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Colliding Worlds in *The Age of Innocence*

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Her speech, charming correct and odd, was like a precaution against her passing for a Pole... there were precautions, he seemed indeed to see, only when there were really dangers.

Henry James, *The Ambassadors*

The theory of "fictional worlds" provisionally restores the link between fiction and the "real world" that has been severed by the post-structuralist critique of the reliability of language. Based in part on post-structuralism's insight that the real world is as much a useful construction as any so-called "fictional world," and drawing its theoretical power from other recent developments in philosophy, such as modal logic, Wittgensteinian game theory, and the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, world theory posits an infinite number of versions of reality – "worlds" defined in relation to the world that we privilege as the "real world." This relation may be one of significant correspondence (the New York of 1873 and the New York of today) or it could bear a striking outward resemblance and still be "fictional" (the New York of Newland Archer), or it could completely suspend certain laws that operate in the "real world" (Newland Archer drawing a square circle in

New York in 1873). The theory of fictional worlds allows discussion of such large issues as the relationship between the work of art and its audience and that between fiction and history in a meaningful manner that respects pluralism and sidesteps the pitfall of "centrism."[1] Although it is useful for formulating tentative answers for such problematic questions as these, world theory, as will be shown below, can also illuminate the dynamics of the relationship *between* the worlds that exist in a fictional text.

Anthropology, which was one of the first scholarly disciplines to adopt this hermeneutic model, was of particular interest to Edith Wharton. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out, in addition to having read *The Golden Bough* and the other popular ethnological works, Wharton was, in effect, an amateur anthropologist: the two books that Wharton wrote just prior to *The Age of Innocence*, *French Ways and Their Meaning* (1919) and *In Morocco* (1920), are essentially works of ethnography (Wolff 296-309). Numerous critics have commented on how descriptions of Old New York as a "tribe," with "rituals" that can be explained with reference to "books on Primitive Man that people of advanced culture were beginning to read," explicitly invite the reader of *The Age of Innocence* to play the role of the anthropologist.[2]

Anthropology, in Wharton's day, still concerned itself with questions that were dictated by nineteenth-century theological debate. The question that occupied the minds of ethnologists prior to Franz Boas

and Bronislaw Malinowski was not one of what "civilized" people could learn from their "savage" counterparts, but whether the latter were their counterparts at all. For example, in 1855 an Archbishop Whately published a well-received pamphlet in which he questioned the optimism of the followers of Adam Smith in the following terms: "Could the lowest savages and the most highly civilized specimens of European races be regarded as members of the same species? Was it conceivable as the great economist has asserted, that by division of labor these shameless people could 'advance step by step in all the arts of the civilized life'?"[3]

The terms of the debate saw the civilized and the primitive as potentially being separate worlds, and the task before them as being that of demonstrating where these worlds were linked, or else why they necessarily were not. *The Age of Innocence* shares many of these concerns. In the course of the novel, the "small world" of Old New York comes into uneasy contact with a "wider world" bearing a striking resemblance to the Europe of Henry James. Wharton uses the differences between the two to explore the relationship between other pairs of opposing worlds, such as past/present, conscious/unconscious, and self/other.

One of the fundamental expressions of the relation between worlds is found in the rules and regulations relating to marriage, which, as Jane Gallop explains, are in their basic form expressions of the incest taboo:

> If sexual relations are understood as some kind of contact with alterity (although generally there is some ritual homogenization of that alterity), then the incest taboo would institute a prohibition against alterity within the family circle, a law insuring the "imaginary" closure of a cell. Levi-Strauss finds that the correlate to the incest taboo is endogamy. Sexual relations are with someone whose alterity is limited within the confines of a larger circle. (Gallop 145)

In a society as interdependent as that of Old New York, sexual relations need to be regulated with a great deal of care. It is understood that the "individual... is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest" (96); furthermore, "it did not matter if marriage was a dull duty, as long as it kept the dignity of a duty: lapsing from that, it became a mere battle of ugly appetites" (289). In order to control its potential unruliness, sexual conduct is effectively sliced off into a separate sphere: the men quite literally consign it to a separate world, an openly-tolerated "*demimonde*," while the women accomplish this fact with a collective act of cognition: "this frankness and innocence was only an artificial product... untrained human nature was not frank and innocent; it was full of the twists and defenses of instinctive guile... this creation of factitious purity [was] cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and long-dead ancestresses" (42).

After marriage, these women are said to wear the same air of "indestructible youthfulness" and "invincible virginity"(159) that they did before their initiation. Wharton's use of the word "innocence" is ironic, intended in the sense of "purity," not in the sense of "ignorance" (as lawyer Letterblair opines, "virtue is not synonymous with ignorance" (276)); the significance of innocence in the novel is that of a device that deliberately excludes those thoughts, desires, and attitudes that might prove harmful to the "tribe."

On the other hand, as Gallop notes, the other aspect of the incest taboo is the prohibition against exogamy, or "marrying outside the larger circle... Marriage outside of class or race might represent a contact with a non-assimilable alterity, thus like actual incest bringing unmitigated heterogeneity within the family circle" (Gallop 145). The New York of Newland Archer's day is described as a:

> small and slippery pyramid in which, as yet, hardly a fissure had been made or a foothold gained. At is base was a firm foundation of what Mrs. Archer called "plain people," an honest but obscure majority of families who... had been raised above their level by marriage with one of the ruling clans. People, as Mrs. Archer used to say, were not as particular as they used to be, and with old Catherine Spicer ruling one end of Fifth Avenue and Julius Beaufort the other, you couldn't expect the old traditions to last much longer." (44)

One effect of the scrupulous care with which this well-defined, well-regulated world has been superintended is that its members enjoy a form of communication that is so free from the hermeneutic pitfalls that plague other interpretive communities that it could be called Adamic: sign and signifier are so closely allied that actual verbalization is often unnecessary:

> They all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs, as when Mrs. Welland, who knew exactly why Archer had pressed her to announce her daughter's engagement at the Beaufort's ball (and had indeed expected him to do no less) , yet felt obliged to simulate her reluctance, and the air of her hand being forced, quite as, in the books on Primitive Man that people of advance culture were beginning to read, the savage bride is dragged with shrieks from her parents' tent. (41)

The social homogeneity that makes this kind of communication possible is a highly artificial state. Wharton makes this point in comparing society to a sheepfold (14), a hothouse (197) and a garden (214), and in the incessant repetition of patronymics in the names of the male members of the "tribe." Mr. And Mrs. van der Luyden, who are "so exactly alike that [one] wondered how... two such merged identities ever separated themselves for anything as controversial as a talking-over..."(47) represent the furthest expression of this tendency: they have

managed to separate, either by habit of mind or by judicious alliance, the unruly from the regulated to the point where they resemble each other even physically.

In this respect, society functions like the Freudian mind, repressing all distressing elements out of existence. The imposition of homogeneity eliminates desire, or what it terms as a "mere battle of ugly appetites," because desire, by definition, is the attraction to otherness, a fact that prompts Ellen Olenska, upon returning to New York, to remark that she is sure she is "dead and buried, and this dear old place is heaven" (19) and later to comment, "the women here seem not – seem never to feel the need any more than the blessed in heaven" (112).

Catherine Mingott and Julius Beaufort are situated on the borders of New York society, philosophically as well as geographically. Beaufort is known as a "foreigner of doubtful origin" (41), while Catherine, although she is only from as far away as Staten Island, is seen as the same. Her habit of flouting the rules of society is vaguely referred to as her "foreignness," as in the "foreign" arrangement of her rooms and her "odd foreign way of addressing men by their surnames" (29). However, since she lives an otherwise "blameless" existence and keeps out of society, her 'foreignness" exists more as a potential than an actuality, a potential that Archer perceives in her "malice" (249). As in the case of "innocence," "malice" has a very specific meaning in the context of the novel: Catherine's "malice" does not refer to a desire to

harm others, but rather to her refusal to pretend that she does not notice certain things, such as the fact that Newland Archer and Ellen Olenska are attracted to each other.

The only other character in the novel to whom Catherine's "malice" is also attributed is her "foreign" granddaughter, Ellen Olenska: when Archer is scandalized, in spite of himself, to learn that Ellen has been staying at a hotel unaccompanied by her maid, Ellen looks at him with a "flash of her old malice" (194). As with Ellen, Catherine's body has a disturbing effect on people. Her family's strenuous objection to the "monstrous exposure of her person" (154) at Archer and May's wedding likens her to the Gorgon, upon whom no one may look without harm. When Ellen tells Archer, "I have had to look at the Gorgon" (240) she is letting him know that like Catherine, she has faced what the other women in her society have chosen to repress. The Gorgon, she explains, "fastens your eyelids open" (242-3).

Because Ellen has "looked at the Gorgon" she has lost the innocence without which she cannot remain in the "garden" world of New York society. Her fall into knowledge is signaled by her partial loss of the language of the "tribe." Archer notes that Ellen is not "wholly at ease in English," and that she "often spoke as if she were translating from the French" (109). At the same time, he discovers that she has access to another "hieroglyphic world from which he is excluded: "he knew that the southern races communicated with each other in the

language of pantomime, and was mortified to find her shrugs and smiles so unintelligible" (61).

Although Archer cannot escape his impression that European society is "evil," Ellen genuinely appreciates many of aspects of New York society as manifested in Archer's character, suggesting that linguistic access to a world is an important step towards understanding it. It is significant, however, that when she tries to explain to Archer what she most values about him she cannot put it in terms that he can understand:

> It was you who made me understand that under the dullness there are things so fine and sensitive and delicate that even those I most cared for in my other life look cheap in comparison. I don't know how to explain myself... but it seems as if I'd never before understood with how much that is hard and shabby and base the most exquisite pleasures may be paid. (202)

To which Archer uncomprehendingly responds, "Exquisite pleasures – it's something to have had them!"

This difference in language becomes an emblem for the difference between Archer and Ellen's worlds:

> Madame Olenska, in a burst of irritation, had said to Archer that he and she did not speak the same language... but Beaufort... with his habit of two continents and two societies, his familiar association with artists and actors and people generally in the world's eye, and

> his careless contempt for local prejudices... understood every turn of her dialect, and spoke it fluently... (117).

Up to this point in the novel, all that has been said about Count Olenski is that he is an "immensely rich Polish nobleman of legendary fame" (54) and a "blackguard" (40). Olenski's Polish origins are, from the standpoint of Old New York, the equivalent of Beaufort's "doubtful" past: located in a space that is not linguistically recoverable (educated Americans might know French or German, but very few would know Polish), it is therefore potentially contaminating. In her discussion of concepts of cleanliness and pollution, Mary Douglas defines dirt as "matter out of place." Such an approach, she claims. "implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system" (Douglas 35). Olenski, then, is "out of place" in New York society; his presence represents a threat and a source of social contamination. Like Beaufort, Olenski becomes a figure of evil because he fails to conform to the social codes of the "tribe": Archer describes Ellen as being "so close to the powers of evil she must have lived that she still breathed more freely in their air" (68). As with Catherine's "malice," "evil" comes to designate all systems of meaning that exist outside Archer's world.

At the same time, for Archer, the "other world" with which Ellen Olenska is associated is also closely identified with the imagination. As their secret relationship progresses, it becomes for Archer "the scene of his real life, of his only rational activities; thither he brought the books he read, the ideas and feelings which nourished him, his judgments and visions" (220). However, in Archer's world, the imagination roams, but does not come back "tainted with foreignness" (203) like his mother and sister who travel in Europe but who do not speak to any Europeans (161). Ellen's example: starting out as "Ellen Mingott" but returning to New York as "Ellen Olenska," warns of the profound consequences of Archer's desire to cast his lot with Ellen, just as Janey Archer's suggestion that Ellen change her name to "Elaine" because it "sounds more Polish" (37) anticipates her family's efforts to send Ellen back to Europe for good.

Archer's friend Ned Winsett accuses Archer's class of irresponsibility, charging that the "few little local patches [of culture] are dying... for lack of cross-fertilization. You'll never amount to anything, any of you, until you roll up your sleeves and get right down in the muck... or emigrate" (107). Archer himself agrees that "if his world was small, so was theirs, and that the only way to enlarge either was to reach a stage of manners where both naturally would merge (89).

However, it is specifically this process of "cross-fertilization" that the taboo against exogamy tries to prevent. For all his aspirations

toward rebellion and transcendence, Archer is a "prisoner" of the social codes that have formed his character. Despite all his efforts to "fling convention to the winds" (240) he realizes that he is "the prisoner of [a] hackneyed vocabulary" (257), and that his so-called original ideas, his premarital sexual adventures, and even his attraction to Ellen Olenska is "stupidly conventional" (240). Pamela Knights cites the numerous moments in the text where Archer feels himself estranged from his physical surroundings to argue that when he tries to separate himself from his social role, he literally becomes "disembodied;" while to be locked in the family is in a sense to be "buried alive," loss of social being is also a "form of death" (Knights 34-8).

However, for Archer, the very real possibility of transcending the codes that have "imprisoned" him exists in the person of Ellen Olenska. It therefore is all the more bitter for him that it is she who asserts that what seemed to be two worlds is really only one, and that there is no "world where... categories like [marriage and adultery] don't exist" (242). Yet, when Ellen tells him, "You've never been beyond. And I have... and I know what it looks like there" (243), she is not so much asserting the impossibility of escape as she is denying Archer the opportunity to undergo the same hardships and come to the same understandings as she has.

Referring to Mary Douglas's analysis of concepts of purity and pollution, Judith Fryer points out that although Ellen Olenska and Medora Manson are both "marginal people," the fact that Medora is "frivolous and ineffectual" renders her harmless, while Ellen's far more compelling "sexual and cultural richness" makes her a "polluting person" who must be expelled in order to protect the "order and purity" of New York society (Fryer 138-9). Moreover, Carol J. Singley draws on anthropologist René Girard's writings on sacrificial practices to argue that Ellen Olenska, as an "'exterior or marginal individual... incapable of establishing or sharing the social bonds that link the rest of the inhabitants'" is expelled from the community in an act of ritual sacrifice whose purpose is to "'restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric.'"[4] According to Girard, "'the more critical the social crisis, the more 'precious' the victim must be.'" Thus, Singley concludes, Ellen Olenska is "an ideal victim"(Singley 166).

While Wharton does emphasize the ritual aspects of Ellen's farewell party ("the tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe") the case can be made that if there is a sacrificial victim, it is Newland Archer. Ostensibly an embodiment of the Old New York virtues of "Form," "Taste," and "Family," from the outset Archer possesses several qualities that render him vulnerable to being sacrificed in the manner that Singley describes. The first is his secret sense of intellectual superiority to his peers, the fact that he prides

himself on the fact that he had "probably read more, and done more, and even seen a great deal more than any other man of the number" (11). Furthermore, Archer's familiarity with the "disposition" of Old New York society causes him to see through its routines and to chafe at the prospect of becoming a copy of his father-in-law, "doing the same thing, every day at the same hour."[5] This sense of superiority is what causes him, during the dinner party in Chapter Five, to defend Ellen against his mother and sister and Sillerton Jackson, an act that is the first step to bringing the two of them together.

On the other hand, Ellen's "malice," a characteristic that she shares with her grandmother, attests to the fact that far from being outside the social rules that govern Old New York, she understands them almost too well. Indeed, in some instances, her understanding seems to outstrip Newland's own, as in the scene in Chapter Twenty-Four where she tries to explain to him what he has taught her. Ironically, it is impossible for Newland, deprived of a distanced perspective, to understand the insights his actions have occasioned, insights that Wharton herself needed the distance of more than fifty years and a World War to attain.[6] Moreover, Ellen is never made to act against her own will. The only real effect that May's preemptive pregnancy announcement has on Ellen is that it causes her to break her promise to "'come to him just once'" before her planned return to Europe.

In order for worlds to merge, both must change. The central insight of Hans-Georg Gadamer's monumental *Truth and Method* is that if one or both of the worlds cannot change, then it will simply translate the other in terms of itself.[7] Both Archer and Ellen implicitly recognize this fact. As Ellen remarks, "It seems stupid to have discovered America only to make it into a copy of another country" (201). In the case of Archer, it is his openness to the idea of the merging of worlds that enables him to serve as the central consciousness of the story. However, in the end, Ellen and Old New York in effect join forces to prevent him from changing into the person whom he might have become, an action they carry out in the interest of social stability, and more specifically for the sake of his marriage and his future family. Ellen's experience of having found herself driven "beyond" the bonds of family and society has created in her a renewed appreciation of their value. Thus, it is Archer who is actually the one who is "sacrificed" -- not by being expelled from the community, but by being made to stay.

Notes

[1] For an example of how game theory can be applied to problems encountered in genre studies, and how world theory can provide models for the interaction between a creative work and its audience, see Quigley, 60-61; for a useful discussion of the relevance of modal logic to literary criticism, see Pavel, 191-4.

[2] Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (London: Penguin, 1974) 41, 60. All citations are from this edition. For a recent account of Wharton's uses of anthropology, see Nancy Bentley, "Edith Wharton and the Science of Manners," *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*, ed. Millicent Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995): 47-67.

[3] See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966) 7-28 for an early discussion of the theological basis of nineteenth-century anthropology.
[4] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* [1972] trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977) 8-24, quoted in Singley, 166-7.
[5] I owe this insight to my former student Kaori Hara, "The Change of Values in *The Age of Innocence*" (BA thesis, Osaka Women's University, 1995) 22-30.
[6] In her autobiography, Wharton admits that "when I was young it used to seem to me that the group in which I grew up was like an empty vessel into which no new wine would ever be poured. Now I see that one of its uses lay in preserving a few drops of an old vintage too rare to be savored by a youthful palate." See Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, 5.
[7] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garret Barden and John Cumming (New York: Crossroad, 1975).

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