

## Edith Wharton's Geographical Imagination: A Response to Judith P. Saunders\*

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Judith Saunders's article, "Wharton's *Hudson River Bracketed* and Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan': Re-Creating Xanadu in an American Landscape," is a thoughtful study of Wharton's literary influences and their effects on her geographical imagination and aesthetic practice. Saunders's examination of the role of poetry in Wharton's work is especially welcome as this aspect of her work, and her body of poetry itself, has yet to receive sufficient critical attention.<sup>1</sup> Saunders illuminates the various ways in which Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" (1797-98) influences theme, characterization, and setting in Wharton's *Hudson River Bracketed* (1929). Her attention to allusion in the novel contributes to scholarship on the subject of allusion in Wharton's work by, among others, Helen Killoran, Emily J. Orlando, and Rocki Wentzel.<sup>2</sup> Saunders claims that, while Wharton "wields the device of allusion effectively and prolifically in all her fiction," in no other work "does it play such a structurally central role" (205) as in *Hudson River Bracketed*. The article raises important questions about literary influence and aesthetics; the role of the East and West; and the relationship between technology, art, history, and the natural world in Wharton's work. All of these ideas combine in a valuable analysis that contributes to the spatial turn in American studies.

Saunders thoroughly examines the influence of Coleridge's poem on the structure and themes of Wharton's novel, finding many parallels

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and resonances between the two works. Her most distinctive argument about this influence is that Wharton “borrow[s]” the “[m]agically transformative properties” of Coleridge’s poem specifically, and those of “the world of poetry” more generally, to represent the Hudson River Valley as a setting that engenders the artist’s creative energy and vision (187). In a cogent and comprehensive close reading of correspondences between the poem and the novel, Saunders demonstrates the rich connections between the two: for example, details about the landscape, such as the “verdant landscape” and natural splendor of Wharton’s Hudson River Valley, and Coleridge’s Xanadu (198); similarities in architectural detail (198-200); the presence of a female muse (represented by Halo Spear in *Hudson River Bracketed*; 200-01); and an examination of the violent forces of creativity and the inner strength of the artist (201-04).

Since a number of critics find autobiographical links between Wharton and the novel’s protagonist, Vance Weston, an examination of these connections in relation to Coleridge’s ideas about artistic vision can provide insights into Wharton’s own artistic life. As one example, Saunders notes that, in the preface to “Kubla Khan,” Coleridge describes the “fragile and ephemeral nature of the artist’s visions,” and she references Vance’s unpleasant interactions with editors and artists in New York City as evidence of “how ‘business’ can frustrate creativity” (207). Wharton, too, experienced the tensions between creativity and commercialization in the literary marketplace.<sup>3</sup> She was a strong advocate for her own work and thus was sometimes involved in disagreements with publishing professionals before and after the publication of *Hudson River Bracketed*. Her correspondence with her editor at Appleton, Rutger Jewett, highlights some of these disagreements and the effects that they had on the shape and content of her work.

In this correspondence, Wharton emphasizes both her concerns about the effects that business matters might have on her creative work and her frustration when prior agreements are not upheld. Writing to Jewett on 5 January 1920 about the *Pictorial Review*’s concern that *The Age of Innocence* (1920) would be too long, she refers to

the agreement that the novel would not be less than 100,000 words and emphasizes that she “cannot consent to have [her] work treated as if it were prose-by-the-yard” (*Letters* 428). In a 15 July 1929 letter about *Hudson River Bracketed*, Wharton refers to the fact that the *Delineator* had begun the serialization of the novel without warning and earlier than agreed upon. In February 1929, Wharton had expressed to Jewett that this “inexcusable action” had done harm to her and the novel (521), and in the July 1929 letter, she is indignant at the magazine editor’s suggestion that it would be “the last straw” to cut the novel short as she had proposed. She writes: “When I consider what the *Delineator* is, and what the poorest of my work is in comparison, I confess that I feel indignant at such a tone, and I will never again willingly give a line of mine to the *Delineator*” (521). In a letter from 31 January 1931, she balks at a request from the *Ladies’ Home Journal* to make more explicit the ending of her story “Pomegranate Seed” (claiming that a group of friends found the story’s implications obvious; *Letters* 532), although she acquiesced to the changes. Then on 29 April 1933, she voiced her concern about the magazine’s attempt to reduce the agreed upon price for her reminiscences: “No doubt the L. H. J. is hard up, but so am I, and I imagine that they have larger funds to draw upon than I have” (560). Wharton also expressed indignation when Gertrude Lane, editor of the *Woman’s Home Companion*, refused to print her story “Duration,” despite having paid for it. Wharton notes that she is “really staggered at the insolence of her letter” (571) and, in a statement that highlights the crux of the issue, contends that “I am afraid that I cannot write down to the present standard of the American picture magazines” (572).

Some of this correspondence also reveals Wharton’s wish for privacy, suggesting an additional toll on the creative life incurred by the business of writing. After receiving a letter from a woman asking about her private life, she writes Jewett on 25 February 1925 asking that Appleton not give out her address (Jewett replied that she should not “shoot the organist,” and the woman had not received the address from them; 479). She also wrote to him on 10 August 1928 to emphasize that she did not wish to be involved in a film celebrating women’s

accomplishments in various fields (515), for which the filmmakers hoped to film Wharton at her home in France (516). We find an apt fictional representation of Wharton's sense of the cost of public fame on oneself and one's work in "Copy: A Dialogue" (1900). In this story, two writers, Mrs. Dale and Paul Ventnor, reflect on the emotional cost of their writing. Reflecting on "the old days" when they were "real people," Mrs. Dale insists that her real self died years ago, and she is now only "a figment of the reporter's brain" (658). When Ventnor replies that they are indeed "public property," Mrs. Dale laments that "the last shred of [her] identity is gone" (659). Here, Wharton seems to suggest that the business of writing not only depletes the artist's creative energy but also threatens her very self. We might view Wharton's representation of commercialization's negative impact on Vance's creativity as an expression of her own frustration and dismay at similar effects in her life as a writer.

Saunders further explores the idea of Vance's creative energy through her discussion of how the lush and creative setting of the Hudson River Valley feeds this energy and works as an antidote to Vance's sterile Midwest home. The novel emphasizes the "importance of place," which is not a "mere backdrop for action" in the novel, but, indeed, becomes its very "subject" (Saunders 188). Distinctions between East and West occur with frequency in Wharton's works, and these comparisons often emphasize negative aspects of western US life and culture. Her earliest published story, "Mrs. Manstey's View" (1891), establishes this pattern, representing the elderly and titular protagonist's perspective and limited prospects in relation to the setting sun in the West and emphasizing her loneliness by way of an estranged daughter in California, who refuses to visit. Wharton's subsequent fiction is replete with similar images: she lampoons the gullibility of western audiences in "The Pelican" (1898) and associates the West and Midwest with sordid business deals and unsavory personal deficiencies in "A Journey" (1899), "Afterward" (1910), and *Bunner Sisters* (1916). Crass nouveau riche Western characters populate "Charm Incorporated" (1934) and *The Custom of the Country* (1913), the kind of "big money-makers from the West" who Wharton

viewed as infiltrating Old New York culture beginning in the late nineteenth century (Wharton, *Backward* 6).<sup>4</sup> Of course, it would be just such nouveau riche characters from which F. Scott Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) would flee *back* to the Midwest to recuperate after his traumatic experience in the East. Nick reflects that, as Westerners, perhaps he, Jay Gatsby, Jordan Baker, and Daisy and Tom Buchanan "possessed some deficiency in common which made [them] subtly unadaptable to Eastern life" (Fitzgerald 184). After Gatsby's murder, Nick views the East as "haunted" and "distorted" (185) and seeks refuge in his Midwestern home. An emphasis on the cultural and natural deficiencies of the Midwest in *Hudson River Bracketed* suggests both differences to and connections with the theme of East versus West in novels such as Fitzgerald's, placing Wharton's novel and her body of work in provocative new literary-geographical contexts.

Wharton emphasizes the "physical and cultural flatness" of the Midwest in *Hudson River Bracketed* and draws our attention to how even the names of the towns from which Vance hails (Hallelujah, Missouri, and Euphoria, Illinois) underscore the region's "worship of materialism" (Saunders 188) or, as Wharton has it, "religion of business" (*Hudson* 43). As Saunders observes, "Wharton makes no attempt to be even-handed in her presentation of the American Midwest," and, through her focus on the many "artificially engineered booms in real estate and stocks" (188), Wharton ignores the geography of the West that "might make some claim on readers' aesthetic sensibilities" (189). Wharton's intent, instead, to "rain ridicule on the complacent anti-intellectualism and 'social insipidity' ([*Hudson*] 13) of [...] [Vance's] early environment" (Saunders 189) allows her to draw sharp distinctions between the supposed natural and cultural sterility of his Midwest home and the verdant environment of the Hudson River Valley.

This distinction draws our attention to Wharton's engagement with historical and technological forces in *Hudson River Bracketed*. Saunders's analysis suggests that there is less movement in the novel toward a reconciliation of these two forces than we find in Wharton's

other work, such as her travel writing, for example. Technological forces are represented by the “technophilia in which Vance has been indoctrinated” (Saunders 189), something which also seems to indicate the cultural paucity of his Midwest background. On his arrival in the Hudson River Valley, he feels the absence of technological culture: horse drawn buggies have replaced automobiles, dilapidated houses and rutted lanes have replaced modern buildings and roads, and homes in the area lack electricity, running water, and telephones. The “lushness and fertility in the natural environment” (189) compensate for this lack, and the creative possibilities of these new surroundings are evident on his first morning when, “his imagination already fired” (190) by the Hudson Valley, he composes a poem.

In addition to the inspiration of his natural surroundings, Vance also experiences the influence of the past, what we might consider a historical force in the novel. Wharton establishes a connection between the pull of history and the lush natural surroundings of the Willows, the ancestral home in which Vance is staying. His curiosity about the history of the Willows is “stirred by the luxuriant foliage of the grounds and strange intricacy of its exterior” (190), and Wharton represents Vance’s efforts to compensate for his lack of aesthetic education in relation to both his natural and built environment. Saunders notes: “His first fevered attempts ‘to hack a way through the dense jungle of the past’ ([Wharton, *Hudson*] 126) take place at the Willows, in the private library that serves as a treasure trove for his imaginative explorations. He responds to the literary legacy preserved in this library as eagerly as to the fantastical architecture and overgrown garden of the ‘old house’ containing it” (191). She claims that Vance’s “encounter” with “Kubla Khan” is informed by “the legacy of ‘the Past,’ the power of poetry, and the guidance of [his muse] Halo Spear,” and that this combination of forces “lends critical shaping momentum to his vocational and personal energies” (191). But the novel also emphasizes how art and history become linked to nature—a “central web of connection to which ‘Kubla Khan’ serves as key” (192).

The combined generative influence of art, history, and nature on the mind of the artist is especially pronounced in Wharton's travel narratives. This dynamic often plays out in her travel writing as a dialectic between history and technology, which, among other effects, demonstrates her belief in the cultural power of the past. The natural world also plays a key role in this dialectic in Wharton's travel narratives. For example, Wharton gestures toward a resolution of the dialectical opposition between history and technology in *A Motor-Flight through France* (1908) as she appreciates the ways in which her motor-car allows her to engage with spectacles of both history and nature (see Totten, "Dialectic" 134). Her reflections in her travel writing on natural splendor often provide a segue to her discussion of an area's history (138), and, in some instances, she invokes the historical by describing the landscape using images of and references to great works of art (139). Similar to her stance on artistic creation in her travel texts, in *Hudson River Bracketed* Wharton emphasizes Vance's realization (underscored by what his Midwest education lacks) "that art is not produced in a cultural vacuum" (Saunders 192). Further, he learns that both "the rich and multifaceted legacy of past generations" and "the creative vigor, the self-renewing beauty, inherent in elemental and organic forces," all contribute to "the development of both the appreciative and the imaginative faculties" (192). In her travel narratives, Wharton acts as a sort of guide to how one might interact with art, history, and the natural world, providing the same kind of mentorship to other travelers in enhancing one's appreciation for Vance.

This distinctive and significant aspect of Wharton's oeuvre reminds us of the complex manner in which her geographical imagination worked and of the uniquely American space, both physically and philosophically, that she traversed across the body of her work. As Saunders concludes her essay, she notes that the "Mid-Hudson region figured significantly in Wharton's own life," including her development as a young woman (210), and, in her portrayal of the importance of the region to Vance's growth as an artist, she signals the important connections between landscape and artistic potential. Saunders calls attention to Wharton's singular celebration of the region through the

imagery of "Kubla Khan" in *Hudson River Bracketed* and her emphasis on the region as "a cornucopia of generative energies, natural and aesthetic, a place sustained by cultural-historical roots that North America otherwise conspicuously lacks" (210).

These points suggest Wharton's participation in a tradition of US writers asserting the distinctiveness of American landscape and the specific influence it exerts on the American literary tradition. Walt Whitman argues forcibly in "Democratic Vistas" (1888) for the value of uniquely American spaces, themes, and conditions to the development of a flourishing US literary tradition; the "central point in any nation," Whitman claims, "is its national literature" (6). Speaking of the development of US culture more generally, Whitman insists that a "programme of culture" should have "an eye to practical life, the west, the working-men, the facts of farms and jack-planes and engineers, and of the broad range of the women also of the middle and working strata" (43). Hamlin Garland's *Crumbling Idols* (1894) also calls for authentic and local American art situated in a Western space and ethos. He complains that the "mighty West" has been ignored in literature (16), and notes specifically of Pacific-Coast literature that it will be unique to its geographical location and moment in time, the markers of a "national literature" (26). Indeed, US literature does not come into its own, Garland insists, until writers feel "the influence of our mighty forests and prairies" (51).

When Wharton considers in a July 1927 essay what constitutes "The Great American Novel," she seems to offer a somewhat different perspective. Wharton argues that current critical attitudes in the United States about what constitutes an American novel (similar to Whitman's and Garland's) constrain novelists socially and geographically (151), offering "to the artist's imagination a surface as flat and monotonous as our own prairies" (154). She does not view an emphasis on the life of the folk or regional details as key markers of distinctive American fiction. Observing that US technological innovation has "internationalized the earth" (156) and considering of the modern American's "intense social acquisitiveness and insatiable appetite for new facts and new sights" (157), Wharton insists that the great Ameri-



can novel will seek a wider field, both philosophically and, in some cases, geographically: "Its scene may be laid in an American small town or in a European capital; it may deal with the present or the past, with great events or trivial happenings; but in the latter case it will certainly contrive to relate them to something greater than themselves. The ability to do this is indeed one of the surest signs of the great novelist" (158). Such a pronouncement seems to echo the rather banal adage that great literature will tap into something larger than the artist herself.

Thus, Wharton's theory of the great American novel, at least in this essay, does not insist on the distinctions that Whitman and Garland emphasize. Their celebration of the natural and cultural features of the West, specifically, as central to the development of US literature contrasts with Wharton's more general theory about what constitutes worthy American fiction and with her decidedly unromantic representation of the US West in *Hudson River Bracketed* and elsewhere. Yet in her fiction, and in apparent contradiction to her 1927 theories about the great American novel, Wharton demonstrates the profound influence of geography on the writer's imagination. Indeed, Whitman's and Garland's larger points about the defining influence of the landscape on US writers are brought to life in Wharton's examination of Vance Weston's creative process and geographical influences. The play of Wharton's geographical imagination in *Hudson River Bracketed* allows us to better appreciate the spatial and cultural parameters of both Vance's and Wharton's artistic journeys.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Wharton's poetry will receive renewed attention with the forthcoming critical edition of her poetry as part of the *Complete Works of Edith Wharton* from Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup>See Helen Killoran's *Edith Wharton: Art and Allusion* (1996), Emily J. Orlando's *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts* (2007), and Rocki Wentzel's "Classical Reception in Edith Wharton's Late Fiction" (2013).

<sup>3</sup>For more on Wharton's relationship to the literary marketplace, see Edie Thornton's "Selling Edith Wharton: Illustration, Advertising, and *Pictorial Review*, 1924-1925" (2001), Jamie Barlowe's "No Innocence in This Age: Edith Wharton's Commercialization and Commodification" (2007), Sarah Whitehead's "Breaking the Frame" (2008), Elsa Nettels's "Serialization" (2012), Bonnie Shannon McMullen's "Short Story Markets" (2012), Sharon Shaloo's "Wharton and Her Editors" (2012), and Gary Totten's "Selling Wharton" (2012), among other studies.

<sup>4</sup>For more on Wharton's negative representation of the western US, see Gary Totten's "Images of the American West in Wharton's Short Fiction" (2012).

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