighting troops to the intimate setting of life in a provincial French village, on a British country estate, and in a Parisian Anglo-American hospital. Wharton portrays the radical restructuring of civilization and women’s roles in society. In “Coming Home,” a young French woman, Yvonne Malo, works to save her village from destruction during the German occupation. In “The Refugees,” Audrey Rushworth, a wealthy British woman, struggles to find a meaningful place in her country’s war effort. Finally, Ivy Spang in “Writing a War Story” is a naive American woman volunteering in Paris and hoping to make a worthy literary contribution to a magazine for wounded soldiers. Individually, each of these stories focuses on markedly different settings and events, but they are analogous in their explorations of similar themes and their insights into war as both a limiting and liberating force in women’s lives.

Wharton offers little in these stories of the nostalgic view of prewar life that appears in *Fighting France*; nonetheless, she continues to illustrate the élan of those engaged in the struggle, both soldiers and noncombatants. Her observations incorporate a critique of the problematic corruption of privileged Europeans, specifically the British landed gentry. In regards to the lexical changes arising from the war, two of the stories, “Coming Home” and “Writing a War Story,” offer some of Wharton’s most provocative insights about narrative coherence and war rhetoric, underscoring the “fragmentation” that is one of the most noted characteristics of this war experience. As in *Fighting France*, the shifting social structures and the potential for alienation is apparent in these communities. She plays with the varied implications of refuge, highlighting isolating situations and paradoxically new intimacies. The female protagonists
undergo a change in their public roles, and this metamorphosis restructures family life.

Wharton’s first war short story, “Coming Home,” presents an ironic and disturbing account of a French couple engaged just before mobilization. At its center are two pivotal and intertwined events that drive the narrative. An American ambulance driver, H. Macy Greer, befriends Jean de Réchamp, a French soldier who was disabled by a leg wound in battle and now serves as a military chauffeur. They have the opportunity to drive out to the area of Réchamp’s family village, which is located on the Western Front and has been occupied three times by the German army. Despite the devastation in surrounding areas, the town is unscathed.

The plot traces the journeys of Réchamp; however, the experiences of his fiancee, Yvonne Malo, provide the first key event. She saves Réchamp’s village from destruction by charming an infamously brutal German General, Oberst Graf Benno von Scharlach. She persuades him to order that the inhabitants and buildings be left unharmed during this and future occupations. While Malo never reveals how she defended her fiancee’s home and family, Réchamp apprehends what transpired because he reads between the lines of other people’s stories. This first pivotal event provides the motivation for the second: after Greer and Réchamp return from their visit, medical officers ask them to transport a wounded and defenceless German General, whom Greer later learns is Scharlach. On this trip, Jean, who apparently knows the patient’s identity, exacts revenge by killing the General.

Wharton highlights the issues of finding reliable sources and appropriate language for tales of war. A frame opens, though does not close, this work,
foregrounding narrative structure. The introductory section extols the storytelling abilities of Greer. The narrator observes that some of Greer’s tales “are dark and dreadful, some unutterably sad, and some end in a huge laugh of irony. I am not sure how I ought to classify the one I have written down here” (CH, 230). He values Greer’s ability to relay anecdotes that give a sense of diverse war experiences. This opening structure simulates the home front’s lack of first-hand news about the war and distances the reader from events and characters by filtering them through Greer’s point of view.

The distance between home and battlefront contributes to problems with noncombatants formulating a coherent understanding of the war. Greer relays Réchamp’s story several months into the conflict when workers of the American Relief Corps have begun to tell what they witnessed. The frame narrator asserts that

There was no time to pick them up during the first months—the whole business was too wild and grim. The horror has not decreased, but nerves and sight are beginning to be disciplined to it. In the early days, moreover, such fragments of experience as one got were torn from their setting like bits of flesh scattered by schrapnel. Now things that seemed disjointed are beginning to link themselves together, and the broken bones of history are rising from the battlefields. (CH, 230)

Wharton’s metaphors of the “fragments of experience” and “broken bones of history” point to central issues of this conflict, a break in the linear formulations of history and the problems of narrative coherence. Wharton thereby underscores the role of language and stories in the construct of history. Concerns
raised in Fighting France about the abrupt rupture with civilized life recur in this story’s assertion of the ‘broken bones of history.’ Obliquely, the passage alludes to the war’s interruption of ideals that espouse history as a chronicle of man’s continual improvement. Despite the break from the past, this generation shows the promise of healing and rising from the battlefield like a phoenix from the ashes.

Disjointed stories complicate the formation of war narratives, yet this imperfect communication plays an integral role in conveying events and creating a shared history. As Greer explains, the story of the Réchamp village emerges from the “scattered” perspectives of those who are there. He notes that while the townspeople’s individual stories form a scenario in which “the main facts did not vary,” there appeared “little discrepancies of detail, and gaps in the narrative here and there” (CH, 252). Greer must speculate to fill in the missing information and point to what remains unuttered, even by himself.

While historical events and literary narratives often allow much to remain buried in the past and unknown to subsequent generations, World War I is particularly rife with problematic and fragmented stories. Many writers, including James and Hemingway, have commented that some words seemed impotent to clearly convey this war’s experiences. On this subject, Paul Fussell contends that “The difficulty was in admitting that the war had been made by men and was being continued ad infinitum by them. The problem was less one of ‘language’ than of gentility and optimism; it was less a problem of ‘linguistic’ than of rhetoric. . . . We have made unspeakable mean indescribable; it really means nasty.” Wharton’s gruesome metaphor of wounded bodies alludes to the
dilemma of finding appropriate language for carnage, whether physical or emotional.

In “Coming Home,” however, Wharton focuses not on the battlefield, but on a French town that has been occupied by Germans. Both key episodes, one sexual and the other illegal, constitute transgressive or “unspeakable” events. The silence that surrounds these incidents highlights the dilemma of telling “nasty” war stories, such as Malo’s implicit sexual relationship with Scharlach and Réchamp’s subsequent murder of the General.

Wharton identifies direct experience and the ability to discern alternative viewpoints as tools in interpreting the French society and the war’s alteration of it. For instance, Réchamp tells Greer about his provincial and very conservative French family:

‘We’re very province,’ he said. ‘My people live at Réchamp all the year. We have a house at Nancy—rather a fine old hotel—but my parents go there only once in two or three years, for a few weeks. That’s our ‘season.’ . . . Imagine the point of view! Or rather don’t, because you couldn’t . . .’ (He had been about the world a good deal, and known something of other angles of vision.) (CH, 231)

Greer’s parenthetical statement underscores the importance of being familiar with cultures other than one’s own; it develops the skill of comprehending what others may perceive. The interpretation of war’s events and their implications for society occurs within a verbal environment which is further vexed by the intersection of diverse social and cultural groups. Greer represents both the difficulty and promise of bridging the cultural gap between France and Wharton’s audience in the United States.
While many of the war’s stories may be only “fragments of experience,” Greer’s narrative suggests the potential to pull together events into a comprehensible form. This young American has exceptional storytelling abilities, especially in comparison with other members of the Relief Corps: “Some are unobservant, or perhaps simply inarticulate; others, when going beyond the bald statistics of their job, tend to drop into sentiment and cinema scenes; and none but H. Macy Greer has the gift of making the thing told seem as true as if one had seen it” (CH, 230). While still allowing for diverse “angles of vision,” Wharton suggests that war’s incongruous stories, or the “broken bones of history,” may be knit together and passed on. She furthermore depicts a disdain for “sentiment and cinema scenes,” which represent unreliable patriotic persuasions. She highlights the negotiation between “bald statics” and “sentiment” in trying to communicate war experiences.

These complex issues of language mingle with observations about the significant cultural disruptions arising out of the German occupation and the resilience of those affected. The events of an invasion in a small French village illustrate both the ways in which this nation’s culture was changing before the war and the unique effects of this conflict on society. While framed within a tale about a young man’s war experience, the emotional center rests with Malo as a young woman facing enemy invaders; in essence, the brave warrior who saves the home is not the soldier but the woman who loves him. Malo exemplifies the resilience of her civilization and the élan Wharton had identified in Fighting France (FF, 220).

Malo’s strength improves the relationship with her fiancee’s family and illuminates the social changes that the war accelerates. A liberated, unmarried
French woman, Malo is an ambiguous, perhaps morally compromised, character. Orphaned as a girl, she lived near the Réchamp family and was raised by a single, male guardian, the Marquis de Corvenaire, who was a gouty, repentant gambler (CH, 236). As an adult, Malo moves to Paris, lives alone, and gains, like Réchamp, the ability to comprehend other people’s points of view. When Réchamp encounters her as an adult in Paris, he is a man of some experience and yet is amazed by this new type of “artistic-emancipated” woman, as Greer explains:

Apparently he had never before known any but the traditional type, which predominates in the provinces, and still persists, he tells me, in the last fastnesses of the Faubourg St. Germain. The girl who comes and goes as she pleases, reads what she likes, has opinions about what she reads, who talks, looks, behaves with the independence of a married woman—and yet has kept the Diana-freshness—think how she must have shaken up such a man’s inherited view of things! (CH, 237)

While Malo’s “freshness” and “independence” broaden Jean’s perspective beyond outmoded concepts of womanhood, his family does not share his enlightened opinion.

Réchamp’s parents and grandmother reject her. In the months leading up to the war, Jean confronts the prejudices that his family harbors against her. He fights to gain their consent to marry her and explains to his grandmother that ‘the times have changed, and manners with them, and that what a woman was criticized for doing yesterday she is ridiculed for not doing today. Nearly all the old social thou-shall-nots have gone:
intelligent people nowadays don’t give a fig for them, and that
simple fact has abolished them. They only existed as long as there
was someone left for them to scare.’ His grandmother listened with
a spark of admiration in her ancient eyes. (CH, 238)

The grandmother tries to perpetuate traditional women’s roles, yet her eyes
reveal “admiration” for the young people’s energy and self-assurance. Wharton
underscores the radical departure that these independent women make from
French provincial culture, even before the war. Presenting the conflict between
the more conservative elder generation and that of the younger, Wharton
distances herself from the more old-fashioned attitudes and embraces that of
more progressive individuals who allow unmarried women the freedom to live
alone and pursue their artistic interests.

This latitude enables women to demonstrate self-assurance in a way that
ultimately benefits society and is invaluable during wartime, as Malo’s savvy
handling of Scharlach reveals. After she has saved the family house, Réchamp’s
grandmother notes the changes that she herself has resisted:

‘My grandson’s fiancée is a very clever young woman: in my time
no young girl would have been so sure of herself, so cool and
quick. After all, there is something to be said for the new way of
bringing up girls. My poor daughter-in-law, at Yvonne’s age, was a
bleating baby: she is so still, at times. The convent doesn’t develop
center. I’m glad Yvonne was not brought up in a convent’ (CH,
246).

A cloistered education develops little understanding of the opposite sex or
opportunity to discuss such topics as art and politics with men, which Wharton
considered so vital to women’s intellectual growth. Stereotypically “traditional” French girls were locked away and allowed very little contact with men until they were married; then, they enjoyed the opportunity to become involved in discussions of politics and other adult concerns (FWM, 116). In the circumstances created by the war, knowledge derived from this interaction proves essential to Malo’s successful defense of the Réchamp home. Just as Wharton suggests in Fighting France that new bonds have been forged among diverse social classes, this story addresses the shifting socio-sexual dynamics arising from war’s upheaval.

Before the war the family must be convinced of Malo’s purity; then, after the German occupation, they applaud her relationship with the General and turn a blind eye to the nature of her sacrifice. The story affords an insightful interpretation of the pragmatic accommodations made during extreme circumstances. As Jay Winter notes, these adjustments exemplify a changing society: “Strategies of adaptation in wartime involved permutations of identities and loyalties, which could shift radically if one key element changed. . . . [T]he very fabric of daily life was repeatedly torn by changes in the material conditions most people had taken for granted in the pre-war period.”

The efforts to meet fundamental human needs, such as safety and shelter, create the opportunity for “permutations” of women’s “identities.” While Malo has gained greater freedom and knowledge of the world, her value still rests with her attractiveness and ability to use this to get what she wants.

These challenges generate emotional distress even estrangement among those who love one another. Malo’s efforts distance her from the man for whom she made these sacrifices. She avoids him, as Greer observes:
Jean was still indoors, with his people, receiving the village; I rather wondered she hadn’t stayed there with him. Theoretically, her place was at his side; but I knew she was a young woman who didn’t live by rule, and she had already struck me as having a distaste for superfluous expenditures of feeling. (CH, 248-49)

The cultural distance between the American observer and the new type of French woman complicates interpretation of Malo’s reluctance to be with her fiancee. When Greer talks with her, she admits an aversion to listening to the townspeople’s explanations of the German occupation; then, she begs Greer to take Jean away as soon as possible, even before she has had time to spend alone with him.

Malo’s peculiar response raises questions about her motives, as well as the effects of occupation on her relationship with Jean. Her perplexing behavior places Greer in a difficult situation as he considers her plea:

What was I to do? I can’t exaggerate the sense of urgency Mlle. Malo’s appeal gave me, or my faith in her sincerity. No one who had seen her meeting with Réchamp the night before could have doubted her feeling for him: if she wanted him away it was not because she did not delight in his presence. Even now, as he approached, I saw her face veiled by a faint mist of emotion: it was like watching a fruit ripen under a midsummer sun. But she turned sharply from the house and began to walk on. (CH, 250)

Malo’s visible ripening suggests not only the depth of her love for Réchamp but also the possibility that she might be pregnant by the German officer. Her unfaithfulness is at once both a transgression of their relationship and an
affirmation of her love. Perhaps because she is pregnant and perhaps because of her unfaithfulness, Malo now finds her love’s presence unbearable.

Moments later, Greer witnesses the engaged couple’s meeting and the discomfort that Malo experiences as she tries to avoid talking to Jean. When her fiancee demands to know why the ruthless Scharlach left the village unscathed, Malo answers that “here he behaved as you see. For heaven’s sake be content with that!” (CH, 250). The sacrifices of those in occupied territories differ from those on the battlefield, yet women’s homefront experiences can generate silences and alienation, not unlike the soldier’s. Just as some combatants shield their loved ones from the horrors of trench life, Malo does not want to hurt Réchamp by revealing to him what she did to save his home. The relationship of the affianced couple seems a dance of separation and closeness, of fear and delight.

Malo’s refusal to tell her story may derive, in part, from the fact that the words she must use to explain the sexual relationship are ones an unmarried woman, even a liberated one, should not say. Just as trenches have linguistic taboos, so Malo encounters taboos to describe her struggle with the enemy. Fussell’s assertion that what is “indescribable” often means “nasty” takes on particular meanings within this sexualized context. Wharton does not describe the actual events, and, within the story, characters do not discuss the sexual aspects of the bargain. Malo’s experience transgresses verbal proprieties and suggests that she possesses a history that is not appropriate for an unmarried woman. While Malo and Scharlach’s relationship may have been technically consensual, it was a form of sexual blackmail; more precisely, if she did not seduce the General, then the home of her future family would be destroyed. The
choice itself illustrates a particular type of atrocious wartime dilemma, a decision where neither option is acceptable.

Malo’s choice prompts the second “indescribable” incident, Scharlach’s murder. After the men depart from the village, Jean grows silent and reserved. Though he has not been told what happened, he knows. When they arrive at the hospital, they discover chaos:

We found things in a bad mess at the second-line shanty hospital where they were dumping the wounded as fast as they could bring them in. At first we were told that none were fit to be carried farther that night; and after we had done what we could we went off to hunt up a shakedown in the village. But a few minutes later an orderly overtook us with a message from the surgeon. There was a German with an abdominal wound who was in a bad way, but might be saved by an operation if he could be got back to the base before midnight. Would we take him at once and then come back for others?

They agree, of course, and on the way their truck runs out of gas, an unusual occurrence. Jean has to wait for a couple of hours with the patient while Greer walks back to the encampment for gasoline. The German’s injury alludes to the “abdominal” trouble that Réchamp’s fiancee faces as a result of her intimate relationship with the officer. Though Greer does not yet know the identity of the German, Réchamp and those who arranged to have him make this particular ambulance run know the patient is the General who occupied Jean’s village. In effect, they conspire to murder a wounded German prisoner in violation of established laws of war.
Wharton represents the French determination and craft in beating the enemy and dealing out retribution. This portrayal of French élan emphasizes not the moving scenes of a great army as in *Fighting France* but rather a surreptitious and questionable covert operation. Greer is amazed by the French subtlety:

For, after all, I knew there wasn’t a paper of any sort on that man when he was lifted into my ambulance the night before: the French officials attend to their business too carefully for me not to have been sure of that. And there wasn’t the least shred of evidence to prove that he hadn’t died of his wound during the unlucky delay in the forest; or that Réchamp had known his tank was leaking when we started out from the lines. (CH, 256)

The French silently arrange the opportunity for Réchamp to be alone in the ambulance with Scharlach. If Réchamp had killed the General while in battle, no question would be raised; however, Wharton chooses instead to have Réchamp assassinate a man who is defenseless, hardly an heroic act. The story encourages its readers to assume the “angles of vision” that Réchamp and his French associates bring to this situation. Réchamp has Scharlach trapped and vulnerable in the ambulance much in the same way that Scharlach had the Réchamps cornered in their own home with the infirm mother and housebound grandmother. The “fragmented” story comes together with a violent and surprising symmetry.

The narrator, Greer, feels blind-sided and isolated among those who arranged this killing, including Réchamp. He is confused in this disturbing environment of matter of fact retribution. He becomes physically ill:
I don’t think Réchamp and I exchanged a word during the rest of that run. But it was my fault and not his if we didn’t. By the mere rub of his sleeve against mine as we sat side by side on the motor I knew he was conscious of no bar between us: he had somehow got back, in the night’s interval, to a state of wholesome stolidity, while I, on the contrary, was tingling all over with exposed nerves. (CH, 255).

While Greer feels estranged from Réchamp because of the moral ambiguity of Scharlach’s death, Réchamp becomes more “wholesome” and at peace. When they arrive at the hospital and deliver the body, Greer learns the identity of the dead man, and then sees Réchamp: ‘My friend greeted me with a smile. ‘Ready for breakfast?’ he said, and a little chill ran down my spine. . . . But I said: ‘Oh, all right–come along. . . .’ (CH, 256; Wharton’s ellipses). The demise of Scharlach seems to have lifted Réchamp’s malaise; he is ready for breakfast, an oblique reference to the “morning sickness” or nausea that accompanies pregnancy. Wharton points to the potential consequences of war’s complex sexual dimensions.

The differing responses of Greer and Réchamp emphasize the incongruous perspectives of these two men and how such circumstances require different “angles of vision” to comprehend the incompatible viewpoints. The pressures of wartime complicate relationships, yet simultaneously engender remarkable sacrifices and intimacies. Though written less than a year into the war, this story identifies the war’s problematizing of language and narrative coherence as characters struggle to apprehend one another’s experiences and perspectives.
Compared with "Coming Home," Wharton's second war story is a light-hearted satire that illuminates the war's effects in Britain. "The Refugees," named seemingly for those left homeless by the war, illustrates the impact of the hostilities on women of the British aristocracy and their treatment of refugees. While ostensibly following the experiences of Charlie Durand, a Professor of Romance Languages from the western United States, the narrative actually centers on the transformation of Audrey Rushworth, born to a genteel British family.

"The Refugees" contrasts the spasmodic philanthropic efforts during the first months of the war with the institutionalized structures that emerge several years later. The first segment is set only three weeks after the outbreak of World War I, and the second section when America has joined the Allied armies and Durand returns to England as a YMCA volunteer. These scenes depict the influx of refugees and establish the personalities of the central characters, who often seem little more than stereotypes of an American absent-minded professor and a British spinster. While Durand changes little in the intervening years, Rushworth transforms from a marginalized woman in 1914 to a philanthropic leader in 1918.

The opening scenes depict the initial shock of war’s displacement and its sudden disruption of the normal course of civilized life. Durand is in Louvain, where he had been given an honorary degree two years earlier, when the American consul advises him to leave because of impending war. Durand goes to Normandy; then, realizing the war will not come to a quick conclusion, he decides to go on to London to work at the British Museum:

News of the rapid German advance had not reached him; but at Boulogne he found himself caught in the central eddy of fugitives,
tossed about among them like one of themselves, pitched on the boat with them, dealt with compassionately but firmly by the fagged officials at Folkestone, jammed into a cranny of the endless train, had chocolate and buns thrust on him by ministering angels with high heels and powdered noses, and shyly passed these refreshments on to the fifteen dazed fellow travelers packed into his compartment. (R, 571)

First the German army drives them from Belgium and northern France; then, bureaucratic officials move them along from one side of the English Channel to the other and on to London. The fugitives seem disoriented and overwhelmed as their lives are uprooted. These circumstances strip Durand and his fellow travellers of personal agency and yet offer a wry view of the difficulty of formulating an immediate and effective response to the diaspora. Still in shock, the exiles are offered “chocolate and buns” by “ministering angels.” With a light touch, Wharton juxtaposes the bewildering and tragic situation with the civilized act of serving light “refreshments.”

The women’s presence signals another aspect of this complex dynamic, the early deployment of women into wartime philanthropic work. These perfectly coiffed ladies appear incongruous among the beleaguered crowd. Their efforts, even at this early juncture, prove essential to the war effort and would ultimately lead to the formal restructuring of English civil life when women are awarded the vote in 1918.

A bookish American, Durand feels awkward and yet compassionate among these strangers. In his disorientation, he cannot initially apprehend the details of the social upheaval. At first, he notices only the dehumanizing effects
of the exodus, but later he perceives the humanity of those who have lost their homes:

Once on board, he had hastened to isolate himself behind a funnel, in an airless corner reeking of oil and steam, while the refugees, abandoned to unanimous seasickness, became for the time an indistinguishable animal welter. But the run to London had brought him into closer contact with them. It was impossible to sit for three mortal hours with an unclaimed little boy on one’s lap, opposite a stony-faced woman holding a baby that never stopped crying, and not give them something more than what remained of one’s chocolate and buns. The woman with the child was bad enough; though perhaps less perversely moving than the little blonde thing with long soiled gloves who kept staring straight ahead and moaning: ‘My furs—oh, my furs.’ (R, 571)

In this “welter,” the leveling influence of war affects refugees from diverse social classes. Durand is at once repulsed by and drawn to those around him. He finds the scene “perversely moving,” especially the “blonde thing” who is now in a world where those gloves seem an anomaly. This migration reveals the indiscriminate nature of war’s powerful and wide-ranging forces.

Durand resents being removed from his quiet, reclusive life and forced among these exiles; nonetheless, he is also a refugee, and he unexpectedly finds within this eclectic community a refuge. As Durand distinguishes their individuality, he begins to feel a deeper affinity for the foreigners surrounding him. He warms to their suffering and in the process becomes less alone himself. The American, once distanced from the chaos, is swept up in its powerful
currents, a concept that Wharton wishes her compatriots across the ocean would understand. Through Durand, she fictively links the Americans to the experience of finding themselves a part of the European conflict.

Wharton structures the story to contrast this scene of suffering and the generosity of strangers with a portrait of the corruption in the upper echelons of British society. The ambitions of these privileged women manifest themselves in a contest for “fugitives.” When the refugees arrive in London, Durand is mistaken for one by Audrey Rushworth. She is at a disadvantage in competing with the more socially prominent ladies of her neighborhood who have dominated the war charities: “The young Duchess of Bolchester and Lady Ivy Trantham were down at Folkestone with all the Trantham motors—and from that day to this, though we’ve had our names down on the government list, not one of us—not one human being at Lingerfield—has had so much as an application from the committee” (R, 577). As a result, Rushworth decides to circumvent these “unscrupulous women” by coming directly to the station where the refugees arrive (R, 577).

While Rushworth participates in this game, she remains sympathetic; she is deeply moved by the sight of the unfortunate Belgians and appears so forlorn herself that Durand mistakes her for a refugee. She is crying and wears a “threadbare cloak” (573). He sheds his own shyness because of a desire to help this distraught woman who tugs at his sleeve:

He was of a retiring nature, and compassion, far from making him expansive, usually contracted his faculties to the point of cowardice; but the scenes he had traversed were so far beyond any former vision of human wretchedness that all the defences of his
gentle egotism had broken down, and he found himself happy, and almost proud, at having been singled out as a rescuer. He understood the passionate wish of all rescuers to secure a refugee and carry him or her away in triumph against all competitors. (R, 572-73)

Touchingly comic, they rescue each other, an ironic reference to the meaning of the story’s title, “The Refugees.” These two lonely people do not actually help a war fugitive but instead reach out to one other. In a sense, war refugees include not only those fleeing from war but also those who are escaping the disappointments of their own lives. Both Rushworth and Durand enjoy feelings of adventure and fulfillment as they try to contribute to relief efforts. The war’s alteration of cultural life brings not only loss and sorrow but also new opportunities. Read in this way, the story’s title suggests an antithesis: war creates and rescues refugees.

Through a continuing series of polite misunderstandings, Rushworth takes home to her family estate not a Belgian fugitive but an American traveller. Their comic misapprehensions derive largely from breakdowns in communication. Rushworth is endearing because of her bumbling and admittedly self-serving attempts at philanthropy. Rushworth explains to Durand her pressing desire for a refugee and the fear that she would not get one: “You see, I’d so completely lost hope--so completely--I thought no one would ever want me. . . . They all told me at home that no one would--my nieces did, and everybody. They taunted me with it.’ She broke off, and glanced at him appealingly” (R, 576). While her efforts may derive from mixed motives, she
seems sympathetic because she cares about Durand and even begins to cry at his imagined plight.

Rushworth elicits compassion because, lacking a husband or a home of her own, she is marginalized. Though she lives on the family estate, she is emotionally distanced from her relatives. Her niece Clio Rushworth, aptly named for the muse of history, explains to Durand that “nothing much ever happened to the unmarried women of her time. Most of them were just put away in cottages covered with clematis and forgotten” (R, 589). Audrey’s situation recalls the rigid social restrictions endured by women of her class and the role this war played in altering their lives. In this story, as in “Writing a War Story,” Wharton’s focus becomes the means by which women seek in war work to escape their society’s expectations. Wharton layers the meaning of “refugee” as Audrey’s cottage, which appears a beautiful refuge in Durand’s eyes, is revealed to be also a prison where she lives an unsatisfying existence.

Even as Wharton advocates for women’s greater freedom and responsibility as a kind of refuge from the boredom of prewar life, she critiques those who do not take the war and their work in it seriously enough. Rushworth’s vulnerability and modest ambitions contrast with the snobbishness of others in English society. They are cruelly inappropriate in their response to the war and their lack of feeling for those suffering. Audrey’s neighbors, “the most successful refugee raiders in the district,” come to her family’s estate for dinner in order to arrange to take Durand home and use him as an atrocities lecturer at their garden party (R, 585). These women talk excitedly about new entertainments that might be had because of the war: “The Committee has given us a prima donna from the Brussels Opera to sing the Marseillaise, and the what
d’ye-call-it Belgian anthem, but there are lots of people coming just for the atrocities” (R, 587). Wharton portrays with sharp comic effect those who trade in human tragedy for their social objectives and entertainment. While Rushworth and Durand appear flawed but genuinely caring, Wharton reproaches these aristocratic women for the self-serving ambition that drives some people, even in wartime.

Wharton’s criticism of British aristocracy is milder in regards to the old gentlemen than the scheming women. The quiet Lord Beausedge, who presides over Audrey’s family, casts a jaundiced eye on the fervor over refugees. When the Duchess Bolchester announces that she is giving a garden party to raise funds and will have a lecturer to discuss war atrocities, Lord Beausedge comments: “‘Damned bad taste, all that sort of thing’” (R, 586). However, he simply goes back to his reading and stays out of the issues, indicative of some culpable passivism in allowing war to erupt and continue. Beausedge reminds Durand of the era of “stocks and nankeen trousers, a Lawrence portrait, port wine, fox hunting, the Peninsular campaign, the Indian mutiny, every Englishman doing his duty, and resistance to the Reform Bill. It was portentous that one person, in modern clothes and reading a newspaper, should so epitomize a vanished age” (R, 584). Durand admires the anachronistic old man. Wharton’s portrayal offers little criticism of Beausedge as a representative of the civilization that so many war writers disparaged. He seems a kindly and ineffectual old man who is no more than a spectator of the events around him. His passive stance, however, suggests that he too takes refuge in the past and will become a refugee in the modern world. He embodies an emerging and fundamental shift. Just as la belle époque had come to an end with the war, so these years would call into question
ideals of “duty.” This portrait illustrates how removed the British aristocracy seems from the frontline, thereby raising one of the war’s pivotal issues: many soldiers experienced a sense of alienation from their elders and their culture.

Durand spends one evening in the company of this society; then, before he can reveal that he is not a Belgian refugee but an American traveller, Rushworth’s niece Clio hustles him out of the room. She does not want her aunt’s moment of triumph and adventure marred. This kind young woman appears again when Durand returns to London in April 1918.

In this second segment of the story, Rushworth has become a competent leader in the war relief effort, underscoring the easing of Edwardian restrictions that had stifled the intelligence and creativity of innumerable women of her social class. The upheaval of the war has given her a chance to move out of the cottage into London; she has become engaged and will establish her own home. She takes full advantage of the opportunity to throw off the strictures of some old conventions, exemplifying Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s premise that women benefitted from the new freedoms war afforded.\(^8\) They identify Wharton as among those women war writers who express enthusiastic enjoyment of this new liberation. Rushworth demonstrates the adventures open to women and the opportunities for new roles in society, however temporary. Yet Gilbert and Gubar’s insight does not wholly account for the story’s portrait of Rushworth’s new life. Her transformation, although empowering, is tinged with a sacrifice of emotional connection, as is apparent in the personality change Rushworth undergoes. When Durand returns to England as a YMCA volunteer, Clio takes him to see her aunt. Rushworth, however, has become an ambivalent character who is not as empathetic as she once was.
Now the officious Colonel Audrey Rushworth, she is no longer the one forgotten, but she is the one who forgets. And, indeed, Rushworth does not recognize Durand. He follows Clio into a canteen where her aunt works:

At the office desk sat a lady with eyeglasses on a sharp nose. She wore a Colonel’s uniform, with several decorations, and was bending over the desk busily writing.

A young girl in a nurse’s dress stood beside her, as if waiting for an order, and flattened against the wall of the room sat a row of limp and desolate beings—too evidently refugees.

The Colonel lifted her head quickly and glanced at her niece with a resolute and almost forbidding eye.

‘Not another refugee, Clio—not one! I absolutely refuse. We’ve not a hole left to put them in, and the last family you sent me went off with my mackintosh and my electric lamp.’

She bent again sternly to her writing. As she looked up her glance strayed carelessly over Professor Durand’s congested countenance, and then dropped to the desk without a sign of recognition. (R, 592)

She brusquely responds to her niece’s inquiries; then, she “shut her lips with a snap and her pen drove on steadily over the sheets of official letter paper” (R, 592-93). The scene describes Rushworth with an assortment of comic and hard-edged effects. The paradox of a relief worker turning away exiles was a disturbing fact that Wharton increasingly witnessed in the bureaucratization of war philanthropy. Wharton, however, underscores the amusing interplay of rigid rules and their transgression as the refugees take aid workers’ belongings.
While Rushworth’s transformation testifies to the liberation of women during the First World War, in her new role she simultaneously exemplifies the incongruity of warm-hearted volunteerism and icy efficiency. Joining the bureaucracy can desensitize one to the sufferers. Rushworth serves diligently as a philanthropist, but she has become more callous, even to the point of causing Durand “distinct humiliation.” The comically inept Rushworth retains in the loss of her “mackintosh” a hint of her former self, yet her behavior also exemplifies emotional remoteness and signals that she has become part of the war machine, albeit on the home front. This new life creates a peculiar refuge. The portrait of Rushworth recalls Wharton’s increasing frustration with the bureaucratization of war relief, a topic which appears again in *The Marne* and *A Son at the Front*. By the time she published this story, the American Red Cross (ARC) had adopted most of the private charities in France, but this transition to the corporate model of philanthropy was one of the most disappointing social developments during the war. The officiousness of the ARC translates into the chilly demeanor of Rushworth. She has apparently suffered the dehumanization that arises from this mechanized, bureaucratic war. The warmhearted spinster becomes a cog in the war machine.

Wharton’s third war short story, “Writing a War Story,” seems, of all her war writings, the most removed from the conflict. Her primary focus here is on issues of authorship and literary trends. This tale constitutes one of her most pointed attacks on early Modernist experimentation, specifically what would come to be known as stream-of-consciousness. She identifies this type of innovation as a retooling of “the once-famous *tranche de vie*” or slice of life, which Zola and other nineteenth-century French novelists employed in an
attempt to capture a piece of life without aesthetic selection or evaluation. She pointedly comments on the efforts of a younger generation of writers, communicating her concern that the craft developed by previous generations will be discarded.

The plot of “Writing a War Story” illustrates an American woman’s attempts to fulfill her aspirations to be a writer by producing a short story for The Man-at-Arms, a periodical founded to entertain wounded soldiers. This tale has been interpreted as a self-parody or commentary on Wharton’s own wartime experience as a woman writer. While the protagonist’s failed efforts to pen a story may appear to be simply a satiric commentary on the ineptitude of women writers to effectively address war, the story exposes the significant difficulties American women face when trying to learn the craft. The protagonist, Ivy Spang, receives the guidance of four persons who give her diverse concepts of what writing should be. These points of view are suggestive of the contemporary environment for writers, the dearth of good advice for young writers, and the importance of learning inherited traditions of authorship rather than simply following the latest trends.

Ivy Spang’s limited education makes her a malleable figure for those who would shape her concepts of literature. While Spang dreams of being an author, she has little training, knowledge, or encouragement from her society. The quaint, amateurish endeavor of this young woman had originally resulted in “a little volume of verse” that was called ‘Vibrations,’ and was preceded by a Foreword in which the author stated that she had yielded to the urgent request of friends in exposing her first-born to the public gaze. The public had
not gazed very hard or very long, but the Cornwall-on-Hudson News-Dispatch had a flattering notice by the wife of the Rector of St. Dunstan’s (signed ‘Asterisk’), in which while the somewhat unconventional sentiment of the poems was gently deprecated, a graceful and ladylike tribute was paid to the ‘brilliant daughter of one of our most prominent and influential citizens, who has voluntarily abandoned the primrose way of pleasure to scale the rugged heights of Parnassus.’ (WWS, 359; Wharton’s emphasis)

The amusing title “Vibrations” suggests emotions spilling unformed onto the page. The genial and short-lived support for her first attempt reveals that, like Wharton, no one among the girl’s family and friends has an interest in her intellectual aspirations. While the tone mocks Spang’s efforts, the facts illustrate that she lives in a society that offers neither the education nor encouragement to develop her skills. She lives in a community where literary criticism amounts to discouraging “unconventional sentiment” and doling out “ladylike” praise.

This literary effort brings her into contact with the editor of a trendy magazine who provides the first serious advice that she receives. She meets the editor of “Zigzag, the new ‘Weekly Journal of Defiance,’” at a dinner, and he subsequently writes a review of “Vibrations.” Wharton’s facetious title “Zigzag” suggests a transient, faddish publication that is motivated by “Defiance,” rather than aesthetic interests. When the editor reviews the aspiring poet’s collection, he writes that her work ‘hinted that there was more than she knew in Ivy Spang’s poems, and that their esoteric significance showed that she was a vers-librist in thought as well as in technique. He added that they would ‘gain incommensurably in meaning’ when she abandoned the superannuated habit of
beginning each line with a capital letter” (WWS, 359). The editor’s facile and even
comic assertion that verse should all be lower case reveals, as Frederick Wegener
notes, that Wharton “has much diabolical fun . . . with the posturings and
eccentricities of modernism.”

Wharton’s assessment of the theorizing that reshapes some of the
contemporary experimentation, such as that exemplified by the editor of Zigzag,
can be found in her 1914 essay “The Criticism of Fiction,” as well as her 1934
essays “Tendencies in Modern Fiction” and “Permanent Values in Fiction.”
Wharton argues in these three studies on the art of fiction that novelists should
learn from their predecessors. Wharton expresses her dismay that innovators like
James Joyce and Virginia Woolf seem more interested in their ideas than in
fundamentals of character development, which includes situating these
characters in the “general human experience” as a means of establishing for
readers a sense of shared humanity (UCW, 177). She expresses suspicion of
“formulas”:

It is less dangerous for an artist to sacrifice his artistic instincts to
the pursuit of money or popularity than to immolate them to a
theory; and I know of no theory more contrary to the free action of
genius than the persuasion that a given formula–alphabet,
language, or any generally accredited form of expression–is worn
out because too many people have used it. (UCW, 176)

“Writing a War Story” depicts the failed literary efforts of a young woman who
tries to follow the latest trends with little knowledge of the craft of writing that
has been developed through numerous generations. Wharton illustrates the
drawbacks of not training the younger artists in the “permanent values” of
fiction. This failure inhibits their ability to “renovate” old forms and create original and lasting art. Spang has little contact with writers and editors, so the review in *Zigzag* with its spurious advice constitutes the only apparent training she receives in the craft of writing.

The war interrupts Spang’s artistic aspirations for a while. She moves to Paris and volunteers at a hospital. One day an editor arrives looking for contributors to a new periodical, and a doctor tells him that Spang writes. Presumably, she has talked about her book of verse to the hospital staff. The editor asks her to write a short story for *The Man-at-Arms*, which will be distributed in British hospitals. The title is ironic because, while appropriate for the target audience, the contributors are mostly women and other untrained writers who are certainly not “at-Arms.”

The journal’s English editor, a second voice of authority about writing, gives a vivid description of the proposed magazine. In the process, he asks her to formulate “‘A good rousing war story, Miss Spang; with a dash of sentiment, of course, but nothing to depress or discourage. I’m sure you catch my meaning? A tragedy with a happy ending—that’s about the idea” (WWS, 360). He requests a paradoxical fiction that illustrates the tragedy of war and then insists on a “happy ending.” This description suggests the delicate balancing to sustain readership, convey war experiences, and keep up morale. Though Spang has been volunteering for less than a year, the editor exclaims that with her ‘large experience of hospital work of course you know just what hits the poor fellows’ taste. . . . And have you a portrait—if possible in nurse’s dress—to publish with it? The Queen of Norromania has promised us a poem, with a picture of herself giving the baby
Crown Prince his morning tub. We want the first number to be an ‘actuality,’ as the French say; all the articles written by people who’ve done the thing themselves, or seen it done. You’ve been to the front, I suppose? As far as Rheims, once? That’s capital!’ (WWS, 360)

The emphasis on “actuality” highlights the paradox that seeing is not doing “the thing” itself. The picture of the “morning tub” emphasizes the distance of the trenches and hospitals from the courts of the royals, whose role in the conflict can be traced to the particular irony of this war: the assassination of the Archduke and his Consort, two individuals, precipitated the deaths of eight million.13

Wharton illustrates the diverse cultural marketplace in the contrasting advice of the trendy editor of *Zigzag* and the commercial editor of *The Man-at-Arms*. While the former privileges innovation, the latter prefers a trite plot. The wartime editor requests that Spang write “a good stirring trench story, with a Coming-Home scene to close with . . . a Christmas scene, if you can manage it, as we hope to be out in November” (WWS, 360; Wharton’s ellipsis). The editor’s description recalls Wharton’s definition of rhetoric in *Fighting France*: “Rhetoric is the dressing-up of conventional sentiment” (FF, 231). This excerpt critiques the formulaic patriotism of war writing. Neither of these editors advises Spang on the fundamentals of writing that Wharton offers her readers in her three essays on the art of fiction. Both editors focus on superficial elements: capitalization and contrived plots.

Wharton plays with ironically self-referential details in this fiction. For instance, Wharton’s photograph accompanied this story when it was published.
in Woman's Home Companion. The amusing description of her own “Coming Home” story serves to contrast her work with the type of fiction produced for these magazines; after all, her tale’s conclusion does not offer a “happy” homecoming at Christmas. As Spang struggles with the writing, she reveals her concepts of authorship. She first purchases “a ream of mauve paper” and then reserves her mornings because she had read that this time was always “sacred” to authors (WWS, 360). Wharton, too, schedules her mornings for writing; however, the resemblance is limited. Wharton has extensive experience not only traveling along the front lines, but also organizing war charities and even writing award-winning fiction. By paralleling her own work habits, she is amusingly yet explicitly suggesting the differences. One can act like an author, using the habits and even producing fictions, yet to be a writer takes far more craft and experience.

The story addresses concepts about how young authors determine what to write. When Spang cannot come up with an idea, she takes a walk, avoiding her friends “lest they frighten away her Inspiration. She knew that Inspirations were fussy” (WWS, 361). Spang picks up a magazine to get ideas for how to begin her story, but she rejects several types of openings because they are old-fashioned. She finds that the

first tale in the magazine was signed by a name great in fiction, one of the most famous names of the past generation of novelists. The opening sentence ran: ‘In the month of October, 1914—’ and Ivy turned the page impatiently. She may not have known much about story writing, but she did know that that kind of beginning was played out. (WWS, 361).
Wharton is “one of the most famous” of the old guard novelists, and in this self-referential phrase, she critiques those writers who in striving for originality lose what earlier generations have learned about the art of writing. She pointedly denies the idea that the unschooled Spang would presume to know more about and have nothing to learn from a writer like Edith Wharton. Spang asserts that the subject is of little consequence, as the editor of *Zigzag* had told her; however, she later is informed by an author she admires that it is still the key to a well-crafted story. While Spang cannot be taken seriously as an author, the story nonetheless illustrates why the upcoming generation of writers should learn from their predecessors.

Spang enjoys being considered a writer; however, she has never written a short story, and her frustration grows as she tries to quickly learn. She turns to her former French governess, whom she calls Madsy. She voices sympathy for the struggling young writer:

“... How could the editor expect you to be tied to a date? But so few people know what the artistic temperament is; they seem to think that one can dash off a story as easily as one makes an omelet.”

Ivy smiled in spite of herself. “Dear Madsy, what an unlucky simile! So few people make good omelets.”

“Not in France,” said Mademoiselle firmly.

Her former pupil reflected. “In France a good many people have written good short stories, too—but I’m sure they were given more than three weeks to learn how. Oh, what shall I do?” she groaned. (WWS, 363)
Though light and comic, their discussion hints at the dearth of cultural tradition in America and the potential impact this has on young artists. The conversation obliquely indicates that the French offer their young writers a better start, just as they teach their children one of the fundamentals of French cuisine: how to prepare a good omelet. This is not to suggest that Madsy, by virtue of being French, can easily become a great artist, but only that if she had these aspirations the French cultural life would stimulate whatever talents she might possess.

Coincidentally, this governess has a notebook in which she recorded the stories of foot soldiers encountered during her hospital work. These tales gleaned at the bedsides of wounded men read almost as though they are “tranche de vie” (slice of life). Spang observes that the “narrative, written in a close, tremulous hand, covered each side of the page, and poured on and on without a paragraph—a good deal like life” (WWS, 364). The unedited stories Madsy records provides a compelling example of French “expression.”

The lack of selectiveness and going on “a good deal like life” recalls Wharton’s observations in “The Criticism of Fiction.” She denigrates the “new theory of form” that has given rise to “the present welter of experiment”:

The novelist may plead as much as he pleases for the formless novel, the unemphasized notation of a certain stretch of a certain runnel of the stream of things; but why has he chosen that particular stretch of that particular runnel? Obviously, because it reflected, or carried on its current, more things he thought worth studying and recording. Recording—the act is a key to the method; for the instant one has set down certain things one has created a
reason for setting down certain others, and the pattern begins to show. (UCW, 124-25; Wharton’s emphasis)

Wharton stresses that the act of writing can never be simply “a slice of life” because, no matter how seemingly “unemphasized,” the writing reflects choices the author has made about how to “pattern” a story. Madsy’s unedited journal bears some similarity to characteristics of the experimenters critiqued for the “formless novel.” She uses a lean, reportorial style: “Military Hospital No. 13. November, 1914. Long talk with the Chausseur Alpin Emile Durand, wounded through the knee and left lung at the Hautes Chaumes. I have decided to write down his story. . . .” (WWS, 364; Wharton’s ellipsis). Spang adopts this tale as the basis of her contributions to The Man-at-Arms.

Spang and Madsy, the third influence, reshape the material of those hospital tales into their idea of what creative writing should be. The style, however, is sophomoric. At first, her governess helps occasionally, then becomes a “collaborator”:

She gave the tale a certain consecutiveness, and kept Ivy to the main point when her pupil showed a tendency to wander: but she carefully revised and polished the rustic speech in which she had originally transcribed the tale, so that it finally issued forth in the language that a young lady writing a composition on the Battle of Hastings would have used in Mademoiselle’s school days. (WWS, 364)

They transform the compelling, though unformed, pages into outmoded and stilted prose. Their inexpert attempts comically underscore the importance of selecting and revising material, which Wharton deemed essential in “The
Criticism of Fiction.” This story is accepted for publication along with a photograph of Spang.

To comment on all of this and the product of Spang’s pen is Harold Harbard, an established novelist who reads Spang’s writing and, at her request, pronounces his opinion. His views contradict the ill-formed ideas she has received from the three earlier influences, her governess and the editors of Zigzag and The Man-at-Arms. Harbard is a wounded soldier who has written the acclaimed novel Broken Wings and is known to Spang because he is regularly featured in literary journals (WWS, 368). Though nervous with this writer whom she admires, Spang wants his opinion of her short story. He hesitates and then tells her:

‘You’ve got hold of an wonderfully good subject; and that’s the main thing of course—’

Ivy interrupted him eagerly. ‘The subject’s the main thing?’

‘Why, naturally; it’s only the people without invention who tell you it isn’t.’

‘Oh,’ she gasped, trying to readjust her carefully acquired theory of aesthetics.

‘You’ve got hold of an awfully good subject,’ Harbard continued; ‘but you’ve rather mauled it, haven’t you?’ (WWS, 369).

Spang seems comically disoriented by Harbard’s direct criticism and its divergence from what she has been taught. He emphasizes that “subject” rather than theory or form is paramount. The evolution of this story and Harbard’s subsequent evaluation underscore the vital importance of carefully selecting and crafting the narrative subject and pattern.
Simultaneously, Wharton highlights the disadvantage Spang suffers being an American woman with aspirations to write. Harbard’s parting comment encapsulates the irony of her situation: “You were angry just now because I didn’t admire your story; and now you’re angrier still because I do admire your photograph. Do you wonder that we novelists find such an inexhaustible field in Woman?” (WWS, 370). While Spang wants to be admired for her picture, she also wants to accomplish more than this, but has little means of doing so. Harbard’s remark exposes a fundamental dilemma. As a pretty girl she is not traditionally the one who observes and writes; instead, as a “Woman,” she is the “inexhaustible” object of the novelist’s attention. Spang’s dream to be a writer and the rejection by Harbard on these terms cause her to be trapped in a narrower life than she desires. As the story concludes, she promises Harbard a copy of her photograph and exclaims, “And now, if you’ve quite finished, I’m afraid I must run back to my teapot” (WWS, 369). Facing her own inadequate education and confusion about writing, Spang finds herself serving tea rather than enjoying the camaraderie of a fellow writer.

All of these short stories convey the means by which the war gives rise to confusing situations wherein relationships become at once more intense and more difficult. “Writing a War Story” focuses on relationships in the writing community and the craft of authorship. Poor advice and an apparent lack of talent inhibit Ivy Spang from reaching her dream. In contrast, Audrey Rushworth finds success in her wartime endeavors; however, her work has caused her to assume a more emotionally remote exterior. The most fraught relationship among these stories is found in “Coming Home.” Yvonne Malo loves her fiancee so much that she makes intimate sacrifices for his family and
village. She finds herself drawn to and yet estranged from Jean de Réchamp, simultaneously desiring and avoiding his presence. War’s changing cultural circumstances afford women greater freedom and self-knowledge while at the same time tempering these with moral conflicts, painful estrangements, and personal disappointments.

These stories interweave Wharton’s observations concerning the effects of war on the cultural life of French provincial society, British aristocracy, and American volunteers. Even as the conflict takes its toll on the most intimate relationships of families and lovers, they adapt in this environment of military and personal conflict. Wharton critiques the British aristocracy with a comic touch, revealing the callous self-promotion which makes a game of appropriating refugees to further social status. “Coming Home” and “The Refugees” explore the rupture with the customs of life before 1914, particularly the problems arising from the German invasion of Belgium and France. The massive deployment of volunteers significantly expands the public role of women.

Through the lives of these three women, Wharton addresses the issues of the changing civilization and potential for increasing disaffection and bureaucratization, but most interesting are Wharton’s observations about language and writing. These stories reveal the difficulty in communicating painful experiences and the silences that shroud events on the home front. For combatants and noncombatants, wartime language can be as problematic as the incidents that occur; in effect, certain events are “unspeakable.” While “The Refugees” offers little on this subject, “Coming Home” highlights the difficulties of creating a cohesive narrative form in the “fragmented” stories of war. In
‘Writing a War Story, “Wharton presents her increasing concerns about Modernist innovations, specifically stream-of-consciousness, that are based on theories, revealing “a temporary decline of the inventive faculties” (UCW, 176). While Wharton takes a conservative stance, her stories engage with the on-going dialog about language and writing that has been intensified by the fragmented chronicle of the war’s events.

Notes

1Price, End of the Age of Innocence, 58, 50.
2Price, End of the Age of Innocence, 32.
3I am indebted to Elizabeth Ammons for insights about women in Wharton’s war stories. See “The War” in Argument with America, 125-56.
4Fussell, 170.
5Winter, “Capital Cities at War,”16-17.
6Fussell, 170.
7Price reads this story as an expression of ‘her general distaste for ‘the egoistic apathy’ she found in the English countryside.” Price, End of the Age of Innocence, 20.
8They admit, however, that this “triumph was not without its darker consequences for feminism,” such as a backlash of misogyny that some women internalized. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Sexchanges, vol. 2 of No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in Twentieth Century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 319.
9For more information on Wharton’s relationship with the American Red
Cross, see Price’s chapter “At War with the American Red Cross: 1917,” 106-40.
See both Price and Lewis, Edith Wharton.

10 Critics have noted this story’s satire of Modernism. See Wegener, 118.
See also Jean Gallagher, “The World Wars and the Female Gaze” (Ph.D. diss.,
City University of New York, New York, 1994), 36-37.

11 See, for instance, Lewis, Edith Wharton; Price, End of the Age of
Innocence; and, Barbara White, Edith Wharton: A Study of the Short Fiction

12 Wegener, 118.

13 Fussell, 7-8.

14 I am indebted to Wegener for this connection between “Writing a War
Story” and her commentaries in “The Criticism of Fiction.” Wegener, 118.
Wharton later composed in 1934 two pieces that offer commentary on the
experimentation of younger writers. See “Tendencies in Modern Fiction” and
“Permanent Values in Fiction” in Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical
Writings.
Chapter III

‘The Gift of the Seeing Eye’: Regarding War in The Marne

The gift of the seeing eye is, obviously, a first requisite where taste is to prevail. And the question is, how is the seeing eye to be obtained?

Edith Wharton, French Ways and Their Meaning

Published on 13 December 1918, Edith Wharton’s first war novel, The Marne, examines the European conflict’s effects on American society, both in Paris and the United States. This novel was written subsequent to “Coming Home” and “The Refugees,” but in the same year as “Writing a War Story.”

Unlike her practice in that tale, she does not address issues of narrative form in her novel; rather, she focuses on the dilemma of war rhetoric, particularly that found in America. Unlike Fighting France and Wharton’s short stories, this novel offers her perspective on the gradual change in American attitudes toward World War I, culminating in America’s official alliance with the Allied armies. While The Marne raises a number of issues prevalent in Modernism, Wharton advocates for conservative prewar cultural values and a belief in the honor of fighting. She laments the loss of an inherited culture that has enriched civilization for centuries. This novel affirms the belief in passing on the “humanest graces” of Western civilization in language that typifies much of the prewar idealism.

Wharton began writing this work in the spring of 1918, several months prior to the second Battle of the Marne. Having lobbied for years to obtain American military support, Wharton was exhausted and her health had been
permanently eroded. After a series of heart attacks in May 1917, May 1918, and July 1918, she began to be treated with digitalis to regulate her heartbeat.\footnote{1} Despite these setbacks, Wharton persisted in her war work and her writing.

This novel’s focus on America’s role in the war and its responsibility to the Allied Armies may derive, in part, from the escalating need for American reinforcements amid the widespread exhaustion and unrest in France. Civilian strikes and military mutinies proliferated from occasional protests in April 1917, to organized mass meetings the following month and hostile confrontations between soldiers and the government in June. Acts of resistance continued throughout the year.\footnote{2} This mass dissent, nevertheless, did not escalate into the level of violence that might have precipitated another French Revolution.\footnote{3} These demonstrations did not advocate pacifism; rather, Ferro writes that soldiers demanded “that the war be conducted more effectively.”\footnote{4} Even during this “military strike,” as Keegan terms it, soldiers did not attack their officers: “On the contrary, a strange mutual respect characterized relations between private soldiers and the commissioned ranks during the ‘mutinies,’ as if both sides recognized (sic) themselves to be mutual victims of a terrible ordeal, which was simply no longer bearable by those at the bottom of the heap.”\footnote{5} This restrained rebellion began shortly before the Americans joined the Allied armies. The infusion of enthusiastic, if inexperienced, American troops contributed to the resilience and strength of the Allied forces. In The Marne, Wharton does not directly depict these mutinies, but rather offers a conservative perspective that, while conceding wartime hardships, emphasizes instead the responsibility and honor of soldiers.
The novel’s title obliquely refers to the years of American neutrality. An allusion to a river, a town and two battles, the title recalls, in part, the first engagement that had saved Paris from German occupation in September 1914, but paradoxically resulted in four years of bloody stalemate. The second Marne battle occurred in the third week of July 1918, when with the help of American troops, the Allies secured a decisive victory. This fight won, they enjoyed consistent successes along the Western Front, ultimately leading to armistice on 11 November 1918. As a reference to the first battle, the title points to French resistance and yet also evokes the subsequent, catastrophic descent into the deadlocked trench warfare that would persist for years. Wharton devotes most of the work to a portrait of the time between these two battles, while primarily focusing on a critique of isolationism. While the war may have been resolved sooner if Americans had entered after the first battle on this river, this novel ultimately affirms the contributions of United States troops to the Allied victory.\textsuperscript{6}

Scholars have dismissed the novel as little more than a simplistic critique of America.\textsuperscript{7} Admittedly, The Marne is one of Wharton’s least complex fictions, and it does criticize American disengagement from European affairs. Her health problems and the French mutinies cast a gloom that pervaded 1917 and may have been influential in the novel’s criticism of American isolationism. Much of its content and tone derive from Wharton’s choice to portray these years through the perspective of an American adolescent, Troy Belknap, who grows from boyhood to become a soldier. His youthful enthusiasm and naivete create a more simplistic portrait of the war than had been presented in Fighting France or “Coming Home.”
Wharton plots *The Marne* to follow Troy Belknap’s travels from America to France and back again. Not your average American, Troy lives a privileged life and has an extraordinary aesthetic sensibility. The early idyllic scenes of the Belknap family travels provide a contrast with the wartime focus on survival and the abridgement of these types of diversions and intellectual pursuits. The novel is structured in four sections, each consisting of three chapters. The opening chapter depicts the Belknap family’s prewar ocean voyage to France, where the first three chapters are set. They are vacationing when World War I begins. Troy wants to fight but at 15 years old is too young; instead, he must return to America and continue his schooling for the next three years. The second section sketches Troy’s voyage home and his life in America. On his eighteenth birthday, his parents agree to let him return to France and become an ambulance driver. The third section details his return to France and his life as a driver on the Western Front. The final three chapters portray his trip to the Marne, his participation in the battle, and his wounding and hospitalization. Though Belknap has been educated in both countries, his French tutor, Paul Gantier, is his primary influence. Troy feels allegiance to France because its civilization has given him his greatest joys and most deeply-held values.

In the short stories and *Fighting France*, Wharton’s depiction of the rupture with prewar civilization focuses on Europe; however, in *The Marne* she conveys it from the perspective of an American and his evaluation of his national culture in relation to that of France. As the plot follows Troy’s movements, the novel as a whole often depicts this young francophile’s perspectives concerning Americans, particularly their reactions to the war, from isolationism to military action. Troy regards war as a threat to Western civilization. In contrast, most
Americans initially appear interested in the war as little more than an entertaining, if shocking, diversion. Troy prefers life in Europe because it offers rich historical and artistic legacies, as well as fostering the life of the mind. Wharton’s disaffection from the anti-intellectual attitudes of American society prompted her to dissociate herself from it and seek cultural stimulation elsewhere, just as many expatriate Modernists did.

The novel exhibits a similar aversion in Troy, who considers France his true home. His opinion concerning life in France and America provides an outsider’s view of both countries. Like Wharton, he can see “the gods,” as she termed it in her letter to Berenson. He possesses what Wharton identified in describing France to her compatriots in French Ways and Their Meaning as the “gift of the seeing eye,” which enables him to have “taste” (FWM, 52). This “seeing eye” can be developed, as Troy exemplifies through travels and an education steeped in European history, art, literature, and architecture.

His travels abroad each year inform his awareness of the social and intellectual continuity between Europe and the United States. At the age of fourteen, he relishes the transition from the narrow intellectual horizon of America to the wider one found abroad, as signified by the ship’s library. Wharton sketches his superior attitude with a comic touch:

For six golden days Troy had ranged the decks, splashed in the blue salt water brimming his huge porcelain tub, lunched and dined with the grown-ups in the Ritz restaurant, and swaggered about in front of the children who had never crossed before and didn’t know the stewards, or the purser, or the captain’s cat[.] . . .

Then, when these joys began to pall, he had lost himself in others
deeper and dearer. Another of his cronies, the library steward, had unlocked the bookcase doors for him, and buried for hours in the depths of a huge library armchair (there weren't any to compare with it on land) he had ranged through the length and breadth of several literatures. (M, 2)

Troy’s love of learning brings him great pleasure. The shipboard scene of reading provides a visual metaphor for cultivating the “inner” life, a place apart with its own particular “joys.” These interests help him develop the “seeing eye” and the ability to appreciate the “humanest graces,” Wharton’s term in Fighting France (FF, 6). Wharton’s description of the transatlantic crossing, requiring less than a week, emphasizes the relative closeness of the two continents. She highlights the paradox that in some social circles Europe becomes a second home through annual trips abroad, yet many of these Americans regard the European conflict as distant or abstract. Troy disdains the idea articulated by one senator that America enjoys the position of “geographical immunity” (M, 37). In Troy’s playfulness, youthful bravado, and a love of reading, he takes particular pleasure in a sampling of international books as he makes the literal and figurative passage from the United States to multinational Europe.

The close ties that Troy feels between himself and Europe reflect Wharton’s argument that the United States, too, will feel the effects of the war as it breaks with prewar cultural life. After all, American culture originates, in part, from Europe. American literature, art, and architecture derive from sources abroad, particularly from Western Europe. Wharton advocates educating her compatriots about their inheritance: “A new race, working out its own destiny in new conditions, cannot hope for the moral and intellectual maturity of a race
seated at the cross-roads of the old civilizations. But America has, in part at least, a claim on the general inheritance of Western culture. She inherits France through England, and Rome and the Mediterranean culture, through France” (FWM, 96). Early in The Marne, Troy becomes representative of Wharton’s hope that Americans might integrate into their lives and particularly their children’s lives the rich “inheritance of Western culture.”

Just as Wharton offers descriptions of the French countryside in Fighting France to illustrate the lengthy cultural history of this society, she suggests that these landscapes offer Troy’s imagination a visual feast and mythical delights. The Brants’ automobile comes alive itself as it “flew up the Champs Elysées, devoured the leafy alleys of the Bois, and soared away to new horizons” (M, 5). The Pegasus of Greek mythology is a beautiful, white horse with huge wings; he occasionally flies to Mount Helicon where the Muses sometimes join him and dance. Here, he brought forth with the stroke of his hoof, the fountain of Hippocrene, source of poetic inspiration. Troy’s “Motor-Flight Through France,” to use the title of Wharton’s 1908 travel narrative, stimulates his imagination, just as Wharton’s own trips provided her a source of creativity and joy. Troy feels intimately involved in France’s concerns because this country has been formative in his development. Delighted by the exquisite French countryside, Troy expands his appreciation for beauty and taste for adventure.

This scenery embodies an incongruous blend of stability and impending change. On these drives, Troy carefully studies the French landscape and perceives both its transience and continuity:

The little boy’s happiness would have been complete if there had been more time to give to the beautiful things that flew past them;
thatched villages with square-towered churches in hollows of deep green country, or grey shining towns above rivers on which cathedrals seemed to be moored like ships; miles and miles of field and hedge and park falling away from high terraced houses, and little embroidered stone manors reflected in reed-grown moats under ancient trees. (M, 3)

The “thatched villages,” “cathedrals,” and “reed-grown moats under ancient trees” compose an exotic landscape recalling medieval civilization, thus providing a sense of continuity with those generations who have inhabited the region for more than a millennium. Troy’s perspective, however, suggests the potential for significant cultural transience. “Moored” to the provincial towns, the cathedrals could sail off metaphorically, leaving the town without its central social and religious institution. The ancient community, by virtue of its age, offers a promise of endurance. Wharton foreshadows incipient transformations, as well as hope for continuity.

Unlike Troy, many of his compatriots remain blind to France’s history and beauties. Wharton characterizes the Belknaps’ tourist society as an enclave limited in their world view and part of the corruption of prewar civilization. Wharton notes among some Americans the paradox that despite their avid European travels they remain unable to appreciate the inheritances of Western civilization. Troy’s mother, Josephine Belknap, provides an example. She does not want to stop during their long drives to enjoy the ancient cultural treasures of the French countryside; rather, she focuses on her seamstress appointments and, above all, on her pursuit of being the best dressed among her peers:
Unfortunately Mrs. Belknap always had pressing engagements in Paris. She had made appointments beforehand with all her dressmakers, and, as Troy was well aware, it was impossible, at the height of the season, to break such engagements without losing one’s turn, and having to wait weeks to get a lot of nasty rags that one had seen, by that time, on the back of every other woman in the place. (M, 4)

While Wharton prided herself on her own style, she disdains the overarching interest in the superficial trappings of society. The desire for maintaining social status takes precedence over enjoying other, more enriching pursuits.

Before the novel’s plot turns to the war, Wharton has established the self-interested character of Josephine Belknap and her society; in contrast, Troy has been portrayed as a boy with a receptive and educated, though immature, perspective. When his tutor, Paul Gantier, announces that he is leaving because the country has been mobilized, Troy is overwhelmed:

War! War! War against his beautiful France! And this young man, his dearest friend and companion, was to be torn from him suddenly, senselessly, torn from their endless talks, their long walks in the mountains, their elaborately planned courses of study—archaeology, French literature, mediaeval philosophy, the Divine Comedy, and vistas and vistas beyond. (M, 8-9)

He and Paul Gantier have studied and traveled together for several summers. Though Gantier appears only briefly in the novel, he is a role model and represents to Troy what Hélöise (“Halo”) Spear offered to Vance Weston in Hudson River Bracketed (1929): “that solitary spark of understanding burning in
another mind like a little light in an isolated house” (HRB, 482). The close bond between the boy and his tutor increases Troy’s dedication to France and plays a crucial role in his eventual experience in battle.

Troy’s response to Gantier’s departure reveals that the tutoring sessions offer not just book learning but an exceptionally diverse education. Europe, and particularly France, its history, architecture, literature, and other accomplishments are part of a rich legacy that this novel conveys through Troy’s appreciation. In this regard, Wharton advocates a conservative agenda designed to preserve the intellectual and aesthetic refinements of Western civilization as articulated through France’s prewar traditions. Wharton’s internationalism predates and in some regard parallels that of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. In Frank Lentricchia’s view, these High Modernists represent “modernism’s internationalist ideal: a cosmopolitan poetry of tradition, comparative literatures and cultures strongly propelled by distaste for native ground.” While Wharton was suspicious of the iconoclastic innovations of this younger generation, she shares with many of them an “internationalist ideal” and a “distaste” for much of American culture.

Wharton expresses a particular disdain for Americans who chase the trappings of European elegance with none of its substance. Moving from hotel to hotel abroad, the Belknaps and their society embody what Wharton had criticized earlier in The Custom of the Country and its protagonist, Undine Spragg. Like the Belknaps, she can be found at the Nouveau Luxe Hotel, a type of public hotel that exemplifies a paucity of “taste.” According to Carol Wershoven, “The nightmare women of the hotels haunt Wharton because they represent an obliteration of inner spirit.” The ostentatious lifestyle repulsed
Wharton who considered such public displays of wealth a regression in social habits; furthermore, she disapproved of those “exhilarated by the yearly stream of new faces” (BG, 953). Wharton valued instead a closely-knit group of friends: “My idea of society was (and still is) the daily companionship of the same five or six friends, its pleasure is based on continuity” (BG, 953).

When the war arrives, many Americans are travelling in Europe and demonstrate a range of altruistic and selfish behaviors. Wharton depicts their varied responses in The Marne, but emphasizes primarily their self-absorption. Josephine Belknap and her friends respond to the startling events of the late summer of 1914 primarily by resenting the inconvenience. While her son follows the news reports avidly, Mrs. Belknap and her crowd “regard the war as mere background to their personal grievances” (M, 15). These American tourists care only about their own safety and little about France, despite the fact that it is their home several months each year. They give to charities and yet otherwise seem oblivious to the extremity of the situation. Fleeing the country becomes difficult after mobilization:

Mrs. Belknap, in her horrified surprise at seeing her plans again obstructed, lost all sense of the impending calamity except as it affected her safety and Troy’s, and joined in the indignant chorus of compatriots stranded in Paris, and obscurely convinced that France ought to have seen them safely home before turning her attention to the invader. (M, 17)

These Americans have the absurd notion that France could have waited for foreigners to depart. These women become increasingly laughable in their concerns for personal security and material goods: “Of course I don’t pretend to
be a strategist,’ whimpering or wrathful ladies used to declare, their jewel-boxes clutched in one hand, their passports in the other, ‘one can’t help feeling that if only the French government had told our Ambassador in time trains might have been provided’” (M, 17-18). These scenes illustrate not only Wharton’s pointed criticism of her compatriots but also the abrupt shattering of peace, which places these characters in a confusing new situation.

As in “Coming Home,” Wharton stresses the importance of viewpoint in interpreting individual wartime responses. Troy becomes belligerent toward his mother’s friends. The novel’s narrator, however, situates Troy’s anger toward his mother and her friends in the wider perspective of their eventual support of France:

The choristers were all good and kindly persons, shaken out of the rut of right feeling by the first real fright of their lives. But Troy was too young to understand this, and to foresee that, once in safety, they would become the passionate advocates of France, all the more fervent in their championship because of their reluctant participation in her peril. (M, 18-19)

The guilt implicit in their “fervent” support, once they are safe, provides an ironic commentary on the forces that shape American opinion. These descriptions are comic or conciliatory, and they lighten the critique of Americans.

Following the narrator’s defense of these “good and kindly people,” Wharton incorporates a scene depicting the distress of refugees who are arriving in Paris. The fashion-conscious Americans form a striking contrast to the “haggard . . . fugitives” arriving from Paris during the early weeks of war (M,
To escape the frustration he feels with his American compatriots, Troy goes for walks; however, he encounters more distressing scenes:

But in the streets was fresh food for misery; for every day the once empty vistas were filled with trains of farm-wagons, drawn by slow country horses, and heaped with furniture and household utensils; and beside the carts walked lines of haggard people, old men and women with vacant faces, mothers hugging babies, and children limping after them with heavy bundles. The fugitives of the Marne were pouring into Paris. (M, 19)

Wharton emphasizes war’s radical rupture with earlier social stability. The abruptness of this transformation leaves the wealthy expatriates stranded in Paris and the displaced, impoverished refugees seeking a safe haven. While the exiles are concerned with their babies’ hunger, the Belknaps worry about what to do with their jewels should the Germans enter the city.

Amid this welter, Wharton underscores that some Americans accept more responsibility than official neutrality acknowledges. Troy discovers some of his fellow countrymen going off to the Foreign Legion:

A motley band of civilians, young, middle-aged and even gray-headed, were shambling along together, badged and beribboned, in the direction of the Invalides; and above them floated an American flag. Troy flew after it, and caught up with the last of the marchers.

‘Where are we going? . . . Foreign Legion,’ an olive-faced ‘dago’ answered joyously in broken American. ‘All ‘nited States citizens. . . . Come and join up, sonnie . . .’ And for one mad moment
Troy thought of risking the adventure. (M, 20-21; Wharton’s ellipses)

Troy realizes, however, that “he was too visibly only a school-boy” (M, 21). The Italian patois suggests that many newly naturalized Americans are barely removed from their European roots. The “motley band” illustrates that the international community includes not only wealthy travelers but also those whose recent ancestors and even current family still live in Europe. Wharton, however, does not address the issue that many Americans’ closest familial ties are with the Central Powers.

After this encounter, Troy returns to his mother’s apartment and is startled by the contrast of this “motley band” with those who seem more worried about their possessions than about the refugees. His mother’s friends once again display a comic self-absorption:

When he got back to his mother’s drawing-room the tea-table was still surrounded, and a lady was saying: ‘I’ve offered anything for a special train, but they won’t listen . . .’ and another, in a stricken whisper: ‘If they do come, what do you mean to do about your pearls?’ (M, 21)

The tragicomic tone emphasizes their bewilderment in the face of the rapid onset of war. These characters voice surprise that their money cannot solve their dilemma. They seem to have no sense of what a German occupation means, and they are absurdly out of touch with the scenes going on around them in Paris. These alternating vignettes contrast the incongruous communities of displaced persons: tourists, emigrants, and refugees. The novel’s structure juxtaposes a scene of spoiled Americans to one of displaced refugees, and then it offers one of
altruistic volunteers. The progression underscores the reactionary stance of this work, which emphasizes that France was victim to the invading Germans, rather than a country welcoming the opportunity to avenge the Franco-Prussian war. These alternating scenes further emphasize that Americans were negligent toward this violated nation and should have joined the Allied Armies earlier than 1917. The mixture of disturbing scenes, while highly critical, is not without empathy for all involved.

Wharton’s commentary on the cultural changes that war brings to France extends to a depiction of a typical French family, characterized here with the values of humor, tradition, devotion, and patriotism. Families like this form the national foundation and are a source of wartime strength. As part of French provincial society, the Gantiers are keepers of the orderly and beautiful landscapes described in *Fighting France*. This clan animates for an American audience, who may know the war only through news reports, the abstract facts of occupation and war. Wharton illustrates how their earlier life is destroyed by political events.

Early in the novel while Troy is just a child, he and his parents visit the Gantiers, his tutor’s family, while on a drive to the Swiss Alps. Their home rests on the “edge of a gabled village in the Argonne, with a view stretching away for miles toward the Vosges and Alsace,” areas in which the war would be waged (M, 6). Years later Troy remembers them vividly. He reads the communiques in the windows of the Paris *Herald*:

And one day, among the names of the ruined villages, he lit on that of the little town where they had all lunched with the Gantiers. He saw the box-garden with the hornbeam arbour where they had
gone to drink coffee, old M. Gantier ceremoniously leading the way with Mrs. Belknap; he saw Mme. Gantier, lame and stout, hobbling after with Mr. Belknap; a little old aunt with bobbing curls; the round-faced Gantier girl, shy and rosy; an incredibly dried and smoked and aged grandfather, with Voltairean (sic) eyes and sly snuff-taking gestures; and his own friend, the eldest of four brothers. (M, 12-13)

They are a comically endearing family, and they demonstrate the richness of their national culture. The grandfather’s “Voltairean eyes” allude to the national history of lively intellectual and political debate that challenges the status quo. Wharton hints that, like the French people she depicts in *Fighting France*, this family possesses French “expression,” the skill of finding a means of communicating ideas and questioning the establishment even while supporting the war effort.

Simultaneously, the Gantiers embody a concept that Wharton explains in *French Ways and Their Meaning*; specifically, they are members of a “race of artists” who have created over numerous centuries a refined way of life and a cultural environment that is “not art— but it is the atmosphere in which art lives, and outside of which it cannot live. It is the regulating principle of all art, of the art of dress and of manners, and of living in general, as well as sculpture or music” (FWM, 52). The family represents the values that Wharton illustrates as underpinning Western civilization, an integration of fine living and tradition, as well as intellectual and creative energy. The grandfather appears to be a man who would recognize life’s “ironies and beauties” (BG, 1061).
The Gantiers are not unlike the Réchamp family in “Coming Home,” but the story of the tutor’s family does not offer as strong a sense of hope and endurance. Wharton draws the connection between individual families and French civilization more explicitly here than in the earlier work. Troy seems instinctively to understand that the Gantiers live in an extraordinary “atmosphere.” He had admired this provincial world from the window of his chauffeured car and stepping into it deeply affects him:

Troy himself was hardly aware of these emotions at the time, though his hungry interest in life always made him welcome the least deflection from the expected. He had simply thought what kind jolly people the Gantiers were, and what fun it was to be inside one of the quaint stone houses, with small window-panes looking on old box-gardens that he was always being whisked past in the motor. But later he was to re-live that day in all its homely details. (M, 6-7)

As a boy, he cannot fully appreciate how this home resonates with cultural richness, but he comes to this understanding years later. Troy seems intuitively to recognize that these simple citizens enrich not only those in French society but also others who come into contact with them. If these families are destroyed, then civilization is diminished. In essence, French culture rests not only upon great aesthetic achievements, like the cathedral at Chartres, but within families like the Gantiers.

The fate of this typical French family conveys the change in civilization as war disperses them and some members are killed. When Troy later visits their village, his
heart was beating hard as the motor rattled over the hills, through villages empty of their inhabitants, like those of the Marne, but swarming with big fair-haired soldiers. The land lifted and dipped again, and he saw ahead of him the ridge once crowned by M. Gantier’s village, and the wall of the terraced garden, with horn-beam arbour putting forth its early green. (M, 63-64)

The soldiers are beginning to rebuild and replant, and spring comes again. The farmland and villages animate Gantier’s claim for his country’s resilience: “France is the phoenix-country” (M, 39).

This élan, however, contrasts with the burned church which completes, though with a different metaphor, the unstable implications of the “unmoored” cathedral that had occurred to Troy’s imagination years earlier. In fact, he finds that the town was virtually leveled:

Everything else was in ruins: pale weather-bleached ruins over which the rains and suns of three years had passed effacingly. The church, once so firm and four-square on the hill, was now a mere tracery against the clouds; the hospice roofless, the houses all gutted and bulging, with black smears of smoke on their inner walls. (M, 64)

The spiritual and social center of the town has been gutted. This world, which had so enchanted Troy and increased his understanding of what life might be, now lies in ruins. While the “big fair-haired soldiers” suggest regeneration, the church, presumably devoid of its windows, stands as “a mere tracery against the clouds,” a skeleton of its former self.
The Gantier village bears out the novel’s characterization of the war as “the crash of falling worlds” (M, 82). Wharton emphasizes that despite the community’s tenaciousness some families are permanently lost, never to reunite and reclaim their homes. One of the French soldiers who was from the community states matter-of-factly of the Gantier home: “There’s where they were a year ago. . . . Yes, you may say: there’s a family gone—wiped out. How often I’ve seen them all sitting there, laughing and drinking coffee under the arbour! They were not rich, but they were happy, and proud of each other. That’s over” (M, 66). With startling finality, the Gantiers seem eradicated. Much later, however, Troy locates Madame Gantier in Paris. Though now housed in a squalid room, she and her sister keep a modest shrine of family photographs honoring their men who have died fighting. The family’s disintegration and the mother’s persistence suggest the contradictory elements of a society that is ravaged and yet shows a remarkable determination to maintain some semblance of what was lost.

Throughout The Marne, Wharton continues to contrast scenes of the decimation of France with ones demonstrating its persistence. When Troy visits the region where the first Battle of the Marne had occurred, he recalls the area’s former vibrancy and compares that to its present diminished condition:

Fresh in his mind was a delicious July day at Rheims with his tutor, and the memory of every detail noted on the way, along the green windings of the Marne, by Meaux, Montmirail and Epernay. Now, traversing the same towns, he seemed to be looking into murdered faces, vacant and stony. Where he had seen the sociable gossipping (sic) life of the narrow streets, young men lounging at the
blacksmith's, blue-sleeved carters sitting in the wine-shops while their horses shook off the flies in the hot sunshine of the village square, . . . where all this had been now only a few incalculably old people sat in the doorways and looked with bewildered eyes at strange soldiers fulfilling the familiar tasks. (M, 24-25)

As in *Fighting France*, the description emphasizes that while the old life is suspended, new ways of meeting fundamental needs spring up. Similar to Gantiers' village, here soldiers work to restore the domestic front. The sympathy these bewildered people evoke amid this new world creates an emotive context that vivifies the war's radical rupture with the ways of life that had been in place for centuries.

After Troy's trip to the Marne region, he must return home to America. From his boyish yet insightful perspective, Americans in the United States, like those who were temporarily stranded in Paris, evince a detached involvement that typifies their incongruous response to the war. Some Americans treat the war like another interesting diversion, merely a topic of conversation, a subject of propaganda lectures, and another theme for fund-raising activities. At Mrs. Belknap's lavish dinner parties, these Americans voraciously seek the latest arrival, who had been nearer the front, or had raised more money, or had had an audience of the Queen of the Belgians, or an autograph letter from Lord Kitchener. No one was listened to for long, and the most eagerly sought-for were like the figures in a *moving-picture show*, forever breathlessly whisking past to make way for others. (M, 36; Wharton's emphasis)
While admitting the financial generosity of Americans, Wharton criticizes the limits of their genuine engagement with and understanding of the war in Europe. Troy found his mother’s New York “buzzing with war charities, yet apparently unaware of the war. At least that was Troy’s impression” (M, 32). At parties, “the pretty women and prosperous men would interrupt their talk, and listen for a moment, half absently, with spurts of easy indignation that faded out again as they heard the story oftener” (M, 34). The paradox of “easy indignation” suggests that they are emotionally removed from the struggle. This society craves “fresh tales of tragedy”; they “wanted something newer . . . different . . .” (M, 34-35; Wharton’s ellipses). These Americans and their diversions differ markedly from the Gantiers, especially in regards to the old, “Voltairean” grandfather. The calm beauty and cultural tradition of France appear far richer than the surface entertainments these Americans seek.

Wharton’s allusion to the “moving-picture show” suggests that war is treated as an amusing diversion. This reference to cinema recalls Paul Fussell’s insight that to many combatants World War I resembled theatre. Viewing the war as staged, whether in terms of cinema or theatre, illustrates its drama, yet allows one to regard it as unreal or to perceive oneself as a spectator, thus implicitly removed from the action. The cinema, in Wharton’s view, is one of “two world-wide enemies of the imagination.” Apparently unable to appreciate the possibilities of cinema as an emerging art, Wharton reveals a conservative resistance to this artistic innovation. According to Ferro, many intellectuals considered film “the escapist genre.” Their attitude reveals an aversion to the mechanized art form: “This ‘machinery for Helots,’ as Georges Duhamel termed it, was not considered capable of creating works of art worthy of notice. When
cinema was not vulgar, it was reproached for its slavish imitation of the theatre and castigated for being ‘recreative’ rather than creative.” In Wharton’s view, cultural decline would have a direct effect on the inner life of this nation. A person’s interior world is fostered through what she identifies as “les choses de l’esprit; which cannot quite be translated ‘things of the spirit,’ and yet means more nearly that than anything else” (FWM, 49). The cinema, as a ‘recreative’ medium, undermines “things of the spirit.”

This distinction between “recreative” and “creative” is crucial. Many artists had died during the war, and the generative cultural environment for which Paris had been famous was atrophying. As Ferro explains, the “censorship and paper shortages alone cannot account for the precipitous remission in cultural production and intellectual activity: whereas 141 philosophical publications appeared in 1914, no more than 49 came out in 1918.” In short, “high culture itself became sterile during the war.” Such a severe degeneration in the European artistic and intellectual community made it all the more important that young writers, painters, and composers acquire the accumulated knowledge of their crafts as inherited through previous generations.

At this juncture, however, the cinema thrived, becoming the entertainment of choice for many soldiers. Wharton incorporates these issues in The Marne by depicting the popularity of the cinema. In Paris, Troy sees young soldiers “wooed by the polyglot sirens in the obscure promiscuity of cinema-palaces” (M, 77). Wharton’s disapproval of the “siren” call of “recreative” entertainment suggests her concern that young imaginations will be stunted by the lack of cultural nourishment. Years later in “Permanent Values in Fiction” she argues that “a long course of cinema obviousness and of tabloid culture has
rendered the majority of readers insensible to allusiveness and to irony” (UCW, 179). She delineates wartime cultural shifts that would culminate in the “flapper” era, which she critiqued as an intensely “tabloid culture.”

In *The Marne*, Wharton’s antidote to the cultural crisis lies in the metaphor of the cathedral window. While tutoring his American student, Gantier advocates sustained and multivalent attention: “Whatever happens, keep your mind keen and clear; open as many windows on the universe as you can” (M, 39). For Gantier, windows signify intellectual vibrancy and freedom. Troy agrees with this philosophy of French intellectual curiosity, admitting that “France had been the biggest of those windows” (M, 39). In essence, this country “was his holiday world, the world of his fancy and imagination, a great traceried window opening on the universe” (M, 10-11). A “traceried window” suggests a labyrinthine and highly-developed style, which is representative of French cultural evolution. The metaphor of the cathedral window recurs in subtle ways throughout the novel. Troy, for instance, admires the “window box” of the Gantiers and later laments the bittersweet beauty of the “traceries” of the Gantiers’ town’s burned church. The war is not just about saving France but about sustaining this “window opening on the universe” (M, 10). In essence, the fundamental differences between American and French societies are embodied in Wharton’s metaphor for each: the French imagination is shaped by the traceried cathedral windows while the American is shaped by the moving-picture.

Wharton’s analysis of wartime’s cultural transformation extends to the questioning of patriotic sermons and the underscoring of the problematic nature of communicating war experiences. She explores the gradations of self-expression. As the conversations at the Belknaps’ parties indicate, Wharton
examines the adaptations of American, as well as French, language during these years. Perspective and conversations change given the opportunity to serve in the war, whether as a combatant or noncombatant. While Wharton again depicts the duplicity of war rhetoric, the youthful and idealistic Troy adopts inflated language and yet demonstrates a preference for the evocativeness of factual information.

Like many war writers and Modernists, Wharton disdains patriotic slogans and formulas, preferring instead the concrete language of place. Troy’s perspective offers an insight into the negotiation between the language of the prewar generation and the more spare style that this war helped to popularize. Intimately familiar with France, Troy translates the reportorial language to a more complex grasp of the significance of war’s events, thus illuminating for Wharton’s American audience the implications of news reports. For Troy, the towns listed in the war dispatches summon specific memories from his travels: every name in the bulletins—Amiens, Compiègne, Rheims, Meaux, Senlis—evoked in Troy Belknap’s tortured imagination visions of ancient beauty and stability. He had done that bit of France alone with M. Gantier the year before, . . . and the thought of the great stretch of desolation spreading and spreading like a leprosy over a land so full of the poetry of the past, and so rich in a happy prosperous present, was added to the crueller vision of the tragic and magnificent armies that had failed to defend it. (M, 16-17)

Integrating the metaphors of visual and linguistic beauty, Wharton demonstrates how names become meaningful and shape responses. While Troy reconstructs a
dramatic scene simply by reading factual war reports, his responses underscore the contradictions of war, both lingering “poetry” and encroaching “leprosy.”

The novel’s title, simply the name of a place where two battles occurred, suggests Wharton’s awareness of the resonance of a single name. The dramatic expression of this occurs when Troy and his mother visit the land where the first Battle of the Marne was fought. As the staff-officer who acts as their guide describes the events of that conflict, Troy wavers between getting the facts and following the officer’s “every word and gesture with a devouring gaze that absorbed at the same time all the details of the immortal landscape” (M, 26). He struggles to understand what this place and its name have come to signify.

As in Fighting France and “Coming Home,” the bucolic and seemingly normal landscape belies the violent events that unfolded there. Troy’s boyish, fervent imagination responds to this experience:

The Marne—this was the actual setting of the battle of the Marne! This happy temperate landscape with its sheltering woods, its friendly fields and downs flowing away to a mild sky, had looked on at the most awful conflict in history. Scenes of anguish and heroism that ought to have some Titanic background of cliff and chasm had unrolled themselves among harmless fields, and along wood-roads where wild strawberries grew, and children cut hazel-switches to drive home their geese. A name of glory and woe was attached to every copse and hollow, and to each gray steeple above the village roofs. (M, 26-27)

Troy grasps the intricacies of war and resilience, violence and rebirth, which echo the suggestive phoenix imagery of Fighting France and foreshadows his own
experience years later on this same land. Terms like “glory and woe” exemplify the inflated rhetoric that many Modernists rejected. Simultaneously, this phrase encapsulates the fervent attitude of the young Troy and highlights the perplexing nature of war.

The power of language and place is fundamental to this crucial scene. In the repetition of “The Marne . . . the Marne” Wharton illuminates Troy’s apprehension of a single name to represent the complexities of war. Before they leave this battleground, Troy discovers Paul Gantier’s grave, an event which he keeps to himself. Once again, the sacredness of names enters Troy’s thoughts:

Mrs. Belknap stood with her back to him, and he did not ask her to turn. He did not want her, or anyone else, to read the name he had just read; of a sudden there had been revealed to him the deep secretiveness of sorrow. But he stole up to her and drew the flowers from her hand while she continued, with vague inattentive murmurs, to follow the officer’s explanations. She took no notice of Troy, and he went back to the grave and laid the roses on it. (M, 30)

A simple, quiet tribute intensifies the moment and reveals an underlying homoeroticism that Fussell has identified as common to the narratives of this war. Troy expresses the tenderness he feels for his former tutor via silence rather than vehement exhortations. Wharton negotiates between the idealizing terminology of her own generation and the emerging attention to more “concrete” language.

As in her early war works, Wharton continues to critique war rhetoric. When Troy is in America, he finds a paradoxical and frustrating situation in which lively discussions of war offer little more than a minimal understanding of
its implications. At the tennis courts or during parties, events in Europe are treated as a source of entertainment: “he heard the same incessant war-talk, and found the same fundamental unawareness of the meaning of the war” (M, 32). The “incessant war-talk,” contrasts with the “expression” of the lively and evocative French discussions in Fighting France.

Wharton emphasizes her critique of American rhetoric by revealing its potentially duplicitous nature. During an Easter party, a “sonorous” Senator had just returned from Europe and was “rolling out vague praises of France and England” that soon turn “insidiously . . . to hint that it was a pity to see such wasted heroism, such suicidal determination on the part of the allies to resist all offers of peace from an enemy so obviously their superior” (M, 37). The senator is a man of words, and his false mask of support for the Allies is apparent in the discourse that lacks genuine support for France. Infuriated by the Senator, Troy insists that America could change the balance of power in the war in favor of the Allies. The response is laughter.

America appears to be a country wherein vacuous, and even subversive, war rhetoric radiates from the government and into the educational system. At Troy’s school, the authorities give a talk on the need to stay out of conflict:

The masters were mostly frankly for the allies, but the Rector had given out that neutrality was the attitude approved by the government, and therefore a patriotic duty; and one Sunday after chapel he gave a little talk to explain why the President thought it right to try to keep his people out of the dreadful struggle. The words duty and responsibility and fortunate privilege recurred
often in this address, and it struck Troy as odd that the lesson of the
day happened to be the story of the Good Samaritan. (M, 33)
Troy recognizes the irony in preaching a parable about the value of helping
strangers and then lecturing on isolationism. Of course, the United States
government later declared it their citizens’ patriotic duty to serve in this war. The
Rector’s use of such terms as “duty and responsibility” and even “patriotic duty”
to argue against entering the war illustrates the malleability of abstractions.

At school, Troy frequently talks about the war and France, but his
language expresses genuine, rather than political, motives. He tells his friends
about his visit to the site of the first Battle of the Marne: “At first the boys were
very keen to hear his story, but he described what he had seen so often—and
especially his haunting impressions of the Marne—that they named him ‘Marny
Belknap,’ and finally asked him to cut it out” (M, 32). His knowingness and
talkativeness suggest a boyish zeal that verges on the overbearing, yet his
enthusiasm has a precocious charm. His verbose descriptions demonstrate an
effort, in part, to rectify what he sees at his parents’ home and his school as
insufficient support for the Allies.

The conversation of the senator and the loquaciousness of Troy contrast
with the habits of an American girl among his crowd whose attitude and
language embody a more pragmatic stance. Sophy Wicks responds with disdain
to war talk. An orphan, she takes care of her siblings and an infirm grandmother.
Other girls are “war mad” and, after America joins the conflict, talk incessantly
about it (M, 45). Wicks, however, refuses to discuss it and says the topic bores
her. When Troy asks her why, she explains her position:
‘Because it does, my boy; and so do you, when you hold forth about it.’

He was silent, and when she touched his arm with the tip of her swinging tennis-shoe. ‘Don’t you see, Troy, it’s not our job—not just now, anyhow. So what’s the use of always jawing about it?’ (M, 49-50)

Though Troy does not understand at this moment, she is taking the attitude that action, not words, matter. He later appreciates her “ironic eyes” and learns that, without telling her friends, she has completed a nursing course at Presbyterian Hospital (M, 62). When her family situation changes, she goes to France as a nurse.

After a couple of years in America, Troy finally is given permission by his parents to serve in the ambulance corps. On this trip, his shipboard life at age eighteen differs markedly from his voyages as a boy. While literary voices populate his childhood trips, his wartime voyage is inhabited by Americans whose once voyeuristic excitement has now become ignorant war rhetoric. They unhesitatingly voice their vehement determination to improve France, yet their claims are undercut by inexperience and facile symbols: “Very few of the number knew France or could speak French, and most of them were full of the importance of America’s mission. This was Liberty’s chance to Enlighten the World; and all these earnest youths apparently regarded themselves as her chosen torch-bearers” (M, 58-59). In Fighting France, Wharton had expressed her opinion of this symbol, denigrating the national icon as “a pompous statue of a goddess with a torch” (FF, 177). The American youths speak with “glowing condescension” about France’s need for American intervention not only on the
battlefield but also in the home (M, 59). Wharton’s depiction of the closely-knit Gantier family reveals the emptiness of the American rhetoric. While most of these characters talk knowingly of Europe and its history, their conversation reflects their limited education. In this way Wharton suggests, as she had in Fighting France, that language, education, and intelligence comprise facets of the same enterprise.

Wharton’s assessment of her compatriots, however, allows not only for insightful girls like Wicks and mouthy patriots like Troy, but also for characters who embody the potential of war’s transformative effects. One American, in particular, undergoes a remarkable metamorphosis resulting from her contact with French soldiers at the front. On Troy’s Atlantic voyage, Hinda Warlick stands out amid the crowd. Her lack of education is apparent; for instance, she asserts that “Joan of Arc was a Revolutionary hero” (M, 61). In another absurd scene, she pronounces Rheims as “Rams” (M, 62). Despite her amusing ignorance, she holds forth without hesitation about what France might learn from her and other Americans. Warlick expresses what Wharton apparently conceives as American attitudes toward the French. This naive voice considers the world in the simplest of terms: “We must carry America right into the heart of France—for she has got a great big splendid heart, in spite of everything,’ Miss Warlick declared. ‘We must teach her to love children and home and the outdoor life; and you American boys must teach the young Frenchmen to love their mothers” (M, 61). Unlike Troy, for whom the names of cities conjure detailed images of France and its history, this young woman draws conclusions based on limited understanding.
Warlick, however, acquires insight as she travels to canteens along the front lines, causing her to become reflective as she talks about her experiences at the hospitals. When Troy encounters her months later, she has reversed her earlier ideas, asserting that the French love their families and are worth fighting for. She self-deprecatingly observes about her shipboard orations “How I gassed to them” (M, 98). She gains the understated speech patterns of the war zone. When she briefly describes the valor of the French, she acknowledges that the audience is resistant to such exhortations and observes, “you want me to cut it out” (M, 97). She has become aware of what Sophy Wicks knew all along: action matters more than words. She has honed her speech-making skills now to include stillness: “She paused long enough to let the silence prepare them: sharp little artist that she was! Then she leaned forward” (M, 97). While she still has an emotional tone, she speaks from experience and from facts.

The American emotional responses to the war that Wharton depicts range from boredom, to robust condescension, to “ghoulish glee” (M, 33). Each of these provides an incongruous alternative to the matter of fact conversational style prevalent among those with direct knowledge and experience of the war. As Warlick’s example shows, Americans can gain experience and learn to discuss the war with less distortion. Wharton illustrates the power of facts, names, and understated diction to evoke what empty rhetoric cannot.

While Wharton reveals an understanding of the value of concrete language and a disdain for uninformed formulas, her tendency in this novel is to incorporate elaborate and even didactic descriptions that are more characteristic of inflated language. Filtered through the young and idealistic Troy, the novel
articulates the prewar assertions that war is about honor and that fighting is the means to future glory. He dreams of being French because he thought what a wonderful help it must be to have that long rich past in one’s blood. Every stone that France had carved, every song she had sung, every new idea she had struck out, every beauty she had created in her thousand fruitful years, was a tie between her and her children. These things were more glorious than her battles, for it was because of them that all civilization was bound up in her, and that nothing that concerned her could concern her only. (M, 40)

Wharton employs terms like “glorious” to express the intensity of Troy’s admiration for France. This country’s cultural achievements bind each citizen to the whole and the world to France because it has benefitted from her intellectual and aesthetic achievements. Because of Troy’s ability to appreciate these “humanest graces,” he is frustrated with his country’s neutrality and with the fact that he is not a French citizen.

Troy feels at odds with his fellow Americans. When one of his uncles argues that “every young fellow wants to go out and kill something,” the boy is repulsed by the misapprehension of his motives:

They thought he regarded the war as a sport, just as they regarded it as a moving-picture show! As if anyone who had even a glimpse of it could ever again think with joy of killing! His boy’s mind was sorely exercised to define the urgent emotions with which it laboured. To save France—that was the clear duty of the world, as he saw it. But none of these kindly careless people about him knew
what he meant when he said ‘France.’ (M, 38-39; Wharton’s emphasis)

Troy exhibits defensiveness, condescension, and patriotism for France. While he has an “eye” for French culture, he shows no understanding of the complications and ironies of international relations and trench warfare. He feels a revulsion at its mere “glimpse” and does not fully grasp its realities, claiming simply that “To save France—that was the clear duty of the world.” Troy’s reductive stance seems naive considering the complex national alliances that caused the war to become a global conflict. His perspective lacks the discernment apparent in Wharton’s description in Fighting France when she likens war to a labyrinthine world lived “in the strange parentheses between the roars” (FF, 161).

Troy’s emotionality reveals teenage angst intensified by the unusual circumstances under which he comes of age: war and the death of his closest friend. Paul Gantier is not only his tutor but also his intimate companion. Troy is fifteen when Gantier goes to war. When the tutor announces that he is departing, Troy is shocked:

He was just out of his bath, and smothered in towels, when the tutor opened the door and thrust in a newspaper.

‘There will be war—I must leave tomorrow.’

Troy dropped the towels. (M, 8)

Troy responds viscerally. They enjoy a passionate connection and familial closeness. Troy, for instance, tries to take care of Gantier’s mother and aunt, and he has a headstone put at Paul’s grave.

Troy witnesses the eruption of war in a country that is not his home but to which he feels profound emotional allegiance. His concerns are about not being a
soldier in the war machine. In fact, despite his assertion of a lack of desire to kill, he fervently wants to be a soldier: ‘He remembered the anguish of regret with which he had seen M. Gantier leave St. Moritz to join his regiment, and thought now with passionate envy of his tutor’s fate. ‘Dulce et decorum est . . .’ The old hackneyed phrase had taken on a beauty that filled his eyes with tears” (M, 52). While he denies a desire to kill, his enthusiasm resembles that of Henry Fleming, the quintessential adolescent American soldier in Stephen Crane’s The Red Badge of Courage (1895). Fleming “had, of course, dreamed of battles all his life–of vague and bloody conflicts that had thrilled him with their sweep and fire.”18 Troy integrates some of the passion of Fleming while rejecting animalistic pleasure-seeking through battle.

One cannot read this allusion within the context of World War I, however, without considering its accusatory power in Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce Et Decorum Est”:

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,-
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.19

The gruesome truth of the poet’s words incorporates Wharton as one of that parental generation. Her war writings offer less graphic imagery of the brutality of war. Though she illustrates the power of abstract ideals here, she suggests
elsewhere that words like “glory” and “honor” are problematic. Wharton stands between the two generations, giving voice to the perspective of the elders and yet admitting to the situation and attitudes of the young. Finding a fresh means of expression is difficult when grieving and trying to negotiate between grim realities and maudlin formulas.

Wharton offers an antithetical mixture of cultural loyalties as she blends a modern critique of dehumanizing warfare with a persistent belief in patriotism and the individual hero. Wharton establishes early in the novel Troy’s unequivocal willingness to die for France, long before he goes into battle. As a young teenager visiting the area of the first battle of the Marne, Troy loses sight of the nasty violence of war and recalls its presumed glory. He even waxes poetic as he

suddenly remembered a bit from Henry the Fifth that M. Gantier had been fond of quoting:

And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us.

Ah, yes–ah, yes–to have been in the battle of the Marne! (M, 28)

Troy filters the war through his knowledge of history and literature, even ironically of English conflicts with the French. His naive enthusiasm emerges from noble speeches, the very discourse that would seem so absurd in the context of dehumanizing trench warfare.

The basis for Troy’s allegiance consists of the “inner life” that France has helped him develop and that enriches Western civilization. Before the United
States had entered the conflict, he regarded American anti-war sentiment with a jaundiced eye: “there was always the odd belief that life-in-itself-- just the mere raw fact of being alive--was the one thing that mattered, and getting killed the one thing to be avoided” (M, 44). Troy’s remarks point to the apparent incomprehension among many Americans of the overarching and perplexing issues at stake. Their attitude left him pessimistic and bewildered him as much as it disgusted him, since it did away at a stroke with all that gave any interest to the fact of living. It killed romance, it killed poetry and adventure, it took all the meaning out of history and conduct and civilization. There had never been anything worth while in the world that had not had to be died for, and it was as clear as day that a world which no one would die for could never be a world worth being alive in. (M, 44)

His allegiance to France becomes so profound that his dedication to her survival exceeds the sanctity of human life. He maintains the ideal of fighting to preserve a civilized world, an attitude often mocked by writers like Owen.

While such idealism might be attributed to his youth and naivete, similar sentiments appear elsewhere in Wharton’s wartime writings. Specifically, Troy’s words echo Wharton’s commentary in the final essay of Fighting France where she proposes that the French keep in perspective “real values”:

Enamoured of pleasure and beauty, dwelling freely and frankly in the present, they have yet kept their sense of larger meanings, have understood life to be made up of many things past and to come, of renunciation as well as satisfaction, of traditions as well as experiments, of dying as much as of living. Never have they
considered life as a thing to be cherished in itself, apart from its reactions and its relations. (FF, 230)

The integration of what is “past and to come” suggests a belief in the ultimate importance of the cultural whole. While the French live according to these ideals, they nonetheless wrestle with competing claims for individual and communal “reactions and . . . relations” amid war’s upheaval of social structures and the threat of an abbreviated life. Troy embraces this stance, and his fate must be understood through this philosophy.

Unlike many of the Modernists who also portray this disparity, Wharton maintains in The Marne a conservative prewar belief in the French cause and the honor it implies. Troy maintains his devotion to France and derives great satisfaction from being an ambulance driver. His response to the suffering around him is markedly different than it was when he first witnessed it in 1914:

Troy Belknap, instead of hanging miserably about marble hotels and waiting with restless crowds for the communiqués to appear in the windows of the newspaper offices, was in the thick of the retreat, swept back on its tragic tide, his heart wrung, but his imagination hushed by the fact of participating in the struggle, playing a small dumb indefatigable part, relieving a little fraction of the immense anguish and dreadful disarray. (M, 76)

Troy feels more at peace because he draws satisfaction from making a contribution. When he was loitering and reading, he was adrift. Now, he finds himself more at peace, despite being amid the paradoxes of war’s often minute, vacillating victories and defeats.
His work has a peculiar anonymity in simply following orders and driving back and forth to the front. His endeavors nonetheless afford poignant intimacy with a cross-section of those affected by war, including babies, wounded soldiers, and the elderly. He finds his place in this chaotic life where he is satisfied by

The mere fact of lifting a wounded man ‘so that it wouldn’t hurt’; of stiffening one’s lips to a smile as the ambulance pulled up in the market-place of a terror-stricken village; or calling out ‘Nous les tenons!’ to whimpering women and bewildered old people; of giving a lift to a family of foot-sore refugees; of prying open a tin of condensed milk for the baby, or taking down the address of a sister in Paris, with the promise to bring her news of the fugitives: the heat and the burden and the individual effort of each minute carried one along through endless yet breathless hours—backward and forward, between Paris and the fluctuating front, till in Troy’s weary brain the ambulance took on the semblance of a tireless gray shuttle humming in the hands of Fate . . . (M, 76; Wharton’s ellipsis)

Troy’s experiences underscore the vigorous, disturbing, and wearying struggles of the Allies. His travel to and from the front resembles the continual motion of the assembly line as he drives “a tireless gray shuttle humming in the hands of Fate.” Despite the violence and confusion of this diaspora, Troy finds himself a part of this peculiar community in a way that had eluded him when he lurked about newspaper bureaus waiting for the latest information about the front.

In Paris, Troy joins in the revivification of night life. After America declares war, his father visits. When the young man suggests going to a club, his
father is shocked by this cavalier attitude. Troy realizes that “America’s young
zeal might well be chilled by the first contact with this careless exuberance so
close to the lines where young men like himself were dying day by day in order
that the curtain might ring up punctually on the low-necked revues, and fat
neutrals feast undisturbed on lobster and champagne” (M, 75). Wharton offers in
this brief description a remarkably intricate analysis of the awful contradictions
of Paris, a refuge only hours from the front. Nightclubs serve an incongruous
mix of clientele, from soldiers and hospital workers on leave to indulgent,
afluent “neutrals.” Wharton highlights the awful irony that so many young men
on nearby battlefields seem to have died only to preserve the lascivious pleasures
of indifferent consumers. While Wharton critiques them, she expresses an
understanding of the soldiers’ and war workers’ need for some distraction.

A passionate young man, Troy is “sustained by a mysterious secret faith
in the strength of his cause” (M, 51). This “faith” culminates in a dream vision in
which he is reunited with his French tutor and thus symbolically with all who
have fought for France. Troy’s “secret faith” reflects the supernatural stories told
by many French soldiers. Ferro writes that a “patriotic mysticism constitutes one
of the most striking features of cultural life in these war years.”

Ferro quotes a French painter, Henri Lavedan who exclaims:

I believe in the courage of our soldiers, in the wisdom of their
leaders . . . I believe in the power of our just cause, in this crusade
for civilization. I believe in the blood of wounds, in the water of the
benediction. . . . I believe in the great past and our greater future. I
believe in our fellow citizens, alive or dead; I believe in ourselves, I
believe in God. I believe, I believe.
The clipped phrases and emphatic repetition of “believe” signify an attitude that verges on the hysterical and that operates outside of rational thought. Lavedan’s devotion suggests an elision between living and dead, as both are united in the objective. Gantier also depicts the membrane between life and death as permeable when he calls France “the phoenix country” (M, 39). The resurrection metaphor becomes central to the novel’s conclusion. This allusion to mythology recalls Wharton’s assertions in Fighting France and in “Coming Home” that France possesses an élan that will ensure her survival.

Driving out on the day the second Battle of the Marne begins, Troy finds himself in an area where Allied troops are retreating: “Troy’s breast swelled with the sense of the approach to something bigger than he had yet known. The air of Paris, that day, was heavy with doom. There was no mistaking its taste on the lips. It was the air of the Marne that he was breathing” (M, 85). Troy knows it is a pivotal time in history and wants to be “a soldier in the great untried army of his country. It was something—it was a great deal—to be even the humblest part, the most infinitesimal cog, in that mighty machinery of the future” (M, 86). The role of the soldier unfolds in the modern terms of mechanized warfare. Troy accepts this fact and is willing, even desirous, of joining the endeavor. Wharton thus offers an antithetical blend of the rhetoric of Henry the Fifth with the characterization of the individual as a cog in this “machinery of the future.”

While Troy fears for his life, he performs his task and is wounded by an unseen enemy, an event that recalls scenes in Fighting France where the Germans were invisible. The encouragement of his fellow Americans prompts him to join their ranks, providing him with a chance to become a combatant and hero. After his ambulance breaks down, he watches a regiment of American
soldiers driving to the front, and they call him to join their ranks. He takes up a rifle left by a wounded soldier and goes off with the troops to battle.

Troy, however, experiences a confusion of roles and allegiances. In the field, he remembers his duty to the ambulance corps and tries to rescue a wounded soldier from the battlefield:

Troy raised his head an inch or two and looked about him. In the east, beyond the wheat, a pallor was creeping upward, drowning the last stars. Anyone standing up would be distinctly visible against that pallor. With a sense of horror and reluctance and dismay he lifted the wounded man and stood up. As he did so he felt a small tap on his back, between the shoulders, as if someone had touched him from behind. He half turned to see who it was, and doubled up, slipping down with the wounded soldier in his arms. . . . (M, 122; Wharton’s ellipsis)

Wounded on 18 July 1918 during the fighting of Château-Thierry, Troy participates in the second Battle of the Marne, the decisive engagement that turned the Germans back and led to Allied victory. Wharton does not present an elaborate or hyperbolic battle scene; rather, Troy’s wounding occurs as a simple “tap” of a bullet. This pared down rhetoric contrasts with Troy’s effusive attitude toward becoming a hero and is more in keeping with the reportorial style that would typify much of this war’s fiction. Wharton condenses the interplay of demonstrative and understated discussion, as well as the intertwined roles of community and individual agency.
Troy finally unites with his own fellow American soldiers as he joins their regiment, but he also joins with his former tutor. When he is shot, Troy thinks he sees and hears Gantier:

The soldier wore the uniform of the chasseurs à pied, and his face was the face of Paul Gantier, bending low and whispering: ‘Mon petit—mon pauvre petit gars . . .’ Troy heard the words distinctly, he knew the voice as well as he knew his mother’s. His eyes shut again, but he felt Gantier’s arms under his body, felt himself lifted, lifted, till he seemed to float in the arms of his friend . . .’ (M, 127; Wharton’s ellipses)

This fictional French soldier, who continues to fight on the battlefield even after death, contrasts with those real soldiers engaged in the mutinies of 1917. Wharton excludes from this novel images of military protest and offers instead an affirmation of the underlying dedication to the war effort that is apparent in the restraint with which the soldiers demanded a better conducted war. In her next novel, A Son at the Front, Wharton will offer a less reactionary perspective, even depicting the harm endured by soldiers at the hands of the officers, doctors, and government.

The fantastic construct of dead soldiers assisting live ones on the battlefield represents one of many parallels between Wharton’s works and those of other war writers. While recovering at the hospital, Troy is told that an unidentified officer carried him to safety. Though dead, Troy’s former tutor magically intervenes for his American student and saves his life. On the battlefield, separated from loved ones and caught in the anonymity of trench warfare, the soldiers create a strange new community. According to Jay Winter,
many poets, film makers, and other artists imagined that “the dead formed their own army ‘to assist soldiers in the epic struggle.’” For example, Wilfred Owen’s ghost appeared to his brother in November 1918. Such spectral tales were commonplace lore about the battlefields. In his study of mourning and memorial, Winter finds that “Apocalyptic legends marked the first two years of the war. As the casualty lists lengthened and the war dragged on, the realm of the supernatural was dominated more by ghostly apparitions than by divine or demonic ones.” This development is hardly surprising, since the problem of coping with a war of annihilation through legends and tales had been eclipsed by the problem of mass bereavement in a war seemingly without end . . . The dead were literally everywhere on the Western Front, and their invasion of the dreams and thoughts of the living was an inevitable outcome of trench warfare.

Wharton conveys this obsession with the dead in Troy’s battle scene. He becomes initiated into the brotherhood of soldiers and the lore of the Marne where his tutor died. He realizes his dream of joining with French who have fought for their country and its civilization.

Troy comes to resemble those described in Fighting France, men who have seen battle and return “calm, meditative, strangely purified and matured” (FF, 41). In the novel’s final lines, a nurse urges Troy to “find” the mystery man who carried him to safety, and Troy thinks to himself that he will do just that on the battlefields of France. He does not tell his friends or the hospital staff his ghostly tale, even when they suggest that Gantier should get the Croix de Guerre; Troy “smiled a little when the doctor said: ‘Chances are a man like that hasn’t got
much use for decorations . . .” (M, 128; Wharton’s ellipsis). Troy’s muted smile, furthermore, reflects the altered attitudes of these men. With understated irony, Wharton shows the soldiers to be interested in winning the war, not winning acclaim. Troy’s transformation from the loquacious “Marny Belknap,” to the silent veteran of the second Battle of the Marne signals his coming of age (M, 32). Wharton underscores the irony that Troy’s maturation occurs just at the historical juncture when he may not live much longer and the culture for which he fights, embodied in the lush intellectual life he enjoyed with Gantier, seems to be in decline.

The meeting of ghosts on the battlefield signals at once both a dramatic break with prewar normalcy and an assertion of continuity so strong as to allow those from the past to meet with the living. Wharton expresses the rupture with earlier life common to the younger generation of writers and at the same time underscores the importance of and potential for maintaining a link with France of la belle époque. The precipitous end of the summer of 1914 and the ushering in of a significantly more mechanized warfare created a radical abridgement in the progression of cause and effect. While most adjusted to this new world, the discomfort from the most basic level of human needs to the more abstract level of spiritual experience continued throughout the war, as evidenced from the French strikes in 1917 and the battlefield ghost stories. Hynes explains the influence of the war’s heretofore inconceivable events:

The sense of a gap in history that the war engendered became a commonplace in imaginative literature of the post-war years. Poets and novelists rendered it in images of radical emptiness—as a chasm, or an abyss, or an edge—or in images of fragmentation and
ruin, all expressing a fracture in time and space that separated the present from the past.\textsuperscript{26}

While paralleling thematic issues of the younger generation, Wharton reiterates her predominately conservative agenda in this novel. Troy’s rescue at the hands of his dead tutor betokens the completion of the teenager’s long journey from his first visits as an American boy in a foreign land to a young man knowledgeable about French history and culture to finally a defender of this legacy. Gantier’s appearance on the battlefield signals France’s ultimate acceptance of Troy as a French compatriot. He becomes a part of the French tribe and a unique substrata within this people, those who while living have entered the world in which dead men walk. As Troy joins this peculiar community, Wharton’s narrative illustrates the war as giving rise less to moments of alienation than to rapprochement.

The Marne affirms the conservative belief in the war as necessary to defend civilization. Wharton demonstrates her frustration with the isolationism of the United States, yet she depicts Americans with sympathy. She reveals the complexity of her fellow citizens, who appear alternately frightened, generous, self-absorbed, and rather comic. Troy, a francophile who risks his life for France, provides an often satiric perspective on the cultural distinctions between France and America. These disparate civilizations are encapsulated in contrasting metaphors: the cathedral window and the moving picture. The former embodies the creative energies that fostered a remarkable French cultural flowering sustained for centuries; in contrast, Wharton considered the movies an entertainment not conducive to enhancing creativity. Understanding this distinction and the significance of the cathedral windows creates the context in which the novel’s supernatural conclusion can be understood. Europe offers the
opportunity for cultural enrichment, which brings a deep personal satisfaction for Americans whose own society, in Wharton’s experience, offers little.

America’s paucity of culture appears, for example, in the war rhetoric that closes rather than enlightens the mind. While Troy’s exuberance expresses itself in the language of heroic literature, Wharton integrates both the language of earlier generations who idealized warfare and the awareness of the diminished viability of such phrases as “patriotic duty.” She stresses the evocativeness of names and matter-of-fact language, emphasizing the vibrancy of concrete terms; Modernists would later develop this concept into a stylized technique.

The issue of alienation in this novel is recast so that it reveals an American boy’s disaffection with his own culture and yet incorporates a denouement that unites him with his adopted country. This novel, however, seems only obliquely influenced by the political events of 1917 that reveal both the tenacity of French soldiers and their disaffection from the circumstances and poor management of trench warfare. This conservative novel does little more than nod to the psychological suffering that drove French soldiers to their protests for better management of the war. In many respects, this novel is Wharton’s most reactionary statement on the war years.

Notes


2Keegan, 330.

3Keegan, 330. For a discussion of French government efforts to quell

4Ferro, 305.

5Keegan, 329.

6The Marne was serialized in the Saturday Evening Post in the fall of 1918 and published in December 1918. It garnered excellent reviews, but was popular only for a short time: “Initial sales were so strong that the book appeared to be a bestseller, but a spring 1919 quarterly royalty report from her publishers revealed that sales volume had not been sustained into the new year. Vice President Joseph Sears of publisher D. Appleton and Company voiced his disapproval of the public’s cool response: ‘It was almost grotesque to see the aversion which the American public had for purely war literature’” (Benstock, ‘Introduction,’ viii).

7Blake Nevius, for example, contends that the novel is banal and Wharton’s protagonist simply “a name, an ideal, a cause, and nothing more;” furthermore, he writes that Troy’s “desire for self-immolation on the altar of civilization merely furnishes Mrs. Wharton a pretext for belaboring her compatriots” (163-64). Similarly, R. W. B. Lewis narrowly comments that “The best of it, and this must have soon seemed dated, evoked Edith’s contempt for the imperturbably blindness of Americans back home during the war and the self-inflation of those who had glimpsed the devastated areas through the windows of a chauffeur-driven car” (Edith Wharton, 422).


9Wershoven, 113.
Several scholars have noted homoeroticism in Wharton’s war literature. See, for instance, Judith L. Sensibar, “‘Behind the Lines’ in Edith Wharton’s A Son at the Front: Re-Writing a Masculinist Tradition” in Wretched Exotic: Essays on Edith Wharton in Europe, edited by Katherine Joslin and Alan Price, (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 241-256; and, Mary Condé, ‘Payments and Face Values: Edith Wharton’s A Son at the Front” in Women’s Fiction and the Great War, edited by Suzanne Raitt and Trudie Tate (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 47-64. For further discussion of homoeroticism in the literature of World War I, see Fussell’s “Soldier Boys” in The Great War and Modern Memory, 270-309.


Ferro, 296.

Quoted in Ferro, 296.


26 Hynes, xi. See also Fussell, 21.
Chapter IV

The ‘Strange War-World” of Paris: A Son at the Front

And what we said of it became
A part of what it is . . .

Wallace Stevens, “A Postcard from the Volcano”

Edith Wharton’s final war novel, A Son at the Front, offers her most complex representation of the incongruities of war. In A Backward Glance, she expresses her hope that it would ‘live as a picture of that strange war-world of the rear, with its unnatural sharpness of outline and over-heightening of colour” (BG, 1057). As in The Marne, Wharton satirizes the privileged class while simultaneously idealizing soldiers and noncombatants who contribute unwaveringly to the war effort. A Son at the Front, however, depicts the corruption already present in prewar Paris and the opportunities that war might provide for self-indulgence. Wharton extends her portrayal of the complicated adjustment language undergoes in response to this war and highlights the paradox that the most significant utterances come not through rhetoric but through concrete vocabulary, as well as moments of silence and action. Much of the latter becomes apparent through soldiers who exhibit feelings of estrangement from society and their own families. Wharton, however, explores these relational issues not from the soldier’s point of view but primarily from that of a middle-aged father whose son serves at the front. Wharton elucidates the profound transformation of Paris during the war, including a range of experiences arising out of widespread grief and remarkable resilience. In A Son
at the Front, Wharton achieves her most accomplished dialog with ideas that would typify some of the younger generation’s literature.

The novel’s composition and publication history reflects the war era’s exhausting environment, as well as the postwar social transformation. In 1918 while recovering from a heart attack precipitated by the responsibilities and stresses of the previous years, Wharton wrote the first four chapters of *A Son at the Front*. Propelled by a “white heat of emotion,” she nearly completed the manuscript in the spring and summer of the following year (BG, 1056). The flagging sales of *The Marne*, however, suggested potential difficulty in marketing her new war novel, so she asked her publisher, D. Appleton and Company, to store the manuscript in its vault until readers once again became interested in war literature. For the most part, she completed the novel before she wrote *The Age of Innocence*, which won the 1921 Pulitzer Prize. In 1922, Scribner’s bought the war novel, serialized it later that year, and published it in book form in 1923. *A Son at the Front* literally and metaphorically is resurrected from the Appleton vault. Its quality elevates this work above the lesser accomplishments of Wharton’s short stories and her first war novel. Along with *Fighting France*, this last war work provides her most insightful and evocative writing about the war. Wharton’s imagination seems revivified, like the phoenix that Paul Gantier uses to describe France in *The Marne*. This novel offers a far more well-written and more complex engagement with the awful truths of this war, its mismanagement, and those who used the war to make themselves more prosperous and socially influential.

Many of Wharton’s war works articulate her view that French culture is extraordinary; now, after years of witnessing the country’s transformation, the
question became what remained to be saved. She loathed the noise and increasing pace of life in Paris, an attitude expressed in the musings of the protagonist John Campton, who despises telephones and other inventions that disrupt the quiet. By the time Wharton began writing *A Son at the Front*, she recognized that the era known as *la belle époque* had come to a close. Attentive to these transformations, she highlights the incongruities arising in these years of rapid social change as her adopted home was irreversibly altered.

Wharton suffered the loss of numerous friends and family members, including Henry James, Egerton Winthrop, her governess and secretary Anna Bahlmann, Henry Adams, and her youngest cousin Newbold ("Bo") Rhinelander. She dedicates both *The Marne* and *A Son at the Front* to another friend who died during the war: "Captain Ronald Simmons, A.E.F. who died for France August 12, 1918." While her earlier war books had emphasized the value of civilization, this novel illustrates the cultural costs and profound grief of these years.

Wharton turned to writing to help her through these personal sorrows. In *A Backward Glance*, she explains the motivations for composing her last war novel:

> My spirit was heavy with these losses, but I could not sit still and brood over them. I wanted to put them into words, and in doing so I saw the years of the war, as I had lived them in Paris, with a new intensity of vision, in all their fantastic heights and depths of self-devotion and ardour, of pessimism, triviality and selfishness. A study of the world at the rear during a long war seemed to me
worth doing, and I pondered over it till it took shape in ‘A Son at the Front.’ (BG, 1056)

These juxtapositions of “fantastic heights and depths of self-devotion and ardour, of pessimism, triviality and selfishness” characterize war as an amalgam of disparate forces and elements. She translates her “intensity of vision” into the protagonist’s vivid visual experiences, which provide a focal perspective and reveal the intricacies of the Parisian war world.

Central to this novel is the relationship between generations, represented most clearly in the dynamics of John Campton, an expatriate American painter, and his son George. While they rarely see each other, they are close. George has inherited some of his father’s “artist’s vision” (SF, 53). The tie between father and son rests largely on their shared aesthetic values. While Wharton had no children of her own, she was close to her young cousin “Bo” Rhinelander and her friend Simmons, both of whom died in the war. Their presence can be felt in this novel in the characterizations of George and of his friend Boylston. Before the war, Simmons, one of Wharton’s closest friends, had rejected the family business in favor of studying art history and painting. When he died in 1918, she was devastated. He and “Bo” represent the epitome of patriotism while simultaneously signaling an abridgement of hope for a civilized world wherein so many young artists and intellectuals are sacrificed to the war.

The physical description of George Campton resembles “Bo” Rhinelander. George is, as Annette Larson Benert argues, “the eponymous son cast aloofly, almost mystically, with the blond-haired boy-saints that Paul Fussell has demonstrated are identified with the sacrificial soldier of the Great War.” Unlike much of the war writing that Fussell discusses, A Son at the Front does
not portray the mind of the young soldier. Instead, the reader sees this war through the gaze of the older generation, via Campton. In *The Marne*, the narrative follows a young man yearning to be a soldier and his eventual experience in battle, a perspective removed from Wharton’s day to day life in Paris. In *A Son at the Front*, Wharton inverts the gaze represented in her previous novel to create the sense of distance that those on the home front feel from the soldiers’ worlds.

The novel depicts an odd mix of personalities and suggests that the war alters and intensifies relationships. The erosion of the prewar world is played out in personal terms. The novel does not depict battles, though they are ever-present in the background. Instead, this world conveys the transformation of life in Paris during the conflict and the difficult adaptations made by the inhabitants. The narrative follows John Campton who, as a result of his mother’s travel delays, was born in Paris. His wife Julia was raised on Madison Avenue, and they met in Europe. After Campton’s family lost their fortune, the couple chose to remain abroad, so he could pursue his painting career. They intended to return to America for the birth of their son George to “spare their hoped-for heir the inconvenience of coming into the world, like his father, in a foreign country” (SF, 27). Several years later Campton abandoned Julia while they traveled in Spain. He had grown bored with her. She divorced him, married the Paris-based American banker Anderson Brant, and retained custody of George. Brant, as a step-father, becomes in many respects more of a father to George than Campton. The family history signifies the varied allegiances that exist between America and Europe.
This second war novel roughly parallels the years that comprise the focus of *The Marne*; specifically, the narrative of *A Son at the Front* begins on the day before the declaration of war and ends in 1917, when Americans entered the conflict. In the first scene, John Campton studies a wall calendar with the date 30 July 1914. Campton’s sensitivity to everything around him, ironically, causes him to be easily influenced. His point of view is highly subjective as he vacillates about his son’s conscription, his fears about being able to communicate with George, his own restless self-absorption, and his opinions of the various subcultures of this city. His position as a famous painter, the ex-husband of a wealthy, American woman, and father of a young soldier brings Campton into contact with artists, influential travelers, soldiers, war workers, and a variety of Parisian citizens. The radical fracture with the prewar world is apparent in the lives of the people he knows.

Wharton’s title underscores the distance between home front and battlefront. She evokes the Paris of memory and imagination, with its competing and intertwined questions about language raised in this environment. The title itself, as Margaret Higonnet has argued, points to a “polarized verbal system” that “screens a more complex reality: if he is not ‘at home,’ he must be ‘at the front.’” *A Son at the Front* implies a double dislocation, absent children and absent parents, thereby drawing attention to the emotional space that separates them. Emphasizing the distance between the soldier on or near the battlefield and all others, this title conjures a mysterious place where young men live in trenches. Separated, families do not know whether the son is alive or dead.

The home front provides the setting for this novel. Mary Condé writes that for the expatriate Campton “At home’ is, however, a loaded phrase”
because he has no real home. Living in his austere painting studio, he “has the air of constantly camping out. . . . Campton is especially dislocated from any sense of home since he does not live with his adored son, sees little of his former wife Julia, has no other family in France, and enjoys no sexual relationship.” Campton wants his son “at home,” but he has no real home to offer him because he lives in an art studio. This creative space, as a metaphor for the arts, exemplifies the grounds upon which the father-son intimacy rests.

Campton does not provide his son with a “home”; nonetheless, George’s true place is with his father because they inhabit the same intellectual landscape. Campton first realizes that his son shares his love of beauty when George is twelve. Visiting his boy at the Brants, Campton found him “reading as only a bookworm reads” (SF, 19). Realizing this commonality, father and son begin to spend much more time together, and the “visible world, and its transposition in terms of one art or another, were thereafter the subject of their interminable talks” (SF, 20). Just as the Gantiers help perpetuate culture, this father and son demonstrate the passing of aesthetic sensibility between generations, making their shared world a true “home.”

Wharton redefines “home” within the politicized context of wartime, thereby re-conceiving the parameters of citizenship. John and George Campton, born to American families, share a republic that supersedes national borders and yet achieves its greatest flowering in France. They are citizens of the “republic of the spirit” described by Lawrence Selden in The House of Mirth. Wharton conveys through the “home” or “republic” shared by this father and son her own concept of France. In Europe, and particularly in France, she found both freedom and community, a place where one could rise above American anti-
intellectualism and materialism to “keep a kind of republic of the spirit” (HM, 108). This unique mental space represents an oasis in Wharton’s novels. She suggests that home may be defined by parameters other than national borders; nonetheless, those political boundaries help to create the atmosphere of “taste” that typifies France and fosters this republic. As a result, Wharton’s war writings illuminate both the need for military defense of these boundaries and the concept that humanity can transcend political distinctions.

In A Son at the Front, Campton demonstrates a belief in art as transcendent of political definitions. Whereas in Fighting France Wharton had primarily asserted that France did not want war, the central French character in A Son at the Front, John Campton’s best friend, Paul Dastrey, vehemently supports fighting Germany and asserts the French nation’s desire to avenge the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine. He is anxious to be a soldier and breathes “fire and fury” (SF, 10). His nephew Louis explains that

‘It’s the old festering wound of Alsace-Lorraine: Bismark foresaw it and feared it—or perhaps planned it and welcomed it: who knows? But as long as the wound was there, Germany believed that France would try to avenge it, and as long as Germany believed that, she had to keep up her own war-strength; and she’s kept it up to the toppling-over point, ruining herself and us. That’s the whole thing, as I see it. War’s rot; but to get rid of war forever we’ve got to fight this one first.’ (43)

This character articulates the questioning of France’s culpability in war’s outbreak. This dialog represents one of Wharton’s most direct criticisms of the French government’s role in the eruption of hostilities. While this young man,
who later dies in the trenches, believes the need to fight the war to avenge the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, Campton cannot see France in such terms.

The painter lives in a world where the beauty around him often seems more real than political events. His concerns center on his son and, to a lesser extent, his painting. Even at the war’s onset when Campton reads the newspapers, he focuses on articles that seem ominously reassuring. Campton absorbed the reassurance without heeding its quality: it was a drug he had to have at any price” (SF, 32). A concerned parent, he seeks to alleviate his fears about losing his son. Campton’s response echoes that of Wharton in Fighting France. For her, Chartres cathedral had provided a “tranquilizing power . . . [in its] utterance of strength and beauty” (FF, 5). Just as she had suggested the rich heritage of French civilization in descriptions of Chartres cathedral, so Campton derives some reassurance in the artificial “drug” of the city’s beauty.

Campton has the “gift of the seeing eye” and filters the world through his sight. Campton perceives a city at ease with its celebrated fountains and beauty:

The mere fact that the midsummer sun lay so tenderly on Paris, that the bronze dolphins of the fountains in the square were spraying the Nereids’ Louis Philippe chignons as playfully as ever; that the sleepy Cities of France dozed as heavily on their thrones, and the Horses of Marley pranced as fractiously on their pedestals; that the glorious central setting of the city lay there in its usual mellow pomp—all this gave him a sense of security. . . . (SF, 33; Wharton’s ellipsis)

The Horses of Marley were sculpted by Guillaume Coustou in the 1740s and when created were the greatest innovation in outdoor sculpture since the
sixteenth-century gardens of Italy. They stand guard at the entrance to the Champs Elysées. This elegant scene, with French history and Greek mythology captured in these famous landmarks of Paris, illustrates the marvels of French culture, which act on Campton as a “drug” creating a false sense of security. Ironically, the sculpture simultaneously foreshadows the effigy that Campton will be asked to create in memory of his son. The comfort he takes from these visual cues accentuates his blindness to the painful facts: his son will shortly leave for war and Paris will be for the next four years the capital of a nation at war.

The disjunction between perception and actuality illustrates the cognitive dissonance created as the beautiful summer of 1914 suddenly gives way to warfare. This rapid shift causes a sense of unreality so profound that “the world seemed to lie under a spell” (SF, 40). In a similar episode portrayed in A Backward Glance, Wharton describes Paris on the eve of mobilization as “an unknown world” (BG, 1033). Campton becomes disoriented as parents discuss the radical changes that war brings to their families, the “uncanny rapidity with which events were moving” (SF, 37). The city was at once oddly deserted and bustling with activity. All the men had gone home to prepare to leave immediately for their regiments. When Campton goes back to his hotel, he is surprised to find “no one behind the desk: one would have said that confusion prevailed in the hall, if its emptiness had not made the word incongruous” (SF, 36-37).

Campton’s disorientation in the shifting social landscape derives, in part, from the fact he is well into middle age. He notices that he and his generation are no longer on center stage. At a party, he listens as parents and their adult
children discuss mobilization and war: “But the older men said little. The youngsters had the floor, and Campton, as he listened to George and young Louis Dastrey, was overcome by a sense of such dizzy unreality that he had to grasp the arms of his ponderous leather armchair to assure himself that he was really in the flesh and in the world” (SF, 42-43). As though to underscore the slowness of his generation to comprehend the new developments, John Campton must grip the “ponderous” chair to still his dizziness. Wharton signals the social shift from the elder generation to the “youngsters” who become the voice of authority on the burgeoning war.

In descriptions of Campton’s responses, Wharton repeatedly emphasizes the paradoxical and disorienting eruption of war. His usual coping strategies are inadequate to adjust to the transformation of Paris. For an old painter, he relies on his eyes, but his visual acuity becomes impaired:

Usually any deep inward trouble made him more than ever alive to the outward aspect of things; but this new world in which people talked glibly of sons in the war had suddenly become invisible to him, and he did not know where he was, or what he was staring at.

(SF, 40)

The diminishment of Campton’s visual powers suggests the dilemma of the artist whose skills become superfluous while those of the soldier become paramount to the nation. Just as Wharton did not write fiction during the early months of the war, Campton cannot paint. He feels utterly lost: “his only two reasons for living were gone: since the second August he had had no portraits to paint, no son to guide and to companion” (SF, 71). Both his position as a father and his skills as an artist seem obsolete in these early days of the war.
Wharton was in touch with the contemporary discussion of artists’ responsibilities in wartime and whether they should add their voices to the public mobilization. In a gift book she edited, *The Book of the Homeless* (1916), William Butler Yeats contributed a poem entitled “A Reason for Keeping Silent,” which argues for noninterference on the part of artists. He voices a minority opinion among the gift book’s contributors, but raises this issue which Wharton finally addresses in this novel at the end of the war.

Campton’s dilemmas and vacillations portray the conflicted responses of artists in wartime. Even artists not sent off to military duty become incapacitated by the advent of war, which jeopardized the arts in insidious ways. For a while, Campton believes that “If ever there came a time for art to interpret the war, as Raffet, for instance, had interpreted Napoleon’s campaigns, the day was not yet; the world in which men lived at present was one in which the word ‘art’ had lost its meaning” (SF, 71). Campton tries to make sense of these upheavals through his understanding of the artist’s place in history. The assertion that “the word ‘art’ had lost its meaning” recalls the widespread shock that seemed to render incongruous the things of civilized life, such as honor and creativity, amid the anxieties and horrors of this war.

As in *The Marne*, Wharton addresses the decline in the arts; however, she makes this issue central to the plot. The narrative positions this situation within the larger context of Campton’s life, which extends back into the Parisian art world of the late nineteenth century. This aspect of prewar Paris is not idealized; rather, its false and shallow trends create an environment often hostile to new artists. Wharton describes the passing of an older generation, represented by the
ironically named Beausite, who corrupts the arts by selling out to commercial concerns.

When Campton had arrived in Paris as a young man, he tried to get the attention of Beausite, an established painter whom he admired. The master, however, was not accepting new students, so Campton struggled on in obscurity and poverty:

If he could get near enough to Beausite, the ruling light of the galaxy, he thought he might do things not unworthy of that great master; but Beausite, who had ceased to receive pupils, saw no reason for making an exception in favour of an obscure youth without a backing. He was not kind; and on the only occasion when a painting of Campton’s came under his eye he let fall an epigram which went the round of Paris, but shocked its victim by its revelation of the great man’s ineptitude. (SF, 7)

Beausite’s fame belies his paucity of talent, knowledge, and integrity. Campton’s lack of success, however, had little to do with his talent and much to do with his lack of financial resources. Eventually, the arts community comes to recognize his work.

In Wharton’s analysis of the changing art world, she juxtaposes the impostor who obtains commercial success with the genuine artist. When Campton finally gains the attention of the art world, it is for the portrait of his son:

The picture seemed to its author to be exactly in the line of the unnoticed things he had been showing before, though perhaps nearer to what he was always trying for, because of the exceptional
interest of his subject. But to the public he had appeared to take a
new turn; or perhaps some critic had suddenly found the right
phrase for him; or, that season, people wanted a new painter to talk
about. Didn’t he know by heart all the Paris reasons for success or
failure? (FF, 7)

Campton’s experience highlights the vagaries of the public appetite for artists.
Unlike Fighting France or The Marne, which offer a rather idealized view of
prewar Paris, this novel illustrates its petty commercialism and trendiness.

While Campton’s story shows the difficulty of making a living as an artist,
the novel underscores the personal difficulties of those who were not established
before the conflict began. Wharton characterizes the war as an environment in
which artists not only might have trouble working but also may be called to
serve as soldiers, often leaving their families without financial support. To
alleviate this situation George’s friend Boylston, identified only by his last name,
creates The Friends of French Art to aid artists and their families.

Wharton emphasizes the importance of the arts and elucidates the
ravaging of the creative life of France. Campton meets French painter René
Davril, who was wounded in battle. When Davril dies, Campton considers it
“one of the most senseless crimes the war had yet perpetuated.” (SF, 83). He
exclaims

‘Ah, you want genius, do you? Mere youth’s not enough . . . and
health and gaiety and courage; you want brains in the bud,
imagination and poetry, ideas all folded up in their sheath! It takes
that, does it, to tempt your jaded appetite?’ He was reminded of the
rich vulgarities who will eat only things out of season. ‘That’s what war is like,’ he muttered savagely to himself.’ (SF, 83)

While men like Beausite survive, many young, talented painters, writers, and musicians die. Campton rages at the lost potential for future artistic achievement and the perversity of young people dying.

Beausite and the arts world constitute only one aspect of the social universe Wharton explores in this novel. She returns to the paradoxes of corruption amid war’s great sacrifices. Campton begins to socialize with a group of expatriates who provide subjects for him to paint, but through these associations he becomes aware of the selfishness that exists alongside altruism in Paris society. As in “The Refugees” and The Marne, Wharton portrays the self-indulgence that exists even in extraordinary times. The atmosphere where Campton’s new crowd gather is “mirage-like,” an insubstantial oasis amid the reality of wartime Paris (SF, 124). Campton’s friend Paul Dastrey, who works steadily for the war effort, points out that these expatriates have never been genuinely concerned about the war: “they’ve never, not one of ‘em, ever been able to remember it for an hour together; no, not from the first day, except as it interfered with their plans or cut down their amusements or increased their fortunes” (SF, 125). Campton, however, has been completely obsessed with the war and unable to paint, but with these people he finds himself distracted for a time and can paint again. His debilitating fears prompt him to seek relief and “to drug himself with work and frivolity. It was none of his business to pry into the consciences of the people about him” (SF, 125).

He is fascinated by Madame Daisy de Dolmetsch who exemplifies the spoiled expatriate. She joins with those who begin to hold salons and seek
entertainment, trying to escape the war. Her lover’s death devastates her, but she recovers and exhibits a seductive and serpentine devilishness: “On a sofa stacked with orange-velvet cushions Mme. de Dolmetsch reclined in a sort of serpent-coil of flexible grey-green hung with strange amulets. Her eyes, in which fabulous islands seemed to dream, were fixed on the bushy-haired young man at the piano” (FF, 172). Wharton illustrates the painter’s acuity in this vivid scene.

Daisy, having lost her lover to the war, turns her alluring, reptilian attentions to a new young man.

Daisy typifies these superficial people who, according to Carol Wershoven, cannot distinguish “false from true. These Wharton characters live without ties to history or culture and cannot participate in France’s communal effort in any sustained way.” Daisy, for instance, quickly tires of her charity work and seeks diversions; her contributions amount to little more than mere play. Her home resembles a “scented lair” far “from the sights and sounds of the hospital” (SF, 85). Even when she wears her nurse’s uniform, she appears to have a “theatrical imitation” of a nurse’s face (SF, 109). As Wershoven points out, this collection of “aristocrats without heritage, climbers without culture, has so blurred the line between genuine value and market price that it has lost all guidelines.” Daisy is without “heritage”; her name reveals that an American girl has married into some undefined European aristocracy. Her first and last names together provide an incongruous mixture that contrasts the common American name with that of the titled European, a concept reinforced by the allusion to Henry James’s titular character, the charming and flirtatious Daisy Miller. While Daisy de Dolmetsch’s brief appearance in this novel does not raise the ambiguities of James’s satire of Euro-American encounters, both women
seem relatively superficial amid the highly evolved customs of European societies.

The war does not destroy this society; rather, its participants simply adapt. Wharton contrasts the spoiled rich, who lack national allegiances and contribute little to the French war effort, with the soldiers, who become more altruistic and brave. The cultural life of France centers around these men, and noncombatants’ social behaviors are scrutinized in relation to what happens at the front.

Wharton contextualizes these self-indulgent characters with a portrait of those who become altruistic during the war. They appear simultaneously world-weary in their knowledge of the front and idealistic in their desire to make the world a better place. Just as Wharton suggests in Fighting France, many civilians try not to appear “unworthy” of the soldiers’ suffering (FF, 41). Many of Campton’s friends find war work after the soldiers are mobilized. His ex-wife, for instance, joins the committees of numerous war charities. Most of Campton’s other friends and associates become volunteers and devote their time to listing and packing hospital supplies, keeping accounts in ambulance offices, sorting out refugees at the railway-stations, and telling them where to go for food and help; still others spent their days, and sometimes their nights, at the bitter-cold suburban sidings where the long trail-loads of wounded stopped on the way to hospitals of the interior. There was enough misery and confusion at the rear for every civilian volunteer to find his task. (SF, 72)
The war prompts widespread commitment to the national effort, even among those who are not French citizens. While the work is often grueling, the chance to be productive can enrich the lives of those who join the convoluted philanthropic network.

Campton’s friend Adele Anthony, like Audrey in “The Refugees,” transforms from an ineffectual spinster into a woman who makes a substantive contribution to soldiers and their families by “working eight or nine hours a day in a Depot which distributed food and clothing to refugees from the invaded provinces” (SF, 72). A longtime friend of the Brants and of Campton, her relationship with this blended family is complex. George is as near to a son as she will ever have, and he regards Adele as an aunt. While she is friends with Campton’s ex-wife, she has an unrequited and unexpressed love for Campton. Not until the war does she finally express, however subtly, her devotion. When George is wounded, she and Campton embrace in their sorrow:

He held her there for a long moment, stroking her lank hair, and saying ‘Adele–Adele,’ because in that rush of understanding he could not think of anything else to say. At length he stooped and laid a kiss on her lips the strangest kiss he had ever given or taken; and it was then that, drawing back, she exclaimed: ‘That’s for George, when you get to him. Remember!’ (SF, 143)

Her kiss synthesizes feelings for the father, whom she presumably wanted to marry, and the son, who might have been her step-son had she married Campton. In this moment, she reveals her emotions and immediately sublimates them to send to the wounded George. While the war ages Adele Anthony, she
finds deep satisfaction in her work and finally relinquishes her secret love for Campton.

Paul Dastrey is another character whose life becomes enriched amid the suffering and grief. He desperately wants to be soldier, but is too old: “Dastrey, after vain attempts to enlist, thwarted by an untimely sciatica, had found a post near the front, on the staff of a Red Cross Ambulance” (SF, 72). After he spends “three months of hard service in Postes de Secours and along the awful battle-edge,” he changes from a man consumed by “a frenzy of baffled bloodlust” to one with “the professional calm which keeps surgeons and nurses steady through all the horrors they are compelled to live among. Those few months had matured and mellowed him more than a lifetime in Paris” (SF, 101). Frontline experience can elicit profound transformation. While the conflict suspends the prewar life of a nation, these extraordinary times allow for individual development into more selfless and grounded adults.

Wharton depicts the home front as a place where some, like Dastrey and Adele, exemplify a vibrant philanthropic spirit. Others, like Dolmetsch, typify self-indulgence and greed. Campton believes that most in France were part what he calls

the huge obscure majority; out there in the night, the millions giving their lives for this handful of trivial puppets, and here in Paris, and everywhere, in every country, men and women toiling unweariedly to help and heal; but in Mrs. Talkett’s drawing room both fighters and toilers seemed to count as little in relation to the merry-makers as Miss Anthony and Mlle. Davril in relation to the
brilliant people who had crowded their table into the obscurest
corner of the room. (SF, 177)

Personalities become more pronounced in their virtues and flaws because of the
exigencies of wartime. The drawing room of Mrs. Talkett and the “lair” of Daisy
create an environment wherein real value, as embodied by the soldiers and war
workers, diminishes in relation to those seeking only entertainment.

These “trivial puppets” had been eroding fundamental “principles” of
civilization long prior to the war, and their power grew during the war, as is
evidenced by the influence of Cyril Jorgenstein. Betraying her anti-Semitism,
Wharton portrays Jorgenstein as a shady financial speculator who has taken
advantage of the upheaval to parlay his network of multinational business
relationships into greater personal influence and status. The financier, however
questionable his allegiances, makes himself valuable: “If the government
tolerated Jorgenstein’s presence in France, probably on the ground that he could
be useful—so the banker himself let it be known—it was silly of people like Adele
Anthony and Dastrey to wince at the mere mention of his name” (125).

While Jorgenstein’s business dealings are never outlined, his dubious
reputation hints at the corruption of devoting one’s time to making money.
Campton finds him “whining at the interruption of [his] vile pleasures or [his]
viler money-making” (SF, 11). He apparently maintains a “vast web of . . .
financial relations” that are likely to extend beyond his base in Paris to Vienna
and Frankfort (SF, 41). Campton wonders “what side would a cosmopolitan like
Jorgenstein” support (SF, 16). Unlike Dastrey who gains a “worn and
preoccupied” look from his war work, Jorgenstein has an “air of bloated
satisfaction” and drops the names of “Cabinet Ministers and eminent statesmen”
to impress his friends (SF, 124). He is knighted by the British government and is rumored to be in line for the French Legion of Honor. By the end of the novel, Jorgenstein has transformed himself into “the world-renowned philanthropist” in the public eye, but Campton knows his generosity is driven by a desire for power and prestige. Campton dryly supposes that Jorgenstein’s conscience is buried so deeply that to find it ‘one would presumably have had to be let down in diver’s suit, with oxygen pumping at top pressure” (SF, 125).

The cultural changes that Wharton identifies in Paris create an environment within which unusual alliances emerge. For instance, the high-brow Mrs. Brant befriends Jorgenstein in order to ask his help in getting permission for her husband to visit George at his post. She needs to know her son is safe. John Campton watches his ex-wife leave an afternoon party with Jorgenstein, a relationship that exemplifies of what Campton terms “strange war promiscuities” (SF, 127). This affiliation between the promoter and Julia Brant, his ex-wife, is implicitly sexual and signals a departure from prewar social codes. The term “promiscuous” implies sexual indiscretions, but it also denotes an “indiscriminate mixture” or things “confusedly mingled.” 12 The social realignments speak to Wharton’s perception that war is an incongruous environment.

Just such an unhappy convergence occurs when Jorgenstein contributes a substantial sum to The Friends of French Art, an organization formed to provide relief to the families of artists. This presumably generous gesture, however, is contingent upon the transfer of power to his friends Harvey Mayhew and Madame de Dolmetsch. They plan to embezzle these funds for their own gain. The industrious and altruistic Boylston surrenders his position to the mercenary
Dolmetsch. While Campton finds the intrigues and corruption at the Friends of French Art disturbing, his son George shows little interest. Despite his close friendship with the ousted Boylston, George is “curiously unperturbed. He seemed to have taken the measure of all such ephemeral agitations, and to regard them with an indulgent pity which was worse than coldness” (SF, 197). George’s indifference suggests the relative lack of importance of the “agitations” at the rear when compared with what is happening in the trenches.

In Wharton’s depiction of wartime Paris, corruption mixes and interferes with philanthropy, resulting in disorientation and doubts that make the old beliefs seem spurious. Wharton parallels the overthrow at The Friends of French Art with the corruption that drove Europe to war. Filtered through Campton’s perspective and in the context of this coup, Wharton records the questioning in Paris about whether the war was begun for good reason:

As the month dragged on a break of luke-warmness had begun to blow through the world, damping men’s souls, confusing plain issues, casting a doubt on the worth of everything. People were beginning to ask what one knew, after all, of the secret motives which had impelled half-a-dozen old men ensconced in Ministerial offices to plunge the world into ruin. No one seemed to feel any longer that life is something more than being alive; apparently the only people not tired of the thought of death were the young men still pouring out to it in their thousands. (SF, 196)

The pettiness of some at the rear contrasts with the relentless determination of the soldiers. This dedication seems the more absurd and yet admirable when the catalyst can be found in “the secret motives” of those “old men.”
Campton questions his right to encourage young men to war. He suggests that his generation feels culpable and yet helpless: “Men of our age are the chorus of the tragedy, Dastrey; we can’t help ourselves. As soon as I open my lips to blame or praise I see myself in white petticoats, with a long beard held on by elastic, goading on the combatants in a cracked voice from a safe corner of the ramparts” (SF, 103). While the imagery is comic, Campton’s assertion makes a vital point. Those too old to serve in war suffer from feeling extraneous with little to offer but words of encouragement. Like a Greek chorus they cannot intervene in events, but only tell the tale.

Campton’s musings on the corruption of some of his wealthy friends in Paris cause him to face unsettling paradoxes of wartime. Throughout the novel, he has toyed with the idea that war might prove a benefit. He observes that “all societies rose and fell,” yet the “point was to remember that the efficacy of the sacrifice was always in proportion to the worth of the victims; and there at least his faith was sure” (SF, 104, 105). The attempt of a few well-connected people to embezzle the funds of The Friends of French Art undermines his conviction of the “efficacy of the sacrifice.” With all of its death and suffering, war has not yielded the preservation of civilized life that was a presumed objective. He conceives of the situation in vivid images and becomes sickened by it:

It was not merely the affair itself, but all it symbolized, that made his gorge rise, made him, as Boylston said, sick to the point of wanting to chuck it all—to chuck everything connected with this hideous world that was dancing and flirting and money-making on the great red mounds of dead. He grinned at the thought that he
had once believed in the regenerative power of war—the salutary shock of great moral and social upheavals. (SF, 176)

He comes to believe that war does not stand as one of the “turning points of progress” that he had envisioned to have shaped the world (SF, 105). He tries to make sense of this war’s impact on and readjustment of his generation’s world view, discarding a belief that war’s “salutary shock” would lead to greater human progress.

Campton exemplifies the burgeoning psychology of doubt that marks one of the most significant transformations of the war years. Modris Eksteins explains that as a result of the violence and corruption of the war years “the war’s meaning began to be enveloped in a fog of existential questioning [and] the rational connections of the prewar world—the nexus, that is, of cause and effect—the meaning of civilization as tangible achievement was assaulted, as was the nineteenth-century view that all history represented progress.” Campton’s rejection of the “regenerative power of war” suggests a recognition that the war itself and the human failures it revealed shook the underpinnings of faith in the humanity’s ability to improve itself.

Concurrent with this questioning, Campton grapples with his son’s mortality. After George is wounded, John spends months in an army hospital with the young soldier. At first he is expected to die, and then he slowly recovers. During this time, Campton had clung to the conviction that this suffering was a necessary and honorable contribution to the war effort:

Yet he had believed it, and never more intensely than at George’s bedside at Doullens, in that air so cleansed by passion and pain that mere living seemed meaningless gesture compared to the chosen
surrender of life. But in the Paris to which he had returned after barely four months of absence the instinct of self-preservation seemed to have wiped all meaning from such words. (FF, 176; Wharton’s emphasis)

Even with the sacrifices, no rapid victory resulted from the call to arms in 1914, and the grinding day to day effort for survival will not bring great social amelioration. Despite Wharton’s continuing assertion that the war was necessary, she demonstrates that any belief in the efficacy of war is a ludicrous illusion. These philosophical questions are so profound as to unsettle the “meaning” of words that express dedication to the war effort.

Wharton addresses multiple shifts in language, the diminishment of some words’ effects, and the new meanings that other idioms express. When Campton hears the phrase “a son at the front,” he shudders and worries about the soldiers: Winter was coming on, and he was haunted by the vision of the youths out there, boys of George’s age, thousands and thousands of them, exposed by day in reeking wet ditches and sleeping at night under the rain and snow. People were talking calmly of victory in the spring—the spring that was still six long months away! And meanwhile, what cold and wet, what blood and agony, what shattered bodies out on that hideous front, what shattered homes in all the lands it guarded! (SF, 63)

While the trench descriptions in Fighting France are not as graphic, Campton’s mental images animate some of what Wharton must have witnessed during those early travels along the front. She positions these insights from the perspective of parents who know the war only through letters, rumors, and news
reports. In this way, she underscores the power of language to evoke the mystery and fear with which the parents regard the front where their children are fighting.

This novel expresses Wharton’s strongest indictment of war rhetoric. She reiterates her critique of the vacuous self-involvement of the elite and their use of inflated language to hide their fundamental “indifference” (SF, 175). Wharton portrays the diplomatic failure of words in the character of Harvey Mayhew, a loud and brash American delegate to the Peace Council. He embodies the rhetorician who is style with little substance. Corruption appears via those who animate war discussions with contrived emotion.

Mayhew first arrives in Paris on his way to the prewar Peace Conference; however, Campton’s advice that the safest route to the Hague is via Luxembourg leads to Mayhew’s arrest and restraint for one night in a German jail. When he returns, he claims to have come from a German prison, but in reality he was merely detained for eight days at his hotel. He dramatically wipes his forehead with a “scented handkerchief.” Then he exclaims, “When I was finally released I was without money, without luggage, without my motor or my wretched chauffeur—a Frenchman, who had been instantly carried off to Germany. In this state of destitution, and without an apology, I was shipped to Rotterdam and put on a steamer sailing for America” (SF, 78). Mayhew utterly disregards the plight of the real prisoner of war, his chauffeur. The novel’s silence on the chauffeur’s situation seems ominous. Like The Marne’s “sonorous” Senator, Mayhew voices concerns, but his words reveal the falseness of his rhetoric.

Mayhew embodies much of what Wharton criticizes as the use of rhetoric to cover for a lack of truth and compassion. He parlays his experience into a
position on the lecture circuit. While his speeches raise funds for the war, his primary interest appears to be gaining attention. For both Mayhew and his circle of privileged multinationals, his talks provide entertainment that appears acceptable because it masquerades as philanthropy. When he ceases to give his atrocity lectures, it is because their “novelty” has vanished (SF, 175).

While Mayhew’s presence represents the disjunction between words and effective engagement in the war effort, those who actively participate often become reluctant to make pronouncements. Dastrey, for example, hesitates to judge whether George Campton, the son of an American mother and a father raised in America, has a duty to serve in the French army. When Campton asks Dastrey whether he believes George should be forced to serve at the front, Dastrey hesitates to identify what is honorable in this situation. He remarks, “I was considering how the meaning had evaporated out of lots of our old words, as if the general smash-up had broken their stoppers. So many of them, you see, . . . we’d taken good care not to uncork for centuries. Since I’ve been on the edge of what’s going on fifty miles from here a good many of my own words have lost their meaning, and I’m not prepared to say where honour lies in a case like yours.” (SF, 101)

Dastrey points to his experiences as a surgeon working near the front as the source of his reluctance. The proximity to the battlefront reveals the absurdity of abstractions, such as honor, among the realities of this war. Encountering war affects Wharton’s characters so profoundly as to shift such fundamental concepts and expressions as “honour.” Like many war writers and Modernists, Wharton
regards the war as such a “smash-up” that what might have seemed self-evident before the conflict now is rendered obscure.

While Wharton portrays such attitudes, this novel asserts that George’s “honour” lies in his service at the front. More precisely, George himself, the ultimate judge, regards this as his duty. Without a word to his family, the young man makes this decision at the start of the war, but only after he is severely wounded does he tell his father. He joins the frontline troops because of his love for France and for all this country means both to artists like Campton and art-lovers like himself. George does not bother with words and trying to explain “where honour lies”; instead, his actions speak. Wharton negotiates between advocating the responsibility of these men to be soldiers and the realization that such assertions are so fraught that even the language to express them has been eroded.

The difficulty of finding language to convey the experience of this war is only one aspect of wider adjustments. Campton observes that when “the war was three months old . . . people were already beginning to live into the monstrous idea of it, acquire its ways, speak its language, regard it as a thinkable, endurable, arrangeable fact; to eat it by day, and sleep on it—yes, and soundly—at night” (SF 63). To respond to the new situations, a “new speech was growing up in this new world” (SF, 63). Even words of comfort seem inadequate to this war. When Campton sees the refugees, he cannot express his feelings: “he choked with rage and commiseration at all the suffering about him, but found no word to cheer the sufferers” (SF, 72). When the building concierge loses her grandsons, George simply kneels beside her silently.
Wharton depicts a generation gap between soldiers and their elders. This is inscribed, in part, via the disparity between silence and verboseness. The American Mayhew’s garrulousness contrasts with the silence of soldiers. Wharton illustrates, as she had done in “Coming Home,” the difficulty of communicating events at the front to those at the rear. When George’s parents arrange to get a desk job for him, he responds not with words but action: he has himself reassigned to the infantry. The split between combatants and noncombatants, however, is not so simple. Many noncombatants also realize that the appropriate response to war, and its responsibilities, is not speech but action.

Through George’s choices, Wharton further addresses these issues of communicating the experience of war and the gap created between those at the front and other citizens. After mobilization, he distances himself from his parents, acting both as a soldier with responsibilities and as an adult son with the right to independence from his elders. George hides his commitment to serving in the war in order to prevent any intervention they might and, in fact, do make. When Campton tells his son that the doctor who treated George for tuberculosis will get him out of service, George offers little response and does not appear interested in serving in the war. He allows his parents to assume that he remains indifferent to the cause: “George’s eye was cool and unenthusiastic it did not encourage such confidences” (SF, 41). He later camouflages his change of position behind an epistolary sleight of hand, the “colourless” letters.

His father finds the lack of personality and description in these missives a suspicious and even disappointing indication of his son’s indifference. He considers this outrageous in light of the news reports concerning Germany’s attack on Belgium:
This war could no longer be compared to other wars: Germany was conducting it on methods that civilization had made men forget. The occupation of Luxembourg; the systematic destruction of Belgium; the savage treatment of the people of the invaded regions; the outrages of Louvain and Rheims and Ypres; the voice with which these offences cried to heaven had waked the indignation of humanity. Yet George, in daily contact with all this woe and ruin, seemed as unmoved as though he had been behind a desk in the New York office of Bullard and Brant. (SF, 74)
Campton believes George is as removed as he might be if working for his stepfather in America. The elder generation, particularly those removed from the war effort, apparently do not initially comprehend this new linguistic landscape. This disjunction of communication hints at a widening gulf in their relationship. Similar to the reassuring newspaper commentaries before the war, George’s upbeat letters serve both to unsettle and reassure by the obfuscation of reality. Campton’s and the Brants’ controlling behavior forms the basis for George’s mistrust of them and the breakdown in their communication. He wants to control his own life and limit their knowledge; the disinformation of his letters affords him this power. In focusing on the turmoil experienced by parents, Wharton rarely addresses the influence of the elders in persuading their children into battle.

Throughout the novel, Campton seeks ways to feel close to his son, but war makes this difficult. When George is wounded, his father and stepfather travel out to the field hospital in the stepfather’s car. During the trip, Wharton parallels trench warfare and the emotional entrapment that Campton
experiences in the plush automobile, as a trench-like space that ensnares him while he is besieged with noise. The analogy for their situation is violent: the men are “like two strangers pinned down together in a railway smash” (SF, 146). The “many pockets [that] honeycombed the interior of the car” mimic the intertwining network of trenches where his son is shot (SF, 145). He remembers the sound of the guns while visiting George at a hospital in Châlons, but the decibel level of the incessant noise of the canons near the front staggers him:

Campton sat bewildered. Had he ever before heard that sinister roar? At Châlons? He would not be sure. But the sound had assuredly not been the same; now it overwhelmed him like a crash of the sea over a drowning head. He cowered back in his corner. Would it ever stop, he asked himself? Or was it always like this, day and night, in the hell of hells that they were bound for? Was that merciless thud forever in the ears of the dying? (SF, 145)

Campton and Brant sit in the corners of the dark interior listening to the cannonade: “Oh, that pitiless incessant hammering of the guns! As the travellers advanced the noise grew louder, fiercer, more unbroken; the closely-fitted panes of the car rattled and danced like those of an old omnibus” (SF, 146-47). This description chronicles the father’s attempts to enter into his son’s experiences, but it simultaneously underscores the vast distance between the plush environment that noncombatants inhabit when compared to that of soldiers. The father’s emotional frailty, nonetheless, creates a poignant evocation of the trauma that some parents must have felt when trying to reach their sons.

Common among war writings is the depiction of soldiers as detached, sometimes possessing an unearthly quality. George, for instance, appears to have
a wisdom gained in the trenches. This novel’s epigraph, an excerpt from Walt Whitman’s Civil War poetry, highlights this peculiar trait. Contemplating soldiers, the speaker observes that: “Something veil’d and abstracted is often a part of the manners of these beings.” The epigram of *A Son at the Front*, then, points to the soldiers of the Civil War who seem to possess a unique knowledge that preoccupies them, creating an air of mystery and aloofness. Wharton thus draws a parallel between World War I and the war into which she was literally born in 1862.

Campton’s intermittent estrangement from his son occurs again when he sees the boy lying wounded in the hospital. The foreignness of his son’s unrecognizable face and the otherworldliness of his eyes startle Campton. It was “in the moment of identifying his son that he felt the son he had known to be lost to him forever” (SF, 149). A soldier’s time at the front apparently gives him an “altered perspective,” one which is not shared by noncombatants. His father later observes that George “seemed to feel himself mysteriously set apart” (SF, 197). Much of Campton’s relationship with George consists of vacillating moments of closeness and distancing.

Campton strives to maintain his connection with his son, though John has little idea of what George thinks. Still, he sleeps “at his son’s threshold,” as though trying to bridge his world and that of the “lost” soldiers (SF, 150). Even his son’s kindness seems to widen the gulf between father and son: “That universal smiling comprehension of George’s always made him seem remoter than ever. ‘It makes him seem so old—a thousand years older than I am’” (SF, 201). Wharton acknowledges the contradictory experiences that set apart this generation. The “lost” generation lived traumas that their parents would have
found inconceivable. This predicament arises, in part, because warfare had changed so radically from a place where an individual might make a difference into a “no-man’s land” characterized by mechanized slaughter. While Wharton illustrates the perspective of the older generation, she portrays via Campton some of the soldiers’ experiences.

While Wharton offers no specific battlefield stories, she presents an encapsulation of the range of their experiences and the genesis for this generation’s frustrations with the whole endeavor. In the files of The Friends of French Art, Campton finds the histories of numerous combatants. These records show the kinds of problems that prompted the mutinies of 1917. Campton is shocked that many of their experiences were abominable, unendurable, in their long-drawn useless horror: stories of cold and filth and hunger, of ineffectual effort, of hideous mutilation, of men perishing of thirst in a shell hole, and half-dismembered bodies dragging themselves back to shelter only to die as they reached it. Worst of all were the perpetually recurring reports of military blunders, medical neglect, carelessness in high places: the torturing knowledge of the lives that might have been saved if this or that officer’s brain, this or that surgeon’s hand, had acted more promptly. An impression of waste, confusion, ignorance, obstinacy, prejudice, and the indifference of selfishness or of mortal fatigue, emanated from these narratives written home from the front, or faltered out by white lips on hospital pillows. (SF, 104)
Though mediated via Campton’s reading of letters, these insights provide some of Wharton’s most pointed criticism of the war. Myriad problems, some intentional and some accidental, challenge all those who are actively involved. She expresses profound disgust with the war’s brutality, human incompetence, and failure of leadership.

Wharton depicts soldiers possessing a paradoxical commitment to the war and disgust with its actualities. She expresses an increasing suspicion of the war’s origins and corruptions. She portrays soldiers who are critical of the flaws in the management of war:

All these young intelligences were so many subtly-adjusted instruments for the testing of the machinery of which they formed a part; and not one accepted the results passively. Yet in one respect all were agreed: the ‘had to be’ of the first day was still on every lip. The German menace must be met: chance willed that theirs should be the generation to meet it; on that point speculation was in vain and discussion useless. The question that stirred them all was how the country they were defending was helping them to carry on the struggle. There the evidence was cruelly clear, the comment often scathingly explicit; and Campton, bending still lower over the abyss, caught a shuddering glimpse of what might be—must be—if political blunders, inertia, tolerance, perhaps even evil ambitions and connivance, should at last outweigh the effort of the front. (SF, 104)

Wharton does not illustrate the mutinous discontent among the soldiers; rather, the soldiers are stalwart in their dedication to the cause. Only implicitly can we
draw the conclusion that the alienation soldiers experience was exacerbated by the failures of the government and the elder generation.

Wharton is both a critic of war’s corruptions and an advocate of young men’s responsibility to serve in the trenches. Her endorsement distinguishes her from many Modernist writers, though many war writers felt this urgency. In Heroes’ Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War, Bernard Bergonzi argues that war writers, such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, demonstrate a divided consciousness: “one based on courage and comradeship and the other on compassion—so that the claims of duty co-existed for them with those of protest.”14 George Campton exemplifies this dynamic ambivalence of protest and duty. In George’s words, ‘I’ve got to get back to my men” (SF, 189).

Wharton picks up on the dedication that many soldiers felt toward their comrades, such as is expressed by Wilfred Owen in “Apologia Pro Poemate Meo.” Like other war writers, Wharton celebrates the soldiers’ brotherhood in the trenches. George never waivers from his belief that though he has no French blood he must fight for this country because it is a true home for artists like his father and all others like himself with a love of art.

George is quite aware that his generation will be defined by the war: “Oh, it’s only that things look to us so different—so indescribably different—and always will, I suppose, even after this business is over. We seemed to be sealed to it for life” (SF, 202). The irony of George’s words cuts deep because his life is “sealed” by the war; he dies just as American forces enter the conflict. George’s awareness that if he lived he would carry the war inside him all his life is echoed decades later by Edmund Blunden who served both in the Great War and the Second World War. Blunden writes shortly before his death in 1974 that “My experiences
in the First World War have haunted me all my life and for many days I have, it seemed, lived in that world rather than this."\textsuperscript{15}

Both \textit{The Marne} and \textit{A Son at the Front} explore the sacrifice of soldiers, yet the former suggests the promise of a rebirth via the metaphor of France as phoenix while the latter offers the metaphor of an effigy. \textit{A Son at the Front} focuses on a father and son, and the two iconic images created by the father about his son are vitally revealing. The first is a portrait of the boy, which now hangs in a museum. This painting brings the artist fame and a successful career. Secondly, at the end of the novel Campton sculpts a "monument" for his son's grave. A foreshadowing of this ultimate effigy appears earlier in the novel when he sketches George as he sleeps:

‘Like the statue of a young knight I’ve seen somewhere,’ he said to himself, vexed and surprised that he, whose plastic memories were always so precise, should not remember where; and then his pencil stopped. What he had really thought was: ‘Like the \textit{effigy} of a young knight’--though he had instinctively changed the word as it formed itself. He leaned in the doorway, the sketch-book in hand, and continued to gaze at his son. It was the clinging sheet, no doubt, that gave him that look . . . and the white glare of the electric burner . . . the boy lay as if he were posing for a tombstone! (SF, 31-32)

The memory of an effigy sculpture belies the fear burgeoning in Campton’s unconscious. His mind balks at the word “effigy.” Campton’s anxiety suggests a the grief that follows a soldier’s death. Simultaneously, an “effigy” embodies the warrior symbolism that governments employ not only to recognize fallen
soldiers but also to idealize war and thus secure another generation willing to fight for the nation. Depicting this “effigy” through the eyes of a loving father reveals a fundamental war incongruity. Wharton, however, simultaneously affirms heroism through outmoded imagery and suggests the painful result of war’s violence.

Wharton illustrates the decimation of lives behind the lines with vividness more powerful than in any of her war works since Fighting France. Family and friends who worry about the loved ones in battle experience intense estrangement that drives them to promiscuous behaviors. Conservative parents visit for the first time psychic mediums in an attempt to connect with and learn the situation of their sons at the front. It is a lucrative business. A gypsy, Madame Olinda, whom Campton had a relationship with in Spain, has relocated to France. When war begins, she moves from Biarritz to Paris. She goes to see Campton and explains that “when the war broke out I came to Paris; I knew that all the mothers would want news of their sons. I made a great deal of money; and I have wonderful results—wonderful! I could give you instances—names that you know—where I have foretold everything! Oh, I have the gift, my heart, I have it!” (SF, 204). Ironically, when her son is called to serve, the psychic turns to Campton in hopes that he will be able to help her get news of her boy. She exclaims that since departing for the front her son “had vanished as utterly as if the earth had swallowed him” (SF, 204). Like Campton, her life revolves around her son, and she has amassed a fortune for his benefit. She exclaims, “Not a word, not a sign—to me, his mother, who have [sic] slaved and slaved for him, who have [sic] made a fortune for him!” (SF, 204). Olinda engages, like Jorgenstein, in opportunistic wartime money-making, but she elicits sympathy
for the loss of her son. Even the psychic to whom parents turn is not exempt
from anxiety and isolation.

The interweaving of personal and public grief is at the heart of *A Son at
the Front*. While writing this, Wharton mourned the destruction that war had
brought. In *A Backward Glance*, she remembers her emotional state:

>The brief rapture that came with the cessation of war— the blissful
thought: ‘Now there will be no more killing!’— soon gave way to a
growing sense of the waste and loss wrought by those irreparable
years. Death and mourning darkened the houses of all my friends,
and I mourned with them, and mingled my private grief with the
general sorrow. (BG, 1053)

Campton, as a public figure like Wharton, uses art to both express his own
heartache and provide a conduit for the sorrow of George’s family and friends.

The landscape of grief depicted through Campton’s insights into the
personal lives of those around him reveals an emotional wasteland. As Mary
Condé suggests, “The younger generation’s payment for the mistakes of their
elders is redressed in the novel by Wharton’s concentration on the anguish
suffered by those at home.”16 The Brant marriage is held together through a
shared love of George. His death, Campton believes, will cause this couple
greater estrangement with the dawning realization that their marriage is hollow
without the boy. Mrs. Brant, Campton surmises, will avoid the emptiness of her
life by filling it with frivolous activity.

Even the loss of one soldier creates a void that cannot be filled. George
leaves behind a wide circle of friends and family that extends to his honorary
aunt, Adele Anthony. When George departs for his regiment the first time,
Anthony comes to the train station and watches the father-son farewell from afar. At the second departure, Anderson Brant does the same. Both feel intense parental devotion to this boy, yet they enjoy only secondary importance in his life. Like Anthony and Brant, Wharton was devoted to other people’s sons and enjoyed the “reflected light” of a secondary relationship (SF, 218). Their grief reveals an isolation borne of loss of the one person to whom one is uniquely connected. After George’s death, Campton presumes that seeing his son constitutes the only thing that paradoxically could have “vitalized the dead business of living” (SF, 222).

Even after George’s death, Campton still jealously guards his connection with his son. Boylston enlightens Campton that there has never been a need for that jealousy:

‘You’ve had him; you have him still. Nobody can touch that fact, or take it from you. Every hour of his life was yours. But they’ve never had anything, those two others, Mr. Brant and Miss Anthony; nothing but a reflected light. And so every outward sign means more to them.’ (SF, 218)

Ironically, in Campton’s effort to feel close to his son he has missed the truth that George’s friend reveals: his son has always valued his connection with his father above any other. Despite the rift Campton felt, the bond between father and son has not been broken. While Campton vacillates between feeling close and utterly alienated from his son, ultimately the father learns that despite the complexities of their dance of intimacy and detachment his son is devoted to him.

Wharton points to the role of memory in the process of recovery and, in a sense, reunion. Revealed here are the vivid capabilities of the human mind to
keep a lost one alive and the bittersweet experience of the process of mourning.
Even in death, George remains a vital facet of Campton’s psyche. The father comes to recognize

the richness of his own denuded life; when George was in the sunset, in the voices of young people, or in any trivial joke that father and son would have shared; and other moments when he was nowhere, utterly lost, extinct and irrecoverable; and others again when the one thing which could have vitalized the dead business of living would have been to see him shove open the studio door, stalk in, pour out some coffee for himself in his father’s cup, and diffuse through the air the warm sense of his bodily presence, the fresh smell of his clothes and his flesh and his hair. But through all these moods, Campton began to see, there ran the life-giving power of reality embraced and accepted. George had been; George was; as long as his father’s consciousness lasted, George would be as much a part of it as the closest, most actual of his immediate sensations. He had missed nothing of George, and here was his harvest, his golden harvest. (SF, 222)

Developed as an artist, Campton’s sensory acuity has provided him with a rich “harvest,” an attitude that balances bitter recognition of the loss and adaptation to a world without his son. He has what Wharton termed in French Ways and Their Meaning “the gift of the seeing eye,” and this would sustain him through the rest of his life. Campton realizes that his memories can connect him with his son, reaping over the years a “golden harvest.”
The novel advocates embracing reality and the current state of affairs as a means of healing, or at least continuing with life. In his “denuded life,” Campton can turn only to his imagination, cultivated in Europe’s civilization, which will reanimate his world. The painter’s maturation in adjusting to the loss of his son reflects more widely on the novel’s concluding tone of acceptance of the incongruities of wartime. Just as Campton recognizes “the life giving power of reality embraced and accepted,” so will accepting the war and its losses enable those who survive to move forward.

This attitude brings Campton back to an understanding of the fundamental value in continuing his artistic life and thereby nurturing not only himself but those around him. As the novel concludes, Campton begins a monument that in the less enriched imaginations of George’s family and friends would provide some peace and connection to the dead soldier: “He had always had a fancy for modelling (sic)—had always had lumps of clay lying about within reach. He pulled out sketches of his son from the old portfolio, spread them before him on the table, and began” (SF, 223). By financing this monument, Anderson Brant would have the pleasure of spending money on his step-son. Wharton recognizes the varied means through which survivors begin to endure and perhaps even heal this emotional devastation. The conclusion of A Son at the Front reveals the bankruptcy of the world that killed so many sons, yet even amid this “denuded life,” the remembrances of these young men will provide some respite from grief and perhaps even a reconciliation to the new order.

Memorializing the dead functions as a gesture that, in some regard, seems to ease the pain of loss; nonetheless, it still cannot bridge the untraversable distance between the living and dead, as Wharton was painfully aware. This
novel, like Campton’s sculpture of his son, represents a memorial to Simmons and, by extension, to all those who gave their lives during the war. Instead of looking toward the aesthetic icons of France’s past as in Fighting France, she concentrates on celebrating this younger generation.

While this theme of estrangement and reconciliation shapes much of the novel’s thematic focus, the questioning of the efficacy of words reaches its strongest expression. The characterization of Harvey Mayhew, an absurd buffoon who ultimately becomes dangerous to the welfare of artists and their families, suggests Wharton’s condemnation of war rhetoric. The admirable characters value action and distrust words. Paul Dastrey reveals a central paradox of this heightened experience: the apparent evaporation of the meaning of some words as though “the general smash-up had broken their stoppers” (SF, 101).

The question of the role of language and rhetoric in the perpetuation of war is closely allied with another issue, whether war provides a “salutary shock.” The novel represents Wharton’s most scathing criticism of corruption in wartime Paris, yet it portrays simultaneously the remarkable altruism that this war elicits. She pays tribute to those who devoted themselves to war charities. The civilization of France becomes more than the idealized images of Fighting France; here, she offers a more complex view of human nature in wartime.

Just as the characters, particularly Campton, possess a fusion of virtues and flaws, so this novel intricately weaves together threads of pro- and anti-war perspectives, as well as soldierly and parental travails. The novel simultaneously idealizes soldiers and critiques the horrors of at the front and the military and government mistakes that exacerbated the carnage and suffering. A Son at the
Front represents Wharton’s most intricate depiction of the incongruous wartime environment. She offers a multivalent integration of viewpoints from her generation and those of the younger one. Like John and George Campton, one giving his life for the war and the other giving the rest of his life to commemorating the soldiers, all the generations who lived during this war are all “sealed to it” forever.

Notes

1 A review of secondary criticism reveals that A Son at the Front, along with Fighting France, has received more attention than other of her war writings. A number of scholars have addressed the novel’s dialog with the younger generation of writers. These scholars include Shari Benstock, in Women of the Left Bank, Judith Sensibar in “Behind the Lines’ in Edith Wharton’s A Son at the Front: Re-Writing A Masculinist Tradition” (Wretched Exotic: Essays on Edith Wharton in Europe, eds. Katherine Joslin and Alan Price [New York: Peter Lang, 1993]), and Peter Buitenhuis, The Great War of Words.

2 In a letter to Wharton, Joseph Sears, the Vice President of D. Appleton, registers his distaste for the public’s attitude: “It was almost grotesque to see the aversion which the American public had for purely war literature.” Quoted in Benstock, “Introduction,” viii.

3 In an effort to circumvent the apparent public indifference to war novels, Wharton claimed it was not a war novel but “a psychological study of an artist father and his son that chronicled French-American life in Paris [from] 1915 [to] 1916.” Benstock, “Introduction,” viii. For a detailed history of the publication of this novel, see Benstock’s “Introduction.”
See Benstock, “Introduction,” xi, as well as her No Gifts, 342-43.


Higonnet, “Not So Quiet,” 217.

I am indebted to Mary Condé for the insights concerning Campton’s homelessness. See Conde, 51.

Conde, 51.


Wershoven, 115.

Wershoven, 115.


Eksteins, 211.

Bergonzi, 221.

Quoted in Fussell, 256.

Conde, 51.
Conclusion

On the 14 of July 1919 I stood on the high balcony of a friend’s house in the Champs Elysées, and saw the Allied Armies ride under the Arch of Triumph, and down the storied avenue to the misty distance of the Place de la Concorde and its obelisk of flame. . . . The rest is all a glory of shooting sun-rays reflected from shining arms and helmets, from the flanks of glossy chargers, the dark glitter of the ’seventy-fives, of machine-guns and tanks. But all those I had seen at the front, dusty, dirty, mud-encrusted, blood-stained, spent and struggling on; when I try to remember, the two visions merge into one, and my heart is broken with them.

Edith Wharton, A Backward Glance

Even from the perspective of two decades, Edith Wharton continues to underscore the incongruous nature of wartime—the ennobling military scenes contrasting with the filthy, wounded soldiers returning from the front. The paradoxes of the “strange war-world of the rear” shape her war writings Fighting France, “Coming Home,” “The Refugees,” “Writing a War Story,” The Marne, and A Son at the Front. Wharton’s evocative descriptions of France’s culture, people, and landscapes integrate images of past achievements into the contemporary scenes of destruction and resilience. She writes specifically to an American audience, often trying to educate them about European civilization and their own responsibilities in this conflict; however, rather than a collection of jingoistic tales or a chronicle of devastation, these works are candid and satiric observations interwoven with the desire that this emerging world would not just endure but thrive and sustain a continuity with some of the achievements of earlier generations. In retrospect, she regards these war years as the most extraordinary in her life. She explains in A Backward Glance that “if anyone had
suggested to me, before 1914, to write my reminiscences, I should have answered that my life had been too uneventful to be worth recording” (BG, 780). Wharton’s perspectives on this conflict prove “worth recording,” in part, because they illuminate the pivotal era that transformed the modern imagination.

Wharton’s first person accounts of visiting the western front are cited by Barbara Tuchman in The Guns of August, an acclaimed history of the first months of World War I.¹ Tuchman offers a metaphor for how historians construct their narratives; her concept is highly suggestive of Wharton’s intricate work. Tuchman explains that a historian

discovers that truth is subjective and separate, made up of little bits seen, experienced, and recorded by different people. It is like a design seen through a kaleidoscope; when the cylinder is shaken the countless colored fragments form a new picture. Yet they are the same fragments that made a different picture a moment earlier.²

Wharton’s writings reflect the diverse landscapes of war from the silent, Piranesi-like mystery of Paris to the crowded refugee boats crossing to England, from the burned cathedral at Rheims to the hospital near the front in Châlons, from the tennis courts in America to the Réchamp village in the Argonne. Taken collectively, Wharton’s literature of war offers a remarkable kaleidoscope that reveals the experiences and perspectives of her own generation, as well as those of younger one.

Throughout Wharton’s war literature, she chronicles “the crash of falling worlds” and the subsequent human response (M, 82). One of her primary concerns is the potential degeneration of civilized life. The German bombardment of Louvain and Rheims represented an attack on a foundation of
hundreds of years of intellectual and aesthetic history. She addresses the threat to the inheritance of civilization, in part, through an emphasis on a civilized life that has developed over the last thousand years, which in *Fighting France* she terms the “humanest graces.” She evaluates trench warfare in this context and depicts the persistent strength of individuals and of nations despite the unpredictable tumult of wartime. The faces, architecture, and even the trenches reveal a confusing amalgam of profound changes wrought by war. Wharton filters the war’s threat to France and its significance for America through these images of the “humanest graces” as she explores the ways in which civilization is imperiled by this war.

The most intriguing recurrent images in these works are the cathedrals, emblematic of European civilization’s accomplishments. Wharton begins *Fighting France* with a description of Chartres and later conveys the phoenix-like resilience of the burned Rheims, both of which provide vivid symbols of remarkable aesthetic accomplishments and the war’s impact on them. In *The Marne*, the cathedral signifies a point of comparison against the moving-picture, emblematic of American life. The spiritual, substantial, and long-standing architectural edifice represents the inheritance of artistry and craft centuries in the forming, while the movies are only “polyglot sirens,” a seductive and entrapping entertainment (M, 77). Wharton advocates for the protection of the public’s sense of “allusiveness” and “irony,” which she characterizes as under siege from new diversions (UCW, 179). She contends that the younger generation should not spend their time with these “recreative” mediums, but should immerse themselves in what she considered the great art of Europe. Artists and
intellectuals, in particular, must assimilate the models of the past in order to create innovations.

Wharton repeatedly underscores the values represented by cathedrals. Integral to French civilization and the future of cultural life is what Wharton calls “the gift of the seeing eye” (FWM, 52). In order to appreciate France, one must have this ability to apprehend, for example, the subtle beauty in the varied grays of France’s villages and muted greens of the countryside. In *The Marne*, Troy embodies this idea with a boyish enthusiasm for all things French. The vital importance of this insight becomes most apparent in *A Son at the Front* when it provides John Campton both with his painter’s eye and with the rich memories that will sustain him after the losses resulting from the war years. Wharton’s writings assert the increasing importance of the arts in a world crippled by war’s destruction.

The faults of society, which Wharton had identified before the war in her critique of the Nouveau Luxe crowd, simultaneously become more subtle and more pronounced during the conflict. She expresses dismay with those who try to maintain “the good old Ritzian style.” In *Fighting France*, Wharton focuses on the disturbing cityscape and disfigured faces in Paris during the first year of the war. In “The Refugees” and in *The Marne*, she spoofs and yet allows for a comic sympathy for the wealthy British and American women whose war philanthropy serves as an entertaining diversion and a means for social recognition. In *A Son at the Front*, Campton is both intrigued and repulsed by the promiscuous nature of the multinational society he inhabits.

While Wharton criticizes corruption throughout the war, not until her final war novel does she make a clear connection between these characters and
those who are responsible for starting the war. Campton envisages the promoter Jorgenstein and the take-over of The Friends of French Art as akin to the machinations of the diplomats who prompted the war. The conflict does not fundamentally change self-absorbed people; rather, it exacerbates their faults. In essence, wartime brings fresh opportunities for corruption. She would extend her critique of these types of characters in the novels of the twenties and thirties, such as The Glimpses of the Moon (1922), Mother’s Recompense (1925), Twilight Sleep (1927), and The Gods Arrive (1932).

Between the first year of war when Wharton wrote Fighting France and its conclusion and aftermath when she wrote and revised A Son at the Front, her works reveal an increasing disenchantment with the elements that led to war, specifically the diplomats and other individuals who contributed to its outbreak and then profited from it. She was a tough critic of her own generation. Wharton’s pointed characterizations of self-interested civilians are not unlike those voiced by numerous other war writers and Modernists. Her critique of life in Paris amid the wealthy parallels arguments made by such authors as Wilfred Owen, Ernest Hemingway, and Ezra Pound. While these authors would certainly count Wharton one of those they disparaged, she creates her own satiric judgment of the corrupt European elite. She disparages those who create a ‘hideous world that was dancing and flirting and money-making on the great red mounds of dead’ (SF, 176).

Wharton’s ironic war writings, however, are tempered with empathy and an enduring belief that this war was a necessary evil. While she admits her generation’s promises of ‘honour’ remain unfulfilled, she advocates a more
nuanced understanding of both the mistakes and resilience of the Allies. In _A Backward Glance_, she persists in supporting the Allied cause:

When I am told—as I am not infrequently—by people who were in the nursery, or not born, in that fatal year, that the world went gaily to war, or when I have served up to me the more recent legend that France and England actually wanted war, and forced it on the peace-loving and reluctant Central Empires, I recall those first days of August 1914, and am dumb with indignation.

(BG,1033-34)

Wharton critiques the revisionist history that would advance an oversimplified “legend,” and she simultaneously communicates her support of the war and is unwilling to admit that it might have been unnecessary or that the Allies bore some culpability. In this regard, Wharton’s perspective resembles the thinking of the prewar generation rather than that of the postwar.

Wharton demonstrates a lively engagement with issues of cultural change, including the stress placed on language by the radical transformations precipitated by war. By the time her final war novel was published in 1923, the perspective on the war offered in contemporary poetry and fiction was more radical in its critique and its illustration of the divide between the Wharton’s generation and those who served in the war. T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” for instance, became an iconographic representation of the era and the eroding effects of war. Eliot’s innovative form, like the increasing prevalence of “stream of consciousness” in the works of James Joyce and other novelists, marked a clear distinction between the rising generation and most of their predecessors. While
Wharton’s place in this milieu has been regarded as marginal, her war literature suggests a vital engagement with the issues that contribute to postwar aesthetics.

Like many war and postwar writers, including James and Hemingway, Wharton addresses the increasing suspicion that words can no longer convey the experience of war and that some words had lost their viability. As a collection, these works depict the widely-expressed misgivings about language, but emphasize its resilience. In Fighting France, Wharton argues that in response to the inundation of the war’s patriotic pressures the French have created a bifurcated approach to language that distinguishes war rhetoric from genuine speech. The French “expression of real emotion” demonstrates the resilience of language.

Wharton should be counted among those writers, like Henry James, who early in the conflict began to question the viability of abstract words like “patriotism” and “honor,” which can be used to further personal and political interests. By the war’s end, her idiom when discussing these issues seems a precursor to the work of later writers. Wharton’s writings depict not only a distrust of patriotic discourse but also the vitality of the concrete language. While questioning of nationalistic slogans is not unique to this war or era, this issue assumes a particular importance because the questioning of the viability of certain words reshaped the literary landscape.

The presumed weakening of language, according to Fussell, often refers to the gruesome reality of trench warfare. Wharton obliquely addresses this in “Coming Home” with a metaphor of the shrapnel-torn body, which illustrates the linguistic difficulties inherent in conveying graphic violence. Wharton’s story underscores that brutality, including that of a sexual nature, occurs both on the
battlefront and the domestic front. In “Coming Home,” silence shrouds the sexual relationship between Yvonne Malo and General Scharlach and later the unspoken machinations of Réchamp and his French compatriots when they plot the General’s murder. Both the structure of the story and the relationships among characters point to an on-going “fragmentation” of the linguistic environment. This insight appears again in the exiles’ silence in Fighting France and “The Refugees”; furthermore, neither Troy Belknap nor George Campton, in The Marne and A Son at the Front respectively, speaks about the battlefront to noncombatants. Wharton offers a perspective on the dynamics that shape postwar Modernist ideals of language and communication.

Wharton represents the outbreak of this war as a crash of civilization and concludes by exploring the myriad forms of suffering and isolation that remain after the war’s cessation. She explores the painful alienation that some soldiers and civilians experienced, as well as their moments of connection and community. The characters’ faces, particularly in Fighting France and A Son at the Front, reveal the complex emotional response to wartime, from grief to a sense of unity that arises from the communal effort. For some, like those with the satyr-like visages in her essays or Paul Dastry in her final novel, their work for the war effort changes them profoundly. The emotional tone becomes far more disturbing by her last novel, A Son at the Front, wherein mourning and memorial for those who have given their lives permeate the novel.

Wharton traces an array of social transformations, including the wider roles for women and the bureaucratization of war philanthropy. Her three short stories, “Coming Home,” “The Refugees,” and “Writing a War Story,” evaluate one of the most enduring legacies of World War I: the significant increase in
freedom and responsibility that women experienced as a result of the nation’s need for their aid in the war effort. These stories recount the changing lives of women (French, English, and American) and the resulting benefits and difficulties of their greater liberation. These tales illustrate the complicated experiences of women during the war, revealing how their lives and their identities are altered.

The rupture between soldiers and their officers, as well as between soldiers and noncombatants, typifies the most widely-identified alienation arising from World War I. Wharton depicts both the growing unrest and the persistent sense of duty, as exemplified in the French mutinies of 1917. Like many war writers and Modernists, Wharton illustrates the incongruous situation in which the soldiers find themselves. This peculiar tension between dedication and protest is not fully presented until A Son at the Front, but its inception may be recognized in the stricken faces of some of the soldiers portrayed in Fighting France. In her early essays, the soldiers look as though they have seen “the Medusa face of war and lived” (FF, 149). Wharton reveals an evolving perspective on the war that reflects the increasing disenchantment so vividly illustrated by many postwar writers. She delineates the cynicism that emerges during these years and the contradictory relentless determination to fight until the end.

Wharton’s observation concerning the changing social structures focuses, in part, on the generational divide, but she situates her insights primarily from the perspective of the older characters who often feel marginalized and useless. They miss their children and search for meaning amid the suffering. In her war relief work, Wharton witnessed the upheaval’s effects on the family and
demonstrated an increased concern for the welfare of children, which became a personal commitment. As Benstock has found, she cared for four brothers, the Herrewynn children, starting in 1917. Wharton, who had never had any children of her own, became the guardian of these boys just a few months shy of her 60th birthday. The tragedies that befell so many families form a central theme in Wharton’s war writings, influencing her view of social estrangement and intimacy.

Wharton, as a woman and part of the older generation, primarily illustrates the war via the perspective of civilians. Even in her descriptions of soldiers, she emphasizes their relationships with those on the home front. George Campton’s determination to fight derives in part from his love for his father and their shared love of art. The communal effort for the war unites father and son, just as it unifies those who toil behind the lines. Servicemen in Wharton’s fiction lack the ironic detachment and cynicism about the war that shape T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and typify Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises. Wharton’s view of the war’s estrangements includes the potential and sometimes the realization of genuine relationships between combatants and civilians.

While advocating the perpetuation of cultural traditions, Wharton’s war literature endeavors to embrace the present, creating within it a memorial of war and of what she valued of the Europe she had known during her childhood and la belle époque. As a collection, these war works reveal the heterogeneous world of war and engage in the public dialog concerning its effects. She depicts these years as an era replete with myriad competing energies: the destruction of cultural treasures and the effort to create new art, the difficulties of daily life in the trenches and at the rear as well as the beauties of a new spring, the suffering
of refugees and their gritty endurance, the mismanagement of the war and the soldiers’ determination to see it through, the crass materialism of the wealthy alongside the remarkable altruism of volunteers, and the grief as well as the humor. In her kaleidoscopic sorting of war’s paradoxes, she displays an imaginative engagement with the issues that would shape the history and literature of the twentieth century.

Notes

1 Tuchman, 450.
2 Tuchman, 441-42.
3 Qtd. in Price, End of the Age of Innocence, 41.
4 See Fussell, 82-90. Also, one thinks of the scathing criticism of apparently civilized people in Ford Madox Ford’s A Good Soldier (New York: Norton, 1995) or of the spoiled rich in Ernest Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises.
5 During the retreat after the Somme, their mother abandoned them. Their father was gassed in combat and later determined unfit to raise the boys. These boys moved Wharton deeply: “Starving and clinging to one another in fear when they arrived in Paris, they represented for Edith the suffering of all children victimized by war” (Benstock, No Gifts, 343). When the hostels separated the boys, authorities came to believe that one was a risk to himself. Wharton intervened and arranged to have them live near one another. She provided for all their needs, even signing in 1921 with Mr. Herrewynn a formal agreement for full responsibility of the boys.
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